

Rebels in Marriage—A Case Study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Based on the customs of making matches in the renaissance, this paper intends to demonstrate social restrictions imposed on women when choosing partners. Through textual analysis of Hermia's escapement from an enforced marriage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the duchess's clandestine marriage in *The Duchess of Malfi*, more detailed explanations would be given to elucidate how those restrictions were put on women, how women reacted to them, and finally what were the consequences of their reactions. The paper will conclude that both Shakespeare and Webster, by creating progressive women carried with them a rebellious consciousness, calculated to laud the courage of women characters while also to lambaste the suffocating patriarchal society.

Keywords: patriarchal power, male-centered, rebellious, women

Literature Review

"He was not of an age, but for all time!" This line was dedicated to Shakespeare by Ben Jonson. Needless to say, Shakespeare deserves such compliments for most of his works have never failed to grasp people's attentions and most of them are even listed as canons of English literature.

Throughout his life, Shakespeare has written 37 plays, two poems, and 154 sonnets, which has contributed to classify him as the greatest playwright in the English language. His greatness not merely lies in the voluminous plays he created, but also rests on the in-depth and graphic depiction of his characters and the profound thoughts that filtered through his plays. He is widely considered as a great thinker, philosopher, and even anthropologist, as in his plays, a vast image of human society was shown and all kinds of characters with distinct personalities were delineated. As what Harold Bloom (2008, p. 249) wrote, "Shakespeare was larger than Plato and than St. Augustine".

As one of his most well-known comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* deals with the love stories between four pairs of lovers. It is a love comedy teeming with tears and laughter. There are some critics being deceived by the seemingly happy ending, like Stopford Augustus Brooke, considering it as a happy love story. "A comedy of love", as what Brooke commented, "It ... is full of the poetry of love" (Brooke, 1905, p. 388). However, Porter and Clarke contended that it is "the fairies hold the play together, without them it would dissolve" (Porter & Clarke, 1903, p. 369). Critics tend to take a mild way to suggest that the play is not as happy as it seems to be. James L. Calderwood called it "the invisibly visible artifice of patriarchy embodied in the Law" (Calderwood, 1965, p. 83). It is the kind of authority that people know it is unreasonable yet still stick

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to it. Pascal makes it clear that it is the “mystic basis of authority”, “the fact that authority is often honored simply because it exists, and continues to exist simply because it’s honored” (Pascal, 1962, p. 134). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Hermia’s marriage is initially arranged by her father. Although it is against her will, yet it does not violate the law, which resulted to Hermia’s elopement. Most critics merely pointed out this latent social reality but made well-nigh no efforts to elucidate the fate of those women fettered by such artifice.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster’s tragedy, the duchess is also a victim of the patriarchal society. Haber states that *The Duchess of Malfi* not only manifested the combination of conventional desire and violence, but also exposed “familial and social dominance” (Haber, 2010, p. 238). Women, who were robbed of their identity serving only as the supplement to men to make their wholeness, were considered inferior to men. Even though under such circumstances, the duchess has never sloughed herself off but endeavored to pursue her happiness to form connexion with the man she loves. Leah S. Marcus commented that it is a clandestine marriage, yet it is “an act of heroic resistance” (Marcus, 2011, p. 289). Her final undoing was the reality that “she is not allowed to succeed”. The duchess was caught into a deadlock, because she is the prey of the environment. As what Ibrahim Abu Shihab commented, “she only has two paths to choose. One path is to give vent to challenge their societies regardless of the dangerous consequences and the other is to abide by the supremacy of men, and the social code of their society” (Shihab, 2020, p. 934). Both of the two plays have reflected the condition of marriage in the renaissance. However, few critics have talked specifically about the problem of marriage except mentioned it in their paper for the purpose of providing a social background. However, the author contends that this topic deserves due attention for it can explicitly show women’s social status in the renaissance.

Consequently, this paper attempts, through analyzing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, to probe the obstacles in the way of renaissance women’s going into marriage and the influences of those obstacles on women’s life.

Marriage in the Renaissance

Since marriage is the combination of not merely two individuals but of two families, it should be designed to protect the interests of both the married couples and their respective families. The protection of the mutual interests is achieved by mutual respect, that is, parents or guardians give their approbation of their children’s marriage or the youngster have the right to refuse the proposed match when it displeases them. This is the ideal mode of marriage with the merit of pleasing everyone. However, in reality, marriage also consists of one’s prospect, legal stipulations, and social conventions.

Parents tend to provide the best for their kids by choosing suitable partners for them. And they invariably presumed that they are more experienced, so that they have the responsibility of selecting a superb match for young folks. In their assumption, they have already pictured a blueprint for their children. It seems like a social consensus that “the older generation should decide marital choices for the younger generation” (Cook, 1991, p. 80).

Apart from parental affection and expectation, the hierarchical conception of the society, which demands the subjection of all individuals to those in charge of them, is also accountable for the patriarchal power in deciding their children’s partners. The hierarchical conception is still ingrained in the renaissance. The majority of the society accepted and lived within this ideology. As it is manifested in William Whately’s *A Care-Cloth, or a Treatise of the Cumbers and Troubles of Marriage*, servants ought not to marry “unless their master give

consent thereto" (1624, p. 71). Under such social backdrop, the relationship between father and their children functions in a similar way like the relationship between servants and their masters, that is,

when matches are made by the Parents...before the young couple has any knowledge of it, and so many time are forced against their minds, fearing the rigor and displeasure of their parents, they often promise with their mouths that which they refuse with their hearts. (p. 71)

Furthermore, civil and canon law further strengthened parental power in marriage affairs. According to the Church of England, a priest was not allowed to marry anyone unless that marriage had the consents given by their father or guardian. "As early as 1559, the Articles of Inquiry sought to discover weddings performed without parent's approval, and subsequent articles in 1584, 1597, and 1604 prescribed suspension for any minister violating these rules". In spite of civil statutes offered girls and boys, aging at 12 and 14, the right to disagree to the marriage arranged by their parents, yet the validity of their objections was often doubted because they are too young. In this sense, the dominance of patriarchal authority over personal affection seems to be backed by the law of England's Church and state.

In 1578, John Stockwood wrote in his famed sermon *A Bartholomew Fairing*: "Shewing that children are not to marie, without the consent of their parents" (p. 110). In the Elizabethan period, it is parents who hold the authority of choosing proper partners for their children, not young folks themselves. Unions that are not blessed by parental approval would even confront the scandal from some "extremist" that their marriage are invalid.

Both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are cultural products. They are the result of the interaction between playwrights and society, which rendered them the characteristic of exposing the writer's sense of life. Both of Webster and Shakespeare touched the topic of marriage in their respective work: *The Duchess of Malfi* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and both of them unraveled the same question, patriarchal restrictions on marriage.

Hermia's Escapement From an Enforced Marriage

Hermia's movement throughout the play is clearly marked by the changing of places, from Athens to the fairyland and then back to Athens. This movement is accompanied with her social position, say, from daughter under the control of her father to a woman asserting her own will and then back to a muted and nameless woman in Athens society. It is easily to discern from the text that the initial leaving from Athens is a passive fleeing while the final backing is a willingly return. Yet, the author holds that Hermia was cheated by the external consent of her father for when backing to Athens, she still fell prey to the formidable patriarchal power.

In Athens, she was a submissive daughter, a person with no identity and to be disposed under the will of her father. A woman at that time was supposed to be docile and obedient either to her father or to her husband, like what Egeus said,

With cunning hast thou filch'd my daughter's heart,
Turn'd her obedience (which is due to me)
To stubborn harshness. (Shakespeare, 2003, Act I, Scene I, pp. 35-37)

It is suggestive that when a girl has not entered into marriage, her ownership belongs to her father and when she is married, her ownership would be shifted to husband. Women are equal with property and Hermia is

just one of them. She is at the disposal of her father, which was his legitimate right endowed by the Athens Law. According to Theseus, the man held the highest position in Athens, also approved that "To you your father should be as a god" (Shakespeare, 2003, Act I, Scene I, pp. 47-50).

Her father is the God in her world, who gives Hermia life and so he has the right to withdraw all these he has once given to her. As to her marriage, it is the society that ensured the parental primacy, which gives no room for Hermia to say no.

If it happens in real life, maybe she will have no way to go but to accept her fate, yet it is in literature. Shakespeare has offered her an outlet, to elope with her lover and to find a place where the Athenian Law shall never pursue them.

In the second act, Shakespeare presents an imaginary fairyland, where there also exists the strict hierarchy system. Although it is not totally free from the patriarchal elements, yet there is something unique at this land, that is, magic.

This paper contends that the fairyland in the play stands for the real literary world and the effect of herb juice symbolizes the power of literature or the power of the writer. The fairyland is created specifically by Shakespeare to transgress social customs and to give female characters a new life. That is why the fairyland still carries the feature of Athens society. Shakespeare is versed in revising real world through his literary creation with his philosophy of life and expectations on society filtering through.

It is in the wood that women character gets the chance to act in accordance with their own wills and that the gender-role seems to be inverted.

Nay, good Lysander; for my sake, my dear,
Lie further off yet; do not lie so near. (Shakespeare, 2003, Act II, Scene II)

When Lysander proposed to lie together with her, instead of being a passive follower, she was capable to speak her own will to refuse. Although it also shows the influence of the Athens' value insisting women should maintain their chastity, yet it is still progressive. In this place, these rebellious young women finally find their voices. When the herb juice was poured into the male lovers' eyes, they started to show their passion to Helena, who was once rejected and jilted over and over again by Demetrius. It was her who used to speak her mind to Demetrius:

I am your spaniel, and Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you. (Shakespeare, 2003, Act II, Scene I, pp. 202-208)

She discarded her dignity lowering herself down to the position of a dog just to beg a bit of love from Demetrius, and yet got nothing back. However, when they stepped to the wood and when the juice was dropped into Demetrius's eyes, their position totally conversed:

O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, devine!
In this sense, Helena was shown taking the upper hand while Demetrius became her follower. (Shakespeare, 2003, Act III, Scene II)

Nevertheless, it is clear that this is the effect of the love-juice, which as the author just mentioned betokens for the effect of literature. The fairyland is the fictive world that Shakespeare created, which also indicates Shakespeare's expectation. But the writer has to draw us back to reality, where there was still a male-centered

world.

In Act IV, Scene I, the four young men are called back by Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus. At the end of this scene, Hermia said her last words in the play, she and Helena, only seen (by listing their names) when they were asked to watch the play and then they seemed just disappeared in this play. But their lovers, the two young male characters could make comments when they watch the play. It seems that when they were back to Athens or rather back to reality, the two female characters were not given the chance to speak. They were confined, marginalized, muted, and suffocated again by the irresistible patriarchal force.

The Duchess's Clandestine Marriage

Throughout the whole play, *The Duchess of Malfi* is permeated by a sense of violence. The plot was pushed forward by the gradual intensifying of the confrontation between the duchess and her two brothers. The whole family of the duchess except her newly-married husband and one of her three children were murdered by her bloody and greed brothers. The plot is so terrifying and the ending is so heartrending that its effect of defiance is so strong. Compared with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this play contains a kind of nightmarish feature, which voices out more fiercely a protest against the patriarchal society. The aim of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is to pour the sensations of fear and pity down to the spectators so that their understanding of life and the world would be improved. Therefore, as a comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* denounced implicitly the patriarchal restrictions on women with covert clues, while *The Duchess of Malfi* lambasted them explicitly by presenting the miserable fate of the duchess.

Compared with Hermia, the duchess was supposed to have the absolute right of choosing her partner, as she has already freed from the bound of family. However, she has two brothers who considered it their responsibility to assume themselves as her guardians. They send Bosola, a merciless and sly murderer, to spy on their sister. Bosola was a vicious and dangerous person,

Indeed, he rails at those things which he wants;
Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud,
Bloody, or envious, as any man,
If he had means to be so. (Webster, 1964, Act I, Scene I)

He is the person who would achieve his goals at any cost, which foreshadows the final ending of the duchess's family. By sending Bosola, the duchess is completely under the surveillance of her brothers. Thus, the duchess's sovereignty and the legitimate right are partly robbed by her brother from the very outset of the play.

Young girls were accustomed to admire widows for their freedom of choosing the second husband, yet they do not know that "even widows sometimes found themselves strictly immured and entirely subject to others' marital plans". Their second marriage if it is not chosen by their guardian would be seen as immoral and will mar their reputation. As Ferdinand said,

Marry! They are most luxurious
Will wed twice!
Their livers are more spotted
Than Laban's sheep. (1964, Act I, Scene I)

A woman married twice is deemed as profligate. Living in such environment, women were doomed to be shrouded by those one-sided values and at last be stifled.

And women like that part which, like the lamprey,
Hath never a bone in't. (1964, Act I, Scene I)

Ferdinand is a crazy misogynistic, who has a mania for using insulting words to describe women even when referring to his own sister. He threatened the duchess not to try to marry again or she would have to suffer her father's poniard. The duchess was trap in this dominance. If she dares to step out of this confinement, the "poniard" would fall on her.

But it is a tragedy after all. If the duchess was frightened and showed her deference to her brother, then how does the play arouse readers' fear and pity? What Webster was indeed attempting to do was to show the result of defying this dominance so as to unpack the cruel truth of reality.

Thereupon, the duchess was portrayed as a bold and rebellious person, who was courageous to challenge the overriding social restrictions. She married secretly to Antonio, a man with a lower social status, witnessed by Cariola. However, Cariola's judgement of the duchess's marriage is that she feels pity for her. She is the opposite of the duchess, because she is internalized like most women by the social value that widow ought not to marry. Yet her pity for the duchess is not groundless, as she knows well about what would happen if the duchess's two vicious brothers happened to hear about it. As to the duchess, courageous as she is, yet she has already eaten "the forbidden fruit" and will be punished by it. Her tragedy is a woman with a passion for life and daring to pursue her own happiness, yet betrayed by society.

Conclusion

A Midsummer Night's Dream and *The Duchess of Malfi* are both written in the renaissance period. As the cultural products of that period, they are bound to reflect the social realities in their respective way. Both of the two plays exposed the invisible restrictions imposed on the renaissance women through the depiction of marriage. In the renaissance, it is a society when women are still suffering. In their marriage, they have little right to choose their own partners and have to show their courtesy and deference to their father or husband. However, by portraying rebellious women characters, both of Shakespeare and Webster have also eulogized the courage of women, which marks the budding of women's awakening in the renaissance.

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