
The Portrayal and Understanding of Gender in Shakespeare's History Plays

Known as a fine interpreter of human thought and action, William Shakespeare often relied on gender roles and stereotypes to create within the audience an opinion of a character or event. Since Elizabethan society made such great distinctions between the actions and feelings of men and women, Shakespeare's gender imagery most certainly would have succeeded in capturing the audience's attention and understanding.

Twentieth century feminist critics of Shakespeare see him as reinforcing the patriarchal values and perceptions of women during the Renaissance (Grady, 237). Madelon Gohlke defines traditional Elizabethan gender roles as masculinity portraying "heroic violence" and femininity portraying "submissive pacifism," (Grady, 238). Shakespeare uses both characters of both genders and gendered language to display the masculine and feminine attributes of the characters, events, and situations in the history in Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V. The manly attributes in Shakespeare's history plays are strength and honor, while womanly attributes are weakness, and untrustworthiness. Thus, Shakespeare continually shows feminine attributes in a negative light while extolling the virtuous masculine qualities.

WEAKNESS VS. STRENGTH

Judging by his words and actions, Richard the Second comes across as a weak and feminine king. He earns nothing for himself and shies away from battle and quarrel. Richard attempts to mediate the conflict between Mowbray and Bolingbroke. The men want to settle with a duel, but Richard stops them before they begin to fight. Both Mowbray and Bolingbroke are prepared to die to clear their names of murder, but Richard wants no part in any sort of physical conflict. Mowbray denounces the war of words as a "woman's war" (I, i, 48). Hence, he mocks Richard's nonviolent attitude as feminine.

By refusing to submit to violence and finding a weaker solution (banishment of both men), Richard takes on the feminine role, avoiding deadly conflict and resolving to weaker consequence. Richard's management of conflict is not strong and decisive; rather it is poetic and idealistic. He relies not on words of action, but on words of philosophy and artsy metaphors, while the duelers wish for manly strength and action. Juxtaposed against the strong and brave Mowbray and Bolingbroke, Richard indeed appears weak and feminine.

The weak leadership of Richard II is contrasted with the strong leadership and valor of

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Bolingbroke. Shakespeare clearly sees Bolingbroke in the masculine role and Richard in the feminine role. Bolingbroke is strong, fearless, and decisive while Richard appears weak, afraid, and careless with his kingdom. Bolingbroke does everything he can to develop a good reputation with his subjects, and his policy shows him to be a strong leader. ". . . Observed his courtship to the common people/How he did seem to dive into their hearts/With humble and familiar courtesy" (I, iii, 24-26). He is not afraid to stand for his belief that he is the rightful king, and his powerful leadership and good rapport with the common people allow him to win the Crown over a weak king. The English people need a strong man as a leader and not a weak and effeminate "boy" as their ruler.

The Garden Scene in Richard II also associates females with weakness by posing Isabel, the queen, against the Gardener. Isabel, grieving for her husband's welfare and her kingdom, provides only sorrow while the Gardener tries to logically explain the situation to her. She will not accept his strategic analysis of the situation; rather she simply dwells on the sadness of the deposition. ". . . O thou thinkest/To serve me last that I may longest keep/Thy sorrow in my breast. . ." (III, iv, 94-95). Feminist critic, Linda Bamber, suggests that her reliance on emotion rather than logic puts her at a disadvantage against the male realm of the Gardener, politics, and war. Isabel is not queen of a kingdom; rather she is only queen of a garden. Her sorrow, which cannot be "released in action" because of the weakness of her sex, distances her completely from the "masculine Self,"(64-65).

The Duke and Duchess of York represent a negotiation in gender roles. Although York likes to believe he controls everything, his wife appears to take the masculine lead within their last exchange. In the first scene between the couple, the Duchess allows her husband to take on the strong role and weakens her own emotions. However, in fighting on her son's behalf, the Duchess is controlling, strong, and intelligent compared to her rather dim witted husband. As the Duchess pleads for her son's life, her husband denounces her by calling her foolish and unruly. He tries to place back on her the feminine role. The Duchess, however, is determined to rescue Aumerle and summons the courage and authority normally attributed to a man to beg for her son's pardon.

The Duchess controls the whole scene with King Henry, using diplomacy and careful language to convey her plight. Her husband's outbursts appear foolish and rather petty in comparison to her strength and courage in petitioning. In fact, King Henry's gracious acceptance of her pleas gives her even more strength. He handles her concerns as he would a man's; he does not stop her mouth simply because she is a woman. During this scene, a woman assumes the role of a man while her husband is relegated to second position.

Just as Richard II portrays a manly trait as strength, Henry V continues this portrayal in the battle of Agincourt between the English and the French soldiers. Although the English soldiers

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appear to be weak and without strength enough to command attention from the well-suited French, they have an inner, masculine strength, which proves to be a key to their success. In Kenneth Branagh's version of Henry V, the English soldiers come across to the audience as powerful, brave, and willing to fight to the death. The French soldiers appear in their full regalia with the foppish Dauphin in the lead. The contrast in the appearance of the two groups is especially evident when Montjoy, decked in beautiful capes and banners, confronts Hal one last time to ask him to desist. Hal's more masculine attire and strong stance give him the masculine identity, which directly opposes the womanly attire of the French messenger. Masculine strength again conquers feminine weakness at Agincourt.

DISHONOR VS. HONOR

Besides strength, Shakespeare also extols honor as a male virtue and plays on the ancient stereotype of femaleness as deceitful, dishonorable, coy, and untrustworthy. Richard, unlike Bolingbroke, does nothing to procure his subjects' love. His way of going about acquiring property is dubious and shows him to be a weak man trying to appear strong. Only minutes after Gaunt dies, Richard orders the house raided of belongings and claims the property for his own. Even after Northumberland and York denounce his scheme, Richard does not heed their warnings and continues the actions that make him an unpopular ruler. Perhaps Shakespeare here plays on the stereotype that women are not trustworthy and will do whatever it takes to get what they want, while men are willing to fight honorably for their claims.

To make matters worse, Richard runs off to Ireland, shirking his first duty to his own country, England. Therefore, the people feel that they cannot rely on him. Elizabethan society saw women as unreliable and unpredictable creatures; they could not be easily trusted. Richard's feminine attributes at this time would most certainly make him an unpopular leader. Thus, they would have been more than welcoming toward the honorable and masculine attributes of Bolingbroke, who is willing to rise up and take control of Richard's mismanaged and abandoned kingdom.

Just as Shakespeare poses the feminine Richard II against the masculine Bolingbroke, he creates the same sharp contrast of gender attributes in the first part of Henry IV. Hotspur is the ultimate Elizabethan male. He is a strong and honorable warrior poised and ready for battle at all times. His main goal is to protect and defend his country and king against traitors. Chivalrous and loyal, Hotspur exemplifies characteristics upon which are the foundations of Elizabethan masculinity.

Quick to anger, he does not mince words when criticizing those around him. He denounces a messenger as being a woman. He insults the man's masculinity and considers him as having no honor and being weak and foppish. ". . . For he mad me mad/To see him shine so brisk and

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smell so sweet,/And talk so like a waiting- gentlewoman" (I, iii, 53-55).

Hotspur also puts no trust in women. He refuses to tell his wife of the battle because he believes she will gossip about it. As a typical male of that era, he would think that women could not keep a secret. He believes she is better off not knowing about his mission. He does not seem to appreciate that she questions his actions. She does not play the part of the simpering female very well until he threatens that he does not love her and will not sleep with her unless she let him go without question. After his declaration, she again becomes the reticent ideal of an Elizabethan woman.

Directly contrasted to Hotspur is the character of Falstaff. Falstaff has no sense of honor. It seems as though he feels honor is a waste of time. His reliance on gossip and deceit pose him in a negative and female light. Linda Bamber suggests that since Falstaff shows a world outside the political realm: bawdy humor, drunkenness, and sexuality, he comes across as a womanly character juxtaposed against the staunchly political and honorable male characters (68). Falstaff has wheedled his way into the Prince's life with a coy and unruly attitude rather than directness and honor. Falstaff now expects favors in return for his friendship to the Prince.

Shakespeare not only relates dishonor to femininity within single characters like Hotspur's wife and Falstaff, but he also equates femininity and dishonor in scenes of battle. King Henry V considers it "womanly" to destroy the whole city of Harfleur and show no mercy to its people. Instead, he fights in a manly and honorable manner by allowing the citizens to wave the white flag. King Henry also sees the French as women after they kill the innocent baggage boys to add to the total of dead. Henry is completely disgusted and sees this atrocity as a woman's revenge. Shakespeare effectively equates dishonor and femininity in his history plays.

The Duke and Duchess of York in Richard II show negotiation between the masculine role of honor and the feminine role of untrustworthiness. York is honorable and loyal to the Crown; he is willing to turn in his traitor son to King Henry. The Duchess also is loyal, however, she is loyal to Aumerle. She will fight with all her strength to see that he is not sentenced to death as a traitor. In the scenes of their argument and their audience with the King, the Duke and Duchess of York both appear to possess masculine honor. Both characters are prepared to fight for what they think is the right solution. There is no stopping the Duchess; she is honor-bound to save her son's life. However, the Duchess does exemplify the feminine trait of untrustworthiness. Her husband had expected her to simply stay at home and bear the decision of the King. Sacrificing her husband's trust for her son's life, the Duchess of York got on her horse and rode after them to rectify the situation.

Henry, here, also comes across as very honorable, sparing Aumerle's life and forgiving him. After all three characters are in the chamber, Henry listens to each one in turn, allowing all to

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have their say. As King, Henry could simply kill Aumerle right there or order a woman out of his presence. He instead acts more than justly and honorably by pardoning Aumerle and sending the young man home with his mother.

Prince Hal presents a negotiation between the masculine traits of strength and honor and the feminine traits of weakness and dishonor. For the most part, Hal is a strong leader and exemplifies masculine strength in his actions and words. He is very much the leader of his group of ruffian friends that includes Bardolph and Falstaff. His father, however, finds the young Prince Hal incapable of ruling a kingdom and denounces his son's irresponsible actions as feminine weakness. "Can no man tell me of my unthrifty son?/. . .If any plague hang over us, 'tis he./ . .Which he, young wanton and effeminate boy,/Takes on the point of honor to support/So dissolute a crew" (Richard II, V, iii,1-11).

After being admonished by his father, Prince Hal quickly changes his policy and outlook on life. "Yet herein I will imitate the sun/Who doth permit the contagious clouds to smother up his beauty from the world,/ . . .By breaking through the foul and ugly mists/. . .Redeeming time when men think least I will' (I Henry IV, I, ii, 197-217). Hal will allow his father, his companions, and his kingdom to believe that he is a good-for-nothing boy until a surprise moment when he allows his true strength to shine through. Then all will see him as a stronger leader and be in awe at his presence. Just as the sun appears brighter after being covered in clouds, Hal will appear a stronger ruler if he hides his strength now and only shows it later. By the time Hal becomes King Henry V, he is a strong ruler who fears nothing. He knows that the French forces are much stronger than England's small army, but he refuses to let the French Dauphin insult him and his Kingdom. He is a strong enough leader to summon the troops and make the Dauphin eat his words. As he rallies the troops before Harfleur, King Henry instills in his men courage and strength simply by the words he uses to build their moral. Here he transfers some of his own strength unto the frightened men. In the Branagh version of the film, the audience first sees the despairing faces of the tired and worn army, but as their king speaks, their faces change from worry to mission. Thus Henry has given his army his masculine strength and valor.

On the topic honor, King Henry V shows masculine honor only when the circumstances permit. He is also very capable of showing feminine dishonor and untrustworthiness. His commoner friends put their trust in him as a young man. Henry fools around with them while he is sowing his wild oats and then simply throws them away, even having Bardolph hanged as a thief in Henry V. Henry only uses these friends while he needs to use them. He sees them as a cover-up, and lets them go when he wishes to let his sunlight shine. Now that he has his own kingdom, he does not need these commoners hanging all over him.

Henry is only honorable toward Hotspur after he does his deed and kills him. Only after he brutally murders Hotspur does he call him valiant and in fact give him a eulogy, "For worms,

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brave Percy. Fare thee well, great heart!" (I Henry IV, iv, 86). Since his nemesis is dead, he can now afford to honor Hotspur's bravery and honor.

King Henry V is able to afford honor on the French battlefields. He knows he has the innocent citizens of Harfleur right where he wants them. Their city is burning and they are afraid. He tells his soldiers to give them mercy and let them live as they surrender. Anything less than allowing the people to live would be dishonorable. Henry also honors the French dead after Agincourt and is willing to settle an honorable treaty with the French king. Since Henry has the French government now groveling at his feet, he is able to show masculine honor toward the king and the French people. Henry seems to be an expert at negotiating between the masculine and feminine roles of strength and honor, using each role as he needs it.

Shakespeare follows the gender stereotypes of the Elizabethan times and equates masculinity with strength and honor and femininity with weakness and dishonor. Since Shakespeare wrote within a period of a glory in England and was writing about the downfall and glory of former English kings, he used the gender roles to strengthen the mantra of the times that English glory was masculine in nature. Only by the "masculine virtue" did England become what she was during the Renaissance (Rackin, 149). Analogous to the gender separation within Elizabethan society, only masculine virtue would prosper, and feminine attitudes would not be able to stand alone. Perhaps Shakespeare felt he had to portray a deposed king in a feminine light and a heroic king in a masculine light, or risk a negative reaction from the Crown. In any case, William Shakespeare was a product of his times, and if he wanted people to appreciate his plays rather than react against them, he needed to encourage the stereotypes of his society. A struggling playwright has no other choice than to follow traditional conventions.

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