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ENG 339: Shakespeare's Drama
10/29/20

Contemporary Feminism and Shakespeare's Women

Protect women, believe women, and empower women. These are three key goals of the modern feminist movement that aim to bring justice to women and bring about gender equality. Feminist movements spanning throughout history have reflected these three goals, as society has continuously failed to achieve them. Shakespeare's development of female characters in his plays aids in critiquing the ways that women are treated, as well as encouraging the protection and empowerment of women. By analyzing different female characters in *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare's writing displays the social gaps in equality between men and women and offers the reader opportunities to reflect on ways to achieve the goals of the modern feminist movement.

The first aspect of the feminist movement that can be seen both in Shakespeare's text and in today's world is the women's lack of protection. Today, one in six women are victims of either attempted rape or completed rape in the United States (RAINN). Women are also more likely to be subjects of domestic abuse than men are. Additionally, the maternal mortality rate in the US is one of the highest in the world (Galvin). These statistics are direct indicators of a society that does not do enough to protect its women and to value female lives as much as it values the lives of men. There is no moral or ethical reason that can be used to justify the value of men's lives over women's. American society should strive towards equal protection of its citizens, regardless of gender.

The situations that Shakespearean women find themselves entangled in often reflect the disproportionate value that real-life society holds on protecting men and women. In *Hamlet*, the treatment of Ophelia's character adds voice to society's failure to protect women. While the rest of characters in the play are either murdered or defeated in battle, Ophelia is the only character in the play who does not die at the hands of any other character. She is left to drown, with no aid or protection given to her. She is an innocent woman, but there is no one there to save her from her drowning.

Shakespeare also depicts women's lack of protection through Iago's treatment of the female characters in *Othello*. Despite his anger being directed towards the male characters in the play, Desdemona's life is the one that is used as a pawn by Iago in his plot to take Othello's power. Iago's wife Emilia is also killed in his pursuit of power. Desdemona and Emilia are exploited by Iago for their "womanly fragility," resulting in their deaths as collateral damage from his lust for power. The disproportion of value that Iago has on men's lives over the lives of innocent women is deeply troubling. Iago's attitude towards women and their demise in their play is reflective of how our society tends to ignore its citizens' troubles. Emilia and Desdemona are good people who do not deserve the end that they were served in the play, the same way that modern-day victims of abuse do not deserve the harm that is done to them.

Society has a long-running history of failing to keep women safe and secure, and *must* learn to do better. Ophelia, Emilia, and Desdemona are both characters that have not wronged anyone in the play, yet they are the people that the world around them has deemed expendable. Why is it that women are more likely to be abused or hurt than men are? Emilia reflects on the abuse that women are forced to endure as she asks "What is it that [husbands] do/ When they

change [their wives] for others? Is it sport?/I think it is” (*Othello*, 4.3.88-89). She struggles with the strife that women, even now, have to go through when they have not been given any reason as to why they deserve it. There is no inherent evil in being a woman, yet society then and now has seemed to punish women for their femininity by refusing to grant them the same protection as men.

An important part of keeping women protected in society is to believe women when they choose to speak up. A majority of sexual assault and domestic abuse victims choose not to report their assault to the police out of fear or trauma, however the recent #MeToo movement has given a voice to sexual assault survivors who have decided to come forward about their past. Trust is an important piece in the feminist movement; if women’s words are never believed, they will not receive the justice that they deserve. How can we protect women if we are not willing to listen to their cries for help? Desdemona’s demise in *Othello* also draws attention to this question; her death could have been avoided if there had been more trust in her words as a woman. If Othello had simply believed his wife’s words, and trusted that she was faithful to him, the play would have ended with justice reigning. This reflects a goal of the feminist movement that still exists today: *believe women*.

The final goal of the feminist movement is to empower women. Women should be encouraged to seek out their own futures, to be confident in themselves, and hold a place in society that does not have to tie them to a male presence. In today’s society, female empowerment can be evaluated by looking into distributions of power in the workplace. In 2020, “even though the number of female CEOs [was] up, that's still only 7.4% of the Fortune 500

ranked businesses compiled annually” (Ebrahimji). Additionally, women make up “half of the total U.S. college-educated workforce, but only 28% of the science and engineering workforce” (National Girls Collaborative Project). Women are less likely to seek out and achieve positions of power because of the social pressure to commit themselves to their husbands or to motherhood, and the feminist movement works to encourage women to consider options beyond marriage and family. If men are incentivized by society to be confident and hard-working, women should be too.

Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Portia from *The Merchant of Venice* are both depicted by Shakespeare as strong, driven women who have their own life goals and ambitions. Beatrice is critical of the men around her, and states that “I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me” (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 1.1.96-97). Although Beatrice eventually ends up with Benedick, she makes sure that she makes the decision on her own terms, rather than falling susceptible to pressure that may fall on her to love him. Beatrice’s love for Benedick is *her* choice, and not anyone else’s. She does not allow society to force her into her marriage, she chooses it herself.

Portia also embodies a strong-willed woman in society in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. She is responsible for the resolution of Antonio’s debt at the end of the play, showing her capability and competence to accomplish her goals when the men around her are unable to. She has more money than Bassanio and uses it to save Antonio at the end of the play. Portia’s actions destroy the stereotype that women are dependent on men, as Bassanio and Antonio end up depending on Portia’s wealth at the end of the play. Portia also works beyond the social pressures of her gender to choose who she wants to marry, rather than being forced into marriage by her

father. Her intellect and wit allow her to work against the conventions that were set for her to get what she really wants.

Beatrice and Portia are arguably the best female role models that Shakespeare has written in his plays. Both of the characters work against the social forces against them to get what they want, and refuse to settle for the social conventions that they are dealt. The male figures that interact with them rarely take them for granted, and these women establish themselves as powerful figures in the play. Women today can look up to Beatrice and Portia as sources of inspiration, knowing that women can belong in positions of power and do not have to follow the expectations that modern society has set for them. In the same way that Beatrice and Portia refused to let patriarchal forces make their decisions for them, women today can share that same power.

Shakespeare's characters reflect the conventions of the society that they are written in, while also empowering the audience of the play to strive to do better. Even after more than 400 years, there are still lessons to be learned from his writing. The feminist movement still has much farther to go, and Shakespeare's characters reflect the failures that society still continues to make in its treatment of women. Ophelia, Desdemona, and Emilia would have lived much better lives if they had been supported by society rather than torn down, and Beatrice and Portia would have made even more progress as women if they did not have the world working against them. These characters share the strife of generations of women before and after them, and while the female struggle is still prevalent today, Shakespeare has created characters in solidarity with modern women.

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