

# The Role of Faminism in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Study

*Debal Kumar Samanta<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Sri Satya Sai University of Technology and Medical Sciences, Sehore,  
MP

## **ABSTRACT**

This study entitled 'Feminism in the Plays of Shakespeare' falls within the category of research on gender studies or feminist scholarship. It sheds light on the origin and evolution of Liberal feminism and its contradictions during the period stretching from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. It focuses on the shift of paradigms of thoughts and discourse about the place of gender in the public sphere. The humanist episteme promoted the spread of the feminist discourse because of the very contradictions inherent to the liberal ideology. This study examines the representation of women in selected plays of Shakespeare. It is seen that women play, or are made to play, roles ranging from the innocent to the complex and devious, to accommodate the needs of the text and of society. It shows that the naturalization and universalization of the woman's role in different societal positions cannot be seen in isolation from hidden patriarchal figurations. The Shakespearean text cannot avoid some of the socially acceptable practices in the presentation of women characters. However, the presentation of women in Shakespeare is neither a blatant exhibition of patriarchal ideology nor an uncritical celebration of its collapse. In an attempt to prove that British feminism evolved from a sympathetic attitude reflected in the writings of the Renaissance to a defensive type during the Glorious Revolution to reach towards the end of the eighteenth century an offensive phase with Mary Wollstonecraft who broke into the public sphere and entered a fierce debate with many of her contemporary philosophers and writers, I selected six authors, three male, William Shakespeare, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and three female, Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft and Susanna Haswell Rowson as representative authors. The thesis is purely a descriptive research which used observation method.

Keywords : Feminism, Shakespeare, Descriptive, Observation.

# THE ROLE OF FEMINISM IN THE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE: A STUDY

## 1.0. Introduction

Three sisters' arguments with one another and with their senile father lead to the disintegration of a family; an infertile couple look for an alternative life project; two battered wives are killed by their husbands; a teenage girl is given poor advice by the adults around her and ends up making bad choices; a young student struggles with his tricky family situation and an attitude problem. Over the past forty years, productions of Shakespeare's major tragedies have not infrequently treated the stories as domestic drama, sometimes boiling down the main plots so that they can be described in these recognisable and highly topical, if mundane, terms<sup>1</sup>. If Shakespeare's texts in performance can depart so radically from convention, the many new stage plays about Shakespearean tragic characters that have been written and performed in the course of the last few decades have had the opportunity to take this development a step further, as they are free to put the themes and stories into any words they choose.

As can be inferred from the one-sentence pitches above, the practice of seeing Shakespeare's tragedies as domestic drama and focusing on the private rather than the public sphere emphasises familial relationships and gender roles in the plays. This tendency can be seen in appropriations of the tragedies from the decades around the turn of the millennium, especially feminist re-visions, as well as in productions of Shakespeare's tragedies from the same time period. This study deals with stage appropriations of Shakespeare's five most

---

<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, Shakespeare-as-domestic-drama is not the only trend in Shakespeare productions from this time period, but it is a fairly prominent one. The rise of this tendency in mainstream British theatre can arguably be traced back to the founding by Buzz Goodbody in 1974 of the Royal Shakespeare Company's studio theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, The Other Place, a space that suited intimate and even 'claustrophobic' performance particularly well. See Alycia Smith-Howard, *Studio Shakespeare: The Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place* (Aldershot, Hants & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006). Two especially influential RSC productions from the late 1980s that treated two of Shakespeare's major tragedies as domestic drama were Adrian Noble's *Macbeth* (1986), on the mainstage, and Trevor Nunn's *Othello* (1989), at The Other Place.

frequently appropriated tragedies (*King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*) written between 1979 and 2010.

While some of these appropriations are explicitly feminist and others are not, the general tendency is to give proportionately more attention to the female characters than the original Shakespeare plays<sup>2</sup>. With a special focus on portrayals of women and relationships within the family, this gender-sensitive study argues that stage appropriations from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries function as a strategy for engaging with certain central themes from Shakespeare's tragedies that are also central to the gender-political climate of the present day. The study investigates how the stories and characters of Shakespeare's plays connect with one another in different versions over time, shedding light on the interaction between Shakespeare's texts, their sources, their productions and their appropriations, with regard to gender- and family-related issues. Since the appropriations will be studied as instances of engagement with Shakespeare's plays rather than as free-standing texts, a good deal of space is devoted to these issues as they occur in Shakespeare's texts and in performances of his plays.

The selection criteria were that all appropriations had to be published plays, written around 1980 or later, written in English, written for the stage – with the exception of Perry Pontac's plays, which were originally written for the radio but were subsequently published as stage plays and have been performed as such – and be spoken theatre rather than musical theatre or opera. Above all, they had to fit into the category of appropriations which place Shakespeare's characters in new or modified stories. This aspect of the delimitation will be further explained below. The appropriations that have been selected for this study are

---

<sup>2</sup> In this study, the pairings woman/man and female/male (with accompanying pronouns) with reference to characters, roles and actors refer to their gender as coded in the theatre. Characters and roles have no biological sex (although the characters' fictional sex can of course be referred to in biological terms in the play); and while the coding of actors as male or female is in most cases in accordance with their biological sex, the significant aspect here is which set of roles they are perceived as being traditionally eligible for. With reference to directors and writers, woman/man and female/male refer to their genders as perceived by the public and/or as self-identified. I use the word 'actor' regardless of gender except when talking specifically about female actors in a context where their gender is a factor of patent significance – then I use the word 'actress'. The male equivalent is 'male actor', since 'actor' is used gender-neutrally.

*Lear's Daughters* (1987) by the Women's Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein; Howard Barker's *Seven Lears: The Pursuit of the Good* (1989); Perry Pontac's *Prince Lear* (1994); Jules Tasca's *Prince Lear* (2007); John Cargill Thompson's *Macbeth Speaks* (1991; 1997); David Calcutt's *Lady Macbeth* (2005); David Greig's *Dunsinane* (2010); Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* (1979; 1994); Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (1988; 1990); Allison Williams' *Drop Dead, Juliet!* (2006); Perry Pontac's *Fatal Loins: Romeo and Juliet Reconsidered* (2001); John Cargill Thompson's *Hamlet II, Prince of Jutland* (1984); Perry Pontac's *Hamlet, Part II* (1992); Jean Betts' *Ophelia Thinks Harder* (1993); Allison Williams' *Hamlette* (2001); and Howard Barker's *Gertrude – The Cry* (2002)<sup>3</sup>. Among these, special attention will be given to the specifically feminist re-visions: *Lear's Daughters*, *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and *Ophelia Thinks Harder*.

A central idea in this study is that an appropriation may have the power to change how spectators/readers think of the appropriated text. As early as 1916, S. P. B. Mais argued for this effect in connection with Gordon Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife*, a prequel to Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

In point of fact, anyone who has for years been troubled by the earlier play will recognize at once how much the new one clears up the ground. It is impossible to re-read 'King Lear' after finishing 'King Lear's Wife' without noticing again and again points that used to puzzle the imagination, now made perfectly plain<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> For plot summaries, see Appendix 1. The study includes four appropriations of *King Lear*, five of *Hamlet* and two to three of the three remaining plays. This discrepancy is partly because *King Lear* and *Hamlet* are more popular objects of appropriation, at least when it comes to the kind of appropriation studied here. (This, in turn, may be because these two plays have an even higher status as 'great' tragedies than the three other plays.) It is also partly because in all cases except *Hamlet* it has been possible to discern a trend among the appropriations, and the appropriations that have been selected are those that adhere to that trend. Appropriations of *Hamlet*, by contrast, do not follow any particular pattern, so there was no justifiable rationale according to which some appropriations could be excluded, and for this reason five disparate appropriations have been included.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Richard Foulkes, "How Fine a Play was Mrs. Lear": The Case for Gordon Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife*, *Shakespeare Survey*, 55 (2002), 128-38 (p. 130).

A similar argument, that coming into contact with an appropriation before reading the appropriated text for the first time influences the reception of the appropriated text, has been made by Jane Smiley, who wrote *A Thousand Acres* (1991), a novel telling a modern American version of the *Lear* story from Goneril's perspective:

I knew that the mind of the reader-jury would be influenced by the order in which it encountered the two works. I hoped that the minds of adolescent girls would encounter *A Thousand Acres* first, and that it would serve them as a prophylactic against the guilt about proper daughterhood that I knew *King Lear* could induce<sup>5</sup>.

Although the appropriations studied here are not primarily concerned with interpreting Shakespeare's texts but rather use Shakespeare for their own purposes, they share the trait of introducing some condition that could have an impact on how the audience understands Shakespeare's original play when they return to it (or encounter it for the first time) after having been exposed to the appropriation. These conditions are of varying monumentality and are sometimes mere suggestions dangled before the audience, never to be revealed as true or false. They include the following: Cordelia is not Lear's biological daughter; Macduff's eldest son is Lady Macbeth's long-lost child; Lear has abused his wife and/or children; Kent is a woman in disguise; Ophelia survives. These propositions, and others like them, seem to have the potential to change spectators'/readers' perceptions of Shakespeare's plays. An additional aim of this study is therefore to identify these new conditions and consider their possible impact on spectators/readers.

There are many different terms to denote a text created by someone else on the basis of an original by Shakespeare (or any writer), 'adaptation' and 'appropriation' being the two most frequently used in contemporary criticism.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jane Smiley, 'Shakespeare in Iceland', in Marianne Novy (ed.), *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 159-79 (p. 171); Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003 [1991]).

Both ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’ can be used to refer to a work that is based on another work in such a way that a recipient who is familiar with the source text perceives that source text as being at the core of the new work’s identity. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, adaptations are ‘haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly. When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works’<sup>6</sup>. To denote a specifically feminist appropriation, the term ‘re-vision’ (as opposed to the more neutral ‘revision’) is sometimes used. The word was originally coined in reference to feminist criticism by Adrienne Rich, who explains it in the following way: Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.

And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society. Both re-vision and appropriation are associated with political engagement in a way that adaptation is not and can thus be seen as indicating a polemical or subversive stance.

In their introduction to *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier discuss their choice of the term ‘adaptation’: they chose it ‘[f]or lack of a better term’, because ‘[i]t is the word in most common usage’. Furthermore, they favoured it for its connotations to ‘recontextualization’ and ‘process rather than a beginning and an end’<sup>7</sup>. The implication of ‘progress’ may be seen as suggesting that adaptations are by definition ‘better than originals’, which is not something Fischlin and Fortier see as an advantage. Most importantly, however,

---

<sup>6</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’ (1972), in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co, 1979), p 35.

they claim that ‘adaptation’ is the term least likely to create ‘confusion’<sup>8</sup>. But the most common understanding of the word ‘adaptation’ is a transfer from one medium into another, such as a novel made into a film. This appears to me to be a strong reason for choosing a different word to denote a work based on another work within the same medium. In *Appropriations of Shakespeare’s King Lear in Three Modern North American Novels*, Anna Lindhé selects the term ‘appropriation’, despite its being perceived by some as ‘pejorative’ owing to possible connotations of criticism, the seizure of power and even violence.

When seen in relation not only to the appropriated text but to the spectator/reader, Lindhé argues, appropriation can be understood as ‘an ethical process’ and not just ‘a political or oppositional act’<sup>9</sup>.

The terms adaptation and appropriation are, in practice, often used interchangeably, albeit with slightly differing overtones. Julie Sanders, however, distinguishes between the two phenomena:

There are many ways in which both the practice and the effects of adaptation and appropriation intersect and interrelate, yet it is equally important to maintain some clear distinctions between them as creative activities. An adaptation signals relationships with an informing source text or original; a cinematic version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for example, although clearly reinterpreted by the collaborative efforts of director, scriptwriter, actors, and the generic demands of the movement from stage to film, remains ostensibly *Hamlet*, a specific version, albeit achieved in alternative temporal and generic modes, of that seminal cultural text. On the other hand, appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic

---

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, ‘General Introduction’ to *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays From the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Lindhé, *Appropriations of Shakespeare’s King Lear in Three North American Novels* (Lund: Lund Studies in English, 2012), p. 35; p. 14.

shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another that we have suggested is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations. But the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process<sup>10</sup>.

According to Sanders' definition, the plays studied here are appropriations, as they do 'not involve a generic shift' and as they are clearly new works that draw on sourcetexts rather than 'specific versions' of those sourcetexts. A relationship to the appropriated text is always signalled, but not as clearly as with, for example, a film adaptation of *Hamlet*.

For the purposes of this study, the distinction between appropriation and adaptation will be the distinction between using Shakespeare to explain the world and using the world to explain Shakespeare. An appropriation draws on a Shakespearean text to make a point about contemporary conditions, while an adaptation makes changes to Shakespeare's play to make it fit contemporary conditions. Inter-medial translations that use mostly Shakespeare's text and that do not involve any change of perspective are, for example, referred to as adaptations. In accordance with this definition, it is possible to argue that even stage productions of a play constitute a form of adaptation. Fischlin and Fortier come close to making this claim: [E]very drama text is an incomplete entity that must be 'translated' by being put on stage. Adaptation is, therefore, only an extreme version of the reworking that takes place in any theatrical production. Theatre does things to the drama text that cannot be justified as acts of fidelity, and yet are necessary for any production to take place<sup>11</sup>. For example, Isabella's reaction to the Duke's two proposals at the end of *Measure for Measure* must be staged in some way, although the text itself gives no indication as to what this reaction should be. Theatre is always a form of reworking, in a sense the first step toward adaptation<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> This is, of course, a narrow definition of 'adaptation', which is a term that may also be used in a much wider sense.

<sup>12</sup> Fischlin and Fortier, p. 7.

However, as is clear from Fischlin and Fortier's argumentation, making a distinction between a play as a work and its performances would be problematic: *Hamlet* is not the same thing as the text of *Hamlet* (even if there had been one definitive text). A play does not fully exist until it is performed, and so *Hamlet* is the sum of all its productions.

In *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, Margaret Jane Kidnie takes issue with Fischlin and Fortier's statement that productions may count as adaptations of a play, which she sees as a way of way of avoiding the problem of deciding where to draw the line between production and adaptation. Instead of being a work that is adapted by being staged and/or by being rewritten, Kidnie argues that a play 'is not an object at all, but rather a dynamic *process* that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users'<sup>13</sup>. Kidnie elaborates on the difficulty of distinguishing between production and adaptation by saying that [a]n encounter with an instance of dramatic production prompts one either to find a place for it within an already-existing conception of a dramatic work (or to *make* a place for it, if necessary, by adjusting one's expectations of the work), or to identify it as a first encounter with what seems, in one's own experience and according to one's own historically and culturally contingent criteria, a new work<sup>14</sup>.<sup>14</sup>

According to Kidnie, then, the experience of a production as an 'original' Shakespeare play or as an appropriation is subjective. The problems of how far a text may be altered without constituting an adaptation and which version or combination of versions of Shakespeare's texts may be considered as 'the text' remain, but these are not central concerns of this study. For the kind of plays

---

<sup>13</sup> Instead, Kidnie refers to both 'scripts' and 'performances' as 'productions', to reflect that both 'the play' and 'adaptation' are unstable categories. Margaret Jane Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 2, 10. Kidnie begins her study by discussing Matthew Warchus' 1997 RSC production of *Hamlet*, in which the text had been heavily cut and rearranged, prompting reviewers to reassure any outraged spectators that *Hamlet* had not been permanently damaged by Warchus' treatment but would still be there for others to enjoy. Kidnie finds such pronouncements problematic, as they assume that there is a true, eternal version of the play that 'exists apart from its printed copies and performances', a version that 'survives' performance; pp. 1-2, 11.

<sup>14</sup> 14 Ibid., p. 32.

with which the present study is primarily concerned, the term ‘appropriation’ will be employed rather than ‘adaptation’, to reflect the stance of the plays studied, which is to make Shakespeare’s plays their own (to appropriate them) rather than making them fit into a new context (to adapt them). The term ‘re-vision’, an appropriation that re-views a classic text from a female perspective, is used to denote specifically feminist appropriations.

Two terms that are used throughout the thesis are ‘unsatisfying endings’ and ‘the appropriative impulse’. The idea that Shakespeare’s endings are often unsettling,

troublesome, frustrating, unsatisfactory, nagging or jarring and will not leave the spectator/reader alone after the end of the play is well known in Shakespeare studies as well as in the theatre. These unsatisfying endings may be seen as a strategy for social critique. The phenomenon has been pointed out less often in the tragedies than in the comedies, where the unsatisfying solution usually consists in the various constellations in which the characters are married off<sup>15</sup>. However, if the marriage-based endings of the comedies are less than happy, the death-based endings of the tragedies are often less than cathartic. As Samuel Johnson pointed out with reference to *King Lear*, Shakespeare’s tragic endings do not satisfy any yearning for justice<sup>16</sup>. In *King Lear*, nearly all characters die, and there can consequently be no justice and no answers. Ophelia and Lady Macbeth both die offstage, rumoured to have committed suicide, and there are no answers as to what ‘actually’ happened. Othello, having murdered Desdemona, turns himself into a victim by killing himself and cannot be tried for the murder; he gets the final say and cannot be argued with, because he is dead. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Friar’s plan annoyingly gets in the way of a happy ending, and, as Michael Bogdanov has

---

<sup>15</sup> For example, it has been suggested by both critics and directors that the male main characters of *Twelfth Night* are inferior to the female ones and that the play’s solution does not amount to a happy ending for Olivia or Viola. Similarly, the marriages between Hero and Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* and between Phebe and Silvius in *As You Like It* may make spectators/readers feel uncomfortable, since in both cases one of the parties has been tricked into the marriage, and since Claudio has treated Hero horribly badly and Phebe has consistently rejected the attentions of Silvius. The fact that both the Antonios, in *Twelfth Night* and in *The Merchant of Venice*, are deserted by the man they love (in whatever way) for a woman and end up alone, and the fact that these circumstances are entirely uncommented on within the plays, also has the potential to leave spectators/readers with a sense of unfinished business.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 222-23.

pointed out, the Montagues and the Capulets can only express their peace in monetary terms<sup>17</sup>. These ‘unsatisfying endings’ are connected to my other term, ‘the appropriative impulse’<sup>18</sup>. I use this phrase to denote the impetus behind the activity of appropriation, building on the idea that the open-endedness and ambiguity of Shakespeare’s works stimulate this impulse.

Shakespeare has always been adapted and appropriated by other playwrights, just as he himself adapted and appropriated other writers. Shakespeare’s works are both the products and the sources of adapting processes; consequently, his versions constitute one stage in an ongoing process of adaptation. During the first period of intensive Shakespeare adaptation, the Restoration, Shakespeare had not yet developed into the cultural icon he is today. Shakespeare’s play-texts were altered (or ‘improved’) as tastes changed. It was taken for granted that current opinions on what constituted good theatre had to rule any artistic choices. In the mid-eighteenth century, however, things began to change. The actor-manager David Garrick was one of the most prominent figures in a new theatre movement that wanted to go back to Shakespeare’s original text (although the texts he used were in fact only marginally less altered than the versions performed by other companies), a policy which has come to be seen as the ideal when producing Shakespeare. Garrick was also central to the creation of Shakespeare as a cultural icon. The idea of Shakespeare as an unsurpassed genius whose originality is celebrated emerged with the romanticising of Shakespeare in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it has been important for the continuation of the history of Shakespeare adaptation<sup>19</sup>. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the second period which

---

<sup>17</sup> Michael Bogdanov, *Shakespeare the Director’s Cut: Essays on the Tragedies, Comedies and Histories*, revised ed. (Edinburgh: Capercaillie Books, 2013 [2003]), p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Iska Alter uses the term ‘revisionary impulse’ in her essay ‘*King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*: Gender, Genre, and the Revisionary Impulse’, in *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women’s Re-Visions in Literature and Performance*, ed. Marianne Novy (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), but in contrast to what the title suggests the concept is not developed in the text but merely taken for granted. Ruby Cohn mentions in *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) that, according to her, ‘[t]he impetus to adaptation [...] is often a specific production [of a Shakespeare play]’ and that ‘[t]he most obvious reason for adapting Shakespeare is to modernize him’, pp. 4, 7.

<sup>19</sup> See further Fischlin and Fortier; Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Vanessa Cunningham, *Shakespeare and Garrick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

saw an explosion in Shakespeare adaptations, many adaptations and appropriations were inspired precisely by Shakespeare's status as a cultural icon.

Authors and theatres appropriated him *because* he was considered to be the greatest, not because they found him imperfect. Now the very point was that Shakespeare enjoyed unique prestige, because that was something that could be challenged. As a canonical male figure, he specifically came to be seen as a symbol of patriarchal society and hence a suitable source for feminist appropriation, despite the fact that in his own time he was one of the main popular dramatists who emphasised the condition of women.

Adaptation and appropriation have of course been the objects of many studies. Two seminal works on adaptation in a wider context are Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* and Julie Sanders' *Adaptation and Appropriation* (both published in 2006).

An early work specifically on re-workings of Shakespeare's plays is Ruby Cohn's *Modern Shakespearean Offshoots* (1976), and a more recent one is *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, edited by Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer<sup>20</sup>. These four works all deal with several different media and with adaptations and appropriations both between and within these media, not primarily with stage plays based on other stage plays.

## 2.0. Feminism and Shakespeare – An Overview

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies....(*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2. 245-8)

---

<sup>20</sup> 20 Ruby Cohn, *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (eds), *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 1999).

This dissertation examines the representation of women in selected plays of Shakespeare. It is seen that women play, or are made to play, roles ranging from the innocent to the complex and devious, to accommodate the needs of the text and of society. It shows that the naturalisation and universalization of the woman's role in different societal positions cannot be seen in isolation from hidden patriarchal figurations. The Shakespearean text cannot avoid some of the socially acceptable practices in the presentation of women characters. However, the presentation of women in Shakespeare is neither a blatant exhibition of patriarchal ideology nor an uncritical celebration of its collapse. At crucial moments the Shakespearean text is ambivalent on the issue of patriarchy and even in the face of its apparent collapse. The ambivalence notwithstanding, what needs to be examined is why women in Shakespeare's plays appear to enjoy textual and ideological space but are ultimately made to subscribe or submit to the patriarchal order.

Recent scholarship on Shakespeare has been increasingly drawn to the representation of gender in Shakespeare's plays. Traditionally Shakespeare's plays have been lauded for the depiction of witty and intelligent female characters in and out of love. During late 1970s and early 1980s critics motivated by the feminist movements, began an examination of gender in the works of Shakespeare. An analysis of gender allows us to understand the variety of ways in which Shakespeare responded imaginatively to gender as a crucial determinant of human identity and political power. By gender we mean the division of male and female and the attribute considered appropriate to each- 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Gender exists primarily as construction of particular societies. Man or woman desire to be the same or opposite sex and this varies from culture to culture and changes historically. Masculinity is typically associated with sexual aggression in our time, whereas in Shakespeare's time women were considered to be more lustful than men. The question of gender ensured that certain roles were determined for women in society by a particular ideology. Any transgression or refusal to adhere to a set pattern was seen as unnatural and deviant. Again interpretations of action and ideas were made along gendered terms. Certain types of behaviour or conduct

including work and participation in the public world of power politics and social welfare were deemed as a masculine preserve and so out of bounds for women. Women who showed any interest in education, work (other than domestic) or public affairs were discouraged and even penalised. Their territory was restricted to the home and hearth.

### **3.0. Faminism & Shakespeare – An Overview**

Women characters play an important role for the dramatic run of events in Shakespeare's plays. Just as in reality, women of Shakespeare's dramas are also seen to be bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. To understand gender in Shakespeare's life time is first to understand the patriarchal household. In the late sixteenth century patriarchy meant the power of the father over everyone in the household, including servants and apprentices. Early culture was hierarchical, with women under the rule of men. Women were believed to be less rational than men and were deemed to need male protection and guidance. Single women were the property of their fathers and were handed over to their future husbands through marriage. In Elizabethan time, women were considered as the weaker sex and dangerous, because their sexuality was supposedly mystic and therefore feared by men. Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy, and patience. All these virtues, of course, have their meaning in relationship to men. The role allocation in Elizabethan society was strictly regulated; men were the breadwinners and woman had to be obedient housewives and mothers. However, within this deprived, tight and organized scope, women are represented in most diverse ways in Shakespearean Drama. Women had few legal or economic rights and her identity was subsumed under her male protector. Women were made to accept their natural inferiority which was instilled into them mainly because of their financial insolvency: they had to depend on their fathers or guardians for support.

In order not to lose authority over women, men condemned women as shrews or scolds. A women's social status was assessed by her economic position,

chastity, and fidelity. But women of all social classes ventured out in public, like Shakespeare's own theatre audience. Women also held productive roles in the economy. However, Shakespeare limits his presentation of economic labour to that of household servants, tavern-keepers, bawds and prostitutes. Interestingly, Shakespeare's London had a visible female presence: they could be seen assisting in household matters as well as buying and selling in the market, engaging in litigation on their own, and frequenting the playhouses. In Southwark the immediate vicinity of the theatres, some of the household were headed by women. While the projection of some energetic and somewhat emancipated women might have attracted a section of female theatre going public, the male spectators would have responded with anxious hostility to the representation of women's power and autonomy.

Shakespeare's plays address some of these troublesome areas in the representation of gender and the roles given to women characters. They also touch upon some of the key patriarchal assumptions concerning gender. The world of real politik is considered to be outside the province of women: the stage of history is no place for women. This view prevailed despite the reigns of Mary and then Elizabeth in England. Again martial valour is presented as a monstrous anomaly in women. In fact women are seen to be caught in a double bind in the Shakespearean play. Strong women like Goneril, Cleopatra and others are unchaste and unwomanly; virtuous women like Ophelia, Octavia and others are confined to playing roles of helpless tools or bystanders, powerless to affect the course of history. Thus the female characters in Shakespeare are confronted with a dilemma: they can be either womanly or warlike. They can be virtuous or powerful, never both. This suggest that the construction (and constriction) of women's roles was well under way in Shakespeare's times and gender specific territory was being charted out, with a little resistance no doubt. It was also very common back in Elizabethan England, to compel woman into marriages in order to receive power, legacy, dowry or land in exchange. Even though the Queen herself was an unmarried woman, the roles of woman in society were extremely restricted. The construction of female characters in Shakespeare's plays reflects the Elizabethan image of woman in general. For all

that, Shakespeare supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of genders, their roles and responsibilities in society; he also puts their representations into question, challenges, and also revises them. Shakespeare's characters, especially the major characters, realise their identities through political, domestic or psychological chaos. In most cases this chaos is represented as an inversion of gender hierarchy. Thus, social order is restored at the end of the plays through the platonic concept of marriage.

#### **4.0. Shakespeare and Women**

The feminist Shakespeare re-visions written around the 1980s are central to the boom in Shakespeare appropriations that took place during the following couple of decades, as the feminist perspective was in many ways a starting-point for other kinds of challenging stances towards Shakespeare. In this chapter, the phenomenon of re-vision is considered as an effect of three different phenomena: firstly, differences between the theatre in Shakespeare's day and that of late twentieth century, notably in respect of gender balance; secondly, the second wave of feminism, including the gender-political climate in the theatre and the specific concerns of radical feminism; and, thirdly, Shakespeare's 'unsatisfying' endings, often related to gender, which trigger the appropriative impulse.

This chapter also expounds the distinction between ideological and practical feminist approaches to Shakespeare as employed in performance and re-vision, as well as considering to what extent Shakespeare's plays may be said to contain ideas that would subsequently be described as feminist, and whether feminist readings work with or against Shakespeare's texts. It must be stressed that what is claimed about Shakespeare's works is primarily applicable to the four major tragedies and, to some extent, to *Romeo and Juliet*. Some critics would claim that *Romeo and Juliet* should be included among Shakespeare's major tragedies; but, apart from other dissimilarities, *Romeo and Juliet* shows less gender inequality than the other four plays studied here.

The plays that I refer to as the major tragedies – *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* – contain a disproportionate amount of oppression of women in relation to the rest of the Shakespeare canon. No doubt this contributes significantly to the appropriative impulse when it comes to feminist re-visions of these particular plays.

Even among these four plays, however, a difference is discernible: *Macbeth*, which is the major tragedy containing the least oppression of women, is the only one that has not been appropriated into a feminist re-vision.

Shakespeare's female characters, both in criticism and in common parlance, are often referred to as strong and intelligent, in addition to being said to possess more moral integrity than their male counterparts. In view of this general perception, it is noteworthy that Shakespeare's female roles are smaller and fewer than his male ones.

Women make up only 16% of Shakespeare's characters. In the four major tragedies, the heroines die before the heroes, their bodies are often handled violently in connection with their deaths, and they are not infrequently objectified, as the plays place other characters' 'male' gaze on the lifeless female bodies. Cordelia dies before Lear, giving him the opportunity to grieve. The actor's arduous task of carrying Cordelia on stage is often commented on (Donald Wolfit's much quoted advice to any actor undertaking the role of Lear to 'get yourself a light Cordelia' is a case in point); but the actress's uncomfortable task of being carried, not to mention put down, while playing dead has received less attention. On the 'villain' side, Goneril and Regan die before Edmund, and the audience has to accept his account of what has happened and why. Lady Macbeth dies before Macbeth, Desdemona before Othello, Emilia before Iago, Ophelia before Hamlet and Gertrude before Claudius. In all these cases, the prerogative of interpreting the destinies of the women belong to men – not only to their partners or the main characters of the plays, but to people like Malcolm, Lodovico, Gratiano and the Gravedigger. Emilia and Desdemona do comment on Desdemona's death, and Gertrude briefly on Ophelia's, but they do not get the final say. Dramaturgically, women

in Shakespeare's major tragedies can be said to die to forward the man's plot; when the man dies, on the other hand, that constitutes the tragedy of the story and the play is over. In *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*, David Mann speaks of the 'tradition in Shakespeare's works in which female characters are presented as sacrificial victims':

[T]heir sleeping, dead, or comatose bodies form the focus of the action and symbol of loss: Juliet drugged in her bed on her wedding day; Ophelia in her coffin; Desdemona on her bed, murdered; and possibly the most touching moment in the canon, the lifeless body of Cordelia carried on by Lear<sup>21</sup>.

Mann argues that the plays see their female characters' tragedies from a male perspective, a central idea in re-visions such as The Women's Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1987) and Jean Betts' *Ophelia Thinks Harder* (1993): Even as wrongs are being done to women in Shakespeare's plays, the spectator is invited to sympathise with the husband, the father – even the perpetrator – and *his* sense of loss; so that it is Lear's agony at Cordelia's murder that is the centre of attention, and her mute body only its object. This is not to deny sympathy to the victim, but places it at one step removed, inviting pity rather than identification<sup>22</sup>.

### 5.0. Trusting and Resisting Shakespeare

It is of course a commonplace that Shakespeare's plays portray patriarchal societies, and that the society he wrote in and for was patriarchal.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, certain aspects of his plays can be construed as reproducing a patriarchal thought system. But it is debatable to what extent Shakespeare himself challenges gender stereotypes and societal conventions in his plays, and to what extent this was something extraordinary for the time. This is an area where critics' opinions diverge dramatically. It is, indeed, possible to see Shakespeare's plays as being proto-feminist in themselves, as several critics have done. In her seminal work *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Juliet

---

<sup>21</sup> David Mann, *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Mann, p. 202.

Dusinberre claims that '[t]he feminism of Shakespeare's time is still largely unrecognised', but that '[t]he ideology, the literature, the social reform, the activism, and the increased awareness necessary to all of them dominated the society for which Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote their plays'.<sup>83</sup> Phyllis Rackin also argues that present-day critics are stuck in a conventional understanding of Shakespeare's time that is not necessarily correct and that women in early modern England had more power and independence than present-day people generally assume.<sup>84</sup> Dusinberre goes as far as saying that '[t]he drama from 1590 to 1625 is feminist in sympathy', and that, while 'Shakespeare's modernity in his treatment of women has always attracted attention', 'it is not nearly so well known that his attitudes to women are part of a common stock to be found in the plays of almost all his contemporaries'. She further claims that 'Shakespeare and his contemporaries could rely on their audience's alertness to controversy about women'.

'Shakespeare's feminism', according to Dusinberre, 'consists of more than a handful of high-born emancipated heroines: it lies rather in his scepticism about the nature of women'.

In the preface to the edited volume *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely argue that late-twentieth-century feminist criticism was motivated by questions to which readers could not find an answer in the plays:

In the early seventies, teachers and students began asking new questions about Shakespeare. Is Kate actually tamed? Should we join Cassio and Iago in mockery of Bianca? Why did Romeo leave Juliet behind when he fled Verona? Why do the strong articulate women in the comedies disappear from the tragedies? The traditional answers – that the author was bound by his sources or by the demands of genre or by the customs of his age – had begun to seem inadequate; yet most criticism offered no responses.

Especially the endings of the comedies contain these kinds of questions. *The Taming of the Shrew*, with its from an even vaguely feminist standpoint worrying ending, is a case in point, as are the sudden marriages in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*.

It is surely a mistake to pass these jarring conclusions off as simply being products of a different time with different values: the unsatisfactory and unsettling endings invite audiences to think and engage with the stories and with the questions implicitly raised; that seems to be an integral part of the plays. As Juliet Stevenson says in Rutter's *Clamorous Voices*, I don't think Shakespeare's plays ever attempt to answer questions. They *ask* questions, and they leave those question marks hanging over the heads of the actors and the audience at the end of the play. That's when the audience's work starts, because they have to go home with those questions unanswered.

These 'unsatisfying endings' are most obviously in evidence in the comedies, with their apparently happy outcomes; but the same kind of unanswered questions can be found in the tragedies, and they are an important trigger of the 'appropriative impulse'. This does not mean, however, that the response is not culturally conditioned or particular to the historical moment of the spectator/reader.

The time in which the spectator/reader lives has an important impact on how s/he interprets Shakespeare's plays and their female characters, as Rackin points out:

Our own experience of Shakespeare's women is conditioned not only by the accumulated tradition of Shakespeare scholarship and reception but Feminist engagement with Shakespeare and with society, then, may be able to affect how future spectators'/readers' perceive Shakespeare's female characters, just as the kinds of engagement with Shakespeare and society that have been prevalent in the recent past have influenced present-day spectators'/readers' perception. According to DusiBerre, Shakespeare had a more 'feminist' view of women

than many present-day critics, which means that these critics' construction of the characters is clouded:

Shakespeare saw men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal. He did not divide human nature into the masculine and the feminine, but observed in the individual woman or man an infinite variety of union between opposing impulses. [...] Where in every other field understanding of Shakespeare's art grows, reactions to his women continually recycle, because critics are still immersed in preconceptions which Shakespeare discarded about the nature of women.

The first edition of Dusi's book was published in 1975, and most of the existing feminist Shakespeare criticism has happened after that. But the idea that interpretations of Shakespeare say more about the time in which he is interpreted than about Shakespeare's own time is still valid; and the conventional interpretations of some of his female characters are extremely tenacious, even when they have little basis in the text. In the same vein, it can be claimed that recent feminist Shakespeare appropriations do not criticise Shakespeare or find anything wrong with his works; they find something wrong with their own society, see an ally in Shakespeare, and turn to him for help.

According to Marianne Novy, feminist re-visions 'let [female] characters escape plots that doom them to an oppressive marriage or to death' and 'imagine stories for figures who are silent or demonized in Shakespeare's version'. Feminist re-visions of Shakespeare's works exist in a relatively small number, and they make no claim to be able to replace Shakespeare's plays or to be of comparable quality. Thus, they do not in themselves constitute a solution to the problem of the gender imbalance of Shakespearean drama; but they may function as a complement to other solutions.

Feminist re-visions should not be understood solely as a response to Shakespeare. Above all, as has already been stated, they use Shakespeare and his iconic status for their own purposes, to give a greater impact to the message they want to convey or the story they want to tell. To the extent that

‘Shakespeare’ is criticised in these appropriations, the target is often the romanticised image of the male genius rather than the texts themselves.

Judith Fetterley uses the term re-vision, as Adrienne Rich originally did, to denote an aspect of feminist criticism, and connects it to her own term ‘the resisting reader’. In the following passage, Fetterley is not referring to feminist critics of Shakespeare but to those of American literature; but the attitudes of ‘resisting’ and ‘reviewing’ may equally well be applied to the former category:

[T]he first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us. The consequence of this exorcism is the capacity for what Adrienne Rich describes as re-vision.

When re-vision is applied, Fetterley argues, male-authored literary texts will ‘lose their power to bind us unknowingly to their designs’: While women obviously cannot rewrite literary works so that they become ours by virtue of reflecting our reality, we can accurately name the reality they do reflect and so change literary criticism from a closed conversation to an active dialogue.

It is a fascinating coincidence in view of how the term re-vision has later come to be used that Fetterley should claim that ‘women obviously cannot rewrite literary works so that they become ours by virtue of reflecting our reality’, since that is literally what authors of re-visions do. In fact, Mark Fortier uses the character Constance Ledbelly in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* as an example of a resisting reader who develops a ‘feminist perspective’ in such a way that it ‘both changes Shakespeare’s work and maintains a dialogue with it’.<sup>96</sup> Adapting the concept of the resisting reader, Elaine Aston invites feminist actors to become ‘resisting performers’, ‘empowered as the feminist critic (rather than female victim) of the “master” text’.

## 6.0. Feminist Re-Vision Strategies

The concept of re-vision, of viewing *again*, assumes a first, original way of viewing, an initial vision from which the re-vision differs. Shakespeare's plays have of course been viewed in a multitude of different ways through history; it is certainly not the case that the appropriations discussed in this study were preceded by one stable understanding of the plays. The 'first' vision that a re-vision implicitly engages with may refer to the vision invited by the text as perceived by the appropriator or the perceived 'conventional' vision. Ultimately, in order for the term to be useful, the function of a revision is to make spectators/readers see the original play in a new way.

The term re-vision is customarily used specifically about appropriations that review Shakespeare's stories and characters from a feminist perspective. Among the plays studied here, the ones that can be categorised as feminist re-visions are Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*, the Women's Theatre Group (WTG) and Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters*, Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and Jean Betts' *Ophelia Thinks Harder*. Focusing on these four plays, this chapter explores what re-visionist strategies the appropriations employ and outline a preliminary model for distinguishing between two fundamentally different types of feminist re-vision.

### **7.0. Strategies for Putting Women Centre Stage**

The chapter on *King Lear* discussed the four strategies identified by Lynne Bradley:

'giving voice to silenced female characters', 'writing around the original story', 'challenging representations of gender identity and female sexuality' and 'using metanarrative qualities to thematize the woman writer'.<sup>1</sup> Bradley discusses these 1 Lynne Bradley, *Adapting King Lear for the Stage* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), p. 186. strategies in relation to *Goodnight Desdemona* and *Desdemona* as well as to *Lear's Daughters*, and especially the first three are also applicable to *Ophelia Thinks Harder*.

These three strategies are further developed in the next few pages. '[G]iving voice to silenced female characters' entails giving the female characters in the re-vision a greater proportion of the lines than the equivalent characters have in Shakespeare's play, as well as letting them tell and define their own stories rather than having other characters talk about them. '[W]riting around the original story' involves using the 'gaps' made by Shakespeare and filling them with possible additions to the story that allow the audience to see the story from the female characters' point of view. The gaps can be temporal, as in *Lear's Daughters*, which takes place before the action of *King Lear* and thus makes use of a temporal space left unclaimed by Shakespeare's play. A gap may also be spatial; in other words, the main action of the revision may occupy a different physical space from Shakespeare's main action.

*Desdemona* takes place in a 'back room of the palace on Cyprus', *Ophelia Thinks Harder* takes place mainly in Ophelia's bedroom, and *Lear's Daughters* takes place in the nursery. These are all conventionally feminine or domestic spaces that are removed from the main part of Shakespeare's action (an obvious exception being the willow scene and the final scene in *Othello*). *Goodnight Desdemona* works in a different way, as it interrupts the storylines of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* and creates new gaps to fill in, whereas the three other re-visions by 'writing around the story' more or less accommodate Shakespeare's storylines within their framework. Above all, the revisions fill in the gaps left in the backstories and characterisations of the female characters by imagining possible answers to questions left open by Shakespeare. All this is done working on the assumption that Shakespeare's plays to a large extent show the stories from a male perspective, which in the re-visions is replaced with a female one.

On a practical level, this means, among other things, that whereas in Shakespeare's plays men appear on stage without any women present more often than the other way around, many scenes in the re-visions take place entirely among women without any men on stage.

### **8.0. Ophelia Thinks Harder, Lear's Daughters, Desdemona and Goodnight**

*Desdemona* all challenge conventional representations of gender identity and female sexuality, but they do so in very different ways. *Ophelia Thinks Harder* explicitly questions what it sees as received opinions about norms and ideals for women. In *Lear's Daughters*, the androgynous fool functions as a non-binary representation of gender identity. *Desdemona* shows an unconventionally promiscuous Desdemona; and while all three female characters are presented as heterosexual, the inclusion of the scene where Bianca teaches Desdemona to be whipped functions as a visual way of challenging representations of female sexuality. *Goodnight Desdemona* challenges gender stereotypes by giving Othello's and Romeo's characteristics to Desdemona and Juliet, and the play questions 'compulsory heterosexuality' by letting Juliet fall in love with Constance and by letting Constance be momentarily seduced by Juliet.

*Goodnight Desdemona* uses an additional strategy: the insertion of a modern female character into Shakespeare's stories. In this play, the twentieth-century Canadian character Constance Ledbelly is the main character. She is a considerably rounder character than MacDonald's versions of Desdemona and Juliet, although she may in some ways be seen as a female version of the stereotypical absentminded and awkward male academic. The inclusion of Constance allows MacDonald to refer directly to problems that women today may have to face owing to gender inequality and patriarchal structures, including poor self-confidence and being exploited, both in the workplace and in personal relationships. The exploitation of Constance in the academic world both highlights the oppression of women in Shakespeare's plays and serves to invite the comparison between oppression of female characters in Shakespeare and discrimination against women in present-day real-life situations. As Constance gains greater selfconfidence, takes control of her situation and starts her journey towards self-realisation, she develops into a strong, independent woman. Laurin R. Porter argues that the Shakespearean characters whom Constance encounters help her realise her own worth:

Because they come to Constance with no preconceptions or stereotypes, Desdemona and Othello are able to see her value. MacDonald, of course,

manipulates the plot to make this possible, using especially the character of Desdemona to turn liabilities, as Constance's culture would perceive them, into assets. The fact that she is a scholar, unmarried, traveling alone, even that she is a vegetarian, which Desdemona declares "meet in vestal vows" (34) – all these qualities are set in a new context and admired.

Though I would question the perception of being 'a scholar, unmarried', 'a vegetarian' and 'traveling alone' as 'liabilities', at least some of these qualities are certainly rare in classic literary heroines, and Constance therefore may provide contemporary women, and indeed men, who struggle to identify with the heroines and heroes of Shakespearean tragedies with a recognisable point of reference. But being a single woman who travels alone, in combination with her inadvertent cross-dressing, also links her to some of Shakespeare's comic heroines, and it is thus one of the components that make the play a comedy. Shakespeare's comedies might be said to show more gender equality than his tragedies, and Constance's endeavour to turn *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* into comedies may therefore in itself be seen as a feminist strategy on MacDonald's part.

Mark Fortier points out that the Shakespearean scenes which Constance enters are both scenes which include only men and in which 'the fate of the characters, both male and female, is decided by men': the scene where Othello decides to kill Desdemona and the scene where Romeo fights Tybalt. The intervention of a woman in these scenes changes the dynamics of the interplay between the male characters.

A strategy used by *Lear's Daughters* and *Ophelia Thinks Harder*, but not by either of the *Othello* re-visions, is to redistribute sympathy and blame so that the female characters appear as more sympathetic than they do in the originals and the blame for the tragic events is unequivocally fixed onto the tragic hero. Anna Lindhé argues that the 'shift in perspective' from Lear to the Goneril character in *A Thousand Acres* contributes to a 'shift of patterns from one that drives women into debt and guilt to one that releases them from debt and guilt'

rather than a simple 'shift of sympathy from Lear to Goneril'. *A Thousand Acres* is more nuanced than *Lear's Daughters* or *Ophelia Studies in English*, 2012), p. 45. Cf. Sarah Appleton Aguiar, who, also writing about female-centred novels based on *King Lear*, says that '[f]eminist revisions seek to revalue the existence of the character – and her narrative – without re-presenting her as merely an "innocent victim", misunderstood within the paradigm she had previously inhabited'; '(Dis)Obedient Daughters: (Dis)Inheriting the Kingdom of *Thinks Harder* in this way, but the argument that it is not first and foremost a question of sympathy still applies to these two plays: the re-imagined Goneril, Regan and Ophelia do not necessarily appear as particularly likeable people (though they deal with issues that many audience members are likely to relate to and may therefore sympathise with), but they are subjected to very cruel treatment by the re-imagined Lear and Hamlet, who are extremely unsympathetic. The redistribution, then, primarily consists in taking sympathy away from the male characters and taking blame away from the female ones: it dehumanises Lear and Hamlet, and alerts spectators/readers to the idea that Lear's and Hamlet's perspectives are not the only possible ones. In this way, the two re-visions may perhaps counteract the 'trauma' experienced by Jean Betts as a schoolgirl reading *Hamlet* and the 'guilt' that Jane Smiley describes in 'Shakespeare in Iceland', where she imagines Lear's two elder daughters on trial in front of a jury of readers.

One aspect of blaming male characters is the recognition that men are responsible for their actions. The same argument can be found in contemporary debates on rape, where victim-blaming is often met by feminists with the argument that a lenient attitude to rapists actually shows disrespect for men, as it implies that they do not possess sufficient maturity or self-control to be held accountable. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are often spoken of as having been led astray and are sometimes therefore pardoned, even pitied, for their misdeeds: it is routinely said that Lear is 'driven mad' by his daughters and that Macbeth is 'driven to murder' by his wife. It is usually Iago who is blamed for Othello's murder of Desdemona,<sup>6</sup> but readings such as Margaret Loftus Ranald's, while providing useful insight into the Renaissance ideals of

womanhood, claim that Othello's actions are understandable in the light of Desdemona's indiscretions in a way that may be thought comparable to blaming rape victims on the basis of their behaviour or dress. Feminist appropriations and productions, on the other hand, may maintain that if a man chooses to spend a night on a heath in a storm, that cannot be blamed on his daughters; if a man commits murder, that is his fault, even if his wife told him to do it; if a man murders his wife, it is his fault – not his wife's or even his lying friend's.

### **9.0. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Several different factors contributed to the emergence of feminist theatrical Shakespeare re-visions in the late twentieth century. The parts that had originally been written for boy actors had now long been played by professional actresses, who could not see why they should not be as central to the projects they worked on as their male counterparts.

Shakespeare's development into a cultural icon meant that feminist appropriations could use him to criticise the Establishment and use his status to give their message greater impact. The development of the role of the modern director had already led to ideologically driven productions of Shakespeare's plays in both fringe and mainstream theatre. Appropriations take this one step further and are a natural continuation of politicised engagement with Shakespeare. In addition, appropriations written collaboratively by prospective casts offer an alternative to actors' exclusion from giving feminist interpretations of Shakespeare's plays.

Shakespeare re-visions are also an opportunity to discuss concerns of secondwave feminism, such as patriarchy, sexuality and domestic aspects of misogyny. These phenomena are already in evidence in Shakespeare's plays; but they are brought to the fore in the re-visions, where other aspects of Shakespearean drama are omitted, such as national politics and warfare, the focus on which can sometimes obscure the inherent engagement with gender issues in Shakespeare's plays. Feminist re-visions employ a balance of drawing

on the perceived inherent feminism in Shakespeare's plays and challenging the patriarchal values reproduced in them, or, expressed differently, a balance of working with and against Shakespeare. The same tension can be found in feminist criticism and performance of Shakespeare.

In Shakespeare's own appropriations of *Leir* and the Macbeth story in Holinshed, and in his treatment of Emilia, Ophelia and Juliet, there is a movement, similar to the movement of present-day feminist re-visions, towards focusing more on and partly exculpating women. By extension, Shakespeare's own versions of these stories can be seen to ask whether women are in life routinely blamed for things that are not necessarily their fault – an approach which can, in a present-day context, be connected to the topical issue of victim-blaming. Shakespeare's plays also tend to focus more on children than his sources do – and not only in the child motif and inclusion of two boy characters (Fleance and young Macduff) in *Macbeth*. If Juliet, Ophelia, Cordelia and Desdemona are thought of as being about thirteen to seventeen years old, they are children by today's legal definition. Juliet, the youngest, is for no obvious reason three years younger than the corresponding character in Shakespeare's source; and in the other three cases the daughter's relationship with her father, and therefore her daughterhood, is foregrounded. As discussed in the chapter on *King Lear*, patriarchy places men above both women and children, leaving girls at the bottom of the hierarchy.

This focus on young girls and their relationships with their fathers may therefore be read as gender-orientated engagement with the source stories. As has been obvious throughout this study, different Shakespearean tragedies give rise to different tendencies in appropriations. *Lear* appropriations tend to take the missing mother into account. Some of them lump Goneril and Regan together, which is often described as the conventional way of portraying them in productions of *King Lear*, while others take care to individualise the two characters, an approach which has in recent years become common in performances of Shakespeare's play. In performance and criticism of *King Lear*, incest and dementia have come to be two standard (not mutually exclusive)

explanations of Lear's personality and his relationship to his daughters. *Lear's Daughters* (like Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*) picks up the motif of incest, but none of the appropriations contains any reference to dementia.

Perhaps most strikingly of all, the questioning of Cordelia as Lear's biological daughter occurs in both *Lear's Daughters* and *Seven Lears*. As I have argued, the trope of Cordelia as a changeling may be connected to similarities between Cordelia and Cinderella and the latter's status as stepdaughter. It may also be a way to relieve anxiety caused by implications of a sexual relationship between Lear and Cordelia.

Since Adrian Noble's 1986 RSC production of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth's missing child has gained a prominent position in productions, appropriations and criticism of the play. While the historical son from her first marriage is conventionally thought to be out of bounds as an explanation in the theatre, all three appropriations studied here choose this explanation of her famous speech beginning 'I have given suck'. The appropriations have the further common traits of reintroducing the historical background into the story and taking Lady Macbeth's part by suggesting that her actions can be excused in view of the trauma to which she has been subjected, by stipulating her legal right to the throne and/or by writing off the acts she performs in Shakespeare's play as malicious slander.

While I would argue that domestic violence against women is a central theme in the play-text of *Othello*, neither productions of the play nor the appropriations studied here foreground this aspect as much as might be expected. *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* treats domestic violence as one manifestation of the oppression of marriage, but *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* instead focuses on an aspect of Shakespeare's play that many spectators/readers appear to experience: the impulse to intervene to avert the inevitable tragedy.

It is also interesting in this context that productions of *Othello* still tend to read

the play as being primarily about race, whereas neither *Desdemona* nor *Goodnight Desdemona* is primarily concerned with race or racism. What is surprising is not that race is seen as being an important element in *Othello*, but that the importance of the very topical area of domestic violence as a central aspect of the play is often at least partly overlooked. One reason for this could be that the issue of race obscures the issue of gender. If Othello's status as a racialised character is seen as important for the play by a production or appropriation with an anti-racist outlook, it is in the interest of this production to present the character of Othello as sympathetically as possible, which is likely to mean that less attention is directed towards his violence and the gender issues in the play. In a similar way, an appropriation or a production that wishes to promote Emilia as a feminist character would be likely to downplay her racist discourse and focus less on the issue of race in the play as a whole. This is an example of how present-day productions and appropriations are more categorical than Shakespeare's texts. This tendency is partly connected to the development of the role of the director during the twentieth century.

The appropriations of *Romeo and Juliet* create an imagined future, but the vision is cynical and challenges the ideas of love at first sight and living 'happily ever after'. However, the idea of romantic tragedy that they question and replace with comedy is not derived from Shakespeare's play but from its afterlife. The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* is not just that Romeo and Juliet die, and certainly not that their romantic story is interrupted. The marriage between these two adolescents is in itself part of the tragedy – it is the modern idea of romantic love that makes us think that marrying for love is always the desirable outcome in fiction. The tragedy, including both the marriage and the deaths, is caused by the adults in Juliet's life: the Friar's risky plan, the Nurse's irresponsible guardianship and the Capulets' bad parenting, including pressuring or even forcing their daughter to be married too young and to someone she does not want to be married to.

Appropriators, directors, actors, scholars, readers and audiences are all likely to see and attach importance to things in Shakespeare's plays that they feel to

be of vital significance in the present moment. In different time periods, people have noticed and focused on completely different aspects of the plays. This can be exemplified by the fact that the idea of mourning a dead child has in about forty years' time gone from not being generally seen as relevant for *Macbeth* at all to being widely viewed as absolutely central to the play. This does not, however, necessarily mean that present-day readers superimpose their own concerns on Shakespeare's plays without any foundation in the texts. On the contrary, it is usually perfectly possible to find evidence in Shakespeare's texts to defend readings that may at a cursory glance appear to be anachronistic. As Shakespearean actors and directors repeatedly point out, Shakespeare's texts are so rich and versatile that the possibilities for different interpretations are seemingly endless; and, above all, the texts are strong and flexible enough to bear the stretch of any 'liberties' taken with them. Most far-fetched stagings of Shakespeare today is accommodated within productions of his own plays. There is limited awareness of the last few decades' stage appropriations in mainstream theatre; and it may also be felt that the advantages of producing Shakespeare's original plays – in terms of the quality and versatility of the text as well as the possibilities for funding and attracting large audiences (and, in consequence, conveying any 'message' the director may wish to get across to more people) – outweighs the advantage of having the freedom to create an entirely new text. It would be possible to draw the conclusion that appropriations of the kind investigated here, especially feminist ones, have largely served their purpose and been replaced by an attitude that is increasingly accepting of varying and unconventional ways of staging Shakespeare's texts.

The appropriative impulse often stems from unanswered questions and what is sometimes perceived as 'unsatisfying' solutions in Shakespeare's plays. These are often connected to gender issues and resonate with appropriators owing to the connections to contemporary concerns. The appropriations, in turn, often introduce a new condition that could have an impact on spectators'/readers' understanding of Shakespeare's plays. This may lead to a back-and-forth movement of interpretation between Shakespeare's play and its appropriation,

where both can be seen as appropriations of each other in the mind of the spectator/reader. Not all of the inventions have this kind of potential, though, either because they are impossible to reconcile with Shakespeare's story or *Dunsinane* is the most recent of the appropriations and the only one with its roots in mainstream theatre because they do not appear to add anything to the interpretation of Shakespeare's play.

Inventions that seem to be inconsistent with Shakespeare's versions include Lady Macbeth surviving (in Greig's *Dunsinane*), Old Hamlet surviving (in Pontac's *Hamlet, Part II*), Desdemona surviving (in MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona*), Romeo and Juliet surviving (in MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona* and Pontac's *Fatal Loins*) and Macbeth's and Hamlet's lives having been completely different from how they are portrayed in Shakespeare's plays (in Cargill Thompson's two plays). Inventions that are irrelevant to the over-all interpretations of Shakespeare's plays include Kent being a woman (in Pontac's *Prince Lear*). The conditions that really seem to have the power to affect the understanding of Shakespeare's plays are Cordelia not being Lear's daughter (in Barker's *Seven Lears* and the WTG's *Lear's Daughters*), Lady Macbeth's baby having been lost and subsequently adopted by the Macduffs (in Calcutt's *Lady Macbeth*), and the idea that Romeo and Juliet would not have stayed in love forever if they had lived (in MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona* and Pontac's *Fatal Loins*). In the latter case, while the two stories involving Romeo and Juliet surviving are of course not consistent with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, there is nothing in Shakespeare's play that says that they would never have fallen out of love *if* they had survived, and so the individual invention of that hypothesis is not inconsistent with Shakespeare's play.

The invention of Ophelia surviving is strictly speaking possible within the story of *Hamlet*, as *Ophelia Thinks Harder* explains away the apparent impossibility by having her maid found dead in Ophelia's clothes and with her face disfigured beyond recognition as a result of asphyxiation. This makes it possible, if difficult, to accommodate Ophelia's survival within the story of *Hamlet*, unlike

the survival of Desdemona and Juliet, who both die on stage and are identified by several other people.

The idea that Desdemona is a prostitute (in Vogel's *Desdemona*) is clearly not consistent with Shakespeare's character, but it has an impact on the interpretation of *Othello*. The suggestion in *Ophelia Thinks Harder* that Ophelia survives can thus be seen as consistent with the story of *Hamlet*, but is not very relevant for interpreting it, as none of the other characters (except possibly Horatio) knows about it; and the invention

Several of my 2015 students spontaneously commented that they would never be able to see *Romeo and Juliet* in the same way again after having read *Goodnight Desdemona* and *Fatal Loins*.

In *Desdemona* can be seen as inconsistent with the story of *Othello* but relevant to an interpretation of that play.

The new inventions in Shakespearean appropriations with maximal impact on a spectator/reader's perception of Shakespeare's plays, then, are the ones that are possible to accommodate within the framework of Shakespeare's stories (that is, the ones that do not obviously contradict Shakespeare's story-lines); the ones that make a difference to the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays if accepted by spectators/readers; and, finally, the ones where this difference adds a layer of dramatic irony to Shakespeare's tragedies: Romeo and Juliet die for their love, but it would not have lasted; Cordelia is Lear's favourite daughter and the only one who truly loves him, and he disowns her because she does not fulfil her duty as a daughter, but she is not in fact his daughter; the childless Macbeth unwittingly has his own wife's child killed. These inventions all add poignancy not only to the appropriations but also to Shakespeare's plays when they are revisited. In addition, they are likely to create an uncomfortable, unsettled and unsatisfied feeling for an audience. Such a feeling is consonant with emotional responses to Shakespeare's own endings – responses that are in

themselves an important source of the appropriative impulse and therefore a reason why Shakespeare's plays are so often reimaged.

-----

## **References**

- Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1992).
- Alexander, Catherine. Lecture on *Much Ado About Nothing*, 6 August 2015, University of Cambridge Shakespeare Summer School 2015.
- Alter, Iska. 'King Lear and A Thousand Acres: Gender, Genre, and the Revisionary Impulse', in *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance*, ed. Marianne Novy (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).
- Anon., *King Lear*, ed. Tiffany Stern, Globe Education (London: Nick Hern, 2002).
- Appleton Aguiar, Sarah. '(Dis)Obedient Daughters: (Dis)Inheriting the Kingdom of Lear', in *He Said, She Says: An RSVP to the Male Text*, ed. Mika Howe and Sarah Appleton Aguiar (Madison & London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), pp. 194-206.
- Aston, Elaine. *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999).
- . *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights, 1990-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- Auerbach, Nina. *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time* (London: J. M. Dent & Son, 1987).
- Avila, Elaine. 'Lisa Wolpe Uses Shakespeare to Bend Gender', *American Theatre*, <<http://www.americantheatre.org/2014/08/13/lisa-wolpe-uses-shakespeare-to-bendgender-roles-around-the-country>> [accessed 14 September 2016].
- Baker, Roberta. *Early Modern Tragedy, Gender and Performance, 1984-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- Baldry, Anna Constanza; Maria Giuseppina Pacilli and Stefano Pagliaro. 'She's Not a Person... She's Just a Woman! Infra-Humanization and Intimate Partner Violence', in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 30:9 (2015), 1567-82.
- Bamber, Linda. *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982).
- Barber, Frances. 'Ophelia in Hamlet', in *Players of Shakespeare 2*, ed. Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 137-49.

Barker, Howard. *Arguments for a Theatre*, 3rd ed. (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997 [1989]).

---. *Death, The One, and the Art of Theatre* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).

---. 'Gertrude – The Cry' in *Plays Two* (London: Oberon, 2006), pp. 79-175.

---. Personal interview, 2 April 2014.

---. Howard Barker, 'Seven Lears: The Pursuit of the Good', in *Plays Five* (London: Oberon, 2009), pp. 97-167.

---. 'Seven Lears: The Pursuit of the Good', in *Seven Lears: The Pursuit of the Good / Golgo:*

*Sermons on Pain and Privilege* (London: Calder, 1990), pp. 1-49.

Bartholomeusz, Dennis. *Macbeth and the Players* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

Barton, John. *Playing Shakespeare* (London & New York: Methuen, 1984).

Bate, Jonathan, and Eric Rasmussen (eds). *The RSC Shakespeare Complete Works* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007).

Battersby, Matilda. 'Maxine Peake "Traumatised" by Watching Herself Play Hamlet Ahead of Cinema Release', in *The Independent* 13 March 2015

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/news/maxine-peake-traumatised-by-watching-herself-play-hamlet-ahead-of-cinema-release-10106882.html>> [accessed 31 October].

'Bechdel Test Movie List' <<http://bechdeltest.com>> [accessed 12 September 2016].

Bennett, Alan. 'Foreword' to Perry Pontac, *Codpieces* (London: Oberon, 2011), pp. 9-11.

Bennett, Susan. *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996).

Berkowitz, Gerald M. 'Shakespeare at the Edinburgh Festival, 1991', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 43:2 (1992), 227-32.

Berry, Cicely. *The Actor and His Text* (London: Virgin Publishing 1987).

---. *From Word to Play: A Handbook for Directors* (London: Oberon Books, 2008).

---. *Voice and the Actor* (New York: Wiley Publishing, 1973).

Betts, Jean, and Wm. Shakespeare. *Ophelia Thinks Harder* (Wellington, New Zealand: The Play Press, 2001 [1994]).

---. 'Writer's Note', in *Ophelia Thinks Harder* (Wellington, New Zealand: The Play Press, 2001 [1994]), p. ii.

Biggins, Dennis. 'Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in *Macbeth*', *Shakespeare Studies* (1975), 255-77.

Bigsby, Christopher. *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Billington, Michael. 'King Lear Review – Glenda Jackson Makes a Triumphant Return to the Stage', in *The Guardian* 5 November 2016

<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/05/king-lear-review-glenda-jacksonold-vic>> [accessed 31 January 2017].

---. 'Macbeth Review: It's Not Just the Sisters That Are Weird in Iqbal Khan's Bizarre Take', in *The Guardian* 24 June 2016

<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jun/24/macbeth-review-shakespearesglobe-iqbal-khan-ray-fearon-tara-fitzgerald>> [accessed 10 November 2016].

---. 'The Role to Die for', in *The Guardian* 31 July 2008

<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/jul/31/theatre.shakespeare>> [accessed 16 January 2017].