

Sexist Themes in *Othello*,  
*The Taming of the Shrew*, and  
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Written by Lauren Cygan

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William Shakespeare's works can be interpreted in many ways. His writings can be picked apart line by line, by theme, or by the characters he invented. There is always some matter within his plays that can be analyzed or examined. Shakespeare seems to be immortal due to those very reasons. One issue that can be thoroughly studied is that of how women were portrayed in his plays. Although it seems like Shakespeare used very strong-willed women in his plays, he also gave them weaknesses, making them seem real and easy to relate to. On the other hand, he sometimes made women seem vicious, spiteful, or malicious. Three characters in particular stood out, in my mind, to possess qualities of women that were worth discussing. Desdemona, Kate, and Miranda were women in Shakespeare's plays that were extremely humanistic. It is within these three women characters that one can find either feminism or sexism in Shakespeare's works.

According to French, a critic in Shakespearean Criticism, Shakespeare wrote only two types of women: "virtuous subhuman or deceiving subhuman, one who was capable of any degradation" (331). He also went on to say that a woman can cross into becoming a deceiver subhuman, but she can never return to being virtuous (331). For an example of this theory, he uses Desdemona from *Othello*. Throughout the play, Desdemona is a very compliant and submissive wife to Othello. She believes that it is her duty to be a "good wife" and that it is her only role in life. When Othello abuses her, she blames herself, never thinking one negative thought about him. She thinks that she cannot exist without her husband, just as she did not exist without her father (333). The story starts off with Iago being jealous of Othello because Othello was given a promotion above him. He decides to get back at his "friend" by persuading Othello to think his new wife, Desdemona, was having an affair with Cassio, another worker. Othello, being an outsider, is more than ready to believe anything Iago tells him. Because of Othello's weakness, jealousy, he ends up killing Desdemona, even though he does not really truly want to, and then kills himself over the pain when he finds that Iago was just "kidding."

Desdemona shows her character when she says to Othello:

"And yet I fear you; for you're fatal then when your eyes roll so.

Why should I fear I know not, since guiltiness I know not, but yet I feel I fear"  
(5.2.37-38).

She does not even know why she is afraid of him, as she did nothing to feel guilty about. She has nothing to be ashamed of, yet the sight of Othello, her husband, makes her feel scared.

I believe that Desdemona was a very beautiful and smart woman. Some critics describe her as weak-willed or frail. However, it is those traits that make up her temperament. She was always very calm toward Othello, willing to give herself to him. She even spoke up to the Duke in order to profess her love for her husband. I believe that Desdemona was strong and able to speak up for her husband, but was just not able to speak up to her husband. She was willing to fight for what she wanted, but the only thing she wanted was Othello. Therefore, she could speak up to the Duke but not stand her ground when it came to Othello. She did not want to hurt him, afraid he may leave her. Desdemona was what most women were at that time, submissive to their husbands but

really their own person inside. Because it was the norm for women to worship their husbands, very few women stepped out of that role, and were criticized if they did. At the end of the play, when Othello finally confronts Desdemona about the so called affair with Cassio, Desdemona is shocked and tells Othello:

“I never did offend you in my life; never loved Cassio but with such general warranty of heaven as I might love. I never gave him token” (5.2.58-61).

Desdemona tried to tell Othello that she had not cheated on him, but Othello was convinced she was lying. She begged him not to kill her, but Othello did not believe her. He decided that the word of his enemy was greater than that of his wife and killed her. He was not able to control his emotions. He was so engulfed by jealousy; he did not know how to make the problem go away without killing his wife.

Shakespeare had his own unique way of taking a character and giving him or her many different depths. He did this with Desdemona as the audience could see she was a strong woman, as she was able to fight for what she believed in, but was not able to stand up to Othello. She could only beg him for her life. She may have been able to speak up to the Duke, but it was only to fight for her husband. She was not able to be her own woman. She was happy in that role, moving from father to husband. She had no idea that being timid would be her downfall, and the exact reason Othello could not trust her when she said she was not cheating. She was not assertive toward Othello, even when begging for her life. She did not put up more than a slight argument and did not even try to fight him physically when he began to smother her.

Faust describes Desdemona in a perfect manner when she writes, “A being so bright, so pure, so unselfish, generous, courageous-so devoted in her love, so unconquerable in her allegiance to her ‘kind lord,’ even while dying by his hand; and all this beauty of body and mind blasted by the machinations of a soulless villain, who ‘out of her own goodness’ made the net that enmeshed her too credulous husband and her absolutely guiltless self” (47). She also goes on to call Desdemona “in all things worthy to be a hero’s bride, and deserving the highest love, reverence, and gratitude from the noble Moor. ‘Gentle’ she was, no doubt; the strong are naturally gentle” (48). Although Faust’s opinion on Desdemona may be a little excessive and extremely praise-worthy, she does point out a few good points. Desdemona was very devoted to Othello, which was obvious by her ability to stand up for him in the beginning of the play. However, I feel that her outspokenness during that time was only to win her husband. She is not able to be strong to Othello, as she feels wives should be submissive to their husbands, and the Duke was standing in her way to be with the man she loved. The Duke was not her husband; therefore, she was able to stand up to him.

On the other hand, a classic character, such as Kate from *The Taming of the Shrew*, shows Shakespeare trying to give women a more positive image. Kate, unlike Desdemona, does everything within her power to not give into her husband. In fact, she fights with her father so she does not have to marry at all. She shows her shrewdness in the first act when she says,

“I’ faith sir, you shall never need to fear: Iwis it is not halfway to her heart. But if it were, doubt not her care should be to comb your noddle with a three-legged stool and paint your face and use you like a fool” (1.1.61-65).

Kate would rather be a spinster than marry because her father and her sister want her to. However, once she is married, she is anything but submissive. Although Petruchio tries to

play the usual domineering, assertive husband, Kate does not let him. She is her own woman and she does not let him forget that. On the other side, Kate's sister, Bianca, was much like Desdemona. Bianca's only goal was to find a husband that she could make happy. She wanted nothing more than to be a wife. She was often appalled by the way Kate acted toward men, especially since Bianca was not allowed to marry until Kate did.

Although at the end of the play, many critics say that Kate gave into Petruchio, therefore giving up her own identity, I disagree. It was not that she gave up who she was, but rather learned something new about herself. She is able to connect with Petruchio on a level she never thought she could have with a man. He does not force her to give up her independence, and she realizes it. In the last scene, there is a dinner party going on. Two men call for their wives and the women do not come. Petruchio calls for Kate, and she comes to him, bringing the other two women with her. Kate says,

“I ashamed that women are so simple, to offer war where they should kneel for peace, or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway, when they are bound to serve, love, and obey” (5.2.161-165).

Contrary to what may be popular belief, she does not give into society by saying this. Actually, I believe she has realized what society expects of her, but even more importantly what she and Petruchio expect of each other. Saying these lines in front of everyone at a party, like Kate did, showed that she was ready to commit and settle down with Petruchio. It is understandable how people may see this as she becoming tame, but I think that it is she showing that she is ready to “serve, love, and obey” her husband because he is her husband, someone she has connected with emotionally, and not because submissiveness was a societal norm. She feels passion for Petruchio, who has challenged her, then opened her eyes that marriage did not have to be a force that meant death of her identity. Of course, the manner in which she declared her tameness and obedience was in the manner that was very “Kate”. She was loud, brash, harsh, and assertive. There is nothing in the text that says that she will be a dutiful, compliant wife just because she no longer scorns the idea of marriage.

According to Gay, in the time since Shakespeare has written *The Taming of the Shrew*, “the patriarchal system has remained entrenched in our society, changing a little superficially, but in no way relinquishing its power” (86). She believes that an audience can go either one way or the other on deciding if Kate had given into the norms of society. She says that a conclusion such as that can be made “by the way the words are portrayed, as well as the Kate's final speech is spoken and received both by her on-stage audience and by the audience in the theater” (86). In other words, everyone is entitled to their opinion of her attitude at the end of the play, as well their own opinion on whether or not she is, in fact, tamed. Although the play is read in classrooms today, it was written to be acted on the stage. Therefore, I believe that each actress will portray Kate differently. This play is certainly one that is open to interpretation, and one's opinion will be formed on whether the work was read or acted out. In fact, in one popular interpretation of the play, the actress playing Kate actually listens to the men at the party making the bet on the women. She then comes when Petruchio calls in order to humiliate the men he made a bet with and have Petruchio win the wager. She was able to put herself out in front of everyone and show that she was able to be obedient, even if that meant ruining her reputation as a headstrong woman. She did not want her husband to be embarrassed as the other men were. She then made the speech condemning the other

women for not doing their duties as a wife, embarrassing them. Her love for her husband was so strong, she wanted to obey his call and show the party that she was in love.

In a version shown at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater in downtown Chicago in fall of 2003, Petruchio wins the bet at the end of the play, but throws the money he has won up in the air. He then picks Kate up and runs offstage with her, leaving the money behind. This shows that he really loves Kate and could not care less about the money he had just won. Petruchio leaving something with value, such as money, shows that his love for Kate means more to him than any material thing.

So did Shakespeare write women in an encouraging way, like Kate, in order to show women they did not have to be mindless or mechanical? Of course, he could have written women like Desdemona in order to keep the tradition of male domination alive. According to Gay, *The Taming of the Shrew* is “thoroughly rooted in a medieval and Elizabethan way of thinking about women and their relation to the patriarchy than any other of Shakespeare’s plays” (86). She goes on to say that the play “enacts the defeat of the threat of a woman’s revolt; it does so in comic form” (86). However, she follows up that statement with another, saying that looking at the play in modern terms; one can easily find full communal persuasion in the cruelest way possible (86).

Shakespeare may have not been an obvious feminist; however, his ability to let his female characters have strong personalities, such as Viola in *As You Like It*, may show that his views on females were not disparaging, but rather supportive in their strive to have their own identities. One director of a version of *The Taming of the Shrew* argued that Shakespeare was most definitely a feminist. He says, “All the plays I direct analyze the roles of women from that ideological point of view...Shakespeare shows women totally abused- like animals- bartered to the highest bidder...There is no question of it, his sympathy is with the women, and his purpose, to expose the cruelty of a society that allows these things to happen” (Gay 104).

Virginia Woolf, a feminist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gave an indication of women’s rights in Shakespeare’s time in her 1929 piece, *A Room of One’s Own*. She ponders of what would happen if Shakespeare’s sister, Judith, would have been given an opportunity to write. She says straight out that it was considered impossible for a woman of that day to have Shakespeare’s genius (1241). However, she goes on to say that it was considered impossible for a woman to have that kind of intellect, according to men. Woolf then says that if Shakespeare’s sister was born with a great gift of intellect, she would have “gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at...a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty” (1242). She is basically saying that a woman who would be considered intelligent and respected today would have ended her days alone, insane, or dead in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, it is safe to say that if intelligent women were not looked upon with respect, it would be hard for everyday women, or women who were a little outspoken and honest, to hold any type of reverence.

In fact, it was illegal for women to be on the stage during his time, as it was also insubordination if women wore pants (Dusinberre 231). The dramatists of the time often argued that everyone who wears clothes is in disguise, and also that a woman in disguise is not necessarily a man, but a more developed woman and even more feminine

(Dusinberre 233). Because of the laws, Shakespeare's plays often had men dressing like women, who dressed like men. Young boys were used, to give off a more pure look to the women. They then encouraged the playwrights to give the female characters more boyish qualities, which can sometimes be a quality of femininity (Dusinberre 233).

A major question of theater is whether or not women can play the roles that were actually written for men. One opinion of this issue was a dramatic stance by Tilda Swinton through Lizbeth Goodman's essay, "Woman's Alternative Shakespeares." Swinton says, "Plays really work as they were originally intended for men and boys. They weren't written for women. It would probably make life a great deal easier for actresses if Shakespeare were only played by men; then women would be free to play roles which mean something to them, which were written for them" (77).

According to Goodman, it is question of "whether strong female characters have the potential to create, in the act of performing, characters that move beyond the status quo and add more to more than the sum of their parts" (71). She goes on to say, "Nowhere is the gender-biased hierarchy of theatre studies brought out more strongly than in performance of Shakespeare" (71). Whether to have all-male, or even all-female, casts to perform Shakespeare can be a major issue. Some people believe that it is empowering for women to be able to perform a play that was once acted by all men, while others believe that will not be authentic (Goodman 71). If the cast is all one gender or mixed, the stage may still be likely to allow only a subordinate place for women, as men typically still hold the most powerful roles. (Goodman 71-72). Another critical author, Ann Thompson, responds to the idea of Shakespeare being mostly patriarchal by saying, "If we conclude that Shakespeare's views on gender roles would class him with the reactionaries were he alive today, does that mean we shall stop reading or teaching him" (66). She believes that it should not matter if Shakespeare had feminist tendencies or leaned more toward male supremacy, as his writing alone is the reason we still study his works today.

While some people believe that Shakespeare was a primary force for a women's movement, critics Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin go so far to say that Shakespeare raped the identity of women (93). Caliban tries to rape Miranda in *The Tempest*, although Prospero never rapes a native woman on the island he established. Therefore, although Caliban is considered a monster and Prospero a high class man, status is ignored (95). In *The Tempest*, a boat is shipwrecked on an island due to the magical powers of Prospero, who wants the passengers on his island so he can get revenge on them. However, as the story goes on, the audience comes to see that Prospero is more interested in making amends with the passengers, making sure his daughter is happy and taken care of, and that he is using his magical powers for good use. Although the story does not focus on Miranda, she plays a very important role as the only woman on an island full of men. She meets Ferdinand, who is wiser with the ways of the world than she, and starts to have feelings for him. Ferdinand falls for Miranda's innocence and playful, child-like ways. Miranda and her father argue about Ferdinand until Prospero spies on them and is able to see that Ferdinand's intentions are truly honorable. Miranda, still innocent, says to Ferdinand,

"I do not know one of my sex; no woman's face remember, save, mine own.  
Nor have I seen more that I may call men than you, good friend, and my dear father...I would not wish any companion in the world but you" (3.1.49-52, 54).

She is saying here that she has never met another woman in her life; she has met nothing but men. However, the men she met were just friends, and she would like nothing more than to have Ferdinand as her partner. Shakespeare presented Miranda as “a chaste, obedient, and dutiful daughter” (Sachdev 224). However, her curiosity becomes rather strong and cannot resist Ferdinand as a companion. However, their relationship is innocent, as in one scene, they are playing chess. Chess is a game of logic and reason, and there is also no need for touching. The two characters are obeying the rules of the game, as well as obeying Prospero’s request that Miranda stay a virgin until marriage. But they as a couple can still have fun and are able to be flirtatious with each other. Miranda teases Ferdinand:

“Sweet lord, you play me false.”

To which Ferdinand responds:

“No, my dearest love, I would not for the world” (5.1.171-172).

Miranda seems to be both human, as well as a symbol of “original virtue,” as she feels sympathy for people and wants to right the wrongs she has seen (Tillyard 126).

Miranda is a very sweet, well-spoken character. She is not as submissive as Desdemona, as she is able to tease and talk with Ferdinand on the same level as him, but she is also not as brash and vulgar as Kate. Miranda seems sometimes too childlike and full of human virtue, as one may start to think that no one is able to be that naïve, but then one must remember she grew up on an island where there is really nothing to learn except how to treat other people. She is inexperienced in the ways of the world, but is not shy or reserved, and therefore, she is able to talk to Ferdinand without having to feel subservient.

Shakespeare’s plays cause a vast difference of opinion between critics, as well as audiences, even to this day. His plays contain so many different themes, it would be impossible to find just one subject matter in any piece of work. Of course, it would also be impossible for people to agree on what he could mean by any given line in any composition. There will never be one solid opinion on whether Shakespeare wrote his women characters to make the women of his day powerful or if he wrote them in a way that would keep “real” women under man’s authority. It is up to the reader, the audience, or the critic, to decide which stance to take and which of Shakespeare’s works he or she will use to back up their decision. It is obvious that no one conclusion can be reached on this topic, as evaluators from both sexes had different opinions and different ways of proving their point. Of course, many other aspects can go into thinking about this topic. For instance, there is a period in which we know nothing of Shakespeare’s life. This is a time where he could have grown to love everything about the female sex, or come to despise it. We also know of his love for the queen, and yet have come to know his feeling for the women of his own class. The manner in which Shakespeare wrote his female roles will probably never be truly known; however, he has brought us some of the best-known and recognizable female characters in literature.

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