

GENDER STUDIES FROM THE 16TH CENTURY SEXUAL AND FEMINIST THEMATIC IN SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

Gender Inclusivity in Shakespeare's Works

Shakespeare's plays have long been viewed as the point where the boundaries of binary gendered sex, sexuality, and desire become murky. However, the contemporary social justice call for gender-inclusivity has been integrated into the Shakespearean theater's existing conventions. This paper closely reads the reviews and other materials to argue that contemporary Shakespeare performance is a space where the public makes meaning of gender nonconformist. In the same manner, performance institutions need to become self-aware of their role in potential education or misrecognition of gender norms. Complex and holistic strategies for engaging in transgender themes were devised in the recent productions of his work at the Pittsburgh Public Theater, the African-American Shakespeare Company, and the California Shakespeare Theatre. These transgender themes were incorporated through the various processes of staging, casting, and outreach programming into multiple Shakespearean works.

KEYWORDS: *Shakespearean Drama, Sexual & Feminist Thematic*

INTRODUCTION

A short blog post was released by the Globe Theatre in May 2017, promoting its summer production of Twelfth Night. In the blog, scholar Will Tosh compares Viola's disguise as Cesario to the experiences of contemporary Trans and gender-nonconforming youth:

“Shakespeare's vision of a gender identity that slips along the scale from female to male and back seems, even in 2017, intriguingly familiar. However, suppose the number of transgender people seems greater in the 21st century. In that case, it is noteworthy to remember that gender fluidity is not an invention of the recent past bit of the Shakespearean era. Shakespeare had famously remarked that when it comes to gender, it is just a matter of importance [and not gender].

Tosh suggests that one can use Shakespeare as a historical documentation of gender fluidity to validate the legitimacy of transgender youth. In exchange, Shakespeare is rendered socio-politically relevant. The Globe is a strong patron of heralding the case of model gender inclusivity in Shakespeare's performance. California Shakespeare Theatre's 2017 production of *As You Like It* sought out a gender queer actor to play Rosalind's character. The program details also reveal that they cast engagement with local Trans and gender non-conforming people to try to listen to other peoples' stories and life journeys. This invited a deeper analysis and investigation of the gender queer Rosalind and her own journey through life.

William Shakespeare is also known to have driven women to gender studies and studies of women's issues in an objective light. Although Shakespeare reflects the occupational and duty-related stereotypes of men and women, he also makes sure that he questions, challenges, and strives to change those interpretations. His stories are used in secondary and college classrooms even to this day and, thus, afford opportunities to understand Renaissance culture better and confront our contemporary generalizations about gender, and specifically what it means to be female.

Providences

Gender Roles, Female Agency, Virginity Parchment and Class Ideologies

During his era, Shakespeare seems to have raised questions about what the characteristics of each gender and about the standard images of males and females, about how both genders possess both masculine and feminine qualities. He has also highlighted the nature and the power of hegemonic patriarchy, the roles men and women play, and the roles they should ideally play in society. As the feminist criticism today focuses on quite a few of these same issues, we can bring such critical inquiry into the classroom by asking straightforward questions about Shakespeare's stories.

The preponderance of scholarship on cross-dressed characters like Viola or Rosalind unraveling the gender binary would seem to suggest that Tran's identity has been integral to Shakespearean performance and criticism. However, it is because of structural and social inequalities in casting practices those transgender actors seldom in any other roles involving Shakespeare's plays. Living, self-identified transgender people hence have experienced a privileged and completely disposable relationship to William Shakespeare.

Defining what every female was supposed to be and do was an act of Renaissance culture, just like it has been for other times. For Shakespeare, as well as for a majority of the Renaissance society, women as the feminine represented the following virtues which have their meaning in relationship to the male; patience, obedience, constancy, humility, sexual purity, piety, and silence. However, as gender characteristics are not laws of nature and were socially constructed, there was an easy cross-over of these traits into both genders.

Defining masculine and feminine characteristics permitted Shakespeare and other writers to draw males with certain "feminine" characteristics and females with certain "masculine" characteristics. The cross-over of masculine and feminine characteristics into both males and females with relative ease shows how it was fairly easy to employ both men and women and utilize them on the stage. They were used to play strong female characters like Lady Macbeth, Juliet, Cleopatra, and Kate, the Shrew. Contemporary audiences who were so set on separating a female from a male would have great difficulty returning to this standard practice of the Renaissance.

Indeed, both masculine and feminine characteristics were different parts of what the Renaissance considered "human nature," and every gender participated in both sets of characteristics to varying degrees. For example, take the act of weeping. Although both genders were essentially "allowed" to weep during tough emotional circumstances, tears were thought of as feminine (even though they were not exclusive to females).

Just like the Renaissance defined female roles, it also delegated certain behaviors to males. Theirs was a patriarchal society. We catch a glimpse of this patriarchy in plays like Romeo and Juliet with the power of Lord Capulet. It is easy to see that the male had a place and a role to play, just like the female had a lesser place and a role. The woman is either in her father's house as Juliet is or in that of her husband as Lady Macbeth is.

Notice that in *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is observed only within the castle at Inverness, and it's her duty to prepare for the arrival of King Duncan. Lord Capulet also underscores this female responsibility when he announces, in anticipation of Paris and Juliet's marriage that he will "play the huswife for this once."

In *Macbeth*, like in the Renaissance society, men were expected to engage in public affairs (as soldiers, politicians, leaders), be talkers, make decisions, and move events forward. They led lives that were duty-bound (mostly to the state), aggressive, and self-satisfying. On the other hand, women were usually expected to assume a more passive role. For example, at the beginning of the play *Romeo and Juliet*, when the boys are milling around the streets of Verona and also talking dirty about girls, Sampson (one of Capulet's servants) remarks, "And therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall; therefore I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall." The passage is full of instances where the thinking reflects that women are weaker and that they merely exist for male sexual gratification. Women were thought to be emotionally, intellectually, and morally weaker than men by society.

However, Shakespeare rises above the stereotypical views of Renaissance society since he portrays women as more than passive vessels. The love of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, is an equitable experience. Each assumes responsibilities for making their relationship work. Lady Macbeth goes beyond Juliet's collaborative nature and even takes charge of her relationship with Macbeth. When Macbeth sends his wife a letter consisting of all the strange happenings and prophecies so that she may know that what is promised is promised not only to him but to her, he refers to her as "my dear partner of greatness."

There were certain characteristics that were associated with males and females exclusively during this period. Shakespeare refers to this distinction between the masculine and feminine as a juxtaposition that is also glaringly apparent in the female monarch of his day, Queen Elizabeth. The chief worry of Elizabethan males was to get the Queen married off to someone so that she could produce children. She surely knew that if she had done that, she would have lost the great power that she had as an unmarried Renaissance princess. Elizabeth, however, was not above playing with gender distinctions whenever it was to her advantage.

Like Elizabeth, the heroines of the romantic comedies - Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Viola in *Twelfth Night* - also reflects this blend of feminine and masculine attitudes and behaviors. Although they are expected to take up caring roles for their fathers, brothers, or husbands, they are often also "masculine" in these actions. As "strong females," they demonstrate more self-awareness than the men; they use their reason, they talk, they are mobile, often found in the out-of-doors rather than inside their fathers' or husbands' houses. They control the action. For example, in the play *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia fights a case in court and makes Shylock fall by tempering justice with mercy and also by controlling the forces that help her live happily with Bassanio.

Shakespeare also comments on the power of women. We cannot help but understand that even though Portia's father has sought to control her destiny, she resolves differently. She not only marries the man of her choice but also defends in an intelligent and scholarly way his kin Antonio in court against the Jewish merchant - albeit disguised as a man. Similarly, Shylock's daughter disowns him to run off with her Christian suitor- only to be abandoned. This allows us to ponder on the autonomy of women in society as well as deliberating the age-old question of whether children should follow their own hearts or what their parents want them to follow - an issue that is still fairly contentious in many cultures and societies around the world.

In addition to the merit in examining literary characters totally within the context of the work in which they appear, it is also essential to have some background knowledge of the time in which the works were written. These heroines are restricted to Renaissance standards only because the reading and discussions could limit the outcome of the study by carefully demarcating the boundaries of the Renaissance woman used as a model for Shakespeare's work. Quite the opposite happens, in the end, owing to the disagreements which appear in research conducted on gender in that period.

Scholars are not in agreement as to whether Shakespeare's women and men reflect his time or defy his time, whether they are women and men for all ages or the Renaissance only, whether they reflect society's attitude or only the author's attitude, and whether the Renaissance men and women were really liberated thinkers or people tightly restricted by their society. Ironically and delightfully, the more reading one does about the Renaissance period, the more unclear the issue becomes.

Research has shown that there is a problem of gender and cultural discrimination within both the English and history A-level syllabi, but this can be eliminated if new subject content, texts, and objectives are added to the syllabi. Moreover, new learning outcomes should be added to acknowledge the need for students to identify constructions of gender roles and representations of culture in set texts in the English syllabus. In this syllabus, there needs to be a learning outcome related to women's suffrage. This paper suggests that if these changes are observed in the status quo, the syllabi will possess the power to break gender and cultural barriers and expose students to these regions of knowledge in post-secondary education.

The set drama texts consist of two of Shakespeare's plays, Othello and Romeo and Juliet. Both plays are firmly established within the literary canon and will certainly help students to continue developing their awareness about Shakespeare's works within the Renaissance period. However, many think that the lack of inclusion of early women dramatists will have the potential to create yet another gender imbalance in society. This will not only give the students the false impression that no plays were written by women around the Renaissance and Restoration periods, but they will also not gain knowledge about literary works by women that challenged dominant ideologies of gender in the early modern period.

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