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EXAMINING SHAKESPEARE'S HEROINES IN A MODERN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of my thesis is to examine Shakespeare's heroines in a modern context so that actresses and directors have a more complete and balanced view of these characters. By evaluating Shakespeare's text from the perspective of modern feminist writers, one is able to see more clearly the universal issues that both women of today and women of Shakespeare's time have in common. In addition, one can better understand Shakespeare's views on women, which in some ways could be considered "ahead of his time." In this paper, I will look specifically at central female characters in four of Shakespeare's well-known plays: *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and *King Lear*. By reevaluating these women in new ways, modern audiences can gain a better understanding of characters that are often written off as weak or flat by current standards. Finally, I want to help directors and actresses find ways to interpret and perform these women for the rich and fully human characters that they are.

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Chapter 1

A Brief Look at the Life and Times of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare's Life

According to the baptismal record of the parish church in Stratford-Upon-Avon, England, William Shakespeare was born on April 26, 1564. His parents, John and Mary, were both well-respected members of the community, although neither of them could read or write. John Shakespeare was a prominent member of the town and held various positions of responsibility in Stratford until around 1578, when he mysteriously fell off the wagon—becoming a debtor, mortgaging the house he shared with Mary, and losing his spot on the Board of Aldermen. However, near the end of John's life, he was able to redeem himself and applied successfully for a coat of arms (probably due to the success of his son, William, in London); this coat of arms bore the motto, *Non sanz droict*, or “Not without right.” John died shortly after being reinstated to the Town Council in 1601, probably around the age of seventy. His wife, Mary, outlived him until 1608.

William Shakespeare was the first of his siblings to survive to adulthood—two older siblings died shortly after birth. He was followed by a brother, Gilbert, who became a successful tradesman in the town of Stratford; two sisters Joan and Anne, of whom only Anne lived past childhood; and finally a brother, Edmund, in 1580—Mary's last child. Of the four surviving Shakespeare children, Joan was the only one to carry on the Shakespeare line after the seventeenth century and provides our only genetic link to the family.

During his childhood, William most likely attended Stratford's local Grammar School, where he would have learned basic reading and writing in English. The majority of his other

lessons would have been taught in Latin and based on various Latin writers such as Seneca or Virgil. He was pulled out of school at the age of thirteen, and his subsequent activities are impossible to trace until he married Anne Hathaway in 1582. Some historians suggest that he went to work for his father's business or was hired by his brother Gilbert; however, there is no solid evidence of either. What is clearly known from parish records is that William married an already pregnant Anne Hathaway in 1582. They had their first daughter, Susanna, in 1583 and twins, Hamnet and Judith in 1585. Hamnet died mysteriously at the age of eleven but by the time of his death, William was already long removed from the family, living life as an actor and playwright in London. Nevertheless, historians speculate that William was deeply affected by the loss of his only son, as may be reflected in some of his written work.

Although William Shakespeare's road to success in London is undocumented, it is clear that by 1592 he was a successful actor and that some of his early plays, such as *Titus Andronicus* and *The Comedy of Errors*, were already being staged by the Pembroke Men, a company sponsored by the Earl of Pembroke. Due to these successes, Shakespeare was able to garner the patronage of the Earl of Southampton, with whom it is suggested Shakespeare also had a close friendship. Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1594—the company for which Shakespeare wrote the majority of his most famous works, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *King John*, and *Love's Labor's Lost* among many others. During his time with this company, Shakespeare became involved in every aspect of production, writing, and acting. He wrote plays specifically for members of the company, acted in them himself, and owned shares of the Globe Theatre and later a second theatre, the Blackfriars. The cause of Shakespeare's death in 1616 is a mystery; however in that day and age, living to the age of 52 was essentially old age. He was buried in the Holy Trinity Church in his hometown of Stratford-Upon-Avon.

Through the course of his lifetime, Shakespeare wrote thirty-eight plays that are credited to him. (Three other plays may have been written by Shakespeare and a collaborator; these are

dated after the time of his retirement from the theatre in 1611.) His plays are divided into three main categories: histories, tragedies, and comedies. Most of the story lines that the plays are based on can be traced back to two primary texts that were popular during the time: Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (from which Shakespeare took many of his English history plots) and Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. Part of the reason Shakespeare was able to produce plays at such a fast rate was because of his use of plots from previous texts such as these.

Life in Shakespeare's London

Shakespeare arrived in London at the perfect time for his career to flourish. London was expanding and changing at a drastic pace; in fact, the population quadrupled from 1500 to 1600. The people of England flocked to London because it was the center of trade, the home of the governing royal family, and the most culturally exciting city in the whole country. The governing royal family—the Tudors—included infamous rulers such as King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth. These monarchs helped to lead London into a time of prosperity and growth. Tudor London is when the first maps of the city were created, which show its increased size. London was divided into two parts by the river Thames: Westminster and the City of London. There was only one bridge across the river, which was always extremely crowded. Between the city and Westminster was a street called “The Strand” where all the wealthy houses stood facing the Thames. The Strand was a reflection of the economic times, as London was a very divided city in terms of wealth. There were the extremely wealthy and the extremely poor, with a large divide between them. However, this divide was slowly changing with the rise of a middle class consisting of merchants and tradesmen—a group that continued to grow in the time of Queen Elizabeth I.

London was not the healthiest city. The extreme spike in population left it overcrowded and dirty. Plague swept through the city almost every summer, along with many other diseases that frequently affected Londoners. Infant mortality rates were always high and age of death was also extremely low, with most people on average living to around the age of thirty-five. However, none of this stopped the culture of London from booming during this period. A region of London called Southwark was famous for its pubs and alehouses, and by 1600 there were over 1000 pubs in the city. The theatre was also a very popular form of entertainment for both rich and poor, with its affordable prices for the masses and more expensive box seats for the upper class. Important theatres such as The Swan, The Hope, The Rose, and, of course, The Globe, were extremely popular and started the careers of many famous playwrights and actors, including Shakespeare.

Influence of Elizabeth I

Elizabeth Tudor assumed the throne of England after the death of her half sister, Mary, and became Elizabeth the First of England in 1558. Her accession to the throne was never assured; as the last of Henry the Eighth's children, she was the target of many plots and death threats throughout her life as a princess. Upon assuming the throne, Elizabeth made it clear her England was going to be very different from Queen Mary's. Mary was a staunch Catholic who had prosecuted Protestants so aggressively during her time on the throne that she had earned herself the nickname "Bloody Mary". In contrast, Elizabeth, a Protestant herself, is quoted as saying that she refused to "make windows into men's souls" and chose to let her people practice whatever form of Christianity they preferred. She also created an official doctrine that laid down the laws of the Church of England—uniting many Catholic and Protestant Doctrines into one. Her reign was a time of exploration. She sent explorers such as Sir Francis Drake and many others to discover more about the Americas, thus laying the groundwork for colonization. Elizabeth was also a great supporter of the arts—building elaborate new houses, supporting composers such as

William Byrd and Thomas Tallis, and attending and patronizing many theatre performances and artists, including William Shakespeare. Elizabeth's reign was not always perfect—there was economic depression in the countryside, and she was forced to handle various plots against her throne including her famous defeat of the Spanish Armada. However, despite these issues, Elizabeth was one of the most popular British monarchs of all time, and her reign is regarded as a Golden Age for England.

Women in Elizabethan England

In comparison to U.S. culture of the 21st century, the treatment of women during the life of Shakespeare was unbalanced and unfair. Inheritance laws dictated that all property and money were passed on to the eldest sons, leaving daughters to fend for themselves by finding and making a successful marriage. Women could inherit if there were no sons at all; however, this practice was frowned upon, making inheritance by women nearly unheard of. Growing up, a girl was completely dependent on the good will of her father, and this control was then passed on to her husband when she married. Remaining unmarried was not an option unless a woman wished to join a nunnery; otherwise she might be labeled a witch or fall into complete poverty. Until the time of marriage, the importance of virginity was stressed in all levels of society—a woman must be a virgin on her wedding night, or else she and her entire family would be shamed.

The primary goal of a good Elizabethan-era woman would have been to become a dutiful wife and mother. There was barely any education to speak of except if you were a wealthy woman, in which case lessons in sewing, dancing, painting, and playing a musical instrument were encouraged. Although girls were sometimes allowed to attend grammar schools, they were not allowed to attend university or hold professional jobs of any kind. The primary job of most women was to organize a household and bear children—a reality that made life extremely limiting for most. In addition, painful and dangerous childbirths often led to early deaths. Given

that the role of women during this period was extremely bleak, it is interesting to note that many of Shakespeare's female characters are portrayed as having a vigor and sense of adventure that most women of the period never experienced.

Chapter 2

The Focus of This Study and the Feminist Perspective

Shakespeare's canon is large and difficult to summarize, but I have chosen four plays to examine that I believe contain the most challenging and controversial female characters under the most complex situations. My intent was to include both tragedies and comedies, so as to better encompass the range of Shakespeare's work. My analysis will consider not only how Shakespeare viewed his female characters, but also how actresses, directors, and audiences can view them today. Is it possible that this great writer saw flaws in the treatment of women that many of his contemporaries did not?

I believe that each play addresses a different controversial issue that concerned women of Shakespeare's period and is also still relevant to women today. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude and Ophelia have always been swept under the rug as weak or amoral. However I want to examine these characters in terms of the intense love they feel for their families and, ultimately, Hamlet himself. Love can be seen as weakness or it can be seen as one of the ultimate human powers. By examining *Hamlet* in a contemporary context, one can see that modern women struggle with similar issues of loss of control and power because of love. How can we stay in control of ourselves when our feelings of love are intense? Is the capacity to love intensely a woman's greatest weakness or her greatest strength?

Measure for Measure is one of Shakespeare's lesser known plays. Although it is technically categorized as a comedy, it has a serious plot line that revolves around the importance of virginity and who is to blame when virginity is lost. I would certainly not call Isabella a weak

character. However, I would say her belief that her virginity is more important than her brother's life always garners a mixed response from modern audiences. The importance of virginity is still complex for women today, making this play extremely relevant. How much exactly is virginity worth, and what kind of power does it give women?

Including *Taming of the Shrew* seemed to be an obvious choice for examining Shakespeare's treatment of women. Today, it is easily regarded as one of Shakespeare's most outdated plays in terms of Petruchio's treatment of Kate. Consequently, the fascination that audiences have with this controversial show has always baffled me. I want to know why so many famous actresses have dreamed to play a part that requires them to debase themselves so much. However, by looking at *Taming* as a love story and embracing the complex nature of relationships, one can reevaluate Kate and Petruchio's relationship. Is it possible that relationships can be uneven and be just as successful? Does Petruchio hurt Kate or ultimately help her?

King Lear is simultaneously known as one of Shakespeare's most patriarchal plays and a play with one of his strongest female characters: Cordelia. How is it possible that a play known for its promotion of male leaders contains such a strong female character? What about Gonerill and Regan? Are they really as evil as they are always portrayed? By looking at *Lear* in a present-day context, the play can be seen as depicting three sisters who are all powerful and strong in their own right. Did Shakespeare really mean to promote patriarchy so aggressively in *Lear* or are we misinterpreting it?

In order to begin to answer these questions using feminist writers of today, we must first understand the concept of feminism and modern feminist theory. According to its broadest definition, as found in the Merriam Webster dictionary, feminism can be defined as the belief that women and men should have equal rights. However, those who identify with feminism as a movement would agree that the concept is far more complex and has changed in focus and

meaning through time. The word feminism arose in the mid 1800's when it referred to the "quality of being female"—it was not until 1892, during the First International Women's Conference in Paris, that the word was used in reference to inequality of women and men. This usage came along with what feminists call The First Wave, which is the period of women's fight for the vote in the early 20th century. Feminism then waned during the first and second World Wars, with a so-called Second Wave occurring in the 60's and 70's.

The most recent feminist movement is termed the Third Wave and encompasses all the feminists of the modern era beginning in the early 90's. Feminism as a modern movement is hard to define because many disagree on what the term includes. Furthermore, some argue that defining feminism in terms of a particular political movement isn't correct because feminism covers all human history's fight to end gender inequality. However, all modern feminists definitely believe two statements: women and men should be treated equally, and currently women are at a disadvantage in society.

In this study, my analysis of Shakespeare's plays and female characters will draw upon the thought of specific modern feminist thinkers who can shed light on issues surrounding women, both in the world of his plays and in the present. Although I plan to use these thinkers to show the relevance of Shakespeare's work to modern times, I am not going to argue that Shakespeare was ever a feminist himself. He lived in a different time when the concept had not yet arisen; therefore, such a designation cannot be made. However, I do believe that Shakespeare was ahead of his time on many feminist issues and had unique views on important social problems impacting women. I believe that the reason that Shakespeare is still so widely produced today is because so many of his themes are highly relevant to modern audiences, including the plights of his female characters.

Chapter 3

***Hamlet*: “Frailty, thy name is woman”... or is it?**

Shakespeare’s Ophelia, perhaps his most celebrated female character, appears in one of his most famous plays, *Hamlet*. Ophelia’s difficult relationships with Hamlet and her family members—Polonius and Laertes— create interactions that range from tyrannical to brotherly to loving to abusive. Eventually, she is overwhelmed and driven to her ultimate demise. In examining Ophelia as a modern character, an audience tends to see her as weak—a young woman broken by the influential and strong men in her life. According to Paula S. Berggren, “women in tragedy seem to be split into two basic types: victims or monsters,” and Ophelia has most certainly found herself in the victim category.¹ Gertrude, the other controversial female character of the play, instead finds herself staunchly in the “monster” category. She is typically portrayed as the enabler of Claudius’ evil and the temptress who leads to the late King Hamlet’s murder. However, this portrayal has absolutely no textual backing and comes from years of famous productions that have misinterpreted this loving woman. By looking at Ophelia and Gertrude in the context of their great love for those around them, we uncover a new side to each that allows us to see them as stronger and more whole characters.

One way that we can view Ophelia is to understand her role in communicating to the audience. On a literary level, Marianne Novy argues that Ophelia’s presence in *Hamlet* serves as a foil for Hamlet’s madness: “she is a mediator between him and the offstage audience.”² He sees in her the weakness and pain that he feels himself as they both lose their fathers in the play. Since

¹ *The Woman’s Part*

² Marianne Novy, *The Woman’s Part*

Hamlet is more limited in his ability to express that sadness as a male character, Ophelia expresses it for him; thus, she allows the audience to feel for Hamlet, and helps him to be seen as a tragic hero.

However, on a more human level, Ophelia's story is that of oppression, and through madness she is able to both express herself and draw attention to her oppression; according to Marianne Novy, "She must go mad in order to escape social restrictions and take center stage."³ On the one hand, Ophelia may be seen as weak because her obedience and love drive her to madness, but on the other hand it is that madness that finally gives her the strength to escape the shackles of her father, brother, and lover. Shakespeare allows Ophelia to become a powerful female character through her madness, which creates verbal opportunities for her that otherwise would have been taboo.

The idea that Ophelia's madness is her strongest moment may seem a bit far-fetched to a modern reader of the play. However, upon further examination it is possible to see that in her madness Ophelia gains the freedom to finally say what she wishes, and to live outside of the gender restrictions that have been placed on her throughout her entire life. In her final appearance in the play, Ophelia hands out flowers that each have a symbolic meaning, and for the first time the issues of the play are finally addressed out loud—not by Hamlet—but by Ophelia:

There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference! There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they wither'd all when my father died. They say he made a good end. (4.5.180-5)

Ophelia first gives Gertrude fennel and columbines, which represent adultery. This is the first time in the play that any character has implied in public that Gertrude perhaps may have been involved with Claudius before the death of her first husband. She then gives Claudius and herself flowers that represent repentance. She is publicly accusing the royal couple of the crimes that

³ Marianne Novy, *The Woman's Part*

Hamlet believes they have committed but will not act to revenge. She also gives Claudius a daisy for unhappy love and tells him that the violets (flowers representing faithfulness) all dried up after her father's death. Thus, Ophelia, of all the characters, is the first to confront Claudius and Gertrude publicly on their perceived wrongdoing. According to Lacey Stan, "[Ophelia] is able in her insanity to speak her mind, defy authority, and remove the shackles that had been placed upon her since birth all because of the accidental sex she was born with."⁴ Speaking out in this way, even in madness, implies a certain amount of strength of character, which is generally forgotten in weaker interpretations of Ophelia.

Like Ophelia, Gertrude is constantly at the whim of the male characters in the play. She fights to keep peace between Hamlet and Claudius because she genuinely loves both of them and wants them to get along. In doing so, she is traditionally portrayed as a seductress because of the reactions she gets from the men in the play, who are both physically and emotionally drawn to her in an almost violently sexual way. However, Rebecca Smith points out that this "traditional depiction of Gertrude is a false one"⁵ because once we examine her actual words and actions in the play, we see that she is merely an obedient, loving woman who desperately wants to keep the peace between Claudius and Hamlet. The famous line uttered by Gertrude following Polonius' murder, "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain" (3.4.156) is her final plea to her son; she loves both Hamlet and Claudius and does not know what to do. Although, this uncertainty makes her appear weak and malleable to audiences, in reality, it can be argued that her love makes her strong. Her driving force throughout the play is her deep and unapologetic love for two men who are constantly at odds, as well as her unwavering quest to keep them both in her life.

The women in *Hamlet* are perceived as controversial, on the one hand due to Ophelia's madness and on the other hand due to Gertrude's seemingly over-sexualized character. However,

⁴ Ophelia and Gertrude: A Look at the Modern and Ancient Woman

⁵ Rebecca Smith, *The Woman's Part*

the true root of all their actions is the intense love that they hold for their families. Ophelia and Gertrude are driven throughout the play by this love, which can be seen as their strength rather than their weakness. The idea that love makes women weak is actually a concept that many modern women struggle with. Fear of relationships and of attachment is also a familiar feeling for the modern woman. Does a woman have to give up control and power to truly love unconditionally? Ophelia and Gertrude both ultimately lose control, but they go down fighting until the bitter end for those they love. Does love make us weak?

Love is one of the most complicated of human interactions. When one factors gender issues and stereotypes into modern romantic relationships, the complications are almost endless. In particular, differences in sexual and emotional goals between sexes complicate things further. According to Reneta Grossi, a writer for The Feminist Wire, women are still predominantly focused on the goal of marriage and a sustained relationship, while men are judged by quantity of relationships over time. This difference results in major imbalances in modern relationships: men value power and independence while women are seen to carry the more emotional side of the relationship.⁶ Ophelia and Gertrude are examples of women upholding emotional roles in their relationships without any return for themselves. Hamlet, Polonius, and Claudius are too busy with pursuit of power and leave Ophelia and Gertrude to attempt to clean up their messes without any gratitude from them. Modern women sympathize with Ophelia and Gertrude because the men they love often maintain a similar pattern, focusing in their lives on a quest for success and power in their careers and failing to value their emotional side. In *Hamlet*, we can argue that Ophelia and Gertrude's commitment to love is what makes them stronger but also more vulnerable than the men of the play.

To examine Ophelia's plight more deeply, Eva Illouz in *Why Love Hurts*, discusses the trials of modern love in a way that can be compared to Ophelia and Hamlet's ill-fated romance.

⁶ *Romantic Love— A Feminist Conundrum?*

According to Illouz, modern love is not as different from *Hamlet* as we might originally think—she argues that women have become more practiced at masking their pain in relationships, and that the agony we watch Ophelia go through is still experienced today by women, just in a different “content, color, texture.”⁷ She claims, “modern relationship pain generate[s] an almost endless gloss,” which no longer includes dying, running away to a nunnery, or committing suicide as Ophelia does. This develops a fear of love and intimacy that is a modern phenomenon. The knowledge that men control the “sexual field” creates a phenomenon where women attempt to revert from their “natural roles” as the emotional member of the relationship and regain control by acting more “manly.” Society has forgotten—or does not grasp—the notion that love is the most powerful human emotion, and the resulting avoidance of love is alarming. Ophelia’s complete and unbending love for Hamlet and her family allows her descent into madness to be seen as an expression of a deep frustration that women today may be able to understand.

Gertrude and Ophelia will continue to be difficult to portray because it is so difficult to understand their motivations and actions completely. These are complicated characters who are emotional but also strong, and they should not be looked at as mere symbols or foils for Hamlet’s journey. In order for *Hamlet* to work, the women must be portrayed as fully human and the audience must mourn and love with them. It is true that these women are to some extent devices to further the plot, but no audience wants to follow characters that have no truth in them—and Gertrude and Ophelia are full of truths that women can relate to even today.

⁷ *Why Love Hurts*

Chapter 4

***Measure for Measure*: “The tempter, or the tempted, who sins most?”**

William Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure* around 1603 or 1604. It was classified as a comedy in the First Folio, where it was originally published. However, many Shakespearean scholars label it as one of his “problem plays” because of its darker content and themes. According to Mario Digangi, the play’s central plot deals with the “perceived cost of a woman’s autonomy in marital and reproductive affairs”⁸ through the themes of virginity, pregnancy, and marriage. The cast of *Measure*, not unlike many Shakespeare plays, is extremely male heavy, containing almost three times more male characters than female. Each of the female characters has heavy sexual symbolic meaning when taken in the context of how the males in the play see her. Isabella represents the virginal, unattainable woman whom Angelo fears, while Julietta, Claudio’s intended, represents the punishments and shame of virginity lost too early. Digangi states that Elizabethan women could be divided into three categories: “virginity for maidens, marital chastity for wives, abstinence for widows.”⁹ Anyone outside these categories would be labeled as a “whore” because women were defined by the marriage paradigm. Thus *Measure* can be seen as Shakespeare’s commentary on marriage and on treatment of the people, both male and female, who choose to step out of those societal norms.

The play’s central female character is perhaps one of Shakespeare’s morally strongest characters, yet she is no less controversial in a feminist context. Her decision to deny Angelo’s

⁸ Digangi, Mario

⁹ Digangi, Mario

proposition of sex in exchange for her brother's life comes across as unfeeling, and a modern audience has a hard time sympathizing with Isabella as a heroine. However, we might take the time to look at Isabella as Katherine McLuskie sees her—a symbol of “feminist resistance, making her plea for Angelo's life a gesture of solidarity to a heterosexual sister and a recognition of the difficulty of breaking the bonds of family relations and conventional sexual arrangements.”¹⁰ In this view, the story of *Measure for Measure* becomes much more than just a struggle between Isabella and Angelo; it is also a commentary on the nature of women's sexuality during the early 1600's in England. *Measure* makes us ask questions about how important virginity really is, and how the choice of whether and when to lose it defines women as a people.

In a time when any sexual transgressions were normally blamed entirely on the female involved, Shakespeare tells us a completely different story. If we examine both Angelo and Claudio as sexual deviants, *Measure* clearly holds them both at fault for the sexual mistakes in the play (Julietta's pregnancy and Isabella's attempted rape by Angelo.) Shakespeare portrays Angelo as the villain, eventually punishing and degrading him through a forced marriage and public humiliation. The Duke even wishes to kill Angelo as punishment for his actions against Claudio and Isabella, declaring that “measure still for measure” (5.1.385) is due for everything to be even between them. Claudio, similarly, is held responsible for Julietta's pregnancy and expected to sacrifice his life for his choices. The Duke does, however, force Julietta to admit her part in the pregnancy and implicates her eternal shame for having sex out of wedlock. Nevertheless, the negative judgments of the male characters are clear—so is it possible that Shakespeare wanted to comment on the plight of women and marriage during his time, thereby calling attention to unfair treatment of women?

Comparing the value placed on virginity in Shakespearean England to modern times may not present as much of a difference as one might expect. According to Catherine R. Stimpson's

¹⁰ Kathleen McLuskie, *The Patriarchal Bard, Shakespeare, Feminism and Gender*

essay, “the loss of chastity, ‘a dearer friend than life’ (*Rape of Lucrece* line 687) stains women irrevocably during the Shakespearean era.”¹¹ Although virginity is not as important to social standing today as it was then—whether and when women have sex definitely is. According to feminist writer Jessica Valenti, modern obsession with chastity and virginity is still an issue that American women face. Valenti claims that to this day, “a woman’s worth lies in her ability—or her refusal—to be sexual.”¹² Like *Measure*’s Isabella and Julietta, modern women still feel a pressure to contain their sexuality while men do not. Valenti even mentions how many rape survivors are still blamed for their rapes rather than their male attackers. If this mindset is still in fact very much intact, present-day audiences and actors could well use Shakespeare’s message of mutual sexual responsibilities and apply it to our own society.

As a modern actress, I find the character of Isabella particularly intriguing—not because of her stark religious views, but because of her refusal to do anything with her body that she is not comfortable with. Perhaps Isabella’s appeal is not her denial of Angelo, but her refusal to be seen as a sexual object for either him or her brother, Claudio. If looked at from this perspective, Isabella does not seem inaccessible or unfeeling at all; rather she portrays how modern women should feel about themselves.

At the same time, Angelo is clearly portrayed as one of Shakespeare’s cruelest villains for his attempted rape of Isabella, making Shakespeare’s views on rape extremely clear. He confirms this in his poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, which describes a vivid rape but results in Shakespeare’s ultimate exoneration of the victim. According to Catherine R. Stimpson, “he never sniggers and assumes that women, consciously or unconsciously, seek the rapist out and then enjoy the deed: brutal, enforced sex; the ghastly tmesis of the flesh.”¹³ Shakespeare is clear in

¹¹ *The Woman’s Part*

¹² *The Purity Myth*

¹³ *The Woman’s Part*

Measure that sexual acts are a mutual responsibility, and that rape is a crime that only the worst kind of men attempt or commit.

Measure may not appear accessible on the surface; modern audiences struggle with Isabella's choices and may also feel shame for Julietta's choices and her fallen status. However, is this how we, as modern women, should be watching this play? Clearly, virginity and sexual relationships between men and women will always be controversial topics, and this play deals with important themes that are relevant for females to contemplate today. Isabella and Julietta teach us much more about sexual independence and identity than we might realize, because Shakespeare presents these women in a forward-thinking way that should not be ignored.

Chapter 5

***Taming of the Shrew*: “I see a woman may be made a fool,/ If she had not a spirit to resist.”**

Taming of the Shrew is possibly one of Shakespeare’s most difficult but also ironically one of his most popular plays. The title role of Katerina has been played by some of the most famous actresses of our time, such as Meryl Streep and Elizabeth Taylor. However, approaching the play is enormously difficult because, as stated by one modern feminist critic, “the main plot features an unruly and obstreperous woman being tamed by marriage and confirming her newly tamed state, at the end of the play, by publicly submitting to her husband.”¹⁴ This story line makes the play extremely difficult to direct, act, or even watch because the treatment of Kate seems so outdated. However, if we look deeper into the actual content of the play and compare it to similar works of the period, we discover more about Shakespeare’s view of Kate as a character and find clues as to how this play can be interpreted for modern audiences.

There has been extensive writing done on *Taming of the Shrew* and how it can be interpreted to create a more positive show in terms of gender roles. Generally, the conclusions can be divided into two groups—one interprets the play as a commentary on patriarchy in 17th century England and invites the audience to realize the error of this particular social institution, while the other argues that the play is merely meant to be a farce and therefore the torment of Kate is taken in a much lighter manner.¹⁵ However, neither of these solutions helps us to see Kate as a fully human character rather than some sort of symbol or stock character. Kate most certainly

¹⁴ Ms-Directing Shakespeare

¹⁵ The Woman’s Part

experiences growth and character development throughout the play, and it is important for us to acknowledge that she is much more complicated than these two interpretations suggest.

To fully understand Shakespeare's *Taming*, we must look outside of Shakespeare's canon and into the extensive "shrew literature" of the period. According to Jan H. Brunvand, there are many retellings of shrew-type stories recorded throughout Renaissance oral tradition, and a number of these are strikingly similar to Shakespeare's play in terms of their basic plot elements. However, they differ greatly in the abuse that the shrew experiences. In one such story, the shrew is given the status of an animal; it states that, "the husband unmercifully beat[s] a horse or rip[s] apart a chicken...the wife is tamed when she recognizes that she is next."¹⁶ Shakespeare was also not the first playwright to tell the story of the taming of the shrew. A play similarly titled *A Taming of a Shrew* was anonymously published in 1594 and tells a very parallel story to that of Shakespeare's *The Shrew*. However, comparison of the two plays reveals striking differences once again between the abuse that Katerina faces and her counterpart in the anonymous version.

Most importantly, Kate and Petruchio's relationship in *The Taming* is much more playful and loving than that of other productions of the era. Their conversations contain witty banter and playfulness that implies that, although they are fighting, there is more flirting involved than actual malice. Their verbal chemistry is obvious from their very first encounter. These characters are intellectually matched from the start, but we especially begin to see Kate's willingness to play along on the road to her father's house when we hear dialogue such as the following:

PETRUCHIO
I say it is the moon.
KATHARINA
I know it is the moon.
PETRUCHIO
Nay, then you lie: it is the blessed sun.
KATHARINA

¹⁶ The Woman's Part

Then, God be bless'd, it is the blessed sun:
 But sun it is not, when you say it is not;
 And the moon changes even as your mind.
 What you will have it named, even that it is;
 And so it shall be so for Katharina. (4.5.16-24)

Unlike previous scenes, in which Kate has fought him tooth and nail through every playful jab, she accepts his jokes this time more gracefully. At first, she challenges him, but then merely lets him get away with his joke—although not without retaining the mischievous back-and-forth of their relationship. The relationship grows like this throughout the play, to the point where the audience begins to root for it because it is loving and lighthearted.

Thus, we see that Shakespeare's taming process is more civilized and his portrayal of Kate much more human and alive. However, the differences between his play and the anonymous Shrew portrayal go even deeper than that. According to John C. Bean, by comparing both of the Kates' final speeches regarding what a good wife should do, it is possible to see a pronounced difference. Bean argues that if we look at Shakespeare's final speech in the context of the period and the growing Humanist thought movement, we see that his Kate is not talking about matrimonial tyranny. She is actually comparing her marriage to the Humanist concept of ideal kingship and the contract between King and Subject—an idea that obsessed Renaissance scholars. Throughout Kate's final speech, Shakespeare uses words such as "lord," "governor," "king," and "sovereign" to refer to her husband, Petruchio, which establishes the metaphor of marriage being like the relationship of a king to his subjects. She goes on to say, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,/ Thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee,/ And for thy maintenance commits his body/ To painful labor both by sea and land (5.2.155-159)¹⁷—again implying that the relationship between husband and wife is a mutual and loving relationship rather than one of a master to his slave. Bean argues that the metaphor of King to his subject allows for "hierarchy

¹⁷ The Taming of the Shrew

without tyranny, for both the subject and ruler are bound by the mutual obligations of love.”¹⁸

In contrast, the tyrannical relationship found in the anonymous version of *A Taming of A Shrew* shows a stark difference with the loving marriage that Shakespeare has created. Kate’s final speech in *A Shrew* focuses on women’s responsibility for original sin and retells the Genesis story of the creation of women from men:

Olde Adam and from his side asleepe,
A rib was taken, of which the lord did make,
The woe of man so termed by Adam then,
Woman for that, by her came sinne to us,
And for her sin was Adam doomed to die”¹⁹

This version of the shrew story ends in absolute domination over the wife and blames women for men’s problems by recounting the biblical story of original sin. The implication is that the morality of women will always be at a lower level than that of men, and that therefore the domination of husband over wife is natural and needed in marriage. Shakespeare chooses to make no such argument about marriage at any point in his shrew story.

Throughout *Taming*, the roles of both men and women in relationships are questioned and challenged. It is easy to look at the play and dismiss it as outdated even after taking the most feminist interpretation possible. Not many modern women would read Kate’s last speech and swallow it down without a hint of protest, right? However, according to modern feminist writer Jessie Bernard, marriage might not have changed as much as we may think. She argues in her book, *The Future of Marriage*, that equality in marriage is not actually either prevalent or necessary, as would be expected. Although society has taken steps to equalize husbands and wives, who actually holds the power in the marriage continues to tip to one person or the other. Bernard also contends that the importance of who holds the power in a relationship could mean very little if both of the people are content in their relationship. She points out that there are many

¹⁸ The Woman’s Part

¹⁹ The Taming of a Shrew

modern marriages in which women hold more of the power than their husbands, and these couples live just as happily as their more patriarchal friends.²⁰

In this view, imbalance in any relationship may be inevitable—meaning that Kate’s choice to be with Petruchio is not nearly as shocking as originally perceived. Yet regardless of how one perceives the fairness of their relationship, we can certainly agree that the outcome is positive for both parties and ultimately makes them both very happy. Similarly, Shakespeare clearly has something new to say in “shrew literature” that sets his *Taming* apart from the rest. By looking at *Taming of the Shrew* in this new light, Kate and Petruchio’s love becomes one that directors and actresses can continue to enjoy bringing to present-day audiences.

²⁰ *The Future of Marriage*

Chapter 6

***King Lear*: “Howe'er thou art a fiend,/A woman's shape doth shield thee”**

King Lear's Gonerill, Regan, and Cordelia are some of the few female Shakespeare characters with the potential to have influence and power in a patriarchal monarchy. The play begins with Lear deciding which daughter and husband should inherit his kingdom, based on what he believes is to be a very simple method—a “love test.” Cordelia actively defies Lear's leadership in the least objectionable way for the times—by staying quiet rather than arguing. Gonerill and Regan are, however, extremely outspoken throughout the play, eventually challenging their father and even plotting his murder—in short, neither woman is quiet or soft-spoken about her feelings on Lear's leadership. At first glance, *Lear*'s women seem to fit perfectly into typical categories of Elizabethan women: Cordelia is soft-spoken and well-mannered even when she defies her father, while Gonerill's and Regan's lust for power leads them to become evil seductresses that are completely out of control. So how do we find strength in these seemingly stereotyped women? I would like to argue that Shakespeare used these three sisters to defy patriarchal power in ways that were unusual for his time and, therefore, they can still be portrayed as strong and inspiring characters for a modern audience.

In order to understand thoroughly the power that characters such as Gonerill, Regan, and Cordelia hold, we must examine the first two separately from the third. Gonerill and Regan seem to be the more straightforward of the three—set up as the villains of the family and thus easy for the audience members to hate. According to Kathleen McLuskie, “the representation of patriarchal misogyny is most obvious in the treatment of Gonerill and Regan” and therefore *Lear* is one of Shakespeare's most patriarchal plays. At the onset of the play, their temper and foul

behavior seem to be matched by Lear, but he quickly deteriorates and Gonerill and Regan lose themselves in their evil plots, ultimately turning against each other. Taken in isolation, their plots against their father seem foolish and even cruel. However, using a comparison from a similar text of the period titled “King Leir,” McLuskie points out that Shakespeare has toned down the two sisters’ cruelty for his own version significantly. In fact, in Shakespeare’s version, “Gonerill’s and Regan’s treatment of their father merely reverses existing patterns of rule.”²¹ In other words, if these were men, Gonerill and Regan’s actions would not seem so startling and extreme. It is certainly legitimate to ask: if these characters were two sons, would they be treated in the way Gonerill and Regan are by audiences? Audiences mourn the death of king slayers such as Macbeth—why don’t we have similar feelings about Gonerill and Regan, who have more of a right for frustration and action than Macbeth?

Perhaps what is most alarming about Regan and Gonerill is not their actions but their lack of truthful and loyal love, which is a feeling all women are expected to be able to experience easily. Compassion and love are qualities that have been associated with women for centuries; seeing these two sisters value power over these characteristics can be extremely alarming at first. Admittedly, justifying Regan and Gonerill’s actions is difficult—they end up being extremely cruel and cunning. Nevertheless, they still tirelessly pursue their goals at any length, which is not a quality found in many women of this period. Just because we can’t justify the sisters’ evil deeds doesn’t mean they are not extremely strong women who are defying the expected roles of their time. If we begin to look at the older sisters as merely exaggerated instruments of social change—challenging accepted views on patriarchy—they may acquire whole new lives as characters that are exciting to act and watch.

As her older sisters do, Cordelia plays a large part in upsetting the balance of patriarchal power in her father’s kingdom. Paula S. Berggren notes that, “some might call [Cordelia] the

²¹ Shakespeare, *Feminism and Gender*

ultimate ingénue of Shakespeare's middle period"²² because audiences are fascinated by her controversial silent protest of her father's wishes. Although Cordelia eventually returns and reunites with Lear, which is generally seen as symbolizing a return to patriarchy, her brief protest at the beginning of the play is still extremely significant. In a world where a woman did exactly what her father told her, no questions asked, Cordelia chooses to deny Lear his "love test." This makes Cordelia one of Shakespeare's strongest female characters, according to Paula Berggren, because she "stands up to her father's coercion out of love for him."²³ Finally, at the end of the play, Cordelia even leads the French army back to save Lear from the torment of her sisters – a choice that no other female Shakespearian character can match.

The character of Cordelia also serves to expose Lear's weakness—she is "the challenge to his desire for control."²⁴ Cordelia's silent protest—her refusal to speak about her love for her father—is a potent expression of a kind person. She does not wish to express her love for him when she is commanded, and she resents Lear's attempts to force her to show emotion for him or to "control her expression of love." This ability to stand up to her father is unlike any female character we have previously been exposed to in Shakespeare. Never has a woman character desired to control her own freedom of expression and at the same time deny the control of her father and ruler. However, even as Cordelia helps us to see the flaws in Lear, she also leads us to love him through her proclamations of love outside of his presence. The chorus tells us of her love for her father when she receives a letter from him: "Faith, once or twice she heaved the name of father/ Pantingly fort, as if it pressed her heart" (4.3.25-26). Here we see that Cordelia is clearly very upset by her separation from her father, and loves and misses him even after everything that has happened. Cordelia teaches Lear that love cannot be demanded at any given time, but is proven silently over a long period of time.

²² Paula S. Berggren, *The Woman's Part*

²³ *The Woman's Part*

²⁴ Marianne Novy, *The Woman's Part*

Although the ending of *Lear* aligns Shakespeare with patriarchy as an institution, the play perhaps can be looked at as a kind of critique of societal expectations. Shakespeare's treatment of Cordelia is extremely sympathetic; she is the character whom everyone loves and roots for throughout the play. After her reunion with Lear, her sudden death shocks every audience and brings them grief unlike any other character's would. Perhaps we are meant to fall in love with Cordelia because her death allows a return to patriarchal order, but not without a horrible price. The most tragic part of the play is Lear's failed relationship with his youngest daughter that ultimately leads to both of their deaths.

Although this ending results in a return to patriarchal rule, is it entirely a happy one? Perhaps Shakespeare is trying to say more to us here. Patriarchal rule was a staple of his society that is perhaps still just as ingrained in our minds now as when Shakespeare wrote *Lear*. The idea that women are naturally weak and therefore unfit for power is one that, arguably, is still an undercurrent in society. According to feminist theorist Joan C. Chrisler, "gender-role stereotypes make it clear who is powerful and who is not" and "popular culture reinforces beliefs about what can be controlled and by whom."²⁵ Generally, women are still seen as illogical and as lacking self-control in making decisions that involve putting one's emotions aside. Chrisler also argues that gaining power is nearly impossible for women because they are constantly doubted by their male counterparts and are not exposed to direct sources of power early on in life. The argument that our society is still, at its core, patriarchal is one of the reasons *Lear* can be seen as so relevant to modern audiences.

Chrisler also touches on "appropriate" displays of emotion from women, which can be applied to character interpretations of Gonerill and Regan. According to multiple feminist writers, such as Cosgrove & Riddle, Laws, and Chrisler & Caplan, women desperately find any excuse for behavior that would be considered unfeminine or unladylike. Louise Lander suggests that

²⁵ 2008 Presidential Address: Psychology of Women

these excuses are women's way of dealing with their inability "to control their life situations."²⁶

Theories such as these suggest that women such as Gonerill and Regan would continue to struggle even in a more modern world with using "appropriate feminine" forms of communication. Part of the reason they are so despised throughout the play is because of their lack of womanly behavior and their disagreement with Lear who constantly demands the obedience that daughters of this era should owe him. According to Albany:

Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile:
Filths savour but themselves. What have you done?
Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform'd? (4.2.42-15)

As soon as Gonerill and Regan become ambitious, they are not seen as women anymore, but as evil temptresses to be feared. There is no sympathy for women searching for power from the men in *Lear*. Albany sums up the feeling of the men in the play towards Gonerill and Regan in this quote: "Property deformity shows not in the fiend/ So horrid as in women" (4.2.59-60). In other words, powerful women may still look like women but they are actually the devil in disguise.

In comparison to her older sisters, Cordelia's actions are perhaps the ones that line up more with modern gender expectations. According to Chrisler's theory of self control, a "superwoman" is a person who sets rigid, unrealistically high standards and engages in 'all-or-none' thinking when evaluating his or her performance.²⁷ Perfectionism is something that modern women and girls constantly struggle with, and Cordelia might fit into this category of thought. She chooses to set unrealistically high standards for her father, her sisters, and herself, believing that denying herself any part of her inheritance is better than compromising herself and having her father force her to tell him she loves him. She also acts in the most traditionally feminine manner throughout the play, seemingly unassuming and mild-mannered compared to her sisters. Maybe the reason modern audiences sympathize with Cordelia the most is because her

²⁶ 2008 Presidential Address: Psychology of Women

²⁷ 2007 Presidential Address: Psychology of Women

actions are what we still expect a woman to do—protest in the most “womanly” way possible.

Lear continues to be one of Shakespeare’s trickiest plays because of the extremes its characters will go to obtain power. Here we have a large cast of characters, both men and women, vying for power over Lear’s kingdom. The actions taken by Gonerill and Regan are inexcusable, but we should also realize that they are still powerful characters who go beyond what many women of the period would even dream of doing. Cordelia, on the other hand, is more appealing because she does not go to the extremes that Gonerill and Regan do. However, it is in the difficult choices—leaving after staying silent in the face of Lear’s demands and returning at the end with an army to help him—that we see her true strength.

Chapter 7

Comments for Directors and Actresses

Any director or actress who approaches Shakespeare should first keep in mind the context of the time period within which these plays were written. His treatment of his characters will always be colored by the era and the societal norms he knew. It is important to remember to respect and value that history and not expect too much from a brilliant playwright who lived in a very different time from ours. That said, I believe that many of Shakespeare's plays are still relevant and exciting today because his themes and ideas are so timeless. An audience can't hear Romeo wax about love or Claudio contemplate death in *Measure for Measure* without being spellbound by the touching emotional accuracy of Shakespeare's work.

I believe that Shakespeare's portrayal of women is just as worthwhile for modern actresses, audiences, and directors to explore and perform. His plots serve as a reminder of not only how far we have come as women, but also how far we have to go. His work raises questions that are relevant to women today and will continue to be relevant to women of the next generation and beyond. In truth, we still don't have all the answers regarding relationships, power, and love. However, every time we go to the theatre to see a Shakespeare play, we are reminded to ask who we want to be as women and we are inspired by his heroines to always strive for more.

In terms of approaching Shakespeare's women on a directorial level, my main piece of advice would be to let them live. On a scholarly level, these women may be interpreted in various ways—as foils for their male counterparts, flat “stock” characters, or merely symbolic. However, at the end of the day these characters have to come to life for an audience to really understand a

Shakespeare play. Don't push the text to become something it is not, but instead try to understand it in new ways. These women don't have to be the most perfect, modern, "feminist" characters—in fact it's so much better if they are raw and unconstrained, completely real and having nothing perfect about them. I believe that Shakespeare's work reflects an author who had higher hopes for society—who understood that theatre was meant to inspire social change. I believe his female characters are varied and fascinating, each one having something to say. Help your actors say it.

Actresses: First of all, welcome the wonderful challenge that working on a Shakespeare play brings—this is some of the most beautiful language in the world and you should be honored to be able to speak it for an audience. Secondly, don't judge the character. She is not perfect and neither are you, but that certainly does not make her weak or flat. Research and analyze everything the text gives you; there is always more than what you first read. Find the power in actions that you might not think to be powerful, such as love and sacrifice. Finally, breathe life into every Shakespearean heroine—these are some of the most articulate, powerful, passionate, and exciting women you will ever get to play. I have gained a respect for Shakespeare's heroines that I hope to cultivate throughout my professional career because reading their words and understanding their world has made me a better actress and a better woman.

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- Acting: “Georgie” in *Spike Heels* (2013), “Clytaemestra” in *The Eumenides* (2013), “Dolly” in *A Plague on Madison Avenue* (2011), “Mrs. Webb” in *Our Town* (2010), “Cha Cha” in *Grease* (2009), “Maria” in *The Sound of Music* (2008), “Sharpay” in *High School Musical* (2007).
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