

## Shakespeare's Elizabethan Women Historical Contextualization

Shakespeare's plays reflect many aspects of the Elizabethan age and culture. The women characters, particularly, relate to the societal norms of the time period. In Shakespeare's work of *The Tempest*, Women are portrayed as property in marriage and are valued by their endowment. Also seen in Shakespeare's works, we see they accept their position after marriage as devoted wives. When digging deeper into the secondary source, *Family and Inheritance, Rural Society in Western Europe 1200-1800*, by Jack Goody, this research also compliments Shakespeare's views of women's roles of the era and the audience can use this information to better understand the characters and their movements in the play.

Goody's research focuses on the inheritance, property, and the marriage between men and women during Shakespeare's time. He explains how the focus of marriages in early England was more of viewing women as more of "property" than the present day idea of finding one's soul mate. Goody writes, "Women varied in attractiveness as marriage-partners according to their endowment..." (Goody 11). Women were chosen as suitable, not only by love and fate, but ideally based on their wealth and status. If the couple was in a relatable status and each family approved of the pairing, that is all that mattered in matrimony. In the case that the woman was in line to inherit anything of her own family line, especially land, a man would find her much more desirable as a wife because this increased her wealth. Marriage could also be used as strategic way to bring more power to one's family name. Goody also states "...women were more valuable as wives than as daughters" for fathers (Goody 11). Many marriages were based solely on if the father found a suitable, wealthy young man that would take their daughter to relieve his financial

burden of raising them. Women were also With this background information in mind, we can make the further claim onto Shakespeare's work that he depicts marriage as a way of flowing inheritance as well as a strategy for a family to move up in the world. He also shows how women accept their role based off the norms of time period throughout his work of *the Tempest*.

In *The Tempest*, we see the nobles, now stranded on an island, face a conflict with the future of Antonio's kingdom and the next in line for his inheritance. This scene dramatizes the issue of ownership of land preceding death when Antonio and Sebastian come to believe that Ferdinand has drowned in the shipwreck. Ferdinand, being Antonio's son, was next in line for the throne. Because he had just married off his daughter, Antonio finds himself desperately trying to imagine what would happen to his kingdom if he were to never make of this island:

ANTONIO: Who's the next heir of Naples?

SEBASTIAN: Claribel

ANTONIO: She that is Queen of Tunis; she that dwells

Ten leagues beyond Man's life; she that from Naples...(2.1.238-241).

Antonio continues dialogue with Sebastian:

ANTONIO: A space whose every cubit

Seems to cry, out, "How shall that Claribel

Measure us back to Naples? Keep in Tunis,

And let Sebastian wake." Say this were death

That now hath seized them, why, they were not worse

That now they are. There be that can rule Napels

As well as he that sleeps, lords that can prate... (2.1.251-258).

Antonio voices his deep concerns regarding his kingdom if he does not make it back from the island. Claribel, his recently married daughter, the wedding from which he was traveling from, would have been the rightful heir to his throne if both Antonio and Ferdinand died. By marrying her off to an African prince, she is no longer able to rule over Naples from so far away. Antonio felt that he had found a good match for his daughter with a wealthy prince and arranged a marriage for her. Now, we see he is regretting his decision and wished he had someone of his own family line to be in Naples to take over after his death. Antonio saw the opportunity to give away his daughter to a man of status and wealth, never imagining this scenario would happen to him. The audience can see that by following the socially acceptable way of marriage and inheritance, did not always work in a family's favor. This situation is very historically relatable to the time period and shows how Claribel's opportunity to rule over her father's kingdom was diminished by her marriage to the King of Tunis and although Antonio thought he would benefit from marrying his daughter off, it could actually be detrimental if Ferdinand never resurfaces.

Earlier in the scene, Sebastian tells us that Claribel was uncertain with the marriage and was torn between her heart and obedience to her father (2.1.125-128). In this time period it was common to think of women as more valuable to their fathers once they are married off to a man of status; one might even catch a sense of irony that his decision to give away his unwilling daughter has now come back to haunt Antonio. After her marriage, however, Claribel seems to

have assumed her role as Queen of Tunis, therefore accepting a woman's role of the time period. This is important for the audience to consider how Claribel, although nervous about being married off to a King in a land far from home, she went along with her father's plan because that was the expectation of Elizabethan women.

We also see this connection between women treated as property in the act of matchmaking for marriage in *The Tempest* when Prospero aids the marriage between Miranda and Ferdinand. Prospero had been living with Miranda alone on the island for many years and he saw the opportunity for a suitable match for Miranda and took it. Prospero allowed the two to meet and watched as Miranda flirted with Ferdinand. He seemed overjoyed while watching their encounter from afar:

PROSPERO: Fair encounter

Of two most rare affections! Heavens Rain grace

On that which breeds between 'em! (3.1.10-12)

This quote shows that Prospero approves of the relationship forming because he is willing to marry young Miranda off, especially to a man of power, Ferdinand, the Prince of Naples. Miranda, being a woman in this historical context, she counted as one of Prospero's assets and he also longed for a way off the island. By Ferdinand, future ruler of Naples, falling in love with Miranda would allow Prospero a foot in the door to move back to Italy and away from the island and towards a better life for him and Miranda. Shakespeare is showing how Prospero would benefit very much from this union, being associated again with royalty and all that comes with it.

This also depicts how strategic marriage could be for families during this time as mentioned before. Luckily for Miranda, Shakespeare had her character feel love for her partner, but we can conclude that was not always the case for most marriages of the time, like Claribel's to King Tunis.

After bringing to light evidence to argue the perception of women, property, and inheritance during the Elizabethan era, we can compare these common themes in other examples of Shakespeare's work. His play, *Taming of the Shrew*, coincides with the character Miranda in *the Tempest*, by following the historical depiction of a woman's role in a marriage of the time period: as an asset of property. The female lead, Kate, is married off to a horrible man, Petruchio, who secures Kate's loyalty to him by various ways of torment. Kate becomes completely obedient to her husband and strongly voices her wifely duties at the final scene of the play:

Kate: ...Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,

That seeming to be most which we indeed least are.

Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,

And places your hands below your husband's foot,

In token of which duty, if he please,

My hand is ready, may it do him ease (5.2.178-183)

Kate explains that a wife's job is to make her husband's life as comfortable as possible. He is the superior and the woman should be grateful he chose her to be his companion. This kind of deranged devotion assigned to the role of an obedient wife can also be seen in *The Tempest's*, Miranda, through her reverence to Ferdinand. Miranda makes her desperate claim to Ferdinand saying she will be his wife and if he denies her she will die his maid whether he likes it or not

(3.2.84-87). She takes her role as an Elizabethan woman seriously, because she was expected to accept her inferiority to men and trust her father's decision to marry her off to a man of wealth when she, herself came from so little, just like Kate from *Taming of the Shrew*. This shows the common theme that Shakespeare portrayed women's role, not only in inheritance and property, but also their role in a marriage in his works.

The societal norms of women of Shakespeare's time allow the audience to see how the flow of inheritance worked through marriage and a woman's expected role in that marriage in the Elizabethan age. By comparing close readings and looking at a variety of Shakespeare's works, the audience can use Goody's background knowledge of how families and inheritance during the time of 1200-1800, to closer read into the characters and how they reflect the stated lifestyle of the Elizabethan age.

#### References

Goody, Jack. *Family and Inheritance in Rural Society in Western Europe 1200-1800.*, Cambridge University Press, 1976

William, Shakespeare. *The Norton Shakespeare, Taming of the Shrew.*, W.W. Norton and Company, 1997

William, Shakespeare. *The Tempest*. 2nd ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009.