

Shakespeare and gender



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Authors often perform the task of cultural historians, eternalizing with their written word the popular perspectives and social opinions of their time.

Shakespeare himself perfectly encapsulated in his writing the Renaissance mentality towards gender, and the roles and responsibilities men and women both play in society. In his time- as well as still in ours- women are seen as possessing virtuous traits, such as piety, obedience, chastity, patience, and modesty. Men, on the other hand, fulfill honorable roles, demonstrating great wisdom, bravery, gallantry, power, logic, and strength. However, Shakespeare went beyond reflecting his era's beliefs, and actually questioned, challenged, and modified those ideals of gender.

In Shakespeare's plays, Henry VI Part 3 and Richard III, the notion of gender is frequently disputed. Oftentimes, characters do not fit into a perfect mold of "masculinity" or "femininity," but rather, these traits overlap and characters behave in complex, fluid, and simply universally human manners. The women were cunning, and artfully grasped at power through their speech, family and marriages. The men were sometimes weak, crumbling at the will of their enemies, defenseless and unreasonable. Thus, Shakespeare is raising the question of whether gender is a natural arrangement that simply and effortlessly happens, or if it is a socially created binary that requires frequent reinforcement. Understanding Shakespeare's intricate construction of gender in his plays will not only give us insight into Renaissance generalizations of gender, but it will also afford us modern-day readers the opportunity of confronting our own notions of gender.

This is not to say, however, that these plays did not follow, to some extent, the conventional ideas of gender. Several of the female characters in both

Henry VI and in Richard III have moments of sheer femininity, where they display nothing but the expected, lady-like qualities of a woman. Women are often commended for being compliant and meek, whilst also being virtuous and graceful.

Lady Elizabeth Grey masterfully achieves said balance, and demonstrates her virtuous elegance perfectly in Act III Scene 2 of Henry VI Part 3. After losing her husband, the widowed Lady Elizabeth Grey is left without any lands, and without any power. Although King Edward's proposition, of giving the lady her lands if she loves him, would solve Elizabeth's problems, she immediately rejects him, thus maintaining decorum. In fact, she describes the "love" she feels for Edward as "love till death, my humble thanks, my prayers, that love which virtues begs and virtue grants." (III. 2. 73, 74) Lady Elizabeth is careful to make it clearly known that she is in no way behaving inappropriately or without modesty, but is rather being, as she herself puts it, virtuous. However, when Edward proposes to, for lack of better words, make an honest woman out of her, she is quick to accept his offer. This scene does not read as romantic or sweet, but rather, as a woman in need practically selling herself to maintain her and her children's class status and comfortable lifestyle, but doing so in a socially respectable manner.

This exchange is very similar to when Richard tries to woo the Lady Anne Neville in Act I Scene 2 of Richard III. At first, Lady Anne is continually hesitant, rejecting Richard's attempts and even insulting him. However, Richard's perseverance, his permanently unfazed and his flattering character ultimately drove the lady to accept his proposal. Although we, the readers, are aware of Richard's less than romantic intentions for wanting to marry

her, we are still expected to believe that she fulfilled her womanly duty of succumbing to Richard's demands, and agreeing to marry him.

Similarly, quite a few of the male characters in Shakespeare's plays embody social expectations of masculinity, and what it is to be a "manly" man. Men are expected to show strength, both of body and mind. The perfect gentleman is also supposed to strike a balance between being honorable, clever and reasonable in his demeanor, as well as powerful, tough, and brave in his actions.

In Richard III, the character of Henry Richmond is almost sanctified, painted to be an exemplary man and leader. He is noble, righteous, and aspires to achieve peace, but does not crumble in the face of war. His speech to his men before battle in Act V, scene 5 can only be described as heroic and stirring. He comes off as sympathetic, caring, and admirable. He refers to his soldiers as "loving countrymen," and he claims that their cause is dutiful, divinely ordained by God himself. Henry displays an optimistic yet modest attitude, and treats his men as his equal, his companions in a just and virtuous battle. Of course, it is important to note that, having written this play under the reign of a Tudor monarch, it is likely that Shakespeare would try to portray the original Tudor, Henry Richmond, a strong, decisive, brilliant leader. However, the fact still stands that Richmond exemplified what a man ought to be.

Another character that also upheld the social expectations for men, albeit in a slightly less conventional manner, is Warwick. In Act III, Scene 3 of Henry VI Part 3, Warwick changed sides, from York to Lancaster, after receiving

news of Edward's hasty marriage to the Lady Elizabeth Grey. While it is easy to assume that it was Edward's betrayal and humiliation of Warwick that caused him to shift allegiances, it is nonsensical that the loyal and truly dedicated Warwick would switch sides due to such a superficial reason. Warwick did not let his wounded ego get the best of him, and did not sell his allegiance in order to mend his pride. Rather, it was Edward's lack of responsibility and judgment that convinced Warwick. Warwick is honorable and righteous, and he simply wishes to serve a deserving king. Warwick applied his own personal beliefs of morals, honor and duty, and strived to support a dignified king. There are many characters, however, who transgressed the roles they were meant to perform, and acted as they pleased, regardless of their gender or their social standing. Many of the women in Henry VI Part 3 and Richard III manage to exercise a great deal of power despite their social roles. In fact, it is often their position as women that allow them to gain said influence and authority.

The primordial example of this is none other than Queen Margaret, who never fails to cross the faint border between male and female behavior, and embody any characteristic she chooses to. Margaret breaks the norm for women in her times, and does "evil" and "manly" things in order to do what she deems correct and protect her son's best interest. This makes her a thoughtful and realistic, multi-dimensional portrayal of a female character in a work of fiction. In Act I, Scene 4 of the play, Henry VI Part 3, Margaret takes on a masculine role when she tortures and eventually kills Richard, the Duke of York. She goes against everything that was expected of a lady. She is not demure, gentle, and kind, but rather domineering, cruel and revengeful. She

taunts York, belittling him and his attempt at usurping the crown. Her placing a paper crown on his head is a culmination of the passionate fury she feels toward York, and the ultimate manifestation of the ridicule she wishes him to feel. By showing York his son's bloodied handkerchief, she is not only trying to hurt him even further, she is acting against nature, taking pride and reward in the death of a child, a son. Margaret is ruthless and violent, but she behaves so fiercely in order to protect her son Richard, and secure the future she ardently believes is rightfully his. Her maternal instincts, her love and willingness to protect for her son can be considered as a fundamental, basic part of femininity, thus making her essentially feminine. By placing her in this paradoxical split characterization, Shakespeare managed to create a female character that was incredibly intricate- she was both harsh and merciless, and caring and maternal. A mother and a warrior.

The character of Margaret possesses both male and female characteristics, and these two different ranges come together in one victorious, powerful human being. This character creation reflects a joining of masculine and feminine, and can be related to Shakespeare's queen and patron, Queen Elizabeth, whom perfectly personified this very juxtaposition of masculinity and femininity.

Many of the female characters, aside from Margaret, are also written as multi-dimensional, complex women. Lady Elizabeth Grey, for instance, was very much an ideal lady in Henry VI, Part 3. She accepted Edward's impetuous marriage proposal, and she ran for cover when she was in danger. However, in Act IV, Scene 4 of Richard III, she summons up the pluck to address Richard. In fact, what Queen Elizabeth said to Richard regarding his <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeare-and-gender/>

desire to marry her daughter, the Princess Elizabeth, is perhaps one of the harshest, fiercest, and most well-deserved thing someone has ever told Richard. Elizabeth used cruel wit to bring Richard down. She answers Richard's question of how to woo Elizabeth with a list of preposterous ideas, bringing to light several of Richard's heinous crimes. For example, she suggests he " Send to her, by the man that slew her brothers, a pair of bleeding hearts; thereon engrave ' Edward and York'; then haply she will weep." (IV. 4. 276-278) She goes on to tell Richard that he could also present to her " a handkerchief; which, say to her, did drain the purple sap from her sweet brother's body ad bid her dry her weeping eyes therewith." (IV. 4. 281-283) Elizabeth is, of course, referencing Richard's murder of her two sons, the princes Edward and York. She doesn't stop there, and continues to list more of Richard's evil deeds, like his murder of George, Duke of Clarence, and her brother, Rivers, and his own wife, the Lady Anne Neville. By doing so, Elizabeth is overstepping her role as diffident and compliant, and brutally defending her daughter with a sharp, unapologetic tongue.

It is curious to note that at the beginning of Act V, Scene 4, all three women- Queen Margaret, Queen Elizabeth, and the Duchess of York- are all gathered around, tied in conversation by their hatred of Richard, a man. Margaret and Elizabeth, whom have often been pitted against each other, serving as one another's foil, are now united in their efforts to destroy Richard. The scene does seem to present these women as witch figures, since they are plotting evil and casting curses. Also, it would not pass the Bechdal test, a modern creation which simply tests if a story contains at least one scene in which two or more female characters have a conversation about anything at all,

other than men. While the scene does have flaws, they do not necessarily take away from its merit. This scene introduces a rudimentary version of sisterhood. These women are united and work together, outside the boundaries of their gender roles, in order to achieve power and take down a cold and oppressive man. Likewise, there is no lack of male characters that fall short of their masculine expectations, and behave in what can be considered a “womanly” fashion. Richard, the Duke of York, for instance, withers to pieces in Act I, Scene 4 of Henry VI, Part 3. Defeated and hopeless, York did not fight his fate by fighting back or trying to save himself, but rather resigned himself to gracefully accept his inevitable death. In lines 25-28, York states “the sands are number’d that made up my life; Here I must stay, here my life must end.” Rather than playing the part of a valiant man, father and pretender to the throne, he maintains an unaffected and haughty façade, attempting to seem composed in the face of death, but fails to do so, and surrenders to petty behavior, such as not speaking to the other characters, and offending Margaret.

It is remarkable that York’s choice of insults towards Margaret directly attacked her femininity. He called her a “she-wolf,” suggesting that she is violent and merciless in her behavior, akin to a wild animal or a monster. He also refers to Margaret as an “Amazonian trull,” thus accusing her of being a savage prostitute. This particular offense is interesting because it simultaneously reprimands her for not fitting her social role of being soft, mild-mannered, obedient, and made a weapon of her sexuality. York spat out those two bitter, poisonous words with the intent of disintegrating Margaret’s credibility and character, based only on her gender and her assumed

sexuality. Not much seems to have changed, as a woman's promiscuity (or lack thereof) continues to serve as a fundamental excuse for criticism.

Shakespeare's plays afford us modern readers the opportunity to understand Renaissance culture and perspective on gender roles, and also push us to think critically about our own society. By presenting his readers with characters that both fulfilled their socially expected gender roles, but also acted outside of it for political power, familial love, or simply fear, Shakespeare was able to introduce the novel idea that humans do not fit into a closed box based on their sex, but rather, can choose to act in any manner and to any degree they choose, despite their gender.