

SHAKESPEARE'S TIMELESS WOMEN

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Abstract: The history of women's struggle for equality during the last two centuries is relatively well documented; studies of women's history often construct a meliorist narrative in which the progress women have made in recent times represents the final stage in a long upward trajectory. Women's power and authority extended beyond the limits of their families. The example of the Tudor queens Mary and Elizabeth is well known, and the 'anomaly' of Elizabeth's position has been endlessly noted; but they were not the only women who exercised political authority. As owners of boroughs, two of the Queen's female subjects were able to choose Members of Parliament. Women also possessed considerable economic power, not only through inheritance from fathers and husbands, but also by virtue of their own gainful employment. Women lower on the social scale earned their livings, not only as servants, but also in a variety of trades that took them outside the household. In Shakespeare's world, inequalities between men and women were taken for granted. Sanctioned by law and religion and reinforced by the duties and customs of daily life, they were deeply embedded in the fabric of culture. However, the gender hierarchy in Shakespeare's time coexisted with a hierarchy of status and rank, which was also rationalized by theology, and by history as well.

Keywords: Shakespeare, female power, misogyny, feminist, historicist literary scholarship.

In Shakespeare's time, England and Scotland were both ruled by female monarchs, and Catherine de Medici was the regent of France. Shakespeare lived in a time and place when women were excluded from the universities and the learned professions, married women lost the right to their own property unless special provisions were made to preserve it, and wife-beating was regarded as a perfectly acceptable means of resolving domestic disputes.

In that same time and place, however, aristocratic women managed great estates and wielded economic power comparable to that of the head of large modern corporation; and women lower on the social scale were active in trades that are now regarded as "traditionally male". The construction of a historical narrative inevitably involves multiple selections. The records that supply the materials for that narrative are themselves the product of a long process of record-keeping,

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which is conditioned at every point by the personal motivations and institutional constraints that determined what information would be recorded and which records would be kept and retrieved. The selection of the materials for a historical narrative, is similarly constrained by the resources and limitations, both personal and professional, of the historian who makes the selection.

In historical research, you're likely to find what you are looking for, and what most of us have been looking for in recent years is a history of men's anxiety in the face of *female power*, women's disempowerment, and of outright *misogyny*. We need to interrogate that history, not because it is necessarily incorrect but because it is incomplete. It constitutes only one of many stories that could be told about women's place in Shakespeare's world and we need to consider the implications of its current hegemony. Some of the most important recent *feminist/historicist literary scholarship* includes reminders that the period was fraught with anxiety and rebellious women and particularly their rebellion through language; that women's reading was policed and their writing prohibited or marked as transgressive even when they were not engaged in other criminal activities, and that an obsessive energy was invested in exerting control over the unruly woman—the woman who was exercising either her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man.

The female characters we encounter in Shakespeare's plays are not the same ones that appeared in the original productions. In the theatre, we rarely see them portrayed by male actors, but even in reading the women we imagine represent the end product of over four hundred years of modernization to redefine their roles in terms of new conceptions of women's nature and women's roles in the world. Not all of Shakespeare's women have changed to the same degree: in some cases they have been easily recruited to serve as role models – both positive and negative – for women born hundreds of years after their original creation.

In other cases, they have required more updating because the fit between the roles they originally had and the roles post-Shakespearian readers and revisers have imagined for them is less than seamless. An examination of the roles that have been most drastically reshaped both in theatrical production and in readers' comments can tell us a great deal about the history of women's roles in the disparate worlds in which the plays have been performed and read. Paradoxically, however, this implication of Shakespeare's female characters in the process of historical change has tended to occlude their own historicity, as they served, and continue to serve, in everchanging guises as models of an unchanging, universal female nature.

It is also important to recognize that this process of updating Shakespeare's female characters and the consequent occlusion of their historical difference did not begin with post-Shakespearian revisers. Shakespeare himself often updated the women he found in his historical sources to shape their roles in forms that made them recognizable in terms of his own contemporaries' expectations about women's

behaviour and motivation. These changes offer a revealing glimpse of the contested and changing gender ideology that shaped Shakespeare's original audiences' conceptions of women's proper roles, not only in the plays they went to see but also in the lives they lived.

Probably the most obvious manifestation of the way the updating of Shakespeare's female characters both bespeaks and obscures their historical location can be seen in theatrical costume. Illustrations of eighteenth and nineteenth and even early twentieth – century productions of the plays almost always look outdated. In their own time, the costumes and sets these illustrations depict were undoubtedly designed to provide the most appropriate possible realizations of the characters Shakespeare created, but in ours they look like quaint period pieces, and the period to which they belong is not that in which the plays were originally set or produced but that of their own production. Clearly what it shows us is not the way the characters were originally conceived but the ways they were imagined in times and places that are now unmistakably marked as distant, both from our world and from that of Shakespeare.

Illustrations of recent productions, by contrast, tend to obscure their own historicity, coming to us either as “authentic” recreations of the plays' original productions or their historical settings, or else as manifestations of the timeless contemporaneity of Shakespeare's representations of universal human experience.

The only sixteenth – century illustration of a Shakespearian text that we have is a drawing that dates from the mid – 1590 in which Tamora, the Queen of the Goths in *Titus Andronicus*, pleads with Titus to spare her two sons. In keeping with the ancient Roman setting of the play, Titus is dressed in a classical-looking draped garment, perhaps copied from a Roman statue; but Tamora wears a much more modern costume. We do not have an illustration of Cleopatra as she appeared when *Antony and Cleopatra* was first performed, but the playscript indicates that she must have been dressed in anachronistically modern clothing. Early in the play, Shakespeare's ancient Egyptian queen orders her attendant to cut her lace, a demand that would have made sense only if she wore a tight, stiffened busk or bodice like the costumes worn by fashionable ladies in Shakespeare's own time.

To be sure, on Shakespeare's stage modern costume was more the rule than the exception: the two soldiers who attend Titus are also dressed in contemporary Elizabethan costume; in *Julius Caesar*, the conspirators pluck anachronistic hats about their ears; in *Richard II*, one courtier threatens another with an anachronistic rapier and many other examples could be cited. Nonetheless, the anachronism in Tamora's costume is suggestive because it implies that even when her male antagonist is seen as belonging to a specific historical context, the woman's characterization is untouched by the contingencies of time and place.

The anachronism that erases the historicity of the woman and the plebeian men in the illustration from *Titus Andronicus* lies deeper than dress. Here, as in Shakespeare's English plays, historical location seems to be a privilege reserved

for royal and aristocratic men. The Henry IV plays, which cover a broad spectrum of society, provide a striking example. The king's court, inhabited exclusively by high-born men, is relatively free of anachronisms, and of women as well. Not even the queen appears. The East cheap tavern, by contrast, is presided over by a woman, Mistress Quickly, and it is depicted in strikingly contemporary terms. Mistress Quickly entertains a dissolute crew of lowlife men with anachronistic cups of sack, a wine that was not served in English taverns until 1453¹. She is accompanied by another woman, the prostitute Doll Tearsheet, who reproaches the anachronistically named Pistol for tearing her anachronistically Elizabethan ruff.

Mistress Quickly and Doll, like the low-life men they entertain, are placed in an anachronistically contemporary setting that separates them from the high-born men at the king's historical court. But in the case of the women, their anachronistic location is overdetermined because in these plays, even the high-born women are conceived in anachronistic terms. Hopstur's wife, unlike Doll and the Hostess, had a real historical prototype—the granddaughter of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, the same ancestor on whom the Mortimers based their claim to the English throne— but she too seem to inhabit the present world of Shakespeare's audience rather than the late fourteenth-century world of her historical prototype.

All these details – the references to confectioners and their wares; to Finsbury, a district of open walks and fields favoured by London citizens; to the velvet guards that ornamented the gowns of aldermen's wives—associate Shakespeare's Lady Percy with the late sixteenth-century citizens' wives in the playhouse, even though her historical prototype had died in 1403. The anachronistic details of speech and dress evoke a contemporary female stereotype—that of the respectable citizen's wife—which would have been entirely familiar to members of Shakespeare's original audience.

Like Tamora's anachronistic costume of Cleopatra's anachronistic laces, they depend on—and also reinforce – the assumption that women are always and everywhere the same, immune to the historical contingencies of time and place. They interpellate the women in the audience with identities that are defined solely by their gender-identities constrained by usually hostile and always restrictive stereotypes.

All of Shakespeare's female characters, the figure who seems to offer the most unmanageable resistance to those stereotypes is Cleopatra. It is not surprising that modern film-makers have never chosen to produce Shakespeare's version of her story is a big-budget film, despite the obvious attraction of the fabulous Egyptian queen as a cinematic subject².

¹ Samuel Burdett Hemingway, *The Variorum edition of Shakespeare's Henry the Fourth, Part I* Philadelphia and London, J. B. Lippincott Publishing, 1936, p. 174.

² Katherine Eggert, *Age Cannot Wither Him: Warren Beatty's Bugsy as Hollywood's Cleopatra*, in Lynda E. Boose, Richard Burt (editors), *Shakespeare the Movie. Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*, London and New York, Routledge Publisher, 1997, pp. 202-214.

Already legendary when Shakespeare produced his version of her story, the powerfully ambivalent Cleopatra he staged drew on a variety of sources. These included the Roman writers who had defined her as Eastern, barbarian, “harlot queen” and the fifteenth and sixteenth century predecessors who had identified her with threatening power of women’s insatiable appetite³ as well as the antitheatrical polemicists who had insisted on the deceptiveness and corruption of Shakespeare’s own theatrical medium.

The combination of erotic power and political authority that had made Cleopatra such a troubling figure to Romans and humanists alike might also have struck a responsive chord in Shakespeare’s original audiences: they had, until very recently, lived under the sway of their own powerful queen. For twentieth – century American filmgoers, by contrast, Cleopatra had to be reduced to a fetishized female body, adorned in spectacular costumes for the pleasure of male spectators and the emulation of other women. Her motivation is clear and simple: to pleasure her man. In 1963 Joseph Mankiewicz, for instance, Cleopatra’s suicide is no longer staged as a demonstration of her royalty. Instead of ordering her women to show her like a queen, Elizabeth Taylor’s Cleopatra says she wants to be seen by Antony, as he first saw her.

Katherine Eggert observes, the film “domesticates Cleopatra into a spectacular mannequin” who intends to give pleasure only to her man.

Even at the end of the seventeenth century, when John Dryden produced his own version of the play, he found it necessary to transform Shakespeare’s dangerously powerful and supremely artful heroine into a stereotype of artless feminine helplessness. Dryden’s play, unlike Shakespeare’s, brings Octavia to Alexandria for a meeting with Cleopatra, an encounter that Dryden justifies in his Preface as a “natural” expression of their characters as women. To justify his innovation, Dryden relies on what he imagines as the unchanging nature of women to discount any distinctions of nationality, rank, or historicity.

Dryden wrote at a time when neoclassical beliefs that general nature should supersede the accidents of individual identity in the representation of dramatic characters were widely endorsed; and all for Love was explicitly designed as a new version of the story of Antony and Cleopatra rather than merely an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play. Nonetheless, Dryden’s insistence upon transforming Shakespeare’s female characters to bring them into conformity with what he regarded as an unchanging female nature outlasted his era. Even when Shakespeare’s plays were not rewritten, the women’s roles repeatedly reshaped to fit the Procrustean bed of whatever gender ideology prevailed at the time and place of the plays’ production. This practice is strikingly illustrated in the collection on nineteenth-century images of Shakespeare’s heroines that were exhibited in 1997 at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. As Georgianna Ziegler pointed

³ Mary Hamer, *Signs of Cleopatra: History, Politics, Representation*, London, Routledge Publisher, 1993, pp. 33-44.

out in the accompanying catalogue, Shakespeare's female characters were imagined to conform to Victorian ideals of female behaviour. She notes that even Lady Macbeth was redeemed as a good, Victorian wife, a woman whose "ambition was all for her husband"⁴.

If, as Ziegler argues, "Lady Macbeth, with her aggressiveness and murderous instincts turned to madness, was one of the most difficult of Shakespeare's heroines for the nineteenth century to appropriate", she has proved remarkably adaptable to twentieth-century understandings of feminine psychology. O Mary McCarthy, writing in the 1960s, Lady Macbeth was clearly recognizable in temporary terms as:

"a woman and has unsexed her, which makes her a monster by definition... the very prospect of murder quickens an hysterical excitement in her, like the discovery of some object in a shop – a set of emeralds or a sable stole – in which Macbeth can give her and which will be outlet for all the repressed desires he cannot satisfy. She behave as though Macbeth, through his weakness, will deprive her of self-realization; the unimpeded exercise of her will is the voluptuous end she seeks"⁵.

McCarthy's references to "hysteria", repressed and unsatisfied desires that are clearly sexual, and a lust for the glittering objects of conspicuous consumption mark her diatribe as a mid-twentieth-century period piece; but it, no less than the Victorian apologia cited by Ziegler, measures the character against modern norms of wifely behaviour. "Her wifely concern", McCarthy charges, is "mechanical and far from real solicitude". She regards her "as a thing, a tool that must be oiled and polished"⁶.

Despite the three centuries that separated Dryden's Cleopatra from the Victorians' and Mary McCarthy's Lady Macbeth, and despite the manifold differences between the roles of the two characters and the play worlds in which Shakespeare set them, all were judged by reference to the paradigmatic modern embodiment of female virtue, the good wife. Dryden's Cleopatra may have engaged in an illicit alliance with Antony, but, like all good women – she was designed by nature for marriage and domesticity as "a wife, silly, harmless household dove". The Victorian's Lady Macbeth may have been guilty of regicide, but, like all good women, she was motivated by ambition of her husband's advancement. Mary McCarthy's Lady Macbeth was monstrously unwomanly because she was ambitious only for herself.

McCarthy's satirical portrait of Lady Macbeth is exaggerated and oversimplified, but it expresses in the simplest possible terms the preoccupations

⁴ Georianna Ziegler, Frances E. Dolan, Jeanne Addison Roberts, *Shakespeare's Unruly Women*, Washington, The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1997, p. 75.

⁵ Mary McCarthy, *General Macbeth*, originally published in "Harper's Magazine", June 1962, in Sylvan Barnet (edited), *The Signet Classic Edition of Macbeth*, reprinted, New York, New American Library, 1963, p. 234.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

with her sexuality and her relationship with her husband that have dominated modern conceptions of her character. Modern critics and playgoers, like McCarthy, have found in Lady Macbeth a character easily understandable in terms of their own preconceptions about female psychology, especially in the soliloquy in which lady Macbeth calls on murderous spirits to “unsex” her. Along with sleepwalking scene, this soliloquy offers a great showpiece for modern actresses, as well as a powerful advertisement for modern assumptions about female character. Often accompanied by autoerotic display as the actress folds her own breasts, breathes hard, and writhes in the throes of passion, the speech clearly demonstrates that the lady is, in fact sexed; and it locates her sex in the eroticized breasts of the woman who performs the role. On a modern stage. Its meaning seems perfectly transparent.

The implications of the speech when it was first performed would have been much more complicated. First, of course, it would have been spoken by a male actor. Some scholars have speculated that the actor may have gestured toward his crotch when he said “unsex me here”, alluding to his own “unsexing” as he took on the woman’s part. However, although it is impossible to know exactly how the soliloquy was originally performed, the references in the speech to “my woman’s breasts” and “my milk” suggest that he probably did gesture towards the place where the woman’s breasts would have been if he had them. But although the erotic implications of the character’s breasts seem overwhelming in a modern production, they may have been much less central on Shakespeare’s stage, not only because the original actor did not really have a woman’s breasts but also because women’s breasts had other implications as well as erotic.

To modern Western eyes, the eroticization of women’s breasts seems “natural”; on a modern stage, the meaning of Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy seems equally self-evident. The beliefs it assumes—that there is a psychological polarity between men and women, based on sexual differences that are embodied, natural, biologically grounded, and virtually self-evident—are by now too familiar to require explication.

At the time the speech was written, however, these assumptions did not yet represent a cultural consensus.

In the Renaissance, although women’s breasts were already eroticized as tokens of female sexuality, celebrated by poets as “buds”, “strawberries”, or “hemispheres”, and featured in erotic paintings that depicted women with a man’s proprietary hand cupped on their breasts⁷, this was not their only implication, and it may not have even been their primary one. Medieval images of lactating Virgin, of the Church allegorized as a nursing mother, and of souls suckled at the breast of Christ, which associated breast milk with charity and spiritual sustenance⁸, were

⁷ Natalie Angier, *Goddesses, Harlots and Other Male Fantasies*, review of Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, in *The New York Times Book Review*, 23 February, 1997, p.4

⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, p. 207.

still current in the Renaissance and still powerful; and they resonate in the details of the soliloquy Shakespeare wrote.

That soliloquy, spoken by Lady Macbeth in order to steel herself for Duncan's murder, is worth quoting at length. The "smoke of hell" locates Lady Macbeth's desires in a theological context, as does her reference to remorse and compunction. Her supplication to "take my milk for gall" suggests a diabolical exchange, in which she will exchange those benevolent feelings for the poisonous bitterness that will enable her to murder Duncan; and it also carries the suggestion that she is inviting the evil spirits she is invoking to feed on her, as witches were believed to feed the demonic imps who served as their "familiar". This is not the only context, of course. Lady Macbeth's association of her woman's milk with remorse and compunction also implies that women have a natural aversion to killing, physically grounded in their sexed and gendered bodies, which are designed to feed and nurture. Before she can kill, the spirits that wait on nature's mischief will have to unsex her.

This implication that feminine gentleness is grounded by nature in a lactating female body is clearly legible in twenty-first-century terms. It also provides a striking example of the ways Shakespeare female characters have participated in the historical production of femininity as naturally grounded in women's role as wives and mothers, not because it misreads Shakespeare's playscript, but because it does not.

In this speech, Shakespeare transformed his historical sources to define Lady Macbeth's character in terms of an emergent gender ideology that culminated, over three centuries later, in the kind of reading I quoted Mary McCarthy. The beginnings of the process can be seen in Shakespeare's transformations of his character's historical prototype, and post-Shakespearian transformations of the character he created illustrate its realization, especially in twentieth-century readings which emphasize her sexuality and analyse her behaviour in psychoanalytic terms.

But the version of Lady Macbeth that looks so familiar to modern audiences is the product of a long history of anachronistic revision, not only because the psychological motivation we so easily recognize is distinctly modern but also because Shakespeare's own representation of her character required a radical revision of the descriptions of ancient Scotswomen he found in his historical source.

Lady Macbeth soliloquy should probably be read in connection with a passage in Holinshed's *Chronicles* in a chapter entitled "of the Manners of the Scots in these Days, and their Comparison with the Behaviour of the Old, and Such as Lived Long Since within this Island"⁹. As the title suggests, the chapter's theme is the conventional Renaissance opposition between a virile, heroic past and a degenerate, effeminate present. In ancient Scotland, according to the chronicler,

⁹ M.C. Bradbrook, *The Sources of Macbeth*, in "Shakespeare Survey Volume 4: Interpretation", Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 35-48.

“the women... were of no less courage than the men; for all stout maidens and wives... marched as well in the field as did the men, and so soon as the army did set forward, they slew the first living creature that they found, in whose blood they not only bathed their swords, but also tasted thereof with their mouths with no less religion and assurance conceived, than if they had already been sure of some notable and fortunate victory. When they saw their own blood run from them in the fight, they waxed never a whit astonished with the matter, but rather doubling their courage with more eagerness they assailed their enemies”¹⁰.

Although Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth retains some of the fierceness of her ancient predecessors, she lacks their taste for blood. The obsessive theme of her sleepwalking, in fact, will be her repeated, futile efforts to wash what she calls “damned spots” of Duncan's blood from her hands. Here, as in her preparation for Duncan's murder, Shakespeare's eleven-century Scotswomen rehearses a prototypically modern conception of universal femininity, proving once again in her madness that killing is antithetical to woman's essential nature.

In the words of the eighteenth-century English actress, Sara Siddons, most celebrated for her portrayal of Lady Macbeth, the lady's feminine nature, her delicate structure, it is too evident, are soon overwhelmed by the enormous pressure of her crimes¹¹.

Shakespeare's antithesis between women's milk and murder, which also became an essential feature of Lady Macbeth's character, required an even more radical revision of his source. In the “Description of Scotland”, lactation is not opposed to killing; the two, in fact, are associated. Those same bloodthirsty women of ancient Scotland, according to the chronicler,

“would take intolerable pains to bring up and nourish their own children... nay they feared lest they should degenerate and grow out of kind, except they gave them suck themselves, and eschewed strange milk, therefore in labour and painfulness they were equal, and neither sex regarded the heat in summer or cold in winter, but travelled barefooted”¹².

Here maternal breastfeeding is evidence both of the women's physical hardiness and of the equality of the sexes in a primitive culture that lived close to nature. This passage in the chronicle is not illustrated, but a very similar conception of ancient Scotswomen seems to lie behind “the true picture of a woman neighbour to the Picts” that was published in Thomas Hariot's *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (London, 1590).

¹⁰ Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 1587, second edition 1808, London: J. Johnson I., 1808, Vol. 5, pp. 22-27. Holinshed's is shorthand: the *Chronicles* included the work of many writers-predecessors whose work had been incorporated, successors who augmented the narrative after Holinshed's death, and collaborators at the time of its original production. The “*Description of Scotland*”, for instance, was translated by William Harrison from a Scots translation by John Bellenden of Hector Boece's early sixteenth-century Latin text *Historia Scotorum*.

¹¹ Nina Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time*, New York, Norton Publisher, 1987, p. 352.

¹² Raphael Holinshed, *Iop. op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

The woman in the picture is armed, scantily dressed, and barefooted, and the caption explains, “they let hang their breasts out, as for the rest they did carry such weapons as the men did, and were as good as the men for the war”.

Neither the chronicle nor the play offers a reliable picture of ancient Scotswomen. Both are inflected by sixteenth and seventeenth-century debates about breastfeeding-and also by changing conceptions of women’s place in the world, and the basis of gender itself. Historians of sexual difference have argued that “sex as we know it was invented” some time “in the eighteenth century”, but the modern conception of sexual difference that Thomas Laqueur as the “two-sex model”¹³ seems clearly anticipated in Shakespeare’s representation of Lady Macbeth. For although both the chronicler and the playwright can be said to advocate maternal breastfeeding, their advocacy takes strikingly different forms. In the chronicle it is a means by which the strong mothers of ancient Scotland produced strong offspring; in *Macbeth* it is a distinctively female activity which express the gendered gentleness that is the natural disposition of all women in every time and place.

Because this conception of womanhood has become so well established, Shakespeare’s characterization of Lady Macbeth has been both accessible and acceptable to modern audiences. The new requirement that all mothers nurse their own children emphasized instead the distinctions between the male domain of public economic and political action and the female enclosure of private, domestic affairs. This is not to say that all women have ever been enclosed within the household. Even women who might have preferred domesticity have been forced by economic necessity to work outside their homes; but the ideal of woman’s “natural” and “traditional” place at home is undisturbed by that reality. The only division that “counts” is the “natural” division between men and women that was to become one of the salient features of modernity.

¹³ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 149.