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# Shakespeare's Victimisation of Women: An Analysis of the Effacement of the Feminine

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**ABSTRACT:** Many of Shakespeare's plays, poems, and sonnets shed light on issues that women of the Elizabethan era faced; however, this review paper seeks to manifest the contradiction in Shakespeare's real attitude towards women's position in society. Shakespeare's oppression of women and their relative inferiority to males is on display in *The Rape of Lucretia* for a number of reasons. Shakespeare portrays his female characters in a dubious light to support the patriarchal viewpoint, establishing what is appropriate for women in a patriarchal society because male power is the announcing voice of what a woman ought to be, and Elizabethan England relied on the masculine interpretation of socially acceptable standards. Shakespeare's primary motivation in depicting female characters was to reinforce male patriarchal understandings throughout England. Therefore, Shakespeare's female characters should mostly be seen as suicide messengers for the male characters.

**KEY WORDS:** Anti-feminism, Elizabethan England, Patriarchy, Rape of Lucrece, Suicide.

## I.INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's talent extended well beyond the literary world and into the realms of politics, sociology, and psychology, making him the most exceptional mind of all time. Although not everyone will agree with me, I think Shakespeare was a prime example of British policy because he was a brilliant politician who, despite using it extensively for his own gain, was never held accountable for it. In his works, William Shakespeare demonstrates an uncanny insight into the social difficulties of the Elizabethan age and offers remedies to the crises that were woven into the very fabric of existence in early modern England. Shakespeare's humour and tact are so well-received and developed that many of his themes might be used and used in the twenty-first century. There are numerous articles that claim Shakespeare is the defender of women's rights and that he sought to alter society's view of women through his writings. However, after reading a substantial amount of his plays and some of his poems, I found it quite contrary in the case that he might even be called an anti-feminist literary figure. According to Marianne Novy's essay *Demythologizing Shakespeare*, the reason we may discover a variety of viewpoints in Shakespeare is because they really exist in his works. In conclusion, the feminist critic of Shakespeare has a little different scenario than the feminist critic of the other writers I have described because of Shakespeare's special place in our society and because of the specific complexity of his attitude towards women (2010).

## II.DISCUSSION

As a result, the women in Shakespeare's works have been maintained subservient and inferior to males owing to a variety of factors, the most significant of which being the social and cultural climate of Elizabethan England. However, I would like to propose that Shakespeare was so deliberately exacerbated by the power of men through the purposeful portrayal of the female characters in his works of literature. There is no doubt that women have been kept under the dominance of men due to social beliefs in that time.

Consider the sad end suffered by Lucretia, the fabled Roman noblewoman, when she was accused of adultery in *The Rape of Lucrece*. In her work "Publishing Shame: The Rape of Lucrece," Coppélia Kahn argues that Lucretia should have been murdered to protect her husband's reputation. This is an argument I would want to make a case against. Kahn argues that since women were the property of their husbands and, in the event of rape, the women's consent would mean no honour or respect for either her husband or her father, women with particularly noble souls who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others would voluntarily commit suicide to clear their names and the names of those attributed to them. She goes on to say that Shakespeare was against the concept and that in reworking *The Rape of Lucrece*, he hoped to shed light on the morality of suicide. I agree with her that Shakespeare intended to spread knowledge, but that the methods he used to that end are excessively patriarchal, and that any true enlightenment must inevitably be followed by the sacrifice of a woman. In almost all of his plays, Shakespeare either sacrifices a female character or at least puts her much lower than the male characters, including the fools, clowns, and other so-called characters like Ariel and Caliban in *The Tempest* who cannot be categorised under the human classification, making it



quite clear that the male majority of society was the only important part of the social life for Shakespeare. Kahn goes further, defying and thanking Shakespeare for the victimisation of Lucrece, because the rape incident serves as the central conflict of the poem and frees the Roman people from the shackles of the monarchy, allowing them to participate in the revolution. It's fascinating how the rape of a poor woman like Lucrece, who has no power or influence in society, can spark a revolution. But behind it all, we know that Lucrece is merely a pawn in the game of male dominance. This is because males were supposed to see women as their property, and rape of male assets would inevitably spark intertribal conflict since every man wants the opportunity to demonstrate his manhood by the superiority he would gain from exacting vengeance. Therefore, this whole revolutionary situation may be best seen as a battle of masculinity for the purpose of proving and regaining authority, rather than women. Tarquin would not have dared to consider the immoral act of rape if it were not the case. Since most of Shakespeare's female characters are portrayed negatively, I conclude that he intends to promote national enlightenment, but primarily among the male population. Therefore, Shakespeare's feminine characters are best understood as messengers of death-induced revelation for the male characters. Shakespeare, foreseeing his future renown and nobility, depicted these suicides in his plays so that he would be highly decorated and applauded by the men in his society, despite the fact that in Roman cultures of that time, suicide was for the purpose of the defence of the reputation. Since his financial support came mostly from male clientele, it stands to reason that he wrote for their gratification. Women in Elizabethan England were only considered valuable if they were married, since their roles were severely diminished due to male dominance. Conley Greer writes eloquently on this topic in her essay "To be a Woman": "To male society, any behaviour of a woman outside of her role as the subjective wife was cause for alarm." Shakespeare would have been at odds with the patriarchal society that funded his work if he had depicted suspicious women without terrible repercussions or punishment. Shakespeare puts his portrayal of modern femininity on stage while appeasing the demands of his male audience by appealing to masculine suspicions in the patriarchal culture in which he lived. Shakespeare was able to achieve his creative ambitions and please his audience by using envy as a central topic (2003).

According to Greer, "the Elizabethan society of Shakespeare's day was completely dominated by masculine thinking that governed all aspects of daily life" (2003). This viewpoint was presented in the book "The Elizabethan Society of Shakespeare's Day." Therefore, male characters are urged to maintain constant watch on female characters at all times in order to acquire control over them, and Shakespeare presents his own view of the ideal role of women in his patriarchal society throughout the whole of Shakespeare's canon of plays. To a considerable degree, I concur with the assessment that Shakespeare's female characters were severely handicapped by the author's notions that men were superior. Although Queen Elizabeth I held the reins of power, Elizabethan England continued to defer to the notions of men about what constituted appropriate conduct. Therefore, one might say that his image of women matched the prevalent norms and ideals of the culture in which he was raised and that he was raised in. In addition, I believe that I am able to make the allegation that Shakespeare portrays his female characters in a manner that is not very favourable in order to support the patriarchal worldview. Lucrece's case highlights the potential repercussions of the mistrust that may develop between a man and a woman. If Lucrece had been able to find resolution with the help of her husband, she would not have felt the need to end her life by taking her own life. Greer believes that "women should express themselves as individuals as long as they did not cross the lines of approved female behaviour," and that "men should never whole-heartedly trust a woman because of her unpredictability" (2003, emphasis in original). Not only does Shakespeare attack morality, but he also delivers stern warnings and, ultimately, establishes the appropriate position of women in a society that is patriarchal. During Shakespeare's day, a woman's social status may be determined by whether or not she was a virgin, a wife, a widow, or a whore. Each of these statuses signified a distinct level of social standing. It was impossible to reach a compromise" (Greer, 2003). Also, after Tarquin raped Lucrece, she believed she had no other choice than to end her own life in order to safeguard her virginity since she was no longer seen as an honourable and pure woman. This led her to believe that she had no choice but to commit suicide. This indicates that desirable female attributes are best communicated via the megaphone of masculine authority. Shakespeare places women in a surprising number of intricate circumstances that call for the organisation and resolution of a man's traits. A significant portion of the misogyny that was prevalent in Elizabethan society was mirrored in the environment in which William Shakespeare composed his plays. Shakespeare's plays were performed throughout this time period. In general, Shakespeare wrote his plays with male audiences in mind while he was writing them.

His readers were all male, therefore he had to cater to their tastes if he wanted to earn a livelihood and keep his place among Lord Chamberlain's Men. And I think Shakespeare's primary goal in depicting female characters was to support the male patriarchal understandings across England. Despite the fact that England was ruled by a queen and the supposedly progressive genius of the time was known as the defender of women's rights, no women were ever allowed to perform on the stage, and the younger male actors took on the challenge of playing female characters. Because there was no other option, males did not shy away from performing female parts on stage. In this circumstance, how could we claim that the playwright is supporting women? The explanation is obvious, as if he had tried to put female



characters onto the stage in the literal sense, he would have likely angered the audience, as the idea of a woman being able to alter her look and convince others to believe the role was frightening to many people at the time. Considering the history of women in British theatre, it's clear that their participation in the industry was met with resistance. Shakespeare's skill at keeping women in their proper place in society may have contributed to the deterioration of the situation for women in England's theatres during the 16th century, when the rest of Europe was moving away from male dominance. Shakespeare's ideal female character, at least in the comedies, appears to be energetic yet ready to submit herself, much like the ideal female character articulated by the Hallers and other protestant preachers. Shakespeare's ambiguous attitude towards women is evident in his drama, despite the fact that the women he creates (their variety, complexity, and general fascination included) encourage one to say that Shakespeare's drama shows liking and appreciation of women. I've been arguing that the women he depicts as most desirable are independent women who are at least prepared to make a show of submitting to the guys they care about (Novy, 2010). Thinking about the passage from Novy's paper led me to believe that Shakespeare may have had a role in mind-set creation in a manner that was subtle for spectators like me to detect. He depicted powerful women as willingly submitting and suppressing themselves to their male counterparts, and those who did so were seen as chaste and blissful. This was in stark contrast to the aggressive, independent women whose fate was death or execution by the authorities for the devilish actions they had committed. By reading these lines, one of the many Shakespearean critics can deduce that Shakespeare still subordinates women to prevent them from rising up against their male counterparts and that his female characters are more easily subordinated than his male characters. It has been noted that "Shakespeare so often portrays antifeminism in his male characters" (Novy, 2010). Shakespeare was attempting to change the perspective on the self-destruction of humans or the suicide, so the act of victimisation of women in his works, and especially in the poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, makes sense in light of the fact that Elizabethan England was undergoing changes towards modernization or the so-called Enlightenment, which has been established in the previous eras other than its actual, well-known occurrence. Some of the lines in his writings on suicide express the customary Christian horror of an act that religion has written down as a deadly sin, the most horrible of all crimes because of the lack of hope for redemption.

### III.CONCLUSION

To some extent, I believe that the irrationality of men during the Elizabethan era was responsible for the cultural expectation of women's chastity and the resultant lack of control by women over their own lives; *Lucrece*, like many other women in her position, has been forced to submit to this irrationality in order to protect her husband's reputation. Her spouse, therefore, is seen as a mentor who can help her adjust her erroneous outlook. Shakespeare's poetry also provides insight into the societal expectations of his period, which held that a certain degree of masculine logic was to be the means for this transformation. The woman has no rights since she is the man's property; if she is raped, it is the same as if a man's property had been stolen. Therefore, there is no stance for women's topic, and there is only one position, which is suicide, regardless of the woman's desire or reluctance. A literary genius, on the other hand, is expected to accomplish more than just please male patrons so patriarchal that they refuse to accept any role for women outside of the home. In the 21st century, women still need and deserve a place in society where they may exercise their own autonomy.

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