

The real heroes of Shakespeare

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Abstract

Throughout the ages, women have been portrayed in various ways by different writers. Before feminism has emerged, women were treated as mere objects which represent beauty and provide sensual pleasure. But with feminism stretching its wings towards literature, female authors started coming out in large number and published their works in large quantity like never before in which they have given much importance to women. In contrast to this, Shakespeare has given priority to women in his plays much before feminism has emerged in literature. The main objective of this article is to analyze the roles and characterization of women in some of Shakespeare's plays.

Keywords: literature, feminism, significant, renaissance, historians

1. Introduction

Though no birth records exist, according to church records William Shakespeare was said to be baptized at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564. From this, it is believed he was born probably on April 23, 1564, and this is the date scholars acknowledge as William Shakespeare's birthday.

Located 103 miles west of London, during Shakespeare's time Stratford-upon-Avon was a market town divided with a country road and the River Avon. William was the third of children of John Shakespeare, a leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a local landed heiress. William had two elder sisters namely, Joan and Judith, and three younger brothers, Gilbert, Richard and Edmund. Before the birth of William Shakespeare, his father became a successful merchant and held official positions like alderman and bailiff, an office resembling a mayor. However, records say that John's fortunes declined sometime in the late 1570s.

Around 1594 he became an important member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men Company of theatrical players. Written records provide little indication of the way in which Shakespeare's professional life transformed his artistry. On the whole it can be understood that over the period of 20 years, Shakespeare wrote plays that capture the complete range of human emotions and conflicts.

The way Shakespeare regarded his heroines as an increasingly vital factor in carrying forward the action of the play is very interesting and peculiar. He portrayed them as the centre of dramatic interest and appeal, initially in the series of his comedies and later, in a different way, in the tragedies. Because of the significant role the lead female characters have in the plays, it can be said that Shakespeare has no heroes but only heroines. Critics hold the opinion that in his comedies, the thing Shakespeare aimed for was to honour the qualities of Queen Elizabeth. Other Elizabethan Renaissance writers also honoured her in their writings among whom Edmund Spenser occupied a prominent place with his *The Faerie Queene*. As Shakespeare aims to honour Elizabeth, he endows his heroines, like Rosalind in *As You Like It*, with qualities and attributes of the Queen. One reason writers wished to honour Queen Elizabeth, besides

the privileges of patronage, was that Elizabeth was hailed in her own time as one of the greatest rulers of England. Though she was a woman, she was fearless even in the battle field as she was noted for donning armour and riding at the head of troops.

Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra:

In almost all the sources from which Shakespeare built his play, Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra is portrayed in a negative manner. Though it cannot be said that Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra is in a positive way, he presented her in a more favourable way. Roman poets and historians treated Cleopatra in a cruel manner. In their opinion, she was a seductress of men and whore, besides a schemer who could sell her favours to win an empire. She was considered famous for her beauty and she used it to achieve what she wanted and this was not seen as a virtue.

In Plutarch's view, Cleopatra is a terrible and manipulative woman, who even goes as far as to poison men for the sake of research, which she conducted to test different types of poison on prisoners to know its effect on them. In the matter of Antony; she is blamed for everything that goes wrong for him. Her love is said to be sweet poison. It was even said that she distracted Antony and thus became a major cause for his ruin and she was blamed for Antony's betrayal of his own people. Cleopatra When Cleopatra flees to save herself and her men from the war, Antony follows her and for this, Cleopatra is also held responsible. This shows that he is not held responsible for his own actions.

However, in Shakespeare's play, the issue of her responsibility in the destruction of Antony is treated in a different way. This becomes clear in a conversation between Cleopatra and Enobarbus, where Cleopatra asks if she was really at fault and Enobarbus answers her quite rightly as follows:

What though [What if] you fled
From that great face of war [. . .]
[. . .] Why should he follow?
[. . .] 'Twas a shame no less

Than was his loss, to course your flying flags.
And leave his navy gazing.
Shakespeare portrayed Cleopatra in a much more sympathetic way in his play and she receives less blame and more compassion.

According to Plutarch, and the other sources, Cleopatra is emotionally very unstable; she is jealous, weepy and has a tendency to faint. On the other hand, in Shakespeare's play, she is much more balanced and Antony is more unstable; he is the one who often goes into a jealous rage. Ironically, before killing herself in the play, she claims that she now has nothing of women in her; she is marble constant, as she has been throughout the whole play. Although Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra is more favorable than that of in the sources, she is not completely innocent. Antony even remarks that she is cunning past man's thought. At the time of Shakespeare, a woman, who is intelligent, was considered to be cunning and Cleopatra, undoubtedly, was an intelligent woman who knew how to get her way. Elizabeth I often spoke of herself as both female and male. In the same way, the gender boundaries, the traditional roles and expectations of gender are blurred in Shakespeare's play. Cleopatra's behavior is no more feminine than Antony's and his behaviour is no more masculine than Cleopatra's behaviour. The play makes the boundaries between Antony's masculinity and Cleopatra's femininity unclear and also the expectations made towards their characters because of their sex. For instance, in the first act, Enobarbus observes Antony's arrival and says about that, but Charmian corrects him by saying, "Not he, the Queen". Caesar even says at one point that Antony's behaviour "is not more manlike than Cleopatra". When Eros is having trouble in putting on Antony's armor, Cleopatra takes it over and Antony remarks that she is more able with the armor than he, a man. As mentioned earlier, Cleopatra is portrayed as emotionally more stable than Antony. In the third act, when Antony has trouble in controlling his emotions he goes into a jealous rage and Cleopatra decides to be quiet until he finishes. Here the gender expectations get ironically reversed; Antony acts more like a woman while Cleopatra is balanced. It is a matter of interesting to compare the manner of their deaths or suicides. Shakespeare based their deaths on Plutarch, in which it is not clear how Cleopatra killed herself. Her death has no detailed description and the cause and manner of death is unclear. Shakespeare portrays her death scene in a very dramatic way and the audience is overwhelmed with her courage and bravery. Antony, on the other hand, is not courageous enough to kill himself, so he asks his servant to do it, who refuses and stabs himself. Therefore, Antony is forced to stab himself, but he does it clumsily and has a slow death.

Portia in The Merchant of Venice

Portia is a virtuous maid, who obeys her father's wishes in selecting a husband who suits her, although it deprives her of all control over whom she will wed. Though she has the option of cheating by giving a hint as to which casket to choose to whomever she wants to marry, Portia being an honest woman decides against giving a clue. In the play, Portia sees that her husband is upset and wants to know what news the letter Bassanio has received does contain and she claims as follows:

I am half yourself,
And must freely have the half of anything
That this same paper brings you.

She does not torment her husband with constant questions but demands her rights as his wife. She tells her husband to take the money and go help his friend, then she dresses up like lawyers, and save Antonio's life in court. Though Portia is an intelligent woman who knows how to control and manipulate the men in her life, she is not deceiving, dishonest and greedy.

In the trial scene of Act IV, Bassanio asks Portia, disguised as the lawyer Balthazar, to cheat in court. He asks her to:

Wrest once the law to your authority.
To do a great right, do a little wrong
and curb this cruel devil of his will.

Portia refuses to twist the law to their advantage but instead she solves the case and saves Antonio using her intelligence. Portia does play a trick on Bassanio with the ring which is a justified reaction and a reasonable payback for Bassanio telling Antonio in court, that he would give up his valuable wife, if that would somehow save Antonio's life. Portia becomes very upset with Bassanio when she pretends to discover, that he has given the ring away and it leads to Bassanio to swear that he will never break a promise he has made to her. Portia is a very clever girl who knows how to wrap men around her little finger.

Shylock compares Portia, who is disguised as Balthazar, the lawyer, to the biblical character Daniel and this could be a reference to Elizabeth I. According to *Holinshed's Chronicle*, Elizabeth compared herself to Daniel when she stopped to pray at the Tower during her coronation procession. Portia, like Elizabeth, presents herself as a submissive woman who surrenders herself to her lord Bassanio after he has chosen the right casket. However, after they are married, she claims to be his equal half, and further, in the next scene she dresses up herself like a man "to do justice in a high court of law". Thus, she enacts Queen Elizabeth's standard rhetorical strategy of declaring her weakness as a woman, then successfully asserting her masculine privilege over a resisting body of men. It might seem like though Portia is a submissive wife, she demands equality in her marriage.

Conclusion

When compared to the misogynist attitudes towards women and women's repression at that time are taken into account, Shakespeare's heroines are certainly extraordinary which made Shakespeare a controversial playwright of his time. During Shakespeare's lifetime which was full of social and political unrest, attitudes towards women were changing in a very slow manner. He had chosen to adopt the female characters and represent them in a favorable way and he created heroines who must have been stimulating to many in the audience. Most probably, Elizabeth I must have been inspiring to Shakespeare and to all women who were fighting against the misogynist attitude in society. It can be said that in a society in which women were not supposed to speak and be heard, Shakespeare gave them a voice.

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