

Kathrin Köhler

"Tragic Patriarchy": The Misogynist Side of Shakespeare in 'Hamlet' and 'Othello'

Thesis (M.A.)

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1. Introduction

Was Shakespeare a misogynist ? Or was he, on the contrary, an early advocate of female equality ? Were his plays manifests of patriarchy, of the dominance of men over women and of typical stereotypes ? Or were they, like other critics have argued, just the opposite? Was he a "feminist in sympathy", as Juliet Dusinberre has argued¹, or was he the patriarchal bard² many others see in him ? In how far were his views about the sexes influenced by the conceptions of gender in the Elizabethan time - and did he support, question or even reject them ?

These were the questions I had in mind when I started working on this thesis paper. After dealing with both Shakespeare and feminism in the course of my studies, an evaluation of Shakespeare's attitude towards women seemed very interesting. The attraction that Shakespeare combined with feminism has, and the necessity of such criticism, has often been discussed. The following quote is rather long, but perfectly expresses my own interest in the topic.

"Feminist critics of Shakespeare must use the strategies and insights of this new criticism selectively, for they examine a male dramatist of extraordinary range writing in a remote period when women's position was in obvious ways more restricted and less disputed than our own. Acknowledging this, feminist critics also recognize that the greatest artists do not necessarily duplicate in their art the orthodoxies of their culture; they may exploit them to create character or intensify conflict; they may struggle with, criticise or transcend them. Shakespeare, it would seem, encompasses more and preaches less than most authors; hence the centuries-old controversy over his religious affiliation, political views, and sexual preferences. His attitudes towards women are equally complex and demand attention."³

The fact that all major female characters have to die in *Hamlet* as well as in *Othello* is what first brought me to assess these two plays. I believe that even without an in-depth analysis of the plays the excessive murdering of women shows that Shakespeare's attitude towards them is in some way troubled. I was worried that this would be too trivial a starting point, but other critics have had the same idea: "And, as has been noted, the women in the tragedies almost invariably are destroyed, or are absent from the new order consolidated at the conclusions."⁴

¹ Juliet Dusinberre. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*.

² Compare for example McLuskie, Kathleen. "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare – *King Lear and Measure for Measure*". In: Dollimore, John and Sinfield, Alan eds. *Political Shakespeare*.

³ Lenz, Carolyn Ruth Swift, Greene, Gayle, and Neely, Carol Thomas. 'Introduction' in: *The Woman's Part. Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, p. 4.

⁴ Lenz, Greene, and Neely, p. 6.

The more I dealt with this vast topic, however, the more complicated it became. The reason for this is that the questions stated above cannot be answered in a simple manner. There are many critics who see Shakespeare as the "patriarchal bard" - and many who oppose this and think that his stand was well ahead of his time. All find arguments in his works to support their view and the debate is ongoing. If one looks only at the discussion that followed the publication of Dusi's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, one gets an idea of the controversy about Shakespeare and feminism. She claimed that the beginning of humanism, Puritanism and the powerful female figure Queen Elizabeth I all changed the status of women and that the new attitude is visible in Shakespeare's plays. But her views have been disputed. There are critics who doubt whether Puritanism and the existence of "isolated 'women worthies'"⁵ really changed the status of women and if so, whether Shakespeare was also influenced by this change. Others argue that especially at the end of Queen Elizabeth's rule the general attitude towards women was negative, that the death of the female ruler was indeed celebrated and that she was idealised again *after* her death.⁶ All of this shows one of the biggest problems when analysing Shakespeare's portrayal of and his attitude towards women: there is no clear definition concerning the general perspective on women in 16th century England. The times in which a unified Elizabethan world picture, as proclaimed by Tillyard and others, was taken for granted, have past, as Lenz, Greene and Neely stress.

"Historical critics, seeking to relate the status of women in the plays to that of women in the period, must struggle with the problems of how to measure the position of women in life and how to conceive the relationship between life and art. The proliferation of contradictory material on women in the Renaissance increases their difficulties.[...] The plays are aesthetic creations as well as social documents; historical data cannot simply be imported into them or derived from them."⁷

If there was consensus about the attitude towards women in the Renaissance, it might be easier to define whether Shakespeare promoted or criticised the prevailing opinion.

What seems to be clear, however, is that the society in which Shakespeare lived was at least more defined by patriarchal norms than our own, although there were also traits of matriarchy and male dependency on women as in the case of the citizens and their queen. I think the following statement of Steve Mullaney is quite correct: "[...] The patriarchal hierarchy of early modern England was grounded in an explicit and officially promulgated ideology of male supremacy and autonomy."⁸ That this ideology of male

⁵ Lenz, Greene, Neely, p. 8.

⁶ Mullaney, Steven. "Mourning and Misogyny", p. 161.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

⁸ Mullaney, p. 178.