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41505/01

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July 24, 2006

### Shakespeare On the Influence of Gender and Culture on Social Order

Shakespeare's plays appear to have a keen awareness of specific societal aspects of the time period presented in each particular play. These aspects are presented under the guise of comic and tragic elements, perhaps to distribute the didacticism of the message. In particular, cultural disparities between aristocrats and commoners, and the power of men over women, both filial and in marriage, are displayed according to expectations and mores of the age. Though Shakespeare's tragedies focus on social order as well, it is Shakespeare's comedies that, often through the disguise or transformation of characters, reveal the dominance of men and aristocrats in such a way as to be humorous and didactic in nature.

During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when Shakespeare was writing, there was an established social hierarchy in place that did not allow for much mobility among social classes. Aristocrats were deemed culturally dominant to citizens, peasants, and other lower-class persons, but were also held to expectations of being honorable and benevolent to members of lower classes. This was most often the case, but there were exceptions, as Shakespeare exposes, particularly in his play *The Taming of the Shrew*, as several lords find Sly drunk and decide to play a joke on him and also in *Twelfth Night*, as Maria, a noblewoman, connives to convince Malvolio into thinking Olivia is in love with him. These incidents are comic to the audience, but the message is

infiltrated into the comical aspect that people of lower social status are subject to the whims of those above them.

Perhaps even more importantly, however, was the theory that women were subject to the control of men—their male siblings, their father, or their husband. McDonald makes the statement that “As God the Father was to all creation and the monarch to the state, so was the father to the household” (260). Women were expected to adhere to all of their ruling men’s expectations of them—to be subservient and acquiescent, and to help their husband obtain his desires. A woman had virtually no choice in who would be her husband; her father accepted a suitor according to his desires for his daughter and for financial gain. A woman had some control over her children and the servants of the household, but control ultimately resided with the man of the house (the father or the husband).

Deviations from the social hierarchy with regards to social class or between women and men were considered to be potentially harmful for the state because behavior at home was analogous to that of a subject to his/her state. If a woman tried to control the home or her husband in some fashion, and the man did not prevent this from occurring, it was tantamount to the state being overrun by its subjects. Therefore, if a town heard of a man being dominated by his wife or daughter, there was often a punishment implemented upon the man. Called “rough riding,” men were placed backwards onto a horse and made to ride through town to shame them for not making their women follow their rule. The townspeople also shouted and made ruckus noise while the man was on the horse to signify how the world had hence been “turned upside down and rendered inharmonious

by [her] disorderliness and his lack of control” (Greenblatt, Cohen, Howard & Maus, 117).

The ideas of control and social instability in Shakespeare’s plays are perhaps best illustrated in *Taming of the Shrew*. Both Kate and Sly are symbols of disorderliness in the world, although in the case of Sly, the lords are the initiators of the deceit and it is a mere joke, with no resultant permanent turmoil. Though mobility among classes was rare, the lords who encounter Sly as they enter the inn decide to alter the state of Sly as a beggar for a short amount of time by making him out to be a lord. As the play unfolds, however, Shakespeare leaves Sly and the lords’ deceit behind in favor of a focus on the disorderliness that occurs between a man and his wife, particularly Baptista, the father, Petrucchio, the suitor, and Katherine, the daughter who is wild and views marriage and the control a man has over a woman as disdainful.

The reason for the desertion of Shakespeare’s initial view of disorderliness in society with the lords and Sly is unknown, but it might appear to the reader that Shakespeare considers the unruliness of a woman to be more pertinent to society as a whole. It also allows for a didactic presentation of the absolute power of man within the comedy, whereas with the lords’ deceit of Sly, it is so far-reaching with its humorous intent that true didacticism about the control of aristocrats in society seems it would have been almost unattainable had Shakespeare continued the story of Sly as opposed to Kate, Baptista and Petrucchio.

Shakespeare’s transformation of Kate into a wife of subservience and obedience to Petrucchio demonstrates, in the play, a restoration of order. This return to order is a direct statement to the relationship of the power of men to the stability of the social order.

This statement is enforced by a speech coming directly from Katherine at the end of the play. Her dialogue enforces and encourages the obligation of a wife to serve her husband. Kate also establishes a comparison to that of a disobedient citizen, particularly when she states, “Even such a woman oweth to her husband, / And when she is forward, peevish, sullen, sour, / And not obedient to his honest will, / What is she but a foul contending rebel, / And graceless traitor to her loving lord?” (Greenblatt, 198). The language Shakespeare writes for Kate emphasizes the duty of one to the greater power—a man or the state.

An interesting aspect of the play is that Bianca, Kate’s sister is basically given her choosing, a complete reversal of the situation in which Kate is placed in, having Petrucchio chosen as her husband and forced to obey his will. Bianca, once Kate is married to Petrucchio, is allowed to marry Lucentio, the man she desires to marry. The statement here that Shakespeare might subtly be making is that, provided the larger elements of order are maintained, there may be allowances for those that are not typically in power. Kate creates such disarray in the social order that she must be “tamed” so that stability may be maintained socially. Only at the end of the play is she given leave to speak as she desires, because this speech is based on the social aspects desired of a woman.

*Twelfth Night* also discusses the infallibility of the power of men, although, in this play, there is a greater focus on the hierarchy of the social order as compared to *Taming of the Shrew*. Ambition is the downfall of Malvolio, who tries to alter the social hierarchy to make room for him. Malvolio has no respect for the class lines instilled in society during the time period and, as a result, he is “punished” for this display of

unseemly ambition. The disparity in social power is also displayed in the court of Orsino, where Maria, as a gentlewoman, puts Malvolio in his place in a sense by making him appear insane after he is ridiculed for thinking Olivia to be in love with him.

Interestingly, the title of the play implies a period of time in the English culture when social order was obscured somewhat. Twelfth Night was a holiday in which the theme was a reversal of normality. The beginning of the play follows the theme of reversal of order, with Malvolio believing he can marry Olivia and become a nobleman and Viola dressing up like a man to serve Orsino. Maria, on the other hand, actually is able to increase her social status in the play, as it was easier for a woman to marry above her social standing and she also expresses support for the ideas of Sir Toby, showing her ability to remain subservient in her position as woman.

The end of the play, however, has order mostly restored, again establishing the vast power of those on the higher end of the social hierarchy. Malvolio is kept in his place of social ranking and Viola no longer has to disguise herself as a man to work for Orsino; rather, she becomes his wife. Almost everyone is coupled off, except for Malvolio and Feste.

With the introduction of Sebastian into the scene, the disorders of the play can be unraveled and order restored to the court. In this instance, both disorder and order rest with those lower than the Duke of Orsino. As a lady, Viola is forced to disguise herself as a man and deceive the higher court of Orsino. Her brother Sebastian, a lord, must reveal himself to the court at the end of the play as the man who has married Olivia, as the man who Antonio has been searching for, and as the actual male of the two siblings.

When he takes on these roles, Viola is free to return to her subservience as a woman instead of a servant to Orsino, thereby restoring stability to the situation.

Compared to his statement about the influence and stability of power in *Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare is making a more subtle statement about power, but he is offering the idea that order must be reinstated in a social situation to prevent chaos from occurring. The end of *Twelfth Night* leaves the reader with a slightly uneasy feeling, for Malvolio has threatened revenge on the court, thus implying that complete order has not been re-established, an ominous potential occurrences for the state/nation at that time.

A social statement is made with this ending, however; Malvolio, who is of a lower class than Orsino, Olivia, etc., is subject to the whims of the aristocracy. He has been made to look like a fool, and order has been restored at the expense of his reputation. The implication in his statement, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you," (Greenblatt, 1820) is that the return to order is incomplete and there is a foreshadowing of disarray to come in the future. In analysis of this statement and other examples of disorder in Shakespeare's plays, the reader must wonder if Shakespeare means to imply that those in lower social stations inherently cause disorder and if so, the nobility has an obligation and also a "divine right" to restore order at the expense of those necessary to do so.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is also the sense of disorder in the play initially, followed by restoration of the order at the end of the play. This disorder allows for the expression of the power of men and the necessary subservience in women in creating the harmony of the social world of both the fairies and the. With the nobility, Egeus threatens his daughter, Hermia, with death for marrying against his wishes;

Theseus gives her the option of death or the nunnery. Both of these choices are extreme and exaggerative, despite the given time period in which the play is set, but these options emphasize the power that men have over women in all situations, even in social situations, such as marriage preferences. The fact that Shakespeare exaggerates this situation may mean that he is inserting a didactic aspect about power and the infallibility of men and aristocrats, as he appears to have done in *Twelfth Night* and *Taming of the Shrew*.

The play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, also presents two other situations that are construed as issues of power, particularly between genders. Specifically, the fairies Oberon and Titania are at odds because of their quarrel over Hippolyta and Theseus. Titania assumes a dismissive and antagonistic attitude toward her husband, Oberon, over his love for Hippolyta and hers for Theseus, and Oberon vows to humiliate her as punishment for her insubordination. Though Oberon and Titania eventually come to terms with one another and speak of happiness at the end of the play, the emphasis on humiliating Titania to establish a ground of power for Oberon is pertinent to Shakespeare's assertion of the power of men.

Also in the beginning of the play is the story of Theseus and Hippolyta. Theseus, a duke, has conquered the Amazons, and, as a result, has won Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons. This military conquest further exemplifies the power that men have throughout the world in Shakespeare's plays, and furthermore, potentially throughout the world in which Shakespeare is writing. The submissiveness of a queen, particularly of a warrior group such as the Amazons, is truly expressive of the absolute power of man.

Shakespeare utilizes his genres of writing in an interesting fashion. While most authors would seemingly use tragic elements as a form of didacticism, Shakespeare chooses to implement comedy in a didactic fashion, particularly for making statements about the necessity of the stability of social order. The social order present in Shakespeare's comedies is relevant to the social order of the time period in which he is writing and also demonstrative of the social order that has continued to infiltrate societal mores and values even currently, in some societies. Shakespeare's comedies are representative of the strength of power that both men and aristocrats have in society. Aristocrats have ready control over any social situations and regardless of social class and men command women and servants.

While Shakespeare's comedies are exaggerative in nature where the aspects of the power of men and aristocrats are concerned, they are focused on social stability as related to this power that men and aristocrats hold. The chaos that surrounds the beginning of *Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* disintegrates as the play progresses and a shift in either character or plot yields a return to order that also brings about a return to the rightful distribution of power—that is, the return of power to the men and aristocrats of the story. Without the exaggerative nature of the plays, the didacticism emphasized about power and gender positions in society might be rendered offensive and not entertaining; thus, the plot development and shifts in characters that Shakespeare presents offer a comical and entertaining manner of handling the delicate issue of power within relationships. In contemplation of these ideas of aristocracy, men, and power, though, a reader must wonder whether Shakespeare was writing with this underlying message simply because he was writing at the mercy of his patrons—the

members of nobility. If this was truly the case, perhaps his plays written at that time may have yielded a different message if he was writing without regard.

Works Cited

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