

Christian Misogyny in Shakespeare

Introduction

Throughout William Shakespeare's expansive canon there are approximately a thousand male characters and only one-hundred and sixty women.¹ This discrepancy in representation can be attributed to misogynistic ideas of the playwright and the audience. While most of Shakespeare's heroes are male, his female characters are some of the first to show real human complexities. Through a handful of different genres, tragedy, comedy, history, and romance, Shakespeare was able to capture different aspects of the human experience. In Elizabethan England, women were not permitted to act, so all the characters were played by men. Shakespeare wrote his female characters with this in mind, but it does not infringe upon their femininity, or lack thereof. Shakespeare is perhaps the greatest playwright of all time, but recent feminist criticism has called his female characters into question.

It is no secret that many of his plays are filled with misogyny, and while some of his female characters lack dimension, many of them are incredibly dynamic and complex. Shakespeare used classic feminine archetypes for his female characters, especially in his earlier plays. Much of the complexity and depth of the later female characters we see in Shakespeare stems from the stereotypical women in his earlier works. Christian Misogyny simultaneously fuels and is fueled by these stereotypes. Scholars claim that this pattern stems from "men's inability to reconcile tender affection with sexual desire and their consequent vacillation between idealization and degradation of women. They suggest how structures of male dominance grow out of and mask fears of female power and of male feminization and powerlessness."²

Examining Elizabethan society through the lens of these plays creates an interesting opportunity

¹ Packer, Tina. *Women of Will: The Remarkable Evolution of Shakespeare's Female Characters*, xiv.

² Swift, Lenz Carolyn Ruth, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely. *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, 9.

to see historical themes played out in dramatic literature. The phrase “art imitates life” is perhaps the greatest clue that theatre has much to teach us about the societal ideas of the times they were written in. Understanding Shakespearean women is important because it not only provides insight into theatre history and Elizabethan society, but it also creates room for a conversation concerning the evolution of the role of women throughout history.

Christian Misogyny

Christian ideas dominate European history as a whole and the Elizabethan period. One of the chief reasons for this was that England was swinging on a religious pendulum. Protestants and Catholics differ on many beliefs but are of one mind of their disregard for women. *The Oxford Handbook* discusses how much of societies’ ideas about women stem from the Biblical figures of The Virgin Mary and Eve.³ Simply put women are classified as either virginal or sexual, and “although indebted to Christian Misogyny, the gendering of lust as female was also ratified by classical tradition, which allowed for a spiritual love between man and man but not between man and woman.”⁴ It was a widely held belief in Elizabethan society that “ever since Eve men had been seduced and lured into sexual activity by women”.⁵ The emergence of organized Christianity clung to the belief that Eve’s natural weakness was that women are natural temptresses and are pre-disposed to be the fall of man.

The roots of English theatre deeply intertwined with religious history. Corpus Christi pageants and religious plays were some of the earliest forms of drama in England.⁶ They told

³ Bennett, Judith M., and Ruth Mazo Karras. 2013. “Women, Gender, and Medieval Historians.”, 1.

⁴ Rackin, Phyllis. 2013. *Shakespeare and Women*, 103.

⁵ David, Mann, “Dramatic Empathy and Moral Ambiguity.” Essay. In *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*, 160.

⁶ Beadle, Richard. “The York Corpus Christi Play.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 99–124. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

biblical stories and taught Christian morality.⁷ The rare appearances of women in these plays were either portrayed as the paragon of virtue or sinfully monstrous. By 1559 all religious drama had been banned in England as a product of the Reformation and the birth of the Church of England. Elizabeth I signed the Act of Unification which led to a boom of secular theatre. Following this, the era of Elizabethan Theatre became more standardized and regulated. Much of the contemporary theatre industry is rooted in Elizabethan Theatrical practices.

There were strict rules against women becoming actors in Elizabethan England. All of the roles in a play were played by men. One of the main reasons for this was that society did not believe that women could act as proficiently as men. Women were also hindered by their low literacy rates which made it difficult to read scripts. Another reason why women were not able to make careers as actors was that they were generally only able to work in the domestic sphere. Women needed to take care of the home and the children, and any jobs that they did hold were generally family affairs. Women were kept under strict supervision in the Elizabethan era, and powerful women were seen as a threat to the delicately balanced social hierarchy. Finally, actors were seen as untrustworthy, and women could not afford to be associated with them. It was imperative for them to protect their reputation to avoid falling further in the eyes of society.

Female Archetypes

Women in literature can be divided into a few distinct categories: virtuous ingenues, mothers, or evil seductresses. These broad categories are mirror images of the Christian

⁷King, Pamela M. 1994. "Morality Plays." Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, edited by Richard Beadle, 240–64. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

misogynistic dichotomy of The Virgin Mary and Eve. There are sub-categories within these titles, but these are the broad boxes into which women were categorized in the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare wrote many women who have no dimension outside of these stereotypes, but what makes him unique is how eventually he began to write women with dimension comparable to his male characters.

Stereotypes are a useful literary device that playwrights have used throughout history. They are recognizable “categories” of characters that make writing and story telling easier. Audiences both today and in the Elizabethan period easily understood and recognized these archetypes, and they gave writers a guaranteed punch line or successful story outline. While Shakespeare did not invent these stereotypes, they are extremely present in his work. Feminist criticism of Shakespeare tends to be generally troubled by his treatment of women and the use of these archetypes. A specific stylistic element that Shakespeare was known for was establishing his female characters as these different archetypes and then deviating from them slightly throughout the play. However, he always returned them to their traditional roles by the end.⁸

Perhaps the most jarring example of this is Rosalind in *As You Like It*. Rosalind is the driving force behind the action of this play. We see a complete shift in her behavior after she leaves the restrictive court and goes into the forest and experiences the liberty that comes with being a man. Rosalind is easily Shakespeare’s strongest female character, and one unique aspect of her development is that she controls her own marriage. This idea was revolutionary in Elizabethan society because the man of the household primarily controlled who his daughters married. However, as soon as Rosalind re-enters at the end of the play dressed as a woman, she returns to the traditional role of a woman in society. She hardly speaks once she is married, in

⁸ Mann, David. 2012. “Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping.” Essay. In *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*, 122.

stark contrast to her talkative nature as Ganymede. While the audience recognizes that she is willing and happy to go back to playing her part as a woman, it seems jarring to modern audiences to see such a strong woman and well-developed character lose virtually all agency. This is most clearly observed through the resounding lack of dialogue for Rosalind following her re-appearance as a woman.

Dangerous Women

Sinful and dangerous women frequently take the shape of seductresses. Femme Fatale characters were written to give the hero an “obstacle” to overcome and to warn the audience about the dangers of women. Sex was viewed as a “necessary evil” in the eyes of the church, and it was a rather taboo topic in Medieval and Elizabethan England. There is also the rise of another type of a “dangerous” women based on real historic figures: the She-Wolf. A She-Wolf was simply a woman who held power. They were “rapacious, ferocious, or voracious”⁹ women who were categorized as monstrous and were written in dramatic literature as adulterers. They were known to encourage men to hurt other women and “lacked normal affections.”¹⁰

Shakespeare’s history plays provide perhaps the greatest glimpse into the real roles of women during the Elizabethan period. These plays are rooted in historical truth while still maintaining elements dramatized for entertainment. The histories are set in “the places where history is made... [which] are overwhelmingly male preservers, and the business of the main historical plots is conducted entirely by men.”¹¹ There are no female protagonists in Shakespeare’s histories. The ideas about women that are present in these pieces are highly

⁹ Simpson, John A. “She-Wolf.” Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.

¹⁰ Mann, David. “Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping.”, 154.

¹¹ Rackin, Phyllis. *Shakespeare and Women*, 50.

misogynistic and embody ancient patriarchal ideas about sex, “that women’s sexual desires were stronger than men’s, and that women were inferior intellectually, so that women must be not only protected, but controlled.”¹² This characterizes powerful women as a threat to man’s dominance and a stable society. These ideas about chastity stemmed from and Eve’s involvement in “the fall.”

The female characters in these works perform any number of literary stereotypes for the sake of the narrative, and they must fight to have a voice. Margaret of Anjou from the Henry VI and Richard III plays is an excellent example of a literary and historic She-Wolf. York even directly addresses her as such:

*She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France,
Whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth!
How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex
To triumph, like an Amazonian trull,
Upon their woes whom fortune captivates!
But that thy face is, vizard-like, unchanging,
Made impudent with use of evil deeds,
I would assay, proud queen, to make thee blush.
To tell thee whence thou camest, of whom derived,
Were shame enough to shame thee, wert thou not shameless.
-3 Henry VI, I.iv (110-120)¹³*

Margaret has a strong sense of internal and external motivation, which is not something that can be said about many of the women in the histories. Eleanor from the Henry VI cycle represents a different, yet also negative stereotype. She is not depicted to be as extreme as Margaret, and she is not an adulteress. Eleanor is ambitious and even convicted of witchcraft, but she is never seen carrying around a severed head or taunting men with handkerchiefs stained with the blood of their deceased sons:

*Look, York: I stain'd this napkin with the blood
That valiant Clifford, with his rapier's point,*

¹² Wilson, C. (n.d.). Sexuality and capitalism: The Italian Renaissance. Sexuality and capitalism: The Italian Renaissance.

¹³ Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI Part 3*.

*Made issue from the bosom of the boy;
And if thine eyes can water for his death,
I give thee this to dry thy cheeks withal.
Alas poor York! but that I hate thee deadly,
I should lament thy miserable state.
I prithee, grieve, to make me merry, York.
What, hath thy fiery heart so parch'd thine entrails
That not a tear can fall for Rutland's death?
Why art thou patient, man? thou shouldst be mad;
And I, to make thee mad, do mock thee thus.
Stamp, rave, and fret, that I may sing and dance.
Thou wouldst be fee'd, I see, to make me sport:
York cannot speak, unless he wear a crown.
-3 Henry VI, I.iv (518-532)¹⁴*

In this monologue Margaret is mocking and patronizing York in a particularly cruel manner. This text shows the innate lack of empathy and softness that women were expected to maintain in this period. Margaret is an adulteress, while Eleanor is merely ambitious.

The tragedies are less informative of the lives of women during this period. Following traditional tragic structure, they tend to also adhere strictly to having only male protagonists. Women are better developed and maintain a more active role in these plays compared to the histories. This is due to the more psychological nature of the tragedies. Shakespeare felt less of a pressure to maintain a sense of historical accuracy when writing his own stories. They could serve as commentaries on social issues, instead of simply story-telling for entertainment. Unfortunately, the treatment of women in these plays is generally violent and misogynistic. Occasionally we get glimpses into the minds of these female characters through soliloquies, but they pale in quantity to the number of soliloquies that the male characters deliver. The most notable of these women who do soliloquize is Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth fits the stereotype of the She-Wolf. She is not an adulteress, but she is a figure of extreme power. She lacks the traditional nurturing qualities that women were expected to possess. She even goes as far as to

¹⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Henry VI Part 3*.

ask to be “unsexed” so that she might not be subject to the “frailty of womanhood” when she encourages her husband to murder Duncan, the King:

*The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief!*
-Macbeth, I.v (38-50)¹⁵

In this speech, she is defying traditional gender norms. She cannot fit the criteria of an ingenue or a mother because of her defiance of these norms, and the fact that she refuses to be silenced by men. Her defiance is met with punishment for defying these stereotypes. She “goes mad” by the end of the play with subconscious guilt and paranoia, and she ultimately takes her own life. Broadly speaking, women were not allowed to defy their traditional role within society and were regarded as disruptive to the fragile social hierarchy.

The Shrew

Dramatic literature and comedy grew in tandem during this period. The development of the archetype of the Virago shows a completely different type of female character on stage and was very popular in comedy. This type of woman exists strictly for the purpose of showing over the top and “unfeminine” women on stage who hate men. They were loud and bold, not submissive like the Ingenues. Perhaps the most famous of Viragos is Katharina from

¹⁵ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Elizabethan audiences found it comedic to watch a woman on stage act with strength.¹⁶ *Shrew* is one of Shakespeare's first plays, and there are many earlier plays by different playwrights with similar plot lines and characters. Kate's intelligence and brash nature lead her to be rejected by all the men in the play except for Petruchio. However, the main plot revolves around Petruchio taking it upon himself to "tame" Kate into becoming a proper wife:

*Marry, so I mean, sweet Katharina, in thy bed:
And therefore, setting all this chat aside,
Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented
That you shall be my wife; your dowry 'greed on;
And, Will you, nill you, I will marry you.
Now, Kate, I am a husband for your turn;
For, by this light, whereby I see thy beauty,
Thy beauty, that doth make me like thee well,
Thou must be married to no man but me;
For I am he am born to tame you Kate,
And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate
Conformable as other household Kates.
Here comes your father: never make denial;
I must and will have Katharina to my wife.
-The Taming of the Shrew, II.i (267-280)¹⁷*

Kate is treated like property by both her father and Petruchio in this play, and the entire second half revolves around him abusing her into submission:

*I will be master of what is mine own:
She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house,
My household stuff, my field, my barn,
My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing;
-The Taming of the Shrew, III.ii (229-232)¹⁸*

In the final scene, Kate delivers a highly misogynistic monologue about how women are subservient to their husbands:

*A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled-
Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty;
And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty*

¹⁶ Mann, David. "Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping.", 122.

¹⁷ Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*.

¹⁸ Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*.

*Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it.
Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labour both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks, and true obedience-
Too little payment for so great a debt.
-The Taming of the Shrew, V.ii (142-154)¹⁹*

Scholars debate whether Kate has truly been “tamed” or if she is merely playing into Petruchio’s game. Nonetheless, the patriarchal overtones that are present in this play, as well as many of the other comedies, are harmful and degrading to women.

Cross-Dressing Heroines

Women play a much more comedic purpose in these plays than they do as merely a victim or literary device. During the Elizabethan period there is a rise in the trend cross-dressing heroines for comedic purposes. In comedies, women would often disguise themselves as men to take control of the action in the play. These roles are often referred to as “breeches roles” and they include Rosalind of *As You Like It* and Viola of *Twelfth Night*, just to name a few.

Feminist critics of Shakespeare have been fascinated by these types of roles because they break almost all gender norms. It is important to address that this was done primarily for comedic purposes, Elizabethan audiences were greatly entertained by the idea of women parading around as men. Shakespeare “designed [these characters] to exploit the homoerotic appeal of a pretty boy.”²⁰ Shakespeare also enjoyed playing with the direct homoerotic implications of having male leads fall in love with female characters dressed like men; for

¹⁹ Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*.

²⁰ Rackin, Phyllis. *Shakespeare and Women*, 77.

example, Orlando in *As You Like It* became infatuated with Rosalind disguised as Ganymede. From an audience's perspective, we see a man attracted to a man playing a woman disguised as a man. That is a recipe for comedy, and Shakespeare uses this plot repeatedly throughout the course of his career. It was more socially acceptable to watch a cross-dressed woman flirt with a man than it was to have a woman act with agency on stage. On a more psychological and narrative level, these female characters were able to take on more heroic protagonist roles by dressing as men and were no longer restricted by society and corsets.

Victims and Ingenues

In Elizabethan theatre much of the plot revolved around male protagonists with emotional depth surrounded by stereotyped characters. The central conflict often concerned a degree of moral crisis or transgression that related to male sexuality.²¹ Women were either seen as virtuous or lascivious, and the roots of this idea are found in Christian tradition. This idea speaks to the pre-existing prejudices "in the male psyche increasingly brought to the fire by the growing prominence of women in society".²²

For most of the women in the histories who are not She-Wolves or Viragos, the idea of "helplessness seems to be an essential component of female virtue."²³ This is clearly present for all the women in *Richard II* and *III* who are victimized. Lady Anne in *Richard III* is a woman who is victimized and diminished throughout the minimal number of scenes she appears in throughout the play. Feminist critics often discuss the troubling event of this play when Richard woos Anne during the funeral procession of her father-in-law (whom he killed). It is a disturbing

²¹ Mann, David. "Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping.", 124.

²² Mann, David. "Male Didacticism and Female Stereotyping.", 130.

²³ Rackin, Phyllis. *Shakespeare and Women*, 49.

interaction that has puzzled critics for generations. It is apparent that he is violating her on multiple levels and the text implies that she never stood a chance against his advances:

*Was ever woman in this humor wooed?
Was ever woman in this humor won?
I'll have her, but I will not keep her long.
What, I that killed her husband and his father,
To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by,
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,
And I no friends to back my suit at all
But the plain devil and dissembling looks?
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing! Ha!*
-Richard III, I.ii (247-259)²⁴

This scene is comparable to II.i from *The Taming of the Shrew* where Petruchio is attempting to woo Kate. Simply put, these are scenes where men are attempting to woo women and will not take 'no' for an answer. Richard will go on to poison Anne after he marries her and 'sees no further use for her.' Women were seen as objects to be won, and this trope is apparent throughout the dramatic literature of this period.

Ophelia from *Hamlet* is another excellent example of a victimized Ingenue. She is a woman living in a man's world. Everything in her life is dictated by men, and she finds herself stuck between her father's wishes and Hamlet's. Ultimately, the first decision that she makes for herself is to take her own life. Set in Ninth Century Denmark, the idea that a woman's worth is based on her virtue is an incredibly present idea. Hamlet degrades and berates Ophelia for her "sinful nature," and there is this exchange between the two of them which concerns her virtue:

HAMLET
*Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner
transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the
force of honesty can translate beauty into his
likeness: this was sometime a paradox, but now the
time gives it proof. I did love you once.*

²⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*.

OPHELIA

Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAMLET

*You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot
so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of
it: I loved you not.*

-Hamlet, III.i (110-118)²⁵

In this oversimplification of women's sexuality, Hamlet is taking out his frustration with his mother's infidelity on Ophelia. Scholars suspect that Hamlet's targeting of Ophelia's virtue stems from implicit intimacy before the events of the play. Hamlet views not only Ophelia, but all women, as sexual creatures who are inherently evil:

*I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God
has given you one face, and you make yourselves
another: you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and
nick-name God's creatures, and make your wantonness
your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath
made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriages:
those that are married already, all but one, shall
live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a
nunnery, go.*

-Hamlet, III.i (142-149)²⁶

Hamlet ordering Ophelia to a nunnery is merely medieval "slut-shaming." Ophelia is one of Shakespeare's most famously victimized Ingenues, but she has a sense of awareness of her own mortality that is not found in many other Shakespearean women:

We know what we are, but know not what we may be.

-Hamlet, IV.v (43-44)²⁷

Ironically, her awareness arises when she emerges in a state of "madness." This line is perhaps the perfect summation of Shakespeare's tragic women. Ophelia is actively acknowledging "her own constriction- and aware of her powerlessness to overcome it."²⁸ A psychoanalysis on Ophelia's madness is not the central argument at play here, but it must be

²⁵ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*.

²⁶ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*.

²⁷ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*.

²⁸ Reynolds, Paige. 2020. *Performing Shakespeare's Women: Playing Dead*, 1.

noted that there is a gendered bias against Ophelia's madness and Hamlet's. Ophelia is labeled as "hysterical" while Hamlet is merely "grieving".

Women in the Elizabethan period were expected to play a more submissive role compared to men. This was perpetuated by both the Catholic and Protestant Churches strict adherence to modesty and purity cultural ideas. To assert any degree of agency over themselves, women needed their chastity as a twisted sort of bargaining chip. It secured their status and reputation. Shakespeare directly commentates on this idea in his play *Much Ado About Nothing* with the character Hero. Hero is set-up and accused by her soon-to-be husband, Claudio, at the altar of adultery. Once these accusations have been verbalized, Hero is now considered dead to society, metaphorically and then literally when the plan is devised to fake her death. Hero has just been humiliated and dishonored in public and is therefore helpless against their judgements. Her place in society is quite literally determined by the status of her chastity.²⁹

Women as Opposing Forces

The tragedy *Titus Andronicus* is an interesting example of two intensely different female stereotypes pitted against one another. Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, is a stereotypical She-Wolf. She encourages horrendous violence against Lavinia, commits adultery against her husband, and tells the father of her new child to end the child's life. Lavinia is the virtuous and endearing daughter of Titus. Act II Scene iii is the turning point in the play that culminates with Lavinia's husband being slain in front of her by Tamora's sons and she encourages them to assault Lavinia. Lavinia begs Tamora for mercy and appeals to her woman to woman:

²⁹ Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*.

LAVINIA

*O Tamora, be call'd a gentle queen,
And with thine own hands kill me in this place!
For 'tis not life that I have begg'd so long;
Poor I was slain when Bassianus died.*

TAMORA

What begg'st thou, then? fond woman, let me go.

LAVINIA

*'Tis present death I beg; and one thing more
That womanhood denies my tongue to tell:
O, keep me from their worse than killing lust,
And tumble me into some loathsome pit,
Where never man's eye may behold my body:
Do this, and be a charitable murderer.*

TAMORA

*So should I rob my sweet sons of their fee:
No, let them satisfy their lust on thee.*

DEMETRIUS

Away! for thou hast stay'd us here too long.

LAVINIA

*No grace? no womanhood? Ah, beastly creature!
The blot and enemy to our general name!
-Titus Andronicus, II.iii (168-184)³⁰*

Lavinia would rather die than have her virtue compromised. This theme is extremely prominent throughout not only Shakespeare's canon but also dramatic literature in general. This scene is unique because it pits the epitomes of female stereotypes against one another. Tamora dominates this encounter and is ultimately responsible for Lavinia's death. When Titus executes his revenge plan in the final scene, he must rectify his daughter's loss of virtue:

TITUS ANDRONICUS

*An if your highness knew my heart, you were.
My lord the emperor, resolve me this:
Was it well done of rash Virginius
To slay his daughter with his own right hand,
Because she was enforced, stain'd, and deflower'd?*

SATURNINUS

It was, Andronicus.

TITUS ANDRONICUS

Your reason, mighty lord?

SATURNINUS

*Because the girl should not survive her shame,
And by her presence still renew his sorrows.*

TITUS ANDRONICUS

³⁰ Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*.

*A reason mighty, strong, and effectual;
A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant,
For me, most wretched, to perform the like.
Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee;*
-Titus Andronicus, V.iii (34-46)³¹

For Lavinia, and all women, “rape means both submission, death and more... forced sexual submission enforces female death.”³² She could not live with the shame that came with her abuse, society would not tolerate it, and the “evil woman” is responsible for the death of the “good woman.”

Conclusion

Misogynistic ideas about women in literature are not unique to Shakespeare. His canon is extremely broad and well-rounded, so there are a variety of ideas to take into consideration. There is a harmful pattern in the way that he uses women to tell his stories. They tend to be gruesomely victimized and serve as an objectified corpse on stage, or they are evil and cannot be trusted. While the number of men in the Shakespearean canon outweigh the women tremendously, these women counterbalance the men and even appear to be “more human”. These plays portray the “patriarchal structures of honor, shame, violence and might is right” and their harm to women; however, these ideas easily “do as much harm to Hamlet, Edgar, Lear, Coriolanus, and Hector.”³³ The reach of Christian Misogyny was expansive, and art as an “imitation of life” clearly shows this. The influence of these ideas is still present in contemporary dramatic literature. Much progress has been made with the development of female characters, but these systematic issues are deeply rooted in the media. Shakespeare’s women are written for

³¹ Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*.

³² Swift, Lenz. *The Woman’s Part*, 59.

³³ Packer, Tina. *Women of Will*, 298.

the stage in a way that directly reflects their place in society. Elizabethan societal beliefs were highly influenced by the Church. The Church of England and the Catholic Church both perpetuated the belief that a woman's chastity determined her honor and worth in the Elizabethan period. Because of these misogynistic Christian values, women could only fit into a few different categories; and if they were not virtuous, they were dangerous. Ultimately, despite the problematic nature of Shakespeare's canon, we see that the true root of the problem stems from society itself, particularly the Christian Misogyny at its very core.

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