



GENDER IDEOLOGY AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIP IN THE PLAYS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract

This paper highlights the gender ideology and family relationship in the plays of William Shakespeare. The construction of men as superior to women in the physical, mental and moral realms made it possible for men to have a wider range of options and possibilities with regard to occupations and pursuits. While the nobility was always already endowed with a wider range of possibilities with regard to what they could do. In some plays which dramatize family relationships are analysed from the imagined perspectives of original audiences whose intellectual and moral worlds are explored through specific dramatic situations. Plays are discussed as far as possible in terms of their language and plots, rather than of character, and the study is heterogenous in its use of sources, though drawing largely on the extensive moral and polemical writing on the family surviving from the period.

Key words: *Gender, ideology, relationship, family, heterogenous.*

Introduction

While social mobility for men was possible via many avenues, at least in theory, for women the roles that society provided was still limited to those associated with the family. Given that women could not inherit property, could not on businesses and that there were few professions for them to adopt, the possibilities were limited to either familial roles, helping out in family businesses or working as domestic or farm labourers, in addition, on a daily basis they battled the biases which were inbuilt into the patriarchal model of society within which they lived. While men had, as per Shakespeare in *As You Like It*, is seven ages through which they lived, most women had just three: daughters, wife and mother. And in each case these ages were lived in the control, and under the dominance of man: father, husband and sometimes the grownup son, in case of the demise of the husband. While their lives were thus restricted and limited by the structures within which they lived, many women found themselves empowered via early widowhood especially if there were no children or if the sons were young. But widowed women battled against other restrictions: stereotyped as lustful and unable to live without male support, widows were seen as susceptible to the blandishments and advances of man on the make. Indeed, even as women had limited roles within which they functioned, the stereotypes and circulated in Shakespeare's time about then dominated society's perception of women. Thus, women could be either virginal and pure, quiet, meek and submissive as the Virgin Mary mother of Jesus (Miranda in *Tempest*) or they could be Shrews, scolds and nags, uncontrollable, resistant to their men folk (Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*) or lustful and uncontrolled in their appetite etc. Seen in limited ways, these perceptions then shaped and enclosed women's roles and lives. This is not to say that there were no strong positive women figures during this period: Queen Elizabeth was the best example of such a woman. But then these strong individualistic women were seen as possessing the male virtues of assertiveness, courage and self-respect, and this aligned them with masculine even as it neglected the traditional shortcomings of the feminine. Stereotypes, roles, constructions of gender which privileged one in opposition to the other: While all these are true of Shakespeare's time as of any other, what should be kept in mind is that these are broad brush strokes that do not give us all the truth.



Gender ideology

When William Shakespeare put the words “Frailty, thy name is women” in the play Hamlet, he was saying something that was accepted as the norm in his time and in his World: women were frail, not just in the terms of their morals but frailties benefit their physical, emotional and intellectual attributes. Women in modern England were perceived as inferior to men and this perception was facilitated by the discourses of religion, biology and law. On the other hand, these very discourses worked to further endorse and validate Hamlet contention regarding man.

*What a piece of work is a man! novel in reason,
How infinite in faculty, in form and moving how
Express and admirable, in action how like an angel,
In apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the
World, the Paragon of animals! (II. ii.293-97)*

If women’s characters were seen as imperfect in comparison to that of men, their bodies were also seen as lesser than that of man. While Aristotle spoke of women as “deformed” men theories of humours and elements, which enjoyed widespread credence during this period, further disempowered women. In Antony and Cleopatra When Cleopatra is about to commit suicide, she eschews her femininity by first repudiating the moon’s control over her:

*My resolution’s and I have nothing
Of women in me: now from head to foot
I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon
No planet is of mine. (V.ii.234-37)*

The father in the early modern period enjoyed considerable power benefit his wife and children. As Theseus says to Hermia in A Midsummer Night’s Dream about her father Egeus,

*To you your father should be as God,
One that composed your beauties, yea and one
To who you are but a form in wax,
By him imprinted, and within his power
To leave the figure or disfigure it. (I.i47-51)*

This passage reinforces the concept of father as all-powerful and demonstrates the weight attached to his position, especially with regard to daughters. Indeed the father’s power is seen in the passage wherein Egeus asks that Hermia be killed if she refuses to accept his choice of a bridegroom for her ,and claims that this is provided for “according to our law the authority of the father which we see in this is also made clear via Lear’s treatment of Cordelia’s suitors in the Li of King Lear and in plays as diverse as The Taming of the Shrew ,Romeo and Juliet and Henry V, in each of which the decision for a daughter’s marriage and the choice of a bridegroom is based upon the father’s will, even when in opposition to the daughters. Thus, even as Shakespeare shows us the functioning of patriarchy within the family he also attests to its unstable nature, in several of the plays in which he shows us fathers and daughters. This chain of command is seen particularly in a Play such as Romeo and Juliet, Where Juliet’s mother washes her hands off her daughter’s concerns even as Juliet pleads against the marriage that has been arranged for her by her father: “Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word:/Do as. Thou wilt, for I have done with



thee” (III.v.202-04). Thus, when we consider Shakespeare’s era in terms of gender and gendered roles, What We see is that even as the “rule of the father “was prevalent in society that did not necessarily mean that all men were seen as perfect in their masculinity. While women were generally accepted as “lesser than “men they learnt to negotiate the tricky social terrain, finding ways and means that empowered them.

Family relationships

Gendered notions of identity ensured that the family was, in large measure, a patriarchal construct, Wherein the father ruled all the others. In addition, women, having been rendered weaker than men and more unstable by the working of science, religion and classical learning, were mostly seen in ways that disadvantaged them, creating stereotypes that were born out of, and fed into, these discourses. Within the family these ways of imagining women affected marital relationships, the education and marriage of daughters and also the lives of women after the death of their patriarchy also worked in tandem with the concept of male primogeniture to the advancement of the first-born Son, while younger son were often left to fend for themselves.

Marriage during this period was not based upon personal inclination as much as it was upon other considerations. This was particularly so among the upper classes and the landed gentry and aristocracy when consideration other than love and liking determined marriage partners. These included the possibilities of increasing one’s wealth and property via the bride’s dowry but also political alliances and the prospect of future benefits. Also, it was not yet the prerogative of the young to choose their own partners: fathers played a significant role in determining the marriage of their children and this was so even for young men, though of course more so for young women. Prospero in *The Tempest* plots a marriage between his daughter and Ferdinand, Prince of Naples in the hope that this would win him back his Kingdom. While daughters might be cosseted and pampered by their fathers the first signs of rebellion cause them to be reminded of their station in life thus Lear in *The King Lear* describes Cordelia in ways that marks her out as the ideal daughter and begins by claiming that the suitor for Cordelia will receive their answer, depending upon her choice, only to cost her off labelling her a” little seeming substance” (I.i.199) when she refuses to speak as he desires. Further he strips her of her dower and asks her suitors if they will take her “dower’d with our curse” (I.i.205). Juliet’s father initially asks Paris to woo her as his permission for their marriage depends upon Juliet’s consent:” And, she agreed, within her scope of choice/Lies my consent and fair according voice” (I.ii.16-17). However, once she speaks against the choice of her father she is coerced into the marriage, even as Egeus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* attempts to force Hermia. The control of Fathers over a young girl has, of course, been most famously depicted in *Hamlet*, where not only is Ophelia asked to distance herself from Hamlet but also used to spy upon him, her will overpowered by that of her father. The family structure that was operative in Shakespeare’s time, especially in aristocratic circles, involved daughters who were often used to advance the position of their families at court. Thus, there will was of little or no concern, in the choice of marriage partners. The choice rested with the fathers and with the prospective bridegroom and his family but rarely with the girl. An extreme example of this is seen in *The Merchant of Venice* c Where Portia cannot choose her own husband, even after her father’s demise, but is constrained by her father’s will Which declares that whosoever picks the correct casket will be her husband.

While men’s familial roles are as father and husbands, they also play the role of sons and brothers. As fathers and husbands, they are usually posited for us in fairly authoritarian roles, domineering and even wilfully cruel, on occasion. There is considerable controversy among historians as to how family



members interacted with each other and the affective range that could be seen in those relationships, in this period. Thus one view point held to be true for familial relationships is that they were not build upon intense affections, that parents and children as also spouse and siblings ,were not emotionally attached to each other with the force that we now see as “normal” .However this has been disputed by other historians who have claimed that affections tended to be structured around communities and group identities is rather than family identity , Which was also however, fairly strong and thus affectionate and loving relationships were the norm. This is seen in *As You Like It* where Oliver, the elder son, ill-treats Orlando, the youngest, even as he continues to care for their middle brother. My brother Jaques he keeps at school, and report speaks goldenly of his profit: for my part, he keeps me rustically at home, or to speak more properly, stays me here at home unkept;(1.i.4-7).

Orlando acknowledges that” the courtesy of nations” allows the elder to be the “better” (1.i.34-40) Of the siblings but that does not necessarily benefit the younger ones, as Orlando discovers.

Conclusion

William Shakespeare’s plays interpolates some aspects of family relationships - between parents and children, between siblings, and about marriage. The moral bases of all these relationships are derived in part from explicit precept, such as the requirement to honour parents, in part from cultural mores which shaped expectations. The aforementioned value systems were examined with respect to the role they played in the development and evolution of the individual’s self-concept as well as how such persons interacted with other individuals in context of relationships.

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