



12-2019

Shakespeare, Female Sexuality, and Consent

Bayley Goldsberry

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Goldsberry, Bayley (2019) "Shakespeare, Female Sexuality, and Consent," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol12/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Shakespeare, Female Sexuality, and Consent

Bayley Goldsberry

In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Portia is ruled by her father's will for her even after he has died. She complains of her lack of agency saying, "O me, the word 'choose!' I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike. So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?" (*Merchant of Venice* 1.2.27). Just as Portia wished for her own agency, so it was with the general population of women in the Elizabethan era. The agency of a woman was considered much less than that of a man. Today, consent is a socially highlighted concept in current mainstream media and politics; through Shakespeare's fictional female characters, we can perform a historical reading of the ways in which Elizabethan women obtained and expressed their agency. There seems to be an underlying assumption about the way that female autonomy was viewed in Shakespearean times. Were women granted sovereignty over themselves? If they were, how and under what conditions was it granted to them? Shakespeare, throughout his plays, uses independent female characters to show that despite the typical understanding of women's autonomy in his time, this concept could be redefined as not only the ability of the woman to make inconsequential choices, but rather the right to make significant choices regarding her own life and body. Though consent is an idea that was not emphasized in Elizabethan

times in the ways that we understand it today, Shakespeare paves the way for the understanding of it throughout history.

The roles of consent, women's autonomy, and female sexuality are commonly discussed topics among literary critics, though there are some facets left to explore. According to Mario Digangi, Valerie Traub, and Janet Adelman, Shakespeare spurs the argument that male anxiety is the factor that stifles and therefore defines female power, examining the "threat women pose to male bonding and masculine identity" (Traub 215). Though this may be true in some instances, we see through the characters of Portia, Cordelia, Lady Macbeth, Katherine, and Isabella, among others, that Shakespeare defines women's authority and autonomy in different ways. While these critics provide insight into psychoanalytic readings of gender in Shakespeare, I will be exploring the ways in which women in Elizabethan times were expected to behave in relationships as well as the ways in which Shakespeare illustrates the defiance of these structures. My arguments will inform not only the literary conversation regarding this idea, but also the ways we can understand consent in today's world through a lens of female Shakespearean characters. The fact that male anxiety is a byproduct of female power should not detract from our study of female autonomy in Shakespeare. This paper will cover the ways in which Shakespeare redefines women's autonomy as power by creating strong female characters in his works. In plays like *King Lear*, Shakespeare asks us to reimagine women's authority as independence from male expectations. These plays also help us to understand that female sexuality is not whoredom but rather female agency. He redefines this idea of consent not as just the age when a woman could be married off to a man, but rather the right of a woman to make significant choices regarding her own life and body.

In Elizabethan times, women's choices were often governed by the men in their lives. Through characters such as Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet*, the princess and her three friends from *Love's Labour's Lost*, and Portia from *Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare redefines women's autonomy as power. Regarding customs of courtship Olsen writes, "It was the role of the man to do the wooing and the role of the woman to wait to be wooed and hope that an acceptable man would approach her" (146). This construct did not allow women the choice to accept or reject their suitors. Findlay writes, "Whatever material or social improvements marriage brought women, it did not necessarily bring happiness" (258). While marriage was a convenience

for women in some ways, it was a tragedy in others. It provided them social status and often money, a home, and comfort, but it also deprived them of the ability to live a life of their own making. While this social custom of arranged and forced marriage is present in Shakespeare's plays, we also see women taking active roles in their relationships rather than passive roles. Men were expected to "achieve sexual conquest, through seduction and/or marriage, and therefore be considered a truly masculine male," placing them in a position of dominance in the relationship with the woman being pursued (Timbrell 50).

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the princess and her three friends inform the doting men who wish to marry them that if they can wait for them and refine themselves for a year, they will come back to marry them (*Love's Labour's Lost* 5.2.865). This instance in which women have their choice considered in a marriage proposal gives them power in the relationship to withhold or give their consent. Although this particular play does not end in a marriage, it is clear that the princess and her friends establish themselves as autonomous individuals. In the same way that men believed that they had the right to "conquer" the women they desired, these four women believed the opposite as well: "Only for praise; and praise we may afford / To any lady that subdues a Lord" (*LLL* 4.1.39). "Subdue" can be understood as "to control," or to make quiet; contrary to the men in the play, the women think that a man can be conquered by a woman. In another sense, women's sexual access gives them power in their relationships; the princess says,

We are wise girls to mock our lovers so . . .
 How I would make him fawn and beg and seek,
 and wait the season and observe the times
 and spend his prodigal wits in bootless rhymes . . .
 So perttaunt-like would I o'ersway his state,
 That he should be my fool and I his fate. (*LLL* 5.2.63–74)

Here, the tables turn—the woman takes the man to be her "fool," establishing a relationship of dominance which is unusual for the time. The use of rhymed verse in this scene places special emphasis on the words of the princess and her friends. Rhymes are often associated with wise words or bits of truth that should be remembered, therefore we can conclude that Shakespeare hoped that the reader of this play would remember the female power exhibited in these lines. In contrast to Hamlet's quote, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

(*Hamlet* 1.2.146), the princess's quote is a display of female strength over the man, establishing the man as the "fool" and the woman as his "fate."

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet is being forced by her father to marry Paris. While it may seem as though Juliet does not have autonomy in her circumstances, she creates it for herself. Her suicide is a power move, showing her father that to make her do something that she does not wish to do would be worse than death.

In Shakespeare's plays, women were able to gain authority by exercising autonomy. This helps us to reimagine women's authority as independence from male expectations. Historically, women have had very specific roles, ones that were not conducive to the pursuit of their own interests or desires. Men's expectations were the driving motivation for many of women's actions. "[Women] were considered . . . essential tools to build and keep a family, marriageable items who should abide their male tutors, either fathers or their legal substitutes," writes Serras, "They led an existence mainly that of performing their roles as breeders and caretakers" (643, 644). A submissive woman with a good temperament was the most desirable in marriage, according to Olsen. When women like Cordelia come onto the scene in Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, our notions of a "traditional" woman are overturned. Her father, King Lear, asks Cordelia how much she loves him, expecting a declaration of love and admiration much like the ones that her sisters give him, though they are false. Not wanting to be fake and untrue, Cordelia says, "I love your Majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less," (*King Lear* 1.1.92-93). Lear, upon hearing of this love, which was not the declaration he was hoping for, banishes his daughter and deprives her of a dowry. Because of Cordelia's failure to conform to her father's expectations, she leaves, now independent from her father. She becomes the Queen of France and in the end, she is the stronger force, saving her father's land at the expense of her own life. Through this character, we see that female authority comes when male expectations are dismissed or overcome. In the National Theatre performance of *King Lear*, act 1 scene 1 depicts a long table (Figure One) where Goneril and Regan sit with their husbands while Cordelia sits alone. King Lear is seated in front of all of them, asking them each to explain their love for him. The two sisters receive the microphone from their husbands, illustrating their conformity to or dependence on the men in their lives. Cordelia sits with an empty chair next to her, and when her turn comes to profess her dedication to her father, she retrieves the microphone herself.

A small detail like this is significant—it illustrates Cordelia’s difference from the rest of her family and her resistance to conformity.

Another example of this comes from Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*. At the beginning of the play, Katherine is a defiant character. She goes against all expectations of a woman that lived in that time period. She is outspoken, rude, unladylike, uninterested in marriage, and ultimately disregards all assumptions that are expected from a female character. Until Petruccio, her suitor, insists on “taming” her, she is the authority of her own life. When her father pleads for her to not be angry, she replies saying, “I will be angry: what hast thou to do? — Father, be quiet. He shall stay my leisure” (*Taming of the Shrew* 3.2.189–190). Katherine is Shakespeare’s example of a woman who disregards male expectations for the sake of her own agency. While women of the time were expected to embrace a life of marriage, household duties, and child bearing, Shakespeare challenges this structure through his portrayal of independent female characters. While Kate ultimately becomes submissive to her husband, her character at the beginning of the play complicates the typical notion of a compliant woman.

Chastity was attributive of a woman’s worth in Elizabethan times, and through characters like Isabella, Venus, and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare helps us to see that female sexuality is not whoredom but rather female agency. Findlay describes chastity in the early modern period as an adjective that carries a lot of meaning, “signifying not only the sexual purity which guarantees male ownership, identity, and inheritance lines, but also carrying meanings of moral purity, innocence, virtue, and worth” (72). A woman’s worth was defined by her sexual purity, and an unchaste woman was considered a “whore.” Today, we understand that female sexuality is more complex than the virgin/whore dichotomy suggests. Shakespeare can be an aid in analyzing female sexuality as more than just a sin or a precedent to accusing a whore in early modern times. Isabella in *Measure for Measure* gives us an example of someone who withholds their sexuality as an act of will. An aspiring nun, Isabella is asked to compromise her vow of virginity in order to save her brother’s life. Ultimately, she expresses her agency, saying “Then, Isabel, live chaste, and, brother, die. / More than our brother is our chastity” (*Measure for Measure* 2.4.197–198). In this scene, Isabella is autonomous, not because she defies the expectations that are set for her, but because her chastity is her own possession and not something she uses to prove her worth to anybody else. The right to her own body is more

important to her than an expectation to save her brother who, ironically, is in prison for having sex before marriage. In this scene, agency and sexuality are intertwined and in a way, synonymous. In attempts to assert her will, Isabella does not relent in holding fast to her sexual standards.

While Venus is historically the object of male pursuit as the goddess of love, sex, and beauty, Shakespeare flips this typical pattern and makes Venus from Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis* the pursuer of Adonis's love. Adonis becomes "hunted" sexually by Venus and redefines our understanding of female sexuality as something that benefits a woman and brings her agency rather than something that brings her shame. According to Rosenfield, female sexuality was also often associated with witchcraft and collusion with demons (80). Lady Macbeth's "undiluted desire" is connected to her "instigation of treason and to her witch-like characteristics," giving an obviously negative connotation to women's expression of sexuality (80). In a 2016 film version of *Macbeth*, Vicky McClure as a modern day Lady Macbeth is possessed of evil spirits when she gives her famous monologue. The dark tones of the shot paired with the mood of Lady Macbeth combine to paint a picture of an otherworldly, creepy situation. The focus on McClure as Lady Macbeth lets the audience know that she is involved in something evil, and that the point of the shot is to display her witchy nature.

Through the character of Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare redefines our understanding of female sexuality; in a way, Lady Macbeth rejects her own femaleness and gains power over her husband. Of this rejection she says, "unsex me here, . . . make thick my blood; stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose . . . come to my woman's breasts, and take my milk for gall" (*Macbeth* 1.5.31–38). Lady Macbeth manipulates her own sexuality in an effort to establish dominance in her relationship with her husband and she succeeds. She asks the spirits that she calls upon to remove any aspect of her femininity because traditional understandings of femininity would deprive her of power. She asks that the spirits "fill her breasts with gall and stop her menstrual flow" (Gootman). Lady Macbeth presents an alternate way of understanding femininity "that embraces masculine power behind the shroud of feminine appearance" (Gootman). While within the confines of a strict patriarchy, she finds ways to gain dominance and authority through her gender and sexuality.

Throughout his plays, Shakespeare uses strong, independent, female characters to show that despite the typical understanding of sexual consent

and women's agency in his time, this concept could be redefined as not just the age when a woman could be married off to a man, but rather the right to make significant choices regarding her own life and body. In a time when consent was not understood or recognized as an important concept, Shakespeare, though maybe unintentionally, brings it to the attention of men and women in the Elizabethan era. Traub points out the preoccupation that Shakespeare probably had with the "uncontrollability of women's sexuality," and the ways in which it seemed threatening to men—this does not seem like a stretch in comparison to today's society (216).

Toxic masculinity is still often threatened by the presence of female autonomy, authority, and sexuality. When it comes to consent and sexual assault, Angelo's words from *Measure for Measure* may still ring true to many women today: "Who will believe thee, Isabel?" (2.4.67). In light of the #MeToo movement and increasing accounts of sexual assault in the media, Shakespeare's works are "both timeless and timely" in that they engage us in conversations about current day issues as well as historical issues (Burton). Shakespeare's works were a catalyst for the way that we understand consent in society today. While today we have more terminology for what we call sexual assault, sexual harassment, rape culture, patriarchy, and consent, we don't have to search very long to find that the same issues that we deal with today existed in Shakespeare's day, too. Shakespeare's strong, independent female characters encourage us to understand consent in a new way—a woman is entitled to make her own decisions, especially surrounding marriage, courtship, and sexuality.

Works Cited

- Burton, Tara Isabella. "What a Lesser Known Shakespeare Play Can Tell Us About Harvey Weinstein." *Vox*, 17 Nov. 2017. Web.
- DiGangi, Mario. "Pleasure and Danger: Measuring Female Sexuality in Measure for Measure." *Elh*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1993, pp. 589–609.
- Findlay, Allison. *Women in Shakespeare: A Dictionary*, A&C Black, 2010.
- Gootman, Madeline. "Unsexing the Feminine." *Women and Power in Shakespearean Drama*, 25 Feb. 2014. Web.
- Mosch, Jan. "'Why do I Yield to that Suggestion': Crisis of Autonomy and Autonomy as Crisis in Macbeth." *Shakespeare Seminar*, vol. 10, 2012, pp. 17.
- National Theatre Discover. "King Lear: Act 1 Scene 1." Online Video Clip. YouTube. 15 July 2015. Web.
- "Nursing Nothing: Witchcraft and Female Sexuality in the Winter's Tale." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2002, pp. 95–112.
- Olsen, Kirsten. *All Things Shakespeare: An Encyclopedia of Shakespeare's World, A-I*, Vol. 1, Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Rosenfield, Kirstie G. *Theatricks, Theatrix, Theatrics: Witchcraft, Female Sexuality, and Antitheatricality in Shakespeare's Plays*, edited by Charles R. Lyons, Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *The New Oxford Shakespeare, The Complete Works: Modern Critical Edition*. Oxford University Press. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, Gabriel Egan, 2016. Kindle Edition. [Primary Text]
- Timbrell, Daniel. "'I Will Fast Being Loose': Gaming and Sexual Conquest in Love's Labour's Lost." *Rapt in Secret Studies: Emerging Shakespeares*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.
- Thornton, Guy. "National Theatre Performance Photograph."
- Traub, Valerie. "Jewels, Statues, and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare's Plays." *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 20, 1988, pp. 215.
- Wilson, David. "Still from Lady Macbeth Film." Creative Review.