



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Shakespeare's heroines:

An examination of how Shakespeare created
and adapted specific heroines from his sources

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

05.15.50

Lilja D. Schram Magnúsdóttir

Febrúar 2009

Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Enskuskor

Shakespeare's heroines:

An examination of how Shakespeare created
and adapted specific heroines from his sources

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

05.15.50

Lilja D. Schram Magnúsdóttir

Kt.: 250681-3729

Leiðbeinandi: Martin Regal

Febrúar 2009

Abstract

This essay compares some of Shakespeare's female characters to their equivalents in the sources from which the plays are drawn. It tries to provide answers to the following questions: how did he adapt the characters from the sources for his plays; how did he choose to represent them; how do his female characters compare with images of women at the time?

The essay is divided into three main parts. Firstly, it looks at women in early modern England, their role and position in society and the various misogynist attitudes of the day. In doing so, it examines the patriarchal system which repressed women and dominated English society at the time despite the country having a female monarch.

Secondly, it looks at a few of Shakespeare's female characters and how he adapted or created them for his plays from his sources. It analyses and compares Shakespeare's portrayal of Rosalind (*AYL*), Cleopatra (*Ant.*), Portia (*JC*) and Portia (*MV*) and compares it with their portrayal in the sources. Finally, it looks at Beatrice (*Ado*), who was created by Shakespeare. In addition, we look at how Elizabeth I might have had an influence on the creation of these characters.

The conclusion of the essay is that Shakespeare moulded his heroines into extraordinary women, who must have been an inspiration to all women who came to see his plays. Shakespeare's portrayal of these female characters is far more positive and more dignified than their portrayal in the various sources. Taking into account the portrayal of the female characters in the sources and the attitude towards women and their image at the time, it is clear that Shakespeare chose to make his heroines remarkable women.

Table of contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Historical background- The status of women in Shakespeare's society.....	3
Chapter 2: Shakespeare's female characters.....	11
2.1 Cleopatra from <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	11
2.2 Rosalind from <i>As You Like It</i>	15
2.3 Portia from <i>Julius Caesar</i>	18
2.4 Portia from <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	20
2.5 Beatrice from <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	23
Conclusion.....	25
Bibliography.....	27

Introduction

Virginia Woolf claimed that "if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her to be a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as man, some think even greater" (Woolf 44-45). I agree with Woolf that "women have burnt like beacons in all the works of the poets from the beginning of time" and that Shakespeare's female characters "do not seem wanting in personality and character" (Woolf 44). It is difficult to determine what exactly Shakespeare thought of women, but it is interesting to look at his female characters and how they fit into the image of women at the time. Are his female characters similar to the characters in the sources he used; if not how did he adapt them for this plays? Did Elizabeth I influence his characters? At the time Shakespeare was writing his plays, women were believed to be intellectually, physically and morally inferior to men. However, a number of these female characters are intelligent, witty, brave and noble, and many of them even demand equality; they are extraordinary women. According to Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, "the difference between the two sexes was a fundamental principle upon which society was constructed. Writers assumed that woman was inferior to man" (15). Many of Shakespeare's female characters neither fit the ideal image of women at the time, so he was not putting models on stage to show women how they should behave. Nor do they correspond with the misogynist attitude towards women of the day. Considering the image and status of women in Shakespeare's society, his female characters must have been quite controversial. It is understandable, that some men did not want their wives to see some of Shakespeare's plays. There were women who protested against the repression of women and Shakespeare probably knew many inspiring women, although but his most important inspiration was Queen Elizabeth I. Crawford and Mendelson claim that women at that time "could be good, proceeding from virginity to marriage and maternity, and after a virtuously

spent widowhood. Or they could be wicked: scolds, whores, or witches. What they could not be, in theory, was independent, autonomous, and female-focused" (17). The characters, analysed here are not independent, autonomous, or female- focused in the modern understanding or sense, but when compared to women in Shakespeare's time, that is exactly what they are. After studying Shakespeare's sources, it has become clear, that he moulded them into being those remarkable heroines. Even though many female characters like Rosalind mock their own sex, especially women's 'weakness', the female characters are not represented as weak. Inspired by the character of Elizabeth I, Shakespeare created or adapted many extraordinary female heroines. Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra (*Ant.*) is more positive and more compassionate than her portrayal in the source and Shakespeare represents Cleopatra as being strong by portraying Antony as the weaker character. Rosalind (*AYL*) is portrayed in a more respectable manner; she is intelligent and in control and her character does not make misogynist comments as is the case in the source. Shakespeare portrays Portia (*JC*) as a strong woman who demands to be seen as her husbands' equal while in the source she is weak and submissive. Portia (*MV*) also demands equality and she is portrayed in a much more respectable manner than in the source. Finally, Shakespeare created Beatrice (*Ado*), an independent and outspoken woman, who demands to be her male partner's equal as well.

Chapter 1: Historical background- Women in early modern England

According to studies of women in early modern society, the female body was used to show woman's otherness, weakness and inferiority. Women were considered physically and emotionally weaker than men, the weaker sex, the second sex. According to medical science which was derived from the Greeks "men were physiologically different from women, and superior" for the reason that "the elements composing the human body were combined differently in each sex" (Capp 4). Apparently, women's moist and cold constitution made them irrational, emotional, impulsive, and sexually rapacious. In other words medical science "depicted women as physically, intellectually, and morally inferior" (Capp 4). Men did not understand the functions of the female body which frightened them, causing them to claim women were unstable and so not to be trusted; "Fearing the female body, they sought to contain and control it" (Crawford and Mendelson 30).

Conduct books and similar works were written in order to instruct and inform women on how they were supposed to behave and think; what their position and place was in society. Their place was in the home, where they were supposed to serve their husbands, be silent, submissive, chaste and modest. There is, of course, a great difference between the ideal image of a woman at the time and reality. While conduct books instructed women on how they should behave, they certainly do not describe reality. Capp claims:

It is quite possible . . . that sermons and conduct- books generated unease and resentment rather than moulding domestic order and harmony. The more preachers and pamphleteers formalized rigid conventions of household order, the more obvious became the inevitable gap between ideal and social reality, a gap which had of course existed long before the rise of popular print. (24)

In addition, there were many grey areas. A wife, for example, was allowed to disobey her husband under certain circumstances. If her husband forbade her to go to church or read the

Bible she was allowed to disobey. William Gouge advised wives that they should disobey their husbands only when they commanded something that was illegal, irreligious or immoral. What is interesting is he then goes on to name some examples of vices that a wife should refuse and attending a stage play is one of them. (Capp 33) He apparently did not think that was an appropriate pastime for a wife.

The misogynist attitude towards females existed in all classes, not just among the uneducated lower class. According to Crawford and Mendelson, "contemporary proverbs, jokes, anecdotes, and tales give the impression that the axiom of female inferiority was as common among the ordinary people as it was among the educated élite" (60). A joke circulated among the élite which claimed women had no souls and were in fact not fully human (Mendelson and Crawford 62). However, there were a few positive proverbs about women, some of which still exist today, "The man is the womans head, but the woman is sometimes the mans brains' " (Mendelson and Crawford 64), is one example. Most of the proverbs, which cast a female in what seemed to be a positive light, were framed in a way, that showed the female in a negative light and there was an entire genre dedicated to the "crafty maid" or the "cunning wife" (Mendelson and Crawford 64). Instead of seeing women's wit or intelligence as wisdom, it was considered cunning. Even the most exceptional women, the best of the sex, were considered a lesser evil. (Crawford and Mendelson 65)

The Patriarchy

England was a patriarchal society in Shakespeare's time, which meant that every aspect of it was dominated by men. However, there was no official patriarchal system, but "rather an interlocking set of beliefs, assumptions, traditions, and practices" so basically "these social arrangements rested on convention rather than law" (Capp 1). There was great inequality between the sexes and women were were repressed. Many acknowledged "that some wives

were superior to their husbands morally, intellectually, and spiritually", however patriarchal theory had answers to all the contradictions that came up and insisted "that wives must obey bad husbands just as subjects must obey bad kings" (Capp 8).

Religion was a dominant force in English society and had enormous control in society as a whole and over its people. It influenced every aspect of people's everyday lives and affected their view of the world and opinions towards a variety of issues. The story of creation from the Bible was used as a tool to support the patriarchal hierarchy for ". . . the principle of female subordination [is] an integral part of the creation story" (Capp 3). Eve was created second, therefore, she was a deviation from the norm. For that reason and the notion that she was created from the man's rib, she was inferior and should be subordinate to her master. What is more, Eve was weak because she was deceived by the devil and even tempted and led Adam to disobey God and so caused the fall from grace. Therefore, all women must be controlled and kept in their places; women could clearly not be trusted. In Galatians 3:28, Paul claims that, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (New International version). According to Mendelson and Crawford, a cleric explained the inconsistencies by claiming that "Christ hath freed men and women from bondage of sinne and death, but not from outward subjection", therefore "women might hope to benefit from the doctrine of equal soul in the next world, but not in the present one" (31). Everything, even the Bible, was twisted to fit the the patriarchy and the repression of women. The law upheld the patriarchy as it did not treat men and women as equals. It recognized the man as king in his household. A man who murdered his wife, was hanged for murder, however, if a woman murdered her husband, she was burned for petty treason. (Capp 6) In the eyes of the law, husband and wife were one and because the husband was the king of his household, he had control over his wife and all her property. The husband was responsible for his wife and she was, in fact, his property, so that if a man raped

another man's wife the husband was permitted to kill the rapist in self defence. However, the legal system was unstable at the time and there were many inconsistencies and grey areas. Women were able to abuse the law in a number of ways. Since women were their husbands' property, they were responsible for their wives. Therefore, if a wife broke the law, it was possible for her husband to be held accountable and punished for her crime and for her to escape punishment. So in a way, "The law in its framing and administration contained some elements of chivalry towards women as dependants" (Mendelson and Crawford 37).

Men, and society as a whole, strove to exclude women from almost every aspect of society which was outside the home. Women were not allowed any formal role in the church, legal profession, or any role in office, neither central nor local government. They were prohibited from voting and women were not allowed to receive any sort of higher education. Women were, however, allowed to work as nurses and midwives, and some went even further in the medical profession but they did not receive warm welcomes from the men. (Capp 9-10) In the same way, men's meddling in the business concerning the home was frowned upon. However, many households depended on a family income; they could not survive on the income of a single breadwinner. Wives and daughters in families that suffered from poverty, families of tradesmen, craftsmen and labourers to name a few, had to work as well. (Capp 28) Some wives helped their husbands with their work or worked outside the home, along with many single women and widows, at a variety of jobs, for example, running cook shops or lodging houses, running pawnshops and some worked in trading and some even as surgeons. (Capp 47-48) The notion that all women stayed in the home during this time period is not accurate; many women from the lower classes had to work for survival.

Traditional gender roles were supported by the law, pulpit and custom. Naturally a number of women believed this to be their place in the world but several protested. It was difficult for women to challenge their repression since they had not been educated properly;

they were not able to stand their ground in a debate and, further, they had no public forum. While some managed to publish their ideas, it was impossible for women ". . . to break out of the intellectual constraints of patriarchal assumptions and theories" (Capp 15). Patricia Crawford claims, that "men's power depended upon keeping women ignorant." (Crawford 228). Society as a whole would have been severally disrupted had women suddenly began to act like men, it depended on women being submissive and obedient. Keeping the women ignorant was naturally intentional and necessary for the patriarchal system. Many women from the ruling class, who had received education, protested by writing. Margaret Cavendish describes women's reality in *Triumphs of Female Wit*, which was published in 1683. She claims women have become like worms who live in the dull earth of ignorance and are kept like caged birds that hop up and down in their houses. (Crawford 228) Many women believed they were inferior to males because of their sex and Capp claims, "most women writers were apologetic and defensive in tone, acknowledging their intellectual 'weakness' ". Clearly, "women had internalized their own inferiority" but they still fought to change misogynist attitudes towards them (Capp 17). Women, who challenged the patriarchy, were not demanding or fighting for equality. "No radicals, male or female, called for the right for women to attend grammar schools or universities, hold public office or vote, or participate in business or the professions on equal terms" (Capp 17). They were simply trying to bring attention to the fact that although they had weaknesses, they also had strengths. There was a shift towards the end of the seventeenth century in female writers' focus "from the women's inherent worth to the institution of marriage" (Capp 18). Women wanted to be seen as their husbands' equal in their own home and marriage, as Portia (from *JC* and *MV*) and Beatrice, who demand that their husbands or potential husbands treat them as equals.

Juliet Dusinberre, the author of the pioneering work in feminist and literary criticism, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, claims that although women were subject to male

authority, "they also had their own modes of challenging that authority" (xli). Women at the time, as Shakespeare's female characters, learned to survive in the patriarchal society. It is hard to say how involved women were in the politics of the time but Mendelson and Crawford claim there are records which show that women were active participants. There are records of women forming political associations, taking part in political protests and street demonstrations and even attempting to vote, which they were not allowed to do since they were not legally citizens. Women were simply ignored, unless they were causing serious trouble, which is why official records of women's participation are rare, therefore, it is hard to evaluate to what extent women were involved. The records that do exist do so because they survived by chance. (Mendelson and Crawford 347)

Elizabeth I

When Shakespeare was born and throughout most of his lifetime, England was ruled by a female monarch and by the time Elizabeth I died in 1603, England had experienced half a century of female rule. Elizabeth I would have had to share her rule had she married, but she chose not to marry and was thus "the first English queen to confront head-on all the paradoxes created for the English Church and State by an independent female monarch" (Mendelson and Crawford 354). Elizabeth I was a strong and intelligent woman, but she neither attempted to change the misogynist attitudes in her society towards women nor did she accentuate women's strengths and abilities. Instead, she admitted that women were weak and feeble. In one of her most famous speeches she said, "I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king" (Mendelson and Crawford 354). Elizabeth did not demand equality for her sex publicly in her speeches, and for that reason, many historians have labelled her patriarchal and even misogynistic. Taking into account what kind of society she lived in, that is a very unfair statement, in my opinion. According to

Mendelson and Crawford, "her success as a female ruler depended on putting a distance between herself and all other women, because of the central problem of female authority" (Mendelson and Crawford 357). She used the fact that she was a woman and manipulated it in a way as to get what she wanted and was thus "able to capitalize on the expectations of her behaviour as a woman and use them to her advantage; she also at times placed herself beyond traditional gender expectations by calling herself king" (Levin 1). She often referred to herself as king or prince. Elizabeth claimed there was a "strong idea in the world that a woman cannot live unless she is married . . . but what can we do? we cannot cover everybody's mouth, but must content ourselves with doing our duty" (Levin 49). She clearly believed that women were very capable and able to survive without men. Although she claimed women were weak and feeble, that does not mean she believed that to be true. Elizabeth knew what her people wanted or needed to hear from her; she was very conscious of what she said and "even in her most casual, seemingly spontaneous remarks, Elizabeth was playing a role, aware of how her audience would respond" (Levin 130). According to Levin, Elizabeth claimed, that although she was a woman and her main role was to keep the peace between England and their neighbours, if they attacked her "they would find that in war she could be better than a man" (Levin 140). Although she did not demand equality in actual words, she did so with her actions, by not marrying and being a successful queen. Had she demanded equality, she most likely would have failed and been ridiculed. I think she was inspiring and served as a great role model for women. Elizabeth did what she had to do in this world of men she lived in. Sadly, even after her successful rule "the belief persisted that women as a sex were naturally unfit for political rule" (Mendelson and Crawford 357). One might have expected a change in attitudes towards women, but that was not the case according to Mendelson and Crawford. They claim, there was in fact "a decline rather than an increase in women's civic rights and privileges" (434). Capp agrees and claims that gender

relations did not change, nor did women's position in society change in any fundamental way. He claims patriarchy adjusted to the changing circumstances and likewise women adjusted and found ways to come to terms with it but "early modern England reveals no steady march towards female emancipation" (381). Levin does not agree with them and claims, that the rule of Mary and Elizabeth "brought about a number of social, political, and psychological repercussions. Attitudes toward women and their status changed dramatically" (Levin 2).

Chapter 2: Shakespeare's female characters

At the end of *All is true* or *Henry VIII*, Elizabeth I appears on stage as a baby and Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, says:

She shall be-

But few now living can behold that goodness-

A pattern to all princes living with her (5.4.20-22)

She shall be loved and feared. Her own shall bless her;

Her foes shake like a field of beaten corn [...](5.4.30-31)

Shakespeare seems to have shared the love and respect many English people had for their queen and he was inspired by her when creating and adapting his female characters. Elizabeth I noticed this and, according to Marcus, viewed the "plays as political commentary upon herself" and "took the inevitable marriage of the heroine at the end of the play as an implied criticism of her own single state"; she claimed "with some vehemence 'her dislike of the woman's part' " (Marcus 144). Female characters were played by men or boys at the time but this issue will not be discussed here. I will assume, like Marcus, that if the "performance style was naturalistic and the boy actors skilled, they could certainly be relied upon to create convincing female roles" (135). Let us look at how Shakespeare created or adapted a few of his female characters.

2.1 Cleopatra from *Antony and Cleopatra*

Cleopatra is portrayed in a negative way in all the sources Shakespeare built his play on.

Although it cannot be said that Shakespeare portrayed her in a positive way, his portrayal of her is more favourable. Roman poets and historians treated Cleopatra very harshly; she was a seductress and whore, schemer who sold her favours to win an empire. (Bullough 5:218)

Dante placed " 'the luxurious Cleopatra' in the second circle of hell among the carnal sinners"

(Bullough 5:221). She was famous for her beauty and she used it to get what she wanted which was not seen as a virtue. In Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans, The Life of Antonius*¹, Cleopatra is a terrible and manipulative woman, who even goes as far as to poison men for the sake of research, that is, she tests different types of poison on prisoners to see its effect on them. (Bullough 5:305) She is blamed for everything that goes wrong for Antony; her love is called sweet poison. (Bullough 5:284) It was said, that she distracted Antony and caused his ruin and that he deprived and betrayed his people for her sake, so she holds more blame for Antony's betrayal of his own people, than he does himself. (Bullough 5:287) Antony follows Cleopatra when she flees to save herself and her men from the war and for this, Cleopatra is also held responsible; he is not held responsible for his own actions. (Bullough 5:298-301) Cleopatra is also blamed for Antony's destruction in *Cleopatra* by G.B Giraldi Cinthio²; *The Tragedy of Antonie* by Robert Garnier³; *The Tragedy of Cleopatra* by Samuel Daniel⁴ and in those sources, she holds herself responsible. However, in Shakespeare's play, the issue of her responsibility in Antony's destruction is treated very differently. This becomes clear in a conversation between Cleopatra and Enobarbus, where Cleopatra asks if she is really at fault and Enobarbus answers her quite rightly:

What though [What if] you fled
From that great face of war [. . .]
[. . .]Why should he follow? (3.13.4-6)
[. . .] 'Twas a shame no less
Than was his loss, to course [chase] your flying flags

¹ translated by Thomas North

² 1583 edition

³ 1595 edition, translation by Mary Herbert (Sydney)

⁴ 1599 edition

And leave his navy gazing. (3.13.10-12)

Cleopatra is portrayed in a much more sympathetic way in Shakespeare's play, she receives less blame and more compassion.

In Plutarch, and the other sources, Cleopatra is very emotionally unstable, she is jealous, weepy and has a tendency to faint. After Antony's death, according to Plutarch, Cleopatra was "altogether overcome with sorrow and passion of mind, for she had knocked her breast so pitifully, that she had martyred it, and in divers places had raised ulcers and inflammations, so that she fell into a fever withal" (Bullough 5:313). In Shakespeare's play, she is much more composed and Antony is more unstable; he is the one who goes into a jealous rage. Ironically, before she kills herself in the play, she claims she now has nothing of women in her; she is marble constant, but she has been marble constant the whole play. (5.2.236) Interestingly, Fulvia is portrayed in a very negative way in Plutarch; she is a shrew who taught Antony to obey women, but Shakespeare shows her in a positive way, as a great lady. Although Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra is more favourable than her portrayal in the sources, she is not entirely innocent. Antony even remarks, "she is cunning past man's thought." (1.2.132). At that time intelligence in a woman was considered cunning and Cleopatra was an intelligent woman who knew how to get her way.

Elizabeth I often spoke of herself as female and male. In the same way, the gender boundaries and traditional gender roles and expectations are blurred in Shakespeare's play. Cleopatra's behaviour is no more feminine than Antony's and his behaviour is no more masculine than Cleopatra's behaviour; the play blurs the boundaries between Antony's masculinity and Cleopatra's femininity and the expectations made towards their characters because of their sex. In the first act, Enobarbus observes that Antony is entering, but Charmian corrects him, "Not he, the Queen" (1.2.68). Caesar even claims at one point that Antony's behaviour "is not more manlike than Cleopatra" (1.4.5-6). When Eros is having

trouble putting Antony's armour on, Cleopatra takes over and Antony remarks that she is more able with the armour than he, a man. (4.4.14-15) As mentioned earlier, Cleopatra is portrayed as more emotionally stable than Antony. In the third act, Antony has trouble controlling his emotions and goes into a jealous rage and Cleopatra decides to be quiet until he is finished. Here the gender expectations are reversed; Antony acts more like a woman while Cleopatra is composed. It is interesting to compare the manner of their deaths or suicides. Shakespeare bases their deaths on Plutarch, although it is not clear how Cleopatra killed herself in Plutarch; her death is not described in any detail and the cause and manner is unclear. Shakespeare describes her death scene in a very dramatic way and the audience is awed with her courage and bravery. Antony, on the other hand, does not have the nerves or courage to kill himself, so he asks his servant to do it, who refuses and stabs himself. Antony is therefore forced to stab himself, but he does it clumsily and has a slow death.

Cleopatra is reminiscent of Elizabeth I. She is a queen, loved and respected by many, but despised by many as well, in the same way that Elizabeth was. Rumours and gossip about Elizabeth's sexual life and illegitimate children were constant and relentless. Interestingly, her father, Henry VIII, had many sexual affairs but his conduct did not seem to cause his people much concern or at least not as much as Elizabeth's supposed bad behaviour. This double standard can be found in Shakespeare's play, as well as in his sources. Cleopatra is often referred to as a whore and other such degrading names, while Antony is an adulterer, and further, people saw her conduct as worse than his, even though he is the one who is married. But Cleopatra is a strong and admirable female character, and for example, Maenas calls her "a most triumphant [magnificent] lady" (2.2.190). Elizabeth and Shakespeare's Cleopatra both had a strong will and were not easily controlled by others. In Shakespeare's play, Cleopatra says:

Sink Rome, and their tongues rot

That speak against us! A charge we bear i 'th ' war,

And as president of my kingdom will

Appear there for a man. Speak not against it.

I will not stay behind. (3.7.15-19)

This quote sounds very much like something Elizabeth could have said. Cleopatra went to war, along with Antony, and Scarus claims she was in the middle of the fighting. This image is reminiscent of Elizabeth who went to Tilbury to rouse the troops during the much feared Spanish invasion "dressed in a breast plate, mounted on a charger, . . . carrying the sword of state . . ." (Levin 142). According to Plutarch, Cleopatra, or at least her men, fought with Antony in the war, but nothing is said about her being in the battle herself. Shakespeare added that detail. Towards the end of the play, Cleopatra says ironically that a squeaking boy will play her and that her greatness will be shown in the posture of a whore. (5.2.216-217) The sources Shakespeare used certainly did that, but Shakespeare did not follow in their footsteps; he portrayed her in a different manner perhaps to let his audience see her in a more compassionate light. In addition, Shakespeare represents Cleopatra as a strong woman, unlike Antony, who by comparison, is the weaker character.

2.2 Rosalind from *As You Like It*

Rosalind is the queen of the forest of Arden and she dominates the play *As You Like It*, which in my opinion, should really be called *As Rosalind Likes It*. She is in control of everything in the play; she is the drive behind all the action and events that take place. Shakespeare follows his main source, *Rosalynde* by Thomas Lodge⁵ rather closely, however, in the source, other than being named after Rosalynd, she is not the main character in the piece. Alinda's part (Celia in Shakespeare's play) is just as big and important as Rosalynd's part and she does not

⁵ 1590 edition

dominate the story and control the action as Shakespeare's Rosalind does in his play. For example, when Orlando is pretending to woo Rosalind through Ganymede, Rosalind asks Celia to marry them but in *Rosalynde*, it is Alinda (as Aliena) who suggests this and initiates the action. Another example is the last scene where Rosalind/Rosalynde drops her disguise. In Shakespeare's play, Rosalind does most of the talking and controls the action, but in *Rosalynde*, the King (Rosalynde's father) is the one who is in control, he does most of the talking and arranging. Shakespeare makes his Rosalind the star of his play, and further, she is much more intelligent and witty than the one from the source. Rosalynde is an emotional and passionate girl who acts like a silly girl in love, while Rosalind makes fun of romantic love and the silly behaviour that goes with it, she says "Love is merely a madness" and makes people act like fools (3.3.359). Rosalind is in love with Orlando, but she does not act like Rosalynde. Orlando calls his Rosalind virtuous and wise, while Rosalynde from the source is never mentioned as wise or as anything other than beautiful. There is a long description of her beauty but there are no comments about her character.

Rosalynde is a very misogynistic piece of work while Shakespeare's play cannot be considered that at all. *As You Like It* does contain negative comments about women, the play is discussing gender roles and expectations. Rosalynde makes comments on women and their behaviour in *Rosalynde*, but the comments Rosalynde makes are very misogynistic. For example, in a conversation between Alinda/Aliena and Rosalynde/ Ganymede, Rosalynde comments on women's inconstancy and Alinda rebukes her for saying such things about her sex, to which Rosalynde claims she is talking as Ganymede. She claims, if she were speaking as Rosalynde she would defend her sex from such accusations. Alinda then claims that men are often inconstant, to which Rosalynde (as Ganymede) claims that men are inconstant because they are "womens sonnes, and tooke that fault of their mother; for if man had growen from man, as Adam did from the earth, men had never been troubled with

inconstancie" (Bullough 2:182). This is a typical misogynistic way of thinking that was common at the time; women are to blame for everything and have been since the beginning of time. The portrayal of women is very negative in *Rosalynde* and even Rosader says that Rosalynd would love him more willingly, if he were richer, a very demeaning remark about her character. When the conversation above is compared to comments which Rosalind makes, the difference becomes clear. For example, in a conversation between Rosalind and Celia, Rosalind keeps interrupting Celia's story which makes her angry and Rosalind says "Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I/ must speak..." (3.2.227-228). A negative trait or characteristic women were known for at the time was, that they could not hold their tongue; they were too talkative. Rosalind makes fun of her sex and ridicules females but certainly not to the misogynistic extent that Rosalynd does. Her comments are about young women in love; how emotional, moody and inconstant they can be. Although *As You Like It* has negative comments on women and their behaviour, it cannot be considered a misogynistic play. Rosalind claims women are weak but she is the strongest character in the play; in that way, the play contradicts itself.

Rosalind is like Elizabeth I in some ways. They both claimed that women were weak but they certainly did not show weakness, they were both tough women. *As You Like It* is the only Elizabethan play where a female character is given the epilogue, although the boy playing her, comments on the fact that he is a boy, he does the epilogue in his Rosalind costume. That must have been quite shocking to the audience. Shakespeare transforms the Rosalynd from the source who had little control and made misogynistic comments about women to Rosalind, the queen of the forest, who rules her people very successfully, and in the end, arranges many marriages as Queen Elizabeth was famous for doing.

2.3 Portia from *Julius Caesar*

"O ye gods,/ Render me worthy of this noble wife!" (2.1.303). Brutus says these words after Portia has demanded he treat her as an equal and after she has cut her thigh to prove her strength. Shakespeare borrowed substantially for the character of Portia from Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes, The life of Marcus Brutus*⁶ and yet his Portia is much stronger and more respectable than the one from the source. For example, the conversation in the play between Portia and Brutus, when he refuses to tell her what is on his mind, is similar to the conversation in Plutarch. In Plutarch, Portia claims she did not marry Brutus to be his bedfellow and wants him to share his secrets with her, so that she can serve him better. She asks him: "howe may I showe my duetie towards thee, and howe mucche I woulde doe for thy sake . . . I confesse, that a womans wit commonly is too weake to keepe a secret safely: but yet, Brutus, good educacion, and the companie of vertuous men, have some power to reforme the defect of nature" (Bullough 5:98-99). In Shakespeare's play, Portia does not talk about any defect of nature. She simply claims that because of "that great vow/ Which did incorporate and make us one" by which she means their marriage vows, he should "unfold to me, your self, your half..." (2.1.271-273). Portia claims she is his other half, and therefore, has a right to know his secrets. A few lines later, Portia discusses the meaning of marriage. She asks him if their wedding vows mean, that she is part of him in a limited way and has not the right to know his secrets; that she should share his meals and his bed and talk occasionally, but otherwise be silent and invisible. This is an exact description of the ideal wife and marriage at the time. But Portia claims, that if this is her role as his wife, then she is a harlot and not his wife. He replies that she is his true and honourable wife. She demands he treat her as his equal, for she does not see herself as an inferior and submissive wife as Plutarch's Portia. In both the play and the source, Portia admits women's wit is too weak to

⁶ 1579 edition, translation by Thomas North

keep a secret safely and she claims she is not an ordinary woman, being Cato's daughter and Brutus' wife, she is stronger than the average woman. This echoes Elizabeth's claim that she is not an ordinary woman but an exceptional one and as Portia did, Elizabeth identified and used her father, Henry VIII, to support her claim. Elizabeth I was not married and therefore did not demand equality the way Portia did, that is to say, she did not verbally demand equality, but in my opinion she did so with her behavior and actions, by being an independent and successful queen. She proved that a woman was just as capable as a man to rule as monarch. Portia cut her thigh to prove her strength but Shakespeare did not make as big a deal about that as Plutarch. After she cut her thigh, in Plutarch, she became ill with a fever. In fact, throughout Plutarch, she was always crying, and every little noise frightened her. She is portrayed as a physically weak and a very emotionally unstable woman. It is not clear whether she killed herself because she was sick or because she was worried about Brutus and could not stand his absence. In Shakespeare's play, she is emotional, but she comes across as stronger and braver, she is not as unstable as in Plutarch. Shakespeare chose to have her commit suicide because she could not stand Brutus' absence and worrying about him and the outcome of the war.

A possible source that Shakespeare might have used, according to Bullough, is *Il Cesare* by Orlando Pescetti⁷. In this play, Portia is brave and determined; she wishes she was a man so she could join their plot. She claims a manly heart dwells in her female breast. This Portia is similar to Shakespeare's Portia, however, in the conversation between Portia and Brutus, discussed above, it becomes clear this Portia is a submissive wife and there is no demand for equality, in fact, Brutus demands of her that she obey his will. (Bullough 5:185) Their conversation is mainly about how she cannot or will not live without him. Shakespeare's Portia stands out because of her strength and demand for equality.

⁷ 1594 edition

2.4 Portia from *The Merchant of Venice*

Most of Shakespeare's sources for *The Merchant of Venice* are sources for the plot involving the Jew. A probable source for the storyline involving Portia's character is, according to Bullough, *Il Pecorone* by Ser Gionvanni Fiorentino⁸. The Portia character in this work is a widow, " a beautiful and capricious woman, and makes this law, that anyone who arrives must sleep with her, and if he possesses her he can take her for his wife and become lord of the port and all the country. But if he fails, he loses everything that he has" (Bullough 1:465). The widow, the lady of Belmonte, is charming and pleasant to men when they arrive at her home and hosts a grand feast in their honour. However, in the evening she drugs them and as a result they fall asleep as soon as they lie down and so are not able to possess her, which in accordance with her law, allows her to take all their possessions and drive them off her property. The lady has deceived and ruined many gentlemen, among them Giannetto (Bassanio's character) whom she deceives twice. When Giannetto visits the lady the third time a maid warns him not to drink the wine before they go to bed, so he is able to possess and marry her, thus becoming lord of the country. When Giannetto arrives at the widow's port the third time, the lady sees his ship from her window, recognizes the sails and says "This is indeed a great stroke of luck! It is the man who left such riches behind him!" (Bullough 1:470). The lady of Belmonte is greedy and does not have any morals, she does not hesitate to deceive these gentlemen and steal their property. Portia is not a deceiving and greedy woman but a virtuous maid, who obeys her father's wishes on how to choose a husband for her, although it deprives her of all control over whom she will wed. Of course, she has the option of cheating and giving whomever she wants to marry a hint as to which chest to choose, but Portia is not a dishonest woman. She considers giving Bassanio a clue but decides against it. Bassanio asks Portia, who is disguised as the lawyer Balthazar, to cheat

⁸ 1558 translated by the editor

in court. He asks her to:

Wrest once [For once twist] the law to your authority.

To do a great right, do a little wrong,

and curb this cruel devil of his will. (4.1.210-212)

Portia refuses to twist the law to their advantage and solves the case and saves Antonio using her intelligence. After Gianetto has married the lady of Belmonte, he forgets about his friend Ansaldo for a while, until the day arrives on which Ansaldo is supposed to pay the Jew back the money he had borrowed for Giannetto, making it possible for him to visit the widow a third time. At first he does not want to tell his wife what is troubling him, but she wears him out with questions and insists he tell her until he gives in (Bullough 1:471). In the parallel scene in Shakespeare's play, Portia sees that her husband is upset and wants to know what news the letter Bassanio has received contains and like Brutus' Portia she claims:

I am half yourself,

And must freely have the half of anything

That this same paper brings you. (3.2.47-49)

She does not, like the lady, wear her husband out with questions but demands her rights as his wife. The main idea that Shakespeare adapted from this source is that both the lady of Belmonte and Portia, tell their husbands to take the money and go help their friend, then the ladies dress up like lawyers, and save Ansaldo/Antonio's life in court. They are both intelligent women and they know how to control and manipulate the men in their lives but Portia is not deceiving, dishonest and greedy like the lady of Belmonte. Portia does play a trick on Bassanio with the ring which, in my opinion, is a justified reaction and a payback for Bassanio telling Antonio in court, that he would give up his precious wife, if that would somehow save Antonio's life. (4.1.278-282) Portia is very upset with Bassanio when she pretends to discover, that he has given the ring away which leads to Bassanio swearing he

will never again break a promise he has made to her. Furthermore, Antonio swears his "soul upon the forfeit, that you lord/ Will never more break faith advisedly [intentionally]" (5.1.251-252). Portia is a very clever girl and knows how to wrap men around her little finger. In the parallel scene in *Il Pecorone*, the lady of Belmonte pretends to be angry about the fact that Giannetto has given the ring away, but when he starts crying she "felt it like a dagger in her heart, and quickly ran to embrace him, laughing heartily" (Bullough 1:476). She is very quick to forgive him for breaking his promise to her and he does not swear that he will never let her down again. In relation to Shakespeare's treatment of women, Portia's servant falls in love with Bassanio's friend and they marry at the same time as Portia and Bassanio. In *Il Pecorone*, Giannetto gives the servant as a wife to Ansaldo.

An analogue according to Bullough for Shakespeare's play is *The Three Ladies of London*⁹ by Robert Wilson. In this source the merchant borrows the money from the Jew for himself (there is no Bassanio character) and then he refuses to pay it back, because his woman has asked him to prove his love to her by cheating and refusing to pay the Jew (Bullough 1:480). This is perhaps not directly relevant to Portia's character, but it does show the ideas that Shakespeare chose not to use. A probable source for the three chest storyline is *Gesta Romanorum*, however, in this work, the lady must prove her worth by choosing the right chest to win the husband while in Shakespeare's play it is the man that must prove himself worthy of Portia by proving his virtue.

Shylock compares Portia (while she is disguised as Balthazar, the lawyer) to the biblical character Daniel and this could be a reference to Elizabeth I, who according to *Holinshed's Chronicle*, compared herself to Daniel when she stopped to pray at the Tower during her coronation procession. (Levin 131) Like Elizabeth, Portia presents herself as a submissive woman, surrendering to her lord Bassanio after he has chosen the right chest.

⁹ 1584

However, after they are married, she claims to be his other half and equal, and further, in the next scene she dresses up like a man "to do justice in a high court of law". Thus, she "enacts over time Queen Elizabeth's standard rhetorical ploy of declaring her weakness as a woman, then successfully asserting her masculine prerogative over a resisting body of men" (Marcus 144-5). It might seem like Portia is a submissive wife but she demands equality in her marriage and in truth she holds the reins in her marriage.

2.5 Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*

"Shakespeare needed no specific source for his happiest creations" (Bullough 2:78).

Shakespeare borrowed and adapted the Hero- Claudio plot from various sources but the Beatrice- Benedict plot he wrote around the borrowed one, although it is possible the characters are loosely based on a few different characters. Beatrice is not unlike Katherine from *The Taming of the Shrew*, she is bit of a shrew, however, she is called a "pleasant-spirited lady" by Don Pedro and throughout the play she is not cast in a negative light; she is loved and respected by everyone in the play (2.1.299). Unlike Katherine, she is not tamed; she is sharp, intelligent and independent and does not give any of that up in the play.

Although she does claim she will tame her "wild heart" to Benedict's "loving hand" to show her love for him (after she hears the ladies talk about Benedict's love for her), she does not alter her behaviour or let Benedict control her at all (3.1.113). Leonato tells her she will never find a husband "if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue", she certainly does not hesitate to say what is on her mind (2.1.16-17). However, her shrewish ways, do not repulse men. Even Don Pedro asks her to marry him, although he was perhaps not being serious. (2.1.285) In order to avoid having to surrender to the patriarchy, she plans to stay single and claims she would "rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me" (1.1.107-108). In the same way that Elizabeth I refused to marry, Beatrice refuses to marry because if she did, she would

lose her independence and control over her own life. Beatrice, unlike Elizabeth, does give up and falls in love with Benedict, or rather admits, that she loves him but not without a compromise. Beatrice makes it clear to him that she expects to be his equal in their marriage by demanding of Benedict that he kill Claudio. (4.1.287) Claudio and Benedict are friends and equals, while Beatrice is not their equal, and so it is not her place to ask this of Benedict who should be loyal to Claudio, even if he was married to Beatrice. Beatrice demands of him that he prove to her that their marriage will be one of equals before they are married. It is unlikely, that she actually expects Benedict to go through with the murder, because she loves Hero dearly and Hero is in love with Claudio. Beatrice is simply testing him and his loyalty.

Beatrice recognizes the limitations of her sex, she wishes she was a man so she could defend Hero's honour herself. (4.1.312-313) Her wish to be a man is reminiscent of something Elizabeth I said. In 1565 when Elizabeth heard of Turks defeating Christians she "denigrated her female aspect and expressed a desire to be male" (Levin 138). Elizabeth wanted to be male so she could be there in person. As Elizabeth claimed to be both female and male, so Beatrice claims she identifies with the male gender. Beatrice claims she will not marry because "Adam's sons are my/ bretheren, and truly I hold it a sin to match in my kindred" (2.1.53-54).

Shakespeare created Beatrice as a contrast to Hero who fits very well into the image of the ideal woman of the time. The difference between them is striking and no one can deny that Beatrice is much more interesting and the star of the play, along with her male companion Benedict. In fact, the play came to be known as Beatrice and Benedict¹⁰. Although, Hero would have been the more appropriate and conventional heroine, Beatrice charmed the audience, in spite of her shrewish ways.

¹⁰ There is a reference to the play by that title in the Lord Treasurer's accounts (1630).

Conclusion

Traditionally the relationship between Shakespeare and his literary sources, which source study examines, has been imagined as linear and determinative, an empirical smatter of subtractions and additions, in which Shakespeare finds and rejects or accepts details of plot structure, character, or style. I would like to re-imagine this relationship less as a transference of formal ingredients, with sources as sites of mere borrowings, than as a culturally determined reading by Shakespeare of contexts that he found provocative- or not provocative enough. (McEachern 269)

It is interesting to analyse Shakespeare's plays and compare them with the sources he used; how he adapted the characters; what ideas he chose not to use or how he transformed them. When the misogynist attitudes towards women at the time and women's repression is taken into account, Shakespeare's heroines are indeed extraordinary, so Shakespeare must have been a controversial playwright in his time, hence stage plays were not considered an appropriate pastime for women. Mozart did something similar a little more than a century later, for he criticised society through his operas and was a very controversial composer because of his provocativeness. He allowed the servants, even women, to plot and deceive their masters who were a part of the aristocracy and gave them an influential role in the story. Attitudes towards women were changing, although very slowly, during Shakespeare's lifetime which was full of social and political unrest. When he studied the sources for his plays, he chose to adapt the female characters and represent them in a more favourable manner than the sources and he created heroines who must have been provocative to many in the audience. Elizabeth I must have been inspiring to Shakespeare and to all women who were fighting the misogynist attitude in society. I saw *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Shakespeare's Globe in the summer of 2008. When Hippolyta refused to obey and follow

Theseus by walking in the opposite direction at the beginning of the play, the crowd cheered. Perhaps, Shakespeare's crowd cheered as well when the female characters stood up to male characters. In a society where women were not supposed to speak and be heard, Shakespeare gave them a voice.

Bibliography

- Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. 7 vols. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-1975.
- Capp, Bernard. *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2003.
- Crawford, Patricia. "Women's published writings 1600-1700". *Women in English Society 1500-1800*. Ed. Mary Prior. London: Routledge, 1985. 211-282.
- Dusinberre, Juliet. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*. 3rd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. x-xxxiv.
- Greenblatt, Stephen, ed. *The Norton Shakespeare*. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Levin, Carole. *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the politics of sex and power*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.
- Marcus, Leah S. "Shakespeare's Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I, and the Political Uses of Androgyny" *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance Literary and Historical Perspectives*. Ed. Mary Beth Rose. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986. 135-155.
- McEachern, Claire. "Fathering Herself: A Source Study of Shakespeare's Feminism." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (1988): 269-290.
- Mendelson, Sara, and Crawford, Patricia. *Women in early modern England 1550-1720*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1998.
- The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible: New International Version. Indianapolis: B. B. Kirkbridge Bible Co. Inc., 1990.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.