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William Shakespeare: Sixteenth Century Feminist

by Virginia Bateman

(English 228 Shakespeare)

The Assignment: Write an essay that will demonstrate your understanding of and acculturation to Shakespeare, intrigued by his plays closely examined up to midterm.

Although not immediately evident to modern sensibilities, William Shakespeare was in many ways a sixteenth-century feminist. Shakespeare hides pro-woman philosophies especially in his comedies, writing in a time period when speech was heavily censored. All plays had to meet the standards of the Master of the Revels who prevented the presence of blasphemous language, the representation of living monarchs on stage, and made sure theater conformed to the tastes and interests of the English court ("Censorship"). Renaissance society did not traditionally value the freedom of women, and this is why Shakespeare is not viewed as a feminist by modern interpretations. There were only two socially acceptable positions for Renaissance women, marriage and entering a convent. The upbringing of middle and upper class girls stressed the teaching of household management skills and the feminine values of chastity, obedience, and silence ("Women").

In *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare introduces the reader to two uniquely strong heroines who are responding to the confines of Renaissance society. Katherine, the heroine of *The Taming of the Shrew*, is used as an example of how strong Renaissance woman should not behave, while Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is portrayed as the ideal woman who is beautiful and obedient while retaining her strength and independence. These women serve as a guide to Renaissance women, teaching them to be strong, independent, intelligent, and yet still wisely conform to the system, presenting a uniquely Shakespearean breed of feminism.

As a result of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, questions were beginning to arise about women's place in society. Traditionally, Renaissance society viewed the family as a mini-state, containing the same hierarchal structure as the government in order to be harmonious. This system was based on an order where men were the heads of households, and women were considered to be naturally subordinate. If women were naturally subordinate, how could a queen rule (Levine 21)?

At the same time, Puritanism was a major factor in Shakespearean feminism. Puritans believed in spiritual equality among the sexes, questioning the old Catholic doctrine of female subordination (Dusinberre 3). They began to attack traditional Renaissance customs such as forced marriage, marriage for money, child marriages, and marriages between very old men and young women. This was an attempt to create the ideal marriage and, thus, eliminate adultery (Dusinberre 3).

In *The Taming of the Shrew* Shakespeare addresses most of these issues in the form of a comedy. A major source of humor is Gremio, the older suitor trying to capture the younger Bianca's hand. By mocking this situation Shakespeare is objecting to the widely accepted practice of families arranging for men to marry significantly younger women ("Women"). Signifying the old ideal of marriage, Hortensio vows to marry a nice, but wealthy widow (4.2.37). There are many dowry negotiations, part of the old view of marriage. Bianca is viewed as the classic Renaissance ideal of what a woman should be, while Katherine is a new Puritan independent spirit. Shakespeare is clearly influenced by the battle between old Renaissance ideals and new Puritan ideals, which creates much of the conflict in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Later, *The Merchant of Venice* further explores this concept of what makes an ideal marriage and what constitutes the ideal woman. By examining the marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo and Portia and Bassanio Shakespeare compares a traditional marriage in which Jessica is submissive with an untraditional marriage in which Portia not subordinate. Yet, Portia is portrayed as the ideal woman by blending old Renaissance and Puritan ideas of what a woman should be.

Adhering to tradition, Shakespeare makes the dowry a major theme in his comedies. Customarily, middle and upper class Renaissance women could not be married without a dowry. Without marriage women were left few socially acceptable means for survival other than joining the church (King 28). Dowries were a necessity of Renaissance life and so emphasized in Shakespearean comedy. Petruchio's main concern is assurance of Katherine's dowry in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Bassanio immediately mentions that Portia is an heiress in *The Merchant of Venice* (*Shrew*, 1.2.186 and *Venice*, 1.1.168).

In act two of *The Taming of the Shrew*, it seems that Bianca's suitors are bidding for her as though an item up for auction. To the twenty-first century reader this practice seems degrading, but in Shakespearean time this was commonplace. The fact that Shakespeare draws so much attention to the practice by taking it to an extreme level leads one to believe he is objecting to this practice, disguising his objections with elements of comedy (2.1.366-410).

This is not to say there were no advantages for women and their families through a Renaissance marriage. Daughters were able to form alliances between powerful families with their marriages, and this was considered in marriage negotiations as well as a dowry (King 31).

Since Renaissance women needed to get married in order to support themselves, very few lived independently. The ones who were financially independent were left independent by the death of their husbands, explaining the importance of the heroes in Shakespeare's comedies having to prove their wealth in order to court the women of their choice (*Shrew*, 2.1.121-127 and *Venice*, 1.2.180-183).

Society left the heroines Katherine and Portia with little choice but marriage. Shakespeare's development of these characters and how they confront societal constraints is what makes them feminist role models. Katherine begins *The Taming of the Shrew* behaving like a rebellious teenager, frustrated with a system to which she does not wish to conform, but is rather powerless to fight. Her anger and frustration are displayed in fits of temper in which she fights with her sister, Bianca, who is conforming to society's expectations (2.1.288-32). Bianca views Katherine's misbehavior as a negative reflection upon her and possibly womenkind, asking, "Is it for him (referring to one of her suitors) do you envy me so?" (2.2.18). Katherine responds by striking Bianca, physically striking out against the traditional role of Renaissance women. Bianca represents to Katherine everything that is wrong with Renaissance society, and the two women do not understand each other; their conflict represents a conflict in ideologies, not just a sibling rivalry.

Throughout the play Katherine struggles for control of her own destiny. Although Baptista very modernly insists upon her consent to the marriage, she never really gave it, and Petruchio easily tricks Baptista into believing Katherine did give it (2.1.137-143). After the marriage there begins a power struggle between Katherine and Petruchio, with Petruchio stating, "Thus I have politically begun my reign..." (4.1.188). He goes on to lay out his plan to tame Katherine like a falcon by depriving her of food and sleep.

Katherine quickly learns that to get what she wants she must agree with whatever Petruchio says, going so far as to say the sun is the moon because Petruchio said it was (4.5.17-25). Showing more maturity throughout the play, she realizes conforming to the role of the submissive wife is working completely to her advantage. Petruchio's attempt to tame her has taught her how to fit into society and still get what she desires.

There is no clearer evidence than that in Katherine's final speech about wifely duty (5.2.152-195). Katherine is given the largest speech in the play, hardly a sign of passivity in a society that expects women to be silent. While she admits to being obedient to her husband and recommends that the other wives be so as well, the twenty-first century reader must keep in mind that the Puritans believed that a wife's submission to her husband should be voluntary in return for love; this submission was viewed as similar to man's submission to God. It did not mean giving up liberty, but co-existed with liberty, actually giving the wife power over her husband (Dusinberre 108-109). So, Katherine is transformed; she learns how to fit into society, to be the ideal wife but retain her independence. She is never truly tamed.

Portia is Shakespeare's ideal woman. Unlike Katherine, she does not have to go through a transformation to become that ideal; she begins the play that way. Portia has blended the new Puritan ideals of what a woman should be with the old Renaissance ideals and is perfect woman. She is beautiful,

virtuous, intelligent, and submissive to, yet independent from, her husband.

When marrying Bassanio, Portia pledges everything to him, but remains true to the spirit of feminism by keeping her independence, clearly expressed in the later courtroom scene (3.2.175 and Dusinger 85). Portia declares her equality to Bassanio when she demands to see a letter:

...I am half yourself,
And I must freely have the half of anything
That this same paper brings you. (3.2.258-260)

More mature than Katherine, Portia achieves her goal in a socially acceptable manner, not offending anyone.

Then in a reversal of sex role, Portia offers to pay off Antonio's debts; she is the one with money in the marriage because of her inheritance (3.2.311). In a further attempt to save Antonio on her husband's behalf, she decides to disguise herself as a man and travel to Venice (3.4. 59-81). This is significant because not only is she breaking free of role of the submissive wife, but dressing in a man's clothes was taboo in the Renaissance because it was believed that wearing men's clothing literally made women more masculine (Dusinger 246). By turning this all into a big joke, Shakespeare, through Portia, is able to safely criticize traditional gender roles.

In the courtroom scene Portia saves the day by outsmarting the men and finding a legal loophole to save Antonio (4.1). This proves she is the intellectual equal to all of the men in the play, and only her gender is keeping her from being a doctor of law.

Portia once again defies convention by teasing Bassanio about losing his ring and threatening not to consummate the marriage (5.1.215-248). A Renaissance marriage was not considered official until consummated (Hopkins 33). Although this, too, is written off as a joke, this is a serious threat; it is as though Portia is saying to Bassanio our marriage is not official until you admit I am an equal.

Similar to Katherine, Portia defies convention at every opportunity; unlike Katherine she is accepted by society. Why? From the outset Portia works with the Renaissance system to get what she wants and not directly against it. She may not like the terms of her father's will, but she abides by them (1.2.24-26). Disobeying the will would be too direct a revolt for her. Portia is reforming the Renaissance system from within, while Katherine, until the last act of *The Taming of the Shrew*, is behaving like an outsider. Both women are strong and independent, performing a balancing act in order to exert their independence while keeping their positions in a restrictive society.

Shakespeare chose to write about two forms of revolutionary women, supporting feminism at a time when it was not widely accepted. He disguised these ideas in comedy, not only for entertainment's sake, but because everything he wrote was censored by the government, and these feminist views could be seen as treasonous. Similar to his character Portia, the playwright himself was working to reform the system from within. Women were not supposed to step out of line in Renaissance culture, because it was believed to threaten the stability of the state (Levine 16). By writing these plays, Shakespeare took the risk of expressing feminist views in the sixteenth century.

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