

2003

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Recommended Citation

Greer, Conley (2003) "To Be A Woman: Shakespeare's Patriarchal Viewpoint," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 5 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol5/iss1/14>

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To Be A Woman: Shakespeare's Patriarchal Viewpoint

Conley Greer

William Shakespeare reveals an uncanny insight into the social problems facing Elizabethan women throughout his plays. Shakespearean female characters take on a variety of roles and traits depending on the genre of the play. The women of Shakespeare's comedies are, to some degree, in control and make life interesting for their male counterparts in the quest for love. On the other hand, Shakespeare's tragedies and romances reveal women to be much more complex creatures involved in greater philosophical struggles. Shakespeare's characterization of women necessitates further study and discussion to fully appreciate his genius for interpreting human nature. Two plays in particular, *Othello*, *The Moor of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, provide excellent female characters for scholarly analysis. Through his development and portrayal of the female persona, Shakespeare shows how fully he appreciates the difficulties involved in being a woman. Although he makes a conscious effort in both of these works to keep women under the constant glare of the suspicious male eye, and although he generally reflects the values of his patriarchal society, Shakespeare goes to great lengths to present his views on the problematic nature of womanhood and offers his own vision of the ideal status for women in his patriarchal society.

The Elizabethan society of Shakespeare's day was completely dominated by masculine thinking that governed all aspects of daily life. Notions of male-domination greatly constrained Shakespeare's female characters. Initial readings of any of Shakespeare's works could, conceivably, convince novice readers that Shakespeare was a male chauvinist with little regard for the status of women. Research proves that this is hardly the case. Although ruled by a queen, Elizabethan England relied on the male notion of socially accepted norms. Shakespeare simply operated within the guidelines afforded him by English society. In *Othello*, Desdemona must plead before the Senate for the right to marry Othello; Brabantio, as her father, traditionally reserved the right to choose her husband. Although this idea might seem sexist, it was wholly acceptable in Elizabethan society. Feminist critic Jeanne

Addison Roberts places the societal norms of Shakespeare's time in perspective with regards to modern criticism:

There is no point, of course, in blaming Shakespeare for this lopsided picture of the world. He could have only known a patriarchal society. His actors were male, and competent boy actors for female roles may have been in short supply. We all know that compared to most of his contemporary playwrights Shakespeare showed astonishing insight into a variety of female dilemmas and strengths. (367)

Knowledge of the society surrounding Shakespeare places his works in a completely different context: Shakespeare demonstrated an intimate knowledge of female psychology and fully understood the challenges involved in being a woman. His presentation of women was dependent upon the thinking of the society surrounding him. However, though the society was patriarchal, new ideas and thinking were evolving that would provide Shakespeare with a new model for his female characters and enable him to present a new vision of womanhood.

Desdemona, for example, personifies the new social attitudes sweeping across England. She chooses to marry an outsider, and in doing so, she breaks from the traditional mold cast for women by expressing her individualism. Desdemona's actions are in accord with the changes affecting all of England and Europe. If Shakespeare needed a model for female expression, the societal reforms engulfing England provided the perfect prototype. Martha Andersen-Thom elaborates on the source for Shakespeare's ever-changing conception of womanhood:

A changing intellectual climate, vastly freshened by Humanism, and a changing social environment, newly liberated by Puritanism, provided new ideas about women and real models of women which imparted new vitality to female characters on the stage. Humanist ideals were personified in splendidly educated and accomplished aristocratic ladies; Queen Elizabeth was exemplary. Puritan ideals of women as literate, independent helpmates were personified in the good wives of prosperous London merchants. (262)

Unlike textual sources used in his other works, Shakespeare had a living example in his daily life from which to mold the women of his plays. As a result, Shakespeare created very complex, independent female characters that are still cause for debate today. In Othello, Desdemona proves to be an excellent example of the complexity of Shakespearean women.

Desdemona is one of the most widely criticized women in all of Shakespeare's works. She seems to be a paradoxical combination of staunch individualism and willing submissiveness. Shakespeare portrays her as an attractive, intelligent Venetian fully capable of stating her own arguments and making her own decisions; yet, she embodies the wifely ideals through her loyalties, at great individual cost, to her husband. These traits are demonstrated before the senate and Brabantio as Desdemona defends her marriage to Othello:

My noble Father.

I do perceive here a divided duty.

To you I am bound for life and education;

My life and education both do learn me

How to respect you. You are the lord of duty;

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my
husband,

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

(1.3.182-89)

Desdemona willingly admits that she owes her life to her father. She remains submissive to the idea that she will forever be in his debt for granting her the comfortable lifestyle she currently enjoys. However, she points out to Brabantio that she is behaving in the same manner as her mother did in choosing Brabantio as a husband. It proves to be a compelling argument that Brabantio cannot refute and, reluctantly, must agree with. These apparently contradictory qualities make Desdemona, in some scholarly circles, an ideal representative of the new Shakespearean female. Marianne Novy supports the viewpoint of Desdemona as the ideal Shakespearean woman: "It seems that Shakespeare's ideal woman is active but willing to subordinate herself[...]. She can harmoniously combine strength and flexibility, individualism and compromise. Tragic heroines like Juliet, Cordelia, and Desdemona also combine

both of these qualities attractively” (21). In Desdemona, there is a sense of feminine duality and individual expression foreign to the Elizabethan world. She recognizes the authority of the constrictive patriarchal hierarchy in place through her homage to her father, but she also expresses the will to choose her own husband while operating within the established boundaries of that same hierarchy; she combines traditional beliefs with modern ideas. Desdemona’s duality extends into her social interactions, and that, according to Shakespeare, presents a problem that Elizabethan society could not handle.

Desdemona seemingly appears in the context of two extremes throughout Othello: She is a saintly figure incapable of wrongdoing, or she is a promiscuous whore unworthy of trust. The concept of a woman existing between the two extremes was beyond comprehension; she had to be one or the other. The two extremist views of womanhood are represented well by Iago and Cassio. Iago takes her individuality and twists it into promiscuity while Cassio upholds a romanticized view of a saintly virgin worthy of praise. S.N. Garner, in “Shakespeare’s Desdemona,” cites a conversation between Iago and Cassio to demonstrate the extreme views of Desdemona:

Iago Our general cast us thus early for the love
of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore
blame. He hath not yet made wanton the night
with her, and she is sport for Jove.

Cassio She’s a most exquisite lady.

Iago And, I’ll warrant her, full of game.

Cassio Indeed, she’s a most fresh and delicate creature.

Iago What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a
parley to provocation.

Cassio An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.

Iago And when she speaks, is it not an alarm to love?

Cassio She is indeed perfection. (2.3.14-28)

Shakespeare uses Iago and Cassio to illustrate similar extremes present in Elizabethan society. Neither Iago nor Cassio could comprehend the evolution of feminist thinking; she was either a slut or a saint. The presence of such extremist views illustrates the limitations of Elizabethan male thinking. S.N. Garner elaborates on this thought: “Desdemona’s character is neither simple nor any more

easily defined than Iago's or Othello's. Any effort to describe it must take into account of what she says and does as well as what other characters say about her and how their views are limited by their own personalities and values" (235).

Desdemona's individuality, in the end, is her undoing. Iago uses her liberated actions to turn Othello against Desdemona. Harmless things such as touching another man's hand or pleading on behalf of another man are the catalyst for disaster. Desdemona does not fully operate within the boundaries of the male notion of accepted behavior and as a result, puts herself at great risk. By intervening on Cassio's behalf with Othello, she enters the world of military politics and, in doing so, transcends her gender's traditional role. This only adds more fuel to the raging fire of jealousy burning within Othello's heart.

Shakespeare's use of jealousy as a theme is a critical component in understanding his new vision of womanhood. To male society, any behavior of a woman outside of her role as the subjective wife was cause for alarm. Any portrayal of suspicious behavior by women without harsh consequences or punishment would have placed Shakespeare in opposition to the patriarchal society that supported his work. By pandering to male suspicions in the patriarchal society around him, Shakespeare puts his characterization of new womanhood on the stage while satisfying the expectations of his male audience. The theme of jealousy allowed Shakespeare to accomplish his artistic goals while still accommodating his audience.

Othello's jealousy, although greatly agitated by Iago's meddling, is a result of the preexisting fears prevalent throughout Elizabethan England that the husband might fall victim of cuckoldry. Shakespeare uses his female characters, in this case Desdemona, to escalate the feelings of mistrust between the sexes. Marianne Novy validates Shakespeare's preference for the theme of infidelity: "[I]t is interesting that Shakespeare so often portrays anti-feminism in his male characters. He pursues the theme of male suspicion of cuckoldry in both tragedy and comedy" (23). Even though Desdemona commits no infidelity, her actions do not always fall within the limits of patriarchal thought, and that draws further scrutiny from the already suspicious glares of the male characters surrounding her. Her actions, lying about the handkerchief for instance, at least justify some level of suspicion from Othello.

Although Shakespeare clearly sympathized with Desdemona to some degree, he presented her in a suspicious light toward the end of the play in order to appeal to the patriarchal point of view. Marianne Novy elaborates on this concept: "Shakespeare clearly found male suspicion of women an interesting theme to explore, and frequently presented men who held these suspicions in ways that earn the sympathy of many in his audience" (23).

Othello also reveals another of the many preconceived notions of women held by Elizabethan men; women cannot be trusted and are prone to cheat on their husbands. Othello's murder of Desdemona reveals the potential consequences associated with the distrust present between man and woman. Given the patriarchal nature of the society for which the play was performed, Shakespeare enunciates two basic concepts that acknowledge the society's values while reflecting his own vision: women should express themselves as individuals as long as they did not cross the lines of accepted female behavior, and men should never whole-heartedly trust a woman because of her unpredictability. Shakespeare returned to these masculine concepts often and expanded upon them where he deemed fit.

Whereas *Othello* placed women in a suspicious light, *Measure for Measure* is laden with a misogynic, or woman hating/fearing, philosophy. There is a sense of genuine male fear of women throughout *Measure for Measure*. In order to enable men to cope with these fears, Shakespeare presents women as belonging to one of four categories in the hope that by understanding which category a woman falls into, the male, in turn, will know how to act towards the woman. If *Othello* warns of the dangers of crossing traditional gender boundaries, *Measure for Measure* goes a step further by demonstrating those feminine boundaries in the masculine personas of Angelo and the Duke.

It is with regard to *Measure for Measure* that Shakespeare receives some of his greatest sexist criticism for his portrayal of women. The male characters in the play express a misogynic anxiety originating in the masculine perception that women are the source of the evils that plague society. Claudio's predicament at the start of the play alludes to the potentially destructive power of the female body: unless someone intervenes, his impregnation of Juliet out of wedlock will cost him his head. Shakespeare goes beyond the point of moral criticism; he issues stern warnings and eventually defines the

acceptable role for women in patriarchal society. The initial warnings for men originate at Isabella's convent. Shakespeare cleverly uses two nuns to warn men about the dangers of an uncensored, single woman. David Sundelson points out the significance of Francisca's counsel to Isabella upon Lucio's arrival. Francisca warns:

When you have vowed, you must not speak
with men
But in the presence of the prioress;
Then, if you speak, you must not show your face;
Or if you show your face, you must not speak.
(1.4.10-13)

An attractive face and a sharp tongue equate to earthly trouble for the human race, specifically the male gender. David Sundelson explains: "[T]he rules of Isabella's convent seem designed to protect men more than women. Men must not confront the double danger of a pretty face and a confident tongue, and as a whole the play reinforces these rules by keeping a tight rein on energy and initiative" (86). For Shakespeare, the easiest way to manage feminine energy is through marriage. He reinforces the "marriage ideal" through his representation of the unmarried woman.

Shakespeare's single women all suffer from various forms of oppression and strife. The first unwed woman encountered, Juliet, is pregnant and her fiancé is in prison awaiting execution for their act of fornication out of wedlock. Juliet faces a host of troublesome issues: she is pregnant with a bastard child, her would-be husband will soon be dead, and no logical man will ever marry her in light of her circumstances. Shakespeare presents Juliet to the audience via the opinions of the men surrounding her. Mario DiGangi elaborates on the male perception of Juliet:

[H]er reputation will be stained with a child
unlawfully begotten if not unlawfully born.
Angelo, legally precise in his categorization,
describes Juliet in neither the Provost's class
terms as "gentlewoman" nor the Duke's
disturbingly physical terms as "fair one"
(2.3.10,19), but as the "fornicatress" (2.2.230),
thus investing her far-from-airy nothing with a
local habitation and name, (which Pompey was
unable to do). (595)

There is a definite need expressed for the classification of women in regards to their societal status; a woman was a virgin, a wife, a widow or a whore. There was no middle ground. DiGangi continues:

The punitive zeal which seeks Claudio's death seeks to over-write Juliet's reputation with gross characters. Therefore, the Provost's claim that Juliet has "blister'd her report" by "falling in the flaws of her own youth" (2.3.11-12) shows more than his [Shakespeare's] mastery of metaphor. His image of a painful imprint on the body aligns Juliet with another "fallen woman": the prostitute who was branded on the forehead by the state or who carried the syphilitic blister. Consequently, Juliet's body shares the "shame" imputed to the common body of the whore (2.3.36), if not the actual mark impressed upon it." (595)

Shakespeare reduces Juliet to a common street prostitute in the eyes of the male authority. The descriptions offered by the male characters place Juliet in the most unfavorable light possible. Her child will be paid for by Claudio's death, and her body will bear her status as an unclean female. Juliet is clearly on the far-left of the Elizabethan central ideal of the married woman. Isabella's position on the far-right is just as problematic.

Shakespeare presents Isabella as an attractive young virgin choosing a life of abstinence in a covenant over the secular world. The role of a nun does not fit into the Shakespearean mold for the role of the female; a nun will never marry and, therefore, cannot have children. Mario DiGangi cites a conversation between Angelo and Isabella that suggests a woman must prove she is worthy of being called a woman:

Angelo Be that you are,
 That is, a woman; if you be more,
 you're none.
 If you be one—as you are well
 express'd
 By all external warrants—show it now,
 By putting on the destin'd livery.

Isabella I have no tongue but one; gentle my lord,
Let me entreat you speak the former language. (2.4.133-39)

Angelo directly confronts Isabella by challenging her femininity. Angelo alleges that a virgin, much less a nun, cannot be a real woman. DiGangi explains the reasoning behind this: "To be 'a woman,' Isabella must conceive, become pregnant. If she will show her essential femininity 'plainly' (or, punning on the French *plein*, 'fully'), she needs to exhibit more 'external warrants' than mere attire and complexion" (596-97). As Juliet has societal limits because of her promiscuity, Isabella has similar constraints because of her chastity. In both cases, male authority is the proclaiming voice of what "a woman" should be. Shakespeare presents both Juliet and Isabella as believable characters with very problematic circumstances surrounding them. The only way for a woman to avoid such problems was to give up her sexual independence and hand that sexuality over to a man in marriage.

The ending of *Measure for Measure* reveals the only accepted view for women in the patriarchal world of William Shakespeare. The Duke's insensitive questioning of Mariana reinforces the marriage ideal:

Duke What, are you married?
Mariana No, my lord.
Duke Are you a maid?
Mariana No, my lord.
Duke A widow, then?
Mariana Neither my lord.
Duke Why you are nothing then; neither maid, widow, nor wife! (5.1.172-9)

The Duke knows Mariana lost her virginity to Angelo in the "bed trick." In doing so, she has relegated herself to a status similar to Juliet's and Isabella's: she is nothing. The Duke categorizes female status coldly as he questions Mariana. A female could only exist in a state relative to marriage: a virgin awaiting marriage, a married woman, or a married woman whose husband is dead. Without marriage, the man is not in control of the female, and that was unthinkable as far as the Duke was concerned. A woman who did not fall into one of the Duke's social categories did not, in male

society's opinion, exist at all. Referring to the Duke's questioning of Mariana, David Sundelson expands upon this sense of male insecurity by stating: "Angelo has tried once to define a woman in a limited, reassuring way—"if you be more, you're none"—and the attempt continues in the Duke's catechism of Mariana. [W]e see the play's fearfulness about women and its willingness to obliterate their mystery ("You are nothing") rather than embrace it" (90). Shakespeare's presentation of women in *Measure for Measure* reveals as much about male anxieties as about female frustrations. In the end, a slew of weddings are announced and the male patriarchy remains preserved.

Othello and *Measure for Measure* present a very narrow-minded, male dominated world in terms of female expression and sexual freedom. For the most part, Shakespeare's use of women involves a problematic situation that requires a male solution. Some scholars suggest Desdemona's independent nature or Isabella's fickleness merit stern intervention by men. Marianne Novy boldly states: "Even in *Othello*, *Winter's Tale*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *Measure for Measure*, male suspicion is portrayed so convincingly that some critics think that the women must have done something to justify it" (23). Shakespeare must have possessed an intimate understanding of feminine psychology and behavior to concoct such believable predicaments. Feminist criticism often ignores this important detail.

The context of the world in which William Shakespeare wrote his plays determined much of the sexist overtones present in both *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. As discussed in the opening two paragraphs of this paper, it is necessary to understand that the patriarchal world was all that Shakespeare knew. In this context, his portrayal of the problem of domestic violence in *Othello*, and the misogynic attitude of men represented by Angelo in *Measure for Measure* speak volumes about the independence and strong wills of both Desdemona and Isabella respectively. Marianne Novy sums up this interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of women eloquently by saying:

We can learn a lot from Shakespeare about how far a brilliant man can go in trying to understand women, in trying to understand the ambivalence that he and other men have towards women, and in trying to understand the interactions between women's behavior and men's ambivalence. We cannot learn from him the new possibilities for being a woman in the nonsexist society that feminists hope to create, nor should we expect to. (26)

Shakespeare wrote his plays for predominately male audiences. His patrons were male, and most of his money came from the pockets of men. Still, he effectively showed the trauma and potential tragedy that can result when the two sexes do not trust each other.

His understanding of women provided realistic, believable confrontations on the stage that the audience could comprehend. In that regard, he was a genius. However, Shakespeare's primary purpose in his presentation of women was to support the male patriarchal beliefs in place throughout England. *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* support this patriarchal view entirely. Whether or not Shakespeare was a male chauvinist will always be a subject for debate among scholars. What cannot be argued is the astonishing insight he had into the human experience, be it male or female.

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