THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S WORLD

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Abstract: *The familiar stories of women's oppression in Shakespeare's world have proved difficult to displace even as recent historical scholarship has provided the material for alternative narratives. We know now that great many women exercised their own choice in negotiating margins for themselves and for other women as well, but we still tend to assume that patriarchal control was the norm. We also know that the majority of executors of wills in Shakespeare's England were women, but we still assume that most women were deprived of economic power and authority. We have evidence of women's widespread participation in pre-Reformation drama, but we still tend to assume that women's exclusion from the London professional companies followed a long-standing tradition of all-male performance.*

In Shakespeare's London, women were a visible presence all over the city, including the playhouse, but we still tend to assume that Shakespeare's plays should be read from the point of view of a male spectator who would have responded to representations of women's power and autonomy as occasions for anxious hostility.

Giving the difficulty of rethinking our basic assumptions about women's place in Shakespeare's world, it is tempting to abandon the work of trying to see their roles in his plays in historical context.

Keywords: *gender identity, sexual ambiguity, cross-gender, disguise, Shakespeare*

Recent feminist Shakespeare scholarship has relied heavily on historical accounts of the place of women in Shakespeare's world, which is often invoked to ground interpretations of the play scripts in a foundation of historical facts. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that historical writing itself is a kind of story-telling. The reconstruction of past lives is finally an impossible task, compromised by distance and difference that separate the history-writing present from the historical past it seeks to know. We look to the past to discover answers to the questions that trouble us, but no matter how hard we struggle to recover the past as it was, the questions we ask are the products of our own concerns, and answers we find, even when couched in the words of old texts, the products of our own selection and arrangement.

These difficulties are especially troublesome in the case of women. There are far fewer historical records of women than of men, and the questions with which modern historians approach the records that have been found are heavily fraught with present concerns and present controversies. On the one hand, because the experience of women tends to be occluded in the historical record, there is the temptation to universalize- to assume that essential aspects of women's experience were always and everywhere what they are now and here. On the other hand, because 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. The radical incompleteness of the historical record has made both assumptions plausible, but neither is the only story that can be woven around the evidence we have. And because both stories have been told so often in recent years, it seems that the most useful project at present is to challenge both the pessimistic

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conviction that the complexity and essential aspects of women's experience have remained relatively unchanged and the optimistic contrast between past oppression and present opportunity.

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 history as well. The hierarchy of status and rank was just as firmly embedded as the gender hierarchy, and, like the gender hierarchy, it was sanctioned by law and religion and reinforced by customary behaviour. As a result, the fact that male superiority was taken for granted does not mean that every woman was subordinate in every way to every men or that many women did not occupy positions of authority and power that would be considered exceptional even today. The easy assumption of a broad, schematic opposition between past oppression and present equality ignores the variety, the complexity, and the contradictions of women's positions in our own world, not to mention those of a remote-and finally inaccessible-past. As Raymond Williams has argued, the dominant features of a culture always coexist both with residual "elements of the past" and with emergent elements that are in the process of being created.[30] Unlike our own conceptions of gender differences, male superiority was rationalized less in the then relatively marginal discourse of the new biological science than in the established and privileged discourse of theology. Nonetheless, even in Shakespeare's plays, anticipations of the biologically grounded ideology of compulsory heterosexuality that authorizes the modern nuclear family can be found in plays that focus on the life of the proto-bourgeoisie. In The Taming of the Shrew, for instance, Kate's final speech rationalizes the submission of wives to husbands not only on the traditional analogy between husband and king, but also on the now-familiar ground of the physical differences between male and female bodies.

In a time of rapid cultural change, the places of women in families, in the economy, in religion, and in popular thinking were undergoing equally radical transformations.

Renaissance texts contain anticipations of modern constructions of gender and sexuality as well vestiges of medieval ones, just as vestiges of earlier formulations persist in our own discourse.

Clothing offers a good example of the ways gendered identity was complicated by all these factors. In sixteenth-century England, as in our own culture, women's clothing was clearly distinguished from men's. Until the late Middle Ages, however, men and women had worn similar long, loose robes. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, clothing had been increasingly differentiated to emphasize and produce embodied sexual difference. Men's robes were shortened to reveal their legs, and the codpiece was invented. Women acquired tight bodices that altered the shape of their breasts and low-cut gowns to display them, and their skirts, which remained long, were widened. In addition to producing visible signs of sexual difference, changes in clothing also produced differences in daily behaviour. It was during this same period, for instance, that European women began using side-saddles, a fashion that was brought to

[30] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p121

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England near the end of the fourteenth century by Anne of Bohemia when she married the English king Richard II[31].

However, gender was not the only or even the most important distinction that early modern English clothing enforced. In fact, although sumptuary laws contained elaborate regulations of male attire to ensure that men's clothing would express their exact place in the social hierarchy, there was no legislation against cross-dressing.

In late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England, some women adopted the fashion of masculine attire, and although moralists strenuously condemned the practice, it was never made illegal. Moreover, male and female children were dressed in the same attire-in skirts-until they reached the age of seven. Apparently, the physical difference that separated boys from girls was not considered sufficiently significant to be marked by clothing, but the difference in social rank that separated one man from another was so important that clothing which obscured it was forbidden by law.

Another indication that both age and status were at least as important as gender in determining an individual's identity is the fact that medical casebooks referred to children of both sexes as "it" until they reached puberty. In our own culture, by contrast, clothing is gendered from birth, but it is less reliable as an indicator of status and rank.

Political leadership is another example of the ways the status hierarchy-and religious allegiance as well-complicated the relative positions of men and women in ways that are difficult to understand in modern times. At the time of Shakespeare's birth in 1564, women first Queen Mary and then Queen Elizabeth-had already occupied the English throne for eleven years, and Elizabeth was to reign for most of his adult life. Reluctance to accept women in positions of power has kept women from ever holding the presidency and even from being nominated for that office by a major political party, but it is rarely expressed so vehemently as it was by John Knox in his *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which was published in 1558. Knox argued that any authority held by a woman above a man was a monstrous usurpation, forbidden by God, repellent to nature, and condemned by ancient authorities. It is important to remember that Knox's diatribe was in fact directed against Mary Tudor and other Catholic queens who were governing in France and Scotland.

Only a few months after the publication of Knox's First Blast , Mary Tudor died, and her protestant sister Elizabeth ascended the English throne.

Religion was a far more important issue than gender to both Elizabeth's supporters and her enemies. The religious allegiances of the Shakespeare family have long been a subject of debate, although some scholars have recently mounted impressive arguments that William was brought up as a Catholic. Even if that proves to be so, it is important to remember that the vast majority of English Catholics remained loyal to their Queen and country.

Queen Elizabeth brought exceptional political skills to her office, and during the years when Shakespeare was growing up, she was consolidating her remarkable and unprecedented popularity among the vast majority of her subjects. Every year on 17 November, the Queen's accession was celebrated with the ringing of church bells sermons of thanksgiving and public festivities. These celebrations reflected the widespread popular devotion to the Queen, which intensified after the defeat of the Northern rebellion of 1569. Hundreds of records of local celebrations in churchwardens'

[31] John Stow, *The Chronicles of England, from Brute unto this present year of Christ, 1580,* London, Ralphe Newberie, p. 490

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accounts corroborate Thomas Holland's claim in a 1599 sermon that Accession Day celebrations " flowed by a voluntary current all over this realm"[32].

Queen Elizabeth actively courted her subjects with annual royal progresses through the countryside. She rode on horseback or in an open litter so the people who lined the roads could see and speak directly with their monarch during these slow processions.

In 1575 the court poet Thomas Churchyard described her enthusiastic greeting by the city of Bristol.[33]

Written to be recited to the Queen when she entered the town by a boy dressed as Fame, Churchyard's enthusiastic description can be taken with a grain of salt, but it is only one of the many contemporary accounts of Queen Elizabeth's remarkable popularity among the common people of England. According to a 1569 report by the Spanish ambassador, for instance, " She was received everywhere with great acclamations and signs of joy ... She ordered her carriage sometimes to be taken where the crowd seemed thickest, and stood up and thanked the people."[34]

In stark contrast, most recent scholarship on Queen Elizabeth insists on the difficulties she encountered as a woman in a position of authority over men and emphasizes evidence that seems to indicate that her male subjects experienced anxieties similar to those expressed by the scholars 'own contemporaries in the wake of the modern women's movement. Recent work on the politics of the Elizabethan court, for instance, tends to assume the viewpoint of mail courtiers, emphasizing their discomfort in service to a female ruler. However, the semi-public spaces of her court, such as the privy chamber and the presence chamber in which male courtiers predominated, were not the only political arenas in which the Queen held sway. Although she was served in her private apartments by maids of honour and ladies of the bedchamber, "the noblewoman or lady-in-waiting" as Phillipe Berry points out, is usually "elided from contemporary critical views of the Elizabethan court."[35]

Other elisions from recent accounts of Elizabeth's reign include her remarkable popularity among the vast majority of her subjects and the contemporary accounts of the admiration for the effectiveness of her rule expressed by foreign rulers, for whom similarities between their problems as monarchs were more significant than their differences as man and woman. Essex, for instance, has elicited considerable sympathy from recent historians of Elizabeth's reign, and the story of his rebellion and the events that led up to it is usually told from his own point of view. It is important to remember , however, that the rebellion failed to attract the popular support that Essex anticipated. Contrary to his hopes and expectations, the citizens of London did not join his revolt, and many of his own followers deserted him as soon as he was denounced a traitor. Even in France, there was great admiration for the courage and resolution with which Elizabeth had handled Essex rising. Would that their King Henry III had had a pat of her spirit to quell the insolvency of the Duke of Guise on the Day of Barricades! " She only is a King" exclaimed Henry IV. " She only knows how to rule."[36]

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[32] Neale, *The Cult of Elizabeth,* University of California Press, 1977, pp.117-128
[33] Roy Strong, The Firste Parte of Churchyardes Chippes, London , Thomas Marshe, 1575
[34] Neale, *The Cult of Elizabeth,* University of California Press, 1977, pp.211-212
[35] Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen*, London : Routledge, 1989, p.79
[36] Neale, The Cult of Elizabeth, University of California Press, 1977, p.393

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Of all the rulers of her time in Western Europe, she was the only able to deal with the issue of religious conflict. In the judgement of the historian Richard S. Dunn, " This achievement alone is a good reason for nominating Elizabeth the ablest politician of her time"[37]

Mountains of evidence have been adduced in support of both accounts of Elizabeth's reign –the older and more popular emphasis of her remarkable success as a monarch and the recent scholarly emphasis upon the disabilities produced by her gender that haunted her entire reign. Evidence about the ordinary women Shakespeare would have known as a boy in Stratford –upon-Avon is harder to come by; but in this case as well, alternative descriptions can be constructed. Scholarly accounts of Shakespeare's youth and family focus on men, such as his father and schoolmaster, partly because of the greater visibility of men in surviving records, and probably also because of the modern scholars' own greater interest in their activities. Thus, for instance, a glance at the indexes to two standard biographies of Shakespeare shows respectively twenty –six and twenty-seven entries referring to his father but only twelve and fourteen for his mother.[38]

The preponderance of men in the documentary records that have been discovered and cited may, however, be misleading. Because most of the women in Shakespeare's family outlived their brothers and husbands, the family in which he grew up was actually predominantly female. In addition to numerous sisters and female cousins, Shakespeare had eight aunts, including one who outlived her husband by forty-one years.[39]

Sixteenth-century legal records show that the women in Shakespeare's family controlled considerable property both in land and in money. They also bequeathed property, served as executors of wills, and engaged in litigation designed to defend and further their financial interests. Shakespeare's mother, for instance, although she had nine older sisters and two older brothers, inherited the only freehold property her father bequeathed and served as one of his two executors.[40]

This was not exceptional. In fact, most of the executors of wills in Shakespeare's England were women rather than men –so much so that scribes sometimes mistakenly used the female form "executrix" to refer to male executors of wills.[41] Among the many other women in and around Stratford who served as executors for their fathers or husbands wills were Joan Hathaway, the stepmother of William Shakespeare's wife, and Margaret Sadler, the sister of neighbour and lifelong friend Hamnet Sadler.

Like most of the other women in Shakespeare's family, his mother outlived her husband, but Mary Shakespeare must have had considerable authority in the household even during the years when her husband was still living and her son William was

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[37] Richard S.Dunn, The Age of Religious Wars, 1559-1689, New York: W.W. Norton, 1970, p.37

[38] S.Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*, New York: Oxford University Press and Scolar Press, 1975

[39] Carol Thomas Neeley, "*Shakespeare's Women: Historical Facts and Dramatic Representations'*, in *Shakespeare's Personality*, edited by notman N. Holland, University of California Press, 1989, pp.117-118.

[40] Robert Bearman, "*Discovering Mary Arden's House: Property and Society in Wilcomte, Warwicksire*", Spring, 2002, p.58

[41] Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, Routledge, 1993, pp. 156-157.

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growing up. As a woman, her legal status was subordinate to her husband's, but as Robert Arden's heiress, her social status was distinctly superior.

John Shakespeare was eventually to rise to the office of bailiff in Stratford, a position of considerable importance, since a bailiff was one of the aldermen who governed the town, elected by the other aldermen in consultation with the lord of the manor to serve a one year term in an office similar to the modern positions of mayor and justice of peace. However, he began life as the son of a tenant farmer, and Mary was the daughter of John's landlord, Robert Arden . A substantial property owner, Mary's father also possessed an ancient and respected family name.

Evidence that Mary's inherited status was important to john, and to his son William as well, can be found in the documentary records of John's attempts, beginning when William was only five years old, to acquire a coat of arms. This project did not succeed for over twenty years, and it is likely that it was finally successful playwright in London. Significantly, one of the arguments cited in favour of the grant was that "John had married the daughter and esquire. In 1599, John or William made a further request to the heralds that Shakespeare be permitted to impale the arms of the Arden family with their own.

In addition to her inherited status as Robert Arden's daughter, Mary was an active participant in the economic life of the household. Some of this participation can be documented from legal records concerning the sale and conveyance of various pieces of property and litigation about it in which Mary's name appears along with her husband's. Most of it can only be inferred from what we know about the domestic responsibilities of women in Mary's position during the period, which would have been very different from those of a stereotypical housewife in a modern Western country.

The sexual division of labour and the conceptual division between public and private spheres of activity that define the positions of housewives in advanced industrial nations were accepted only slowly and with difficulty in pre-capitalist England. The household had not yet been limited and specialized to its modern status as residential unit. Instead, it was the site where much of the economic production of the nation was conducted –the place where families not only lived together, but worked together as well in a great variety of trades. They were weavers and knitters, bakers and butchers, tailors and grocers, printers, turners, merchants and innkeepers and this is by no means a comprehensive list. Moreover, because it was customary for workers to live on the premises, the members of a household were not restricted to kin. In a farming family, there would be hired agricultural labourers, both male and female, who worked both in and outside the house. Like their mistresses, female agricultural workers were expected not only to cook and to help with the dairying, but also to care for animals and to work in the fields.

The young unmarried men and women who were employed as apprentices and servants in all these households were also involved in domestic work. One important consequence of these living arrangements was that men as well as women, hired workers as well as fathers, spent time with children and were involved in their training and education. John and Mary Shakespeare's household, with the glover's workshop adjacent to the living quarters, was probably no exception.

One reason why the sexual division of labour that is now regarded as traditional was not yet practicable in most English households was that women, no less than men, were expected to provide for their own needs and to contribute to the economic well-being of their families, not only by the money and property they brought

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into marriage but also by managing their household and by marketing the products of their domestic labour.

Married women also supported themselves and helped to support their families by remunerative labour in a variety of crafts and trades, including some that would now be in a variety of crafts and trades, including some that would now be considered masculine preserves. Among the trades to which women were apprenticed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were those of carpenter, plumber, cordwainer, silversmith, housepainter, pipemaker and whittawer- dresser of light leather, the same trade practised by John Shakespeare.

The most frequently mentioned trade for women, however, was housewifery. The Puritan preacher Henry Smith ended his 1591 treatise, *A Preparative to Marriage*, with the argument that we call the wife housewife, that is house wife, not a street wife like Tamar (Gen.38:14), nor a field wife like Dinah (Gen.34:1), but a house wife, to show that a good wife keeps her house. Smith's exhortation seems to anticipate the repressive modern ideal of the suburban, middleclass wife, confined within the four walls of a gleaming little house where she spends her days cooking and cleaning and tending to the needs of her husband and children.

It is important to remember, however, that the title of housewife in sixteenth-century England was not restricted to wives, but instead designated a skill to which a girl could be apprenticed. In Salisbury, for instance, Elizabeth Deacon was apprenticed in 1612, to the mystery and science of housewifery and flaxdressing, and during the same year Mary Gunter was apprenticed in housewifery and knitting.[42]

In fact, as Amy Louise Erickson points out" the title of housewife expressed a relationship to the house, rather than a necessary marital status."

Women at higher levels of the social hierarchy would have been equally busy. The diary of Lady Margaret Hoby for the years 1599 to 1605, shows her collecting rents, reviewing accounts, and paying bills as well as preparing food and medicines, providing for guests, and attending to the sick.[43]

There has been no end of speculation about the circumstances of Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway. At eighteen, Shakespeare was unusually young to marry, and Anne, at twenty-six or twenty-seven , was approximately eight years older. The records concerning the marriage are well-known.

In the case of William's marriage to Anne, as in that of the marriage of John Shakespeare to Mary Arden, it is important to remember that the choice of a spouse was not simply the fulfilment of a romantic inclination but also the basis for the establishment of an economically viable household. Both men and women took serious account of financial considerations when negotiating their marriages. Moreover, in many respects, Shakespeare's choice of a wife was similar to his father's. Anne Hathaway was the daughter of a substantial local farmer, who had had previous business dealings with William's father, John. Although her inheritance was by no means comparable to Mary's, Anne was also remembered by her father in his will , which left her ten marks to be paid on the day of her marriage.

In many ways, the position of English women was deteriorating during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is not to say that woman's status and

[42] Sue Wright, *The Employment of Women in Tudor and Stuart Salisbury*, Croom Helm Ltd, 1985, p.103

[43] Lady Margaret Hoby, *The Private Life of an Elizabethan Lady 1599-1605*, edited by Joanna Moody, Sutton Publishing, 1998.

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opportunities had been equal to those of men during Middle Ages, but a multitude of factors, religious, economic and political, were now producing a widening division between public and private life and an increasing domestication of women and circumscription of their economic scope. Women's work was increasingly distinguished from men's as women were excluded from crafts and trades in which their predecessors had been active. The household was redefined as a private, feminized space, separated from the public arenas of economic and political activity, and women were increasingly confined within the rising barriers that marked the separation.

Although the company William Shakespeare joined, like the other London-based professional companies, did not include women players, there was no legal prohibition against performances by women.

The reason why the English professional companies excluded women from the stage has never been satisfactorily explained, but one of the reasons may have been the players' interest in improving their status. The business of playing was new in late sixteenth-century London, and it was often condemned as a dangerous innovation.

The exclusion of women made the new professional companies look more like the male students who performed Latin plays at Oxford and Cambridge and less like the amateurs who performed in village festivals or the wandering professionals who had travelled across the countryside from time immemorial, both of which included women as well as men. It also provided a basis for claiming superiority to the European professional companies that did include women.

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