

Shakespeare a Feminist?

by Linda Fitz

Feminist criticism of Shakespeare has blossomed in the last several years. Special sessions at the Modern Language Association conventions of 1977 and 1978 were devoted to the topic. Featuring such papers as "Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays" and "Power and Virginity in the Problem Plays," the sessions reached optimistic conclusions about "heroic maternity" and "female sexuality as a creative force." (1) A number of articles and several books on the subject have appeared: Shakespeare Newsletter has published a bibliography of fairly impressive proportions. Feminist approaches to Shakespeare are appearing in dissertations, (2) while Rosalind and other spirited transvestite heroines are being celebrated in Women's Studies courses across the land.

The appearance of this new critical bandwagon does not fill me with any great horror: it is surely a step up from sexist criticism of Shakespeare. It is refreshing to find critics beginning to take off their late-Victorian eyeglasses when viewing Shakespeare's women; and it is hard to escape the conclusion that the playwright was at least a better feminist than many of his critics have been. (3)

But, as with all critical bandwagons, there are dangers.

It would seem that here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare must needs be in the vanguard. We have heard that Shakespeare was "ahead of his time" in such matters as racial toleration, religious toleration, prevention of cruelty to animals. Now we hear that he was ahead of his time in feminism as well--indeed, one would think, a kind of proto-Mary Wollstonecraft with a knack for blank verse.

There are moments in Shakespeare's plays that make one wonder. Surely Kate's submission speech is enough to make the feminist critics blench a little. (4) Not so: feminist critics have been able to explain that away. Their ingenuity suggests zeal for a cause: their question is, "Can this play be saved?" Germaine Greer explains that Petruchio "wants [Kate's] spirit and her energy because he wants a wife worth keeping. . . . The submission of a woman like Kate is genuine and exciting because she has something to lay down, her virgin pride and individuality. . . . Only Kates make good wives." (5) Juliet Dusinberre extricates herself (and Shakespeare) thus: "Shakespeare pos-

tulates domestic harmony--the loving submission of the wife to her husband's cherishing authority--in an equivocal setting. Kate's transformation is a miracle in the world where miracles happen, the theatre, where beggars are lords."(6) Both arguments fail to satisfy. Greer's celebration of the excitement of relinquished individuality is dubious as a feminist argument; Dusiinberre's assertion that we do not accept Kate's words at face value because "it's only a play" is dubious as literary argument. In both cases, reason has pandered to will. Can this play be saved?

Was Shakespeare really a feminist? The most cursory examination of the canon reveals such hoary stereotypes as these: women are irrational;(7) women ought to be submissive to their husbands,(8)and if they are not, they are shrewish;(9)women are "frail" (morally weak, easily seduced);(10) diamonds are a girl's best friend;(11) women talk too much and listen too little;(12)women are inconstant, fickle, always changing their minds;(13) women are vain;(14)women have no business meddling in politics;(15) women should be the wooed, not the wooers;(16)women cannot keep a secret;(17)women are weak, timorous, prone to weeping and fainting;(18) women are tender-hearted by nature.(19)

To my way of thinking, any writer whose

view of women proceeds from stereotype--from the belief that women are thus-and-so by nature--is no feminist. If there is any one assumption that underlies all feminist thought, it is that most behavior associated with sex-roles is learned rather than innate. The fact that this assumption informed the writings of Christian humanists like Erasmus and More generations before Shakespeare's birth is enough to cast doubt on his alleged position in the vanguard, even if he did come to accept it eventually. And as far as I can tell, he did not.

Of course, the feminists have an easy out. These statements on female "nature" issue not from Shakespeare's lips, but from the lips of his characters. It is true that sometimes the sentiments are uttered in a context of the most palpable dramatic irony, as when Macduff declines to tell Lady Macbeth that Duncan has been murdered: "O gentle lady,/ 'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak: The repetition, in a woman's ear,/ Would murder as it fell."(20) Sometimes, indeed, dramatic action belies verbal stereotype; a number of Shakespeare's women are not particularly tender-hearted, some of them do woo their men, and at least one of them finds herself upbraided for talking too little. But Shakespeare almost always takes pains to point out that the stereotype is valid in spite of rare individual departures from it. Portia in Julius Caesar is a woman who can keep a

secret, but Shakespeare has her remind the audience, "How hard it is for women to keep counsel!"(21) The heroines of romantic comedy do behave fearlessly, but Shakespeare has Orsino remind Viola that such actions are "much against the mettle of your sex;"(22) and in Rosalind's case, the heroine herself assures the audience that she really is fearful, as befits a woman, but (like the male cowards who are her counterparts) is putting up a brave front;(23) she does not omit to swoon when the trials of her courage become too harsh. Lady Macbeth's behavior does seem to give the lie to the notion that women are tender-hearted by nature--but she has to be unsexed before she can divest herself of tender-heartedness, and even so she can hardly be said, judging by her later words and actions, to have succeeded.

Lady Macbeth is one of several characters who, because they do not conform to the "tender-hearted" stereotype, must be seen by other characters as monsters rather than women. The imagery of King Lear consistently makes monsters of Goneril and Regan: they cannot be women, for women are not like that. Albany sees Goneril as a fiend disguised as a woman: "Howe'er thou art a fiend,/ A woman's shape doth shield thee" [IV.ii.67-68]. A servant feels that Regan's behavior is enough to call forth a whole new stereotype encompassing all women: "If she live

long,/ And in the end meet the old course of death,/ Women will all turn monsters" [III.vii.102-104]--the inadequacy of stereotypes to deal with individuals is something he never considers. The Duke of York in 3 Henry VI, having been defeated by an army under the generalship of Queen Margaret, declares (in a somewhat unsportsmanlike manner) that Margaret is an ugly, unvirtuous, mannerless trull and then proceeds to reexamine his stereotype of women: "Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible;/ Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless" [I.iv.141-142]. If the minor premise of this fledgeling syllogism is not to invalidate the major premise, the only possible conclusion is, "Therefore, you are not a woman." This, indeed, is York's implied conclusion: Margaret is discovered to be "inhuman" [I.iv.154]; specifically, a tiger disguised as a woman ("O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide" [I.iv.137]).

For the most part, Shakespearean women who depart from stereotype are seen either as temporarily behaving unnaturally in an emergency situation (as are the romantic heroines), or as being permanently dehumanized, warped, monstrous, "fiend-like" (as are the villainesses of the tragedies and history plays). The validity of the stereotype is very rarely challenged. Still, all this could be explained away. Shakespeare could, for example, be presenting Orsino, Macduff, Albany,

the Duke of York, Portia, and the rest as deluded sexists. (Standing just offstage, with his well-known wry smile, congratulating himself on the dramatic irony, hoping the audience will get it.) All we need do is work diligently on the several thousand sexist references in Shakespeare, proving laboriously in case after case that Shakespeare does not accept what his characters are saying. All that is necessary now is hard work. This hard work, toward this predetermined conclusion, is criticism by formula. Find a passage that makes assumptions about the nature of Woman; find a female character (anywhere else in Shakespeare) whose actions contradict these assumptions; conclude that Shakespeare was a feminist.

Why we should not do this is obvious: we run the risk of distorting the plays and making fools of ourselves. But what interests me is why we feel we should do this. The rescuing of Shakespeare by feminists might well be seen as a species of that idolatry that Alfred Harbage has labelled "the myth of perfection:" "The mark of idolatry is the assumption that because the plays are excellent, they are excellent in every way--in a word that they are perfect." (24) While I am prepared for the possibility that not all readers will agree that feminism is perfection, I suppose they might

yet accept my suggestion that feminist critics may be in a class with Harbage's "various musicians, sailors, soldiers, doctors, and others, especially lawyers," who have "fostered the idea that Shakespeare not only knew and loved music, as he truly did, but could take down and reassemble a spinet (if he did not invent the instrument) as well as navigate a ship, command an army, and perform a frontal lobotomy, while his exhaustive knowledge of the law might have ruptured even the capacious brain of the Lord Chief Justice." (25) Feminist critics of Shakespeare fit into this category because of their implied contention that not only did Shakespeare know and love women, as he truly did, and not only does he occasionally allow them to speak movingly in their own defense (a privilege he grants even to villains, so why not to women?), but he was also conversant with all modern notions about sex-role stereotyping, socialization, the economics of sexism and so on. Thus, in yet another way, Shakespeare is seen to have been perfect.

But this is not to explain the phenomenon. Why should feminists (of all people) prove such idolaters? The answer, I suppose, is personal. Those of us who are old enough to be publishing feminist Shakespeare criticism are of the generation which came to its feminist convictions after it

came to the love of Shakespeare. We are of the same generation that came to feminism after making conventional marriages. In the interim, many of us have questioned whether we could go on living with a sexist husband. Are we wondering whether we can live with a sexist Shakespeare? The question finally becomes, "Can this playwright be saved?"

The temptation to reform Shakespeare is great. (The love of a good woman . . . ?) The Shakespeare canon is so large, the voices and opinions so many, so varied. It is so easy to find in Shakespeare almost anything one is looking for. And Shakespeare's

opinions about women may be more amenable to reformation than a husband's opinions, Shakespeare being dead. If we work very hard, we may prove Shakespeare a feminist yet. In ransacking the plays, we shall find many cases where Shakespeare allowed his individualizing impulse to override stereotype. We shall find occasional moving speeches on the plight of women. We shall even find the ideal of "sisterhood." The trouble is that there are a number of passages that I fear (in spite of all our work, in spite of all our ingenuity) will prove intractably sexist. And besides, I don't know why, in the end, we should bother.

NOTES

1. Summaries of papers and sessions appear in Shakespeare Newsletter, November and December 1977, 39-40.
2. Some recent titles include "Woman as Individual in English Renaissance Drama: A Defiance of the Masculine Code"; "Women as Educative Guardians in Shakespeare's Comedies"; "Masks and Roles: A Study of Women in Shakespeare's Drama"; "Women of the Nobility in Shakespeare's English History Plays"; "A Reappraisal of Shakespeare's View of Women"; "Not Cast in Other Womens Mold: Strong Women Characters in Shakespeare's Henry VI Trilogy, Drayton's England's Heroicall Epistles and Jonson's Poems to Ladies"; "The Rose Distilled": Virginitie, Fertilitie and Marriage in Shakespeare"; "Some Shakespearean Characterizations of Women and Their Traditions."
3. This was the conclusion I reached in "Egyptian Queens and Male Reviewers: Sexist Attitudes in Antony and Cleopatra Criticism," Shakespeare Quarterly 28 (Summer, 1977), 297-316.
4. Shr. V.ii.136-179. References are to the G.B. Harrison edition.
5. The Female Eunuch (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), pp. 220, 221.
6. Shakespeare and the Nature of Women (London and New York: Macmillan, 1975),
7. Cf. TGV I.ii.23-24.
8. Cf. Err. II.i.10-42; Ado II.1.63-66; Shr. V.ii.136-179.
9. Cf. Err.; Shr.; the many references to shrewishness and curtness suggest a Shakespearean interest in this marital difficulty. The possible confusion between shrewishness and standing up for one's domestic rights is hinted at in Err., but left largely unexplored.
10. Cf. Ham. I.ii.146; MM II.iv.124ff; TN II.ii.30-34; Ant. V.ii.123-124.
11. Cf. TGV III.1.89-91.

12. Cf. TGV III.i.337; AYL III.ii.264-265; LH4 I.iii.236-238; in 3H6 Queen Margaret is decried as a "wrangling woman" after speaking only 22 of 177 lines in II.ii.
13. Cf. AYL III.ii.429-435; R3 IV.iv.431; Ham. III.ii.164; Ant. V.ii.238-241; Shr. IV.ii.14; this is one of the stereotypes Shakespeare consistently undercuts--good women in Shakespeare seek for constancy.
14. Cf. Lx. III.ii.35-36.
15. Cf. 2H6. I.iii.120; R3 I.i.62-64; Ant. III.vii.70-71.
16. Cf. MND II.i.240-242; Tro. III.ii.134-137.
17. Cf. LH4 II.iii.111-117; JC II.i.29 ff, II.iv.9.
18. Cf. LH6 I.ii.89-90; 2H6 III.i.36; 2H6 II.iii.25; Jn. III.i.14-15, IV.i.36, V.vi.22; Rom. III.iii.110-112, IV.i.119; R3 I.iv.264; JC II.i.120-122, II.iv.39-40, 43; Ham. V.ii.225-226; AYL I.iii.120-124, II.iv.4-5, III.iv.3, IV.iii.165; AMW III.ii.53; Lx. II.iv.280; Macb IV.iii.230; Ant. IV.ii.34-36; Tim. IV.iii.489-91; Cym. III.iv.158-159; WT II.i.108-109 (Hermione emphasizes that her tearlessness is an exception to the general rule); H8 II.i.38; Shr. Ind. i. 124-125 (introduces a variation on the "weeping" stereotype by pointing out that women can turn tears on for effect).
19. Cf. 2H6 I.iv.141; Mac. I.v.41-44, 48-49, II.iii.88-91; AYL I.ii.144-146 (undercut by the fact that the ladies do want to see the wrestling); Lx. III.vii.100-102; IV.2.59-61, 66-67.
20. Mac. II.iii.88-91.
21. II.iv.9.
22. TN v.i.330.
23. AYL I.iii.120-124.
24. "The Myth of Perfection," in Conceptions of Shakespeare (New York: Schocken, New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 31.
25. Harbage, p. 24.