HISTORICAL FACT AND FEMINIST INTERPRETATION ON SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract: 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 a residential unit. 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 into marriage but also by managing their households 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 considered masculine preserves.

Keywords: female oppression, disempowerment, inequalities, status, gender.

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 fact. The reconstruction of past lives is finally an impossible task, compromised by the 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, but no matter how hard we struggle to recover the past as it really was, the questions we ask are the products of our own concerns, the 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 the essential aspects of women's experience were always and everywhere what they are now.

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 to me that the most useful project at present is to challenge both the pessimistic conviction that the essential aspects of women's experience have remained relatively unchanged and the optimistic contrast between past oppression and present opportunity.

We cannot recreate the lives of the actual women Shakespeare knew- or even to recover most of their names. What is possible to us, is to bring together some of the materials that emphasize the ways the practices and beliefs that informed Shakespeare's experiences of women differed from our own and also challenge the story of female oppression and disempowerment that is often told in recent accounts of women's place in Shakespeare's England. In Shakespeare's world, inequalities between men and women were taken from granted. Sanctioned by law and

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religion and reinforced by the duties and customs of daily life, they were deeply embedded on 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 man or that many women did not occupy positions of authority and power that would be considered exceptional even today. Te 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.

Myriad distinctions of status, geography, religion, and occupation determined the social positions, opportunities, wealth, and power available to individual women in Shakespeare's England. Moreover, as Robert Williams has argued, the dominant feature of a culture always coexist both with residual elements of past and with emergent elements that are in the process of being created[1]. 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,* Kate' final speech rationalizes the submission of wives to husbands not only on the traditional analogy between husband and king, but also on 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 as vestiges of medieval ones. 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, men and women had worn similar long, loose robes.

During the fourteenth the 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, that European women began using side-saddles, a fashion that was brought to England near the end of the fourteenth century by Anne of Bohemia when she married the English king Richard II[2].

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. The physical difference that separated boys from girls was not considered

[1] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 121.
[2] John Stow, The Chronicles of England, from Brute unto present year of Christ, 1580, London, Ralphe Newberie, p. 490.

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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, 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 then Queen Elizabeth –has 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.

John Knox argued that any authority held by a woman over a man was a monstrous usurpation, forbidden by God, repellent to nature and condemned by ancient authorities.[3] It is important to remember that Knox's diatribe, written in exile in Geneva, was in fact directed against Mary Tudor and the 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.

Neale[4] recognized, 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.

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 ordinary women Shakespeare would have known as a boy in Stratford –upon –Avon is harder to come by, but 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 activity. Thus, a glance 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[5].

The preponderance of men in the documentary records that have been discovered and cited may 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[6].

Sixteenth century legal records show that 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 litigations designed to defend and further their financial interests. Shakespeare's mother although she had nine older sister and two older brothers, inherited the only freehold property her father bequeathed and served as one of his two executors[7]. This was not

[3] John Knox, First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women, 1558.
[4] J.E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth I*, Academy Chicago Publishers, 1999, p. 64.
[5] S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*, Oxford University Press, 1975.
[6] Carol Thomas Neely, *Shakespeare's Women: Historical Facts and Dramatic Representations*, University of California Press, 1989, p. 117.
[7] N. W. Alcock, *Discovering Mary Arden's House,* Spring, 2002, p. 19.

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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[8].

Like most of 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 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 an one-year term in an office similar to the modern positions of mayor and justice of peace. 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. The project did not succeed for over twenty years, and it is likely that it was finally brought to a successful conclusion by William, who was by then a successful playwright in London. Significantly, one of the arguments cited in favour of the grant was that John had married the daughter and one of the heirs of Robert Arden. In 1599, John or William made a further request to the heralds that the Shakespeares' 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. 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. 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.

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. Like Mary, Anne must have chosen her husband without parental advice, since her parents, like Mary's had died by the time she married. 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.

If the records of Shakespeare's mother life are scanty, those for his wife are almost non-existent. Aside from her marriage, the baptism of her children, the meagre bequest of a second –best bed in her husband's will, and her own death, there is only the will of her father's shepherd, Thomas Whittington, who bequeathed to the poor people of Stratford forty shillings.There is no evidence that Anne ever went to London with her husband or participated in any way in theatrical business in which he made his fortune. Her name never appears on the legal records of his business dealings there. During the long periods when he was away, it would have been normal for Anne to manage the Shakespeare household in Stratford, but her name does not appear in the surviving records of her husband's business dealings in Stratford. The only clue to Anne's role in the

[8] Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, New York Routledge , 1993, p. 156.

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household comes from the Latin epitaph on her gravestone, probably commissioned by one of her daughters. In Anne Shakespeare's time, most women who could afford to do so used wet nurses, and maternal breastfeeding was regarded as an extraordinary sign of devotion, worthy to be commemorated on the tombstone.

One way to explain Anne's absence from all of the legal documents generated by William Shakespeare's increasing property his acquisition of property, his legal and financial dealings in both Stratford and London- is the fact that common law regarded a married woman as a *femme covert*, whose legal identity was subsumed by her husband's and whose property come under his control unless it was specifically protected by a marriage settlement. However , the common –low assumption of coverture was subject to modification by a great variety of circumstances, including the applications of local manorial customs and of ecclesiastical laws[9].Married women in the neighbourhood of Stratford did control considerable property in Anne's time, and they also engaged in litigation to defend and further their financial interests.Another possible inference is that Anne's exclusion was the result of her husband's deliberate choice. When Shakespeare purchased the Blackfriars Gate –House in 1613, the indenture named three co-purchasers or trustee, even though Shakespeare himself was to be the sole owner, a legal fiction which may have been designed to prevent Anne from claiming her common-low right as a widow to a life estate in one third of her husband's lands.

Similarly, a last minute addition to Shakespeare's will suggests a deliberate effort to limit Anne's right to his property in Stratford. In the provision that bequeaths their Stratford home, New Place, and its contents to his daughter Susanna, the following phrase was added: "for better enabling of her to perform this my will and towards the performance thereof".

The inserted phrase, which may have been designed to prevent Anne, who would continue to reside at New Place, from interfering with Susanna's bequest, may also have been motivated by William's hostility to Anne.

Another possibility is that William did not trust Anne to manage the family property. Her absence from the legal records of all William's financial affairs might mean that Anne had an exceptionally passive role in the economic affairs of the Shakespeare family. Taken together with the testament to her maternal breastfeeding, Anne's absence from the legal records may mean that William Shakespeare's household represented a further stage than his father's and also further than the norm- in the transformation of the English household into the feminized enclosure that it was to become in later years.

In many ways, the position of English women was deteriorating during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is not to say that women's status and opportunities had been equal to those of men during the 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 its separation.These changes were rationalized and encouraged by Puritan preachers, who argued that the primary duty of wife was not economic production but the nurturing of children. Accordingly, they attempted to discourage the widespread practice of wet nursing on the grounds that maternal breastfeeding was required by God and nature alike.

William Gouge (1578-1633) states this view forcefully in his 1622 treatise on Domesticall Duties, in which he anticipates and answers every possible objection to maternal nursing. Given the still prevalent assumption that married women had economic responsibilities, it is not surprising that one of the objections Gouge anticipates deals with the economic value of a mother's non-

[9] A. L. Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, London Routledge, 1993, p 21.

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maternal labour.Even in the seventeenth century, Gouge's extreme views on women's subordination were by no means typical. Although they are often quoted by modern scholars, and although Gouge was a popular preacher, the women of his own congregation criticized his restrictive interpretations of their property rights within marriage, forcing Gouge to modify them in his dedicatory epistle, where he enumerates an impressive list of exceptions. None of the restrictions, were intended to apply.

As Natasha Korda observes, " Considering the flexibility of those allowed exceptions, we may surmise that Gouge's rule was honoured more often in the breach than in the observance"[10]. In addition to the women in his family, the boy Shakespeare would have seen women presiding over other households, buying and selling in the local market and working on farms. He would also have seen women performing in theatrical entertainments. It is not known exactly when Shakespeare began his career in the London theatre, but theatrical performances of many sorts were a regular feature of life in Stratford. About a week before William and Anne Shakespeare's first child was baptized, for instance, the Stratford aldermen paid Davy Jones, who was probably related by marriage to Anne, for a Whitsun performance by his troupe of players.

Stratford was a weekly market town, and it also had two licensed annual fairs, which would have included theatrical performances. Professional acting companies regularly toured the country as they had done for hundreds of years. Between 1569, the year when John Shakespeare was bailiff, and 1587, the year when many scholars believe William Shakespeare left Stratford , local parish records list payments to nineteen companies. Records of payments indicate that both the Queen' Men and Earl of Worcester's Men played during John Shakespeare's term as bailiff in 1569. The names of individual actors in those companies rarely appear in the documentary evidence, and as far as we know, they included no female players. Nonetheless, there were many women who performed in the guild plays, May games, and civic entertainments that were regular features of village life, and there were many women among the itinerant musicians, acrobats, and other performers who toured the English countryside.

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. Women were deeply involved in the off-stage activities of the professional companies in London. They participated in the business of the theatrical companies as gatherers or box-holders. Standing at the doors to collect entrance fees from the playgoers, these women would have been a highly visible presence in the play-houses. Contemporary documents contain many references to women who served as gatherers. Probably they did not seem to have been a point of pride with the English professional companies that none of their players were 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 players clearly knew that their exclusion of women was anomalous, and they seem to have exploited that anomaly in an effort to establish their business on a respectable footing. Excluding women from their companies may have been an attempt to insulate themselves both from the taints of effeminacy and immorality that were associated with theatrical impersonation and from the low social status of travelling players. 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. Some of these motives can be seen in Thomas Nashe's defence of play going in his *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the*

[10] Natasha Korda, *Household Property/ Stage Property*, Theatre Journal, p. 190.

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Devil, (1592) where he emphasized the masculine purity of the English companies as a basis for both national and professional pride.

London performances by French and Italian women were condemned by moralists throughout the period. Thomas Northon's 1574 exhortation to the Lord Mayor, complained about "assemblies to the unchaste, shameless and unnatural tumbling of the Italian women".

Fifty years later, Thomas Brande was similarly contemptuous of " certain vagrant French players": those women, he wrote, did attempt, thereby giving just offence to all virtuous and well-disposed persons in this town, to act a certain lascivious and unchaste comedy, in the French tongue at the Blackfriars.

The professional success of the foreign companies must have been known to the English players, and they seem to have provided models for emulation. Many of Shakespeare's plays use characters, plot devices and stage business that have prototypes in the repertory of the Italian commedia dell'arte, and their performances, whether from their English tours, from his fellow actor Will Kempe's visit to Italy, or from the visits by Italian musicians at Queen Elizabeth's court. Confronted with the professional success of the foreign actress, the English players tried to have it both ways: they showed their own superiority by excluding women from their companies, but they also emulated the most striking attractions of the foreign players, not the least of which was the roles they assigned to women.

Leading women had prominent roles in the Italian companies, not only in performing, but also scripting the roles they performed. The women as well as the men were in some measure the authors of their own theatrical selves because they worked from scenarios which required that the actors had to be proficient at onstage improvisation. Shakespeare may have been thinking of these Italian women when he depicted witty, independent heroines such as Rosalind and Portia scripting roles for their own performance.

Medieval and Renaissance women also wrote the scripts for many plays ranging from liturgical drama to aristocratic and royal entertainments. As far as we know, no women wrote scripts for the London professional stage during Shakespeare's life, but we know that, as Virginia Woolf shrewdly guessed, many texts that have come down to us as the work of "Anon" were actually written by women[11].

Woolf's observation is especially pertinent to the case of sixteenth-century play scripts for the public theatres, both because a large proportion of them have come down to us as anonymous and because collaborative authorship was the norm rather than the exception. During the 1580s and 1590s, about half of the plays produced were anonymous, and although authorial attribution increased during the seventeenth century, a great many plays continued to be registered and produced anonymously throughout Shakespeare's lifetime.

Given the fact that the emerging culture of authorship and publication in Shakespeare's England specifically discouraged women from publishing their writing, it would not be surprising to discover that some of these many anonymous plays-as well as some of the plays sold to the players as the work of men whose names are now associated with them-may actually have been written in whole or in part by women. Female authorship is unlikely to have recommended any publication in Shakespeare's England, and plays were published just as they were performed, with an eye to profit. Women suffered from numerous disabilities in Shakespeare's England, but the collective economic power they possessed as paying customers in the playhouse meant that none of Shakespeare's plays could have been successful in his own time if it failed to please them. Given the incompletes and indeterminacy of the historical record, the play scripts themselves may constitute some of the best evidence we have about the desires and interests that women brought with them when they went to the playhouse in Shakespeare's England.

As a political movement, feminism has come in many waves: the women's rights and suffragette campaigns of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Women's Liberation

[11] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, London, 1957, p. 51.

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movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the internationalist and Third War coalitions of recent years. With each wave, feminism has resisted not to men so much as patriarchy, the system of relations that presumes the superiority of men. In political, social and economic spheres, resistance to patriarchy has meant enfranchising women to vote, granting them reproductive rights, and lobbing for equal pay. Because feminism has always been concerned with the representation- artistic as much as political –of women, it has long been committed also to the task of literary criticism. Yet the proper task of a feminist literary criticism has been intensely debated.

Many first-wave feminists, including Virginia Woolf, were interested in the conditions of female authorship. Woolf asked whether, in a patriarchal society, an intelligent woman can match the accomplishment of a male writer like Shakespeare, and whether the absence of a female Shakespeare is due to the differences of social conditioning or of biology. Woolf's answer is that material circumstances are paramount in fostering creativity- a position that has shaped much British feminism, which often is alliance with Marxism, has insisted on the need to transform the conditions within which women live and work.

Shakespeare's plays might give the illusion of being free-standing works of genius; but they emerge from material conditions that divide people along lines not just of class but also of gender. Because women were married early, made to perform menial domestic labour, and deprived of access to education and a "room of their own", even a sister of Shakespeare would have experienced very different material circumstances for him. And for this reason alone, Woolf surmises that no woman could achieve what Shakespeare did.

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