

Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 2

Article 4

Fall 2001

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Recommended Citation

Nichols, P. (2001). Shakespearean Deference to Female Virgin Power. *Inquiry: The University of Arkansas Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/inquiry/vol2/iss1/4>

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SHAKESPEAREAN DEFERENCE TO FEMALE VIRGIN POWER

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Abstract

*This project concerns the ways in which Shakespearean literature becomes translated into political theory. It considers the way Shakespeare captures characteristics of Queen Elizabeth I — portraying her as the era's political icon through his plays. He shows her deference by immortalizing her legacy with strong women characters while limiting them to a level of power beneath her. Using *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, and *Othello*, the Moor of Venice — plays juxtaposing elements of gender, race, and orthodoxy — the paper shows behavioral patterns linking the plays' patriarchs to King Henry VIII. Shylock, Prospero, and Brabantio each operate in the role of commanding patriarch, though Brabantio is the only Venetian noble with any real power. The first two daughters, Jessica and Miranda, manipulate their fathers and their places in society in order to reap the society's benefits. Shakespeare created these daughters in equally convincing resemblances to Queen Elizabeth. On the other hand, Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona, shows the fallacy associated with neither respecting the orthodoxy nor finding the right loophole for change. Many critics argue that women who rose to power during this era did not advance the women's movement. Instead, they only served as substitutes in the event that their male counterparts could not rule. My findings do not dispute this. However, in interpreting Shakespeare, it is more beneficial to note the larger picture — women are being taught ways to rise to equality and power with men.*

This project concerns Shakespeare, particularly how he captures characteristics of the Virgin Queen Elizabeth I in an attempt to portray her as a political icon through his plays. He shows deference to her, not only by immortalizing her legacy with strong women characters, but also in limiting them to a level of power beneath her. Using three examples - *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, and *Othello*, the Moor of Venice - that juxtapose elements of gender, race, and orthodoxy, the paper shows a behavioral pattern linking the plays' patriarchs to King

Henry VIII. It also shows how Shakespeare created the daughters in an equally convincing resemblance to Queen Elizabeth — with the exception of Desdemona, who shows the errors associated with neither respecting the orthodoxy nor finding the right loophole for change.

Elizabeth was just three years old when King Henry had her mother executed. The king was both father and mother to his children. Because he left no male heir, Elizabeth and her half-sister Mary were both given opportunities to rule. Elizabeth controlled England without a spouse, but with the tricks of her father's trade, for 45 years. He had changed the national religion; she changed it back. She ordered the death of her cousin Mary Queen of Scots. In order to sway potential allies and enemies, she used her greatest assets — most important of these was her virginity.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's father had written into his will a plan, consisting of a riddle and a three thousand ducat suitor fee, by which he could choose her spouse — even after his own death. He intended that the proper fiancé would have both proper finances and the ingenuity to promote future success in business ventures. Two suitors who had the suitor fee answered the riddle incorrectly. Further foiling the plan of Portia's father, a clever young suitor (Bassanio) borrowed the necessary sum from his friend Antonio and answered the riddle correctly. Bassanio planned to repay his loan with the dowry he collected, something that might have made Portia's father turn over in his grave. The plot thickened when Antonio had to borrow the money he lent from his archenemy — Shylock, the Jew. So sure that he could repay the debt, Antonio made a horrendous deal — a pound of flesh upon forfeiture of the loan. Then, before Bassanio could return to repay Antonio, the time to pay the debt expired. Since Shylock would not allow repayment in lieu of flesh, Portia assisted Antonio by assuming a male persona and acting as arbiter, literally coming to Antonio's defense.

Elizabeth respected bonds, such as contracts and marriage, and she required other young women to marry and be respectful of their husbands. Both Shylock and Portia treasured their rings

as symbols of the marriage bond. However, while Portia and her maid forgave the men who gave their rings to the arbiter and "his" assistant (really Portia and her maid in disguise), Shylock was unforgiving of his daughter, Jessica, who stole his ring and traded it for a monkey before marrying a Christian. Critic John Gross pointed out that the monkey is a symbol of lechery, and Jessica's act may have been more symbolic than the play signified.

In assuming these male characteristics, Portia reflected in myriad ways the audience's characterization of Elizabeth. Karl Elze showed how the court scene reinforced the message of laws and bonds. The father's riddle and plan for engagement might have forced an unhappy choice upon Portia. The loan agreement might have been a death sentence for Antonio. However, like Elizabeth's all-encompassing power, Portia was able to consider all of this plus the price Jessica might have paid and compensate for all of them in her case against Shylock.

In *The Tempest*, Derek Traversi contends that Miranda's obedience restores her father's happiness. I agree, but add that like Elizabeth, Miranda is only pretending to be agreeable in order to get what she wants; Prospero is only pretending to restrict her relationship with Ferdinand in order to test its potential for success. Living on the island together, Miranda and Prospero understand each other. Perhaps they are meant to be a reflection of King Henry's affection for his daughters — an affection he did not have for his wives.

In contrast to the previous examples, *Othello, the Moor of Venice* shows the result of not finding the proper loophole before confronting the orthodoxy. Desdemona makes a point to tell her father that she is following her mother's actions by choosing her husband over her father. However, strong Shakespearean women do not turn toward their mothers, those that do tend to die brutally. John Quincy Adams reflected that Desdemona's refusal to follow the higher orders — her father ranked over her new husband — led audiences at the time to consider "the outrage against natural law." Many critics concur with Adams, contending that Desdemona's lack of filial responsibility caused her death. If she had married for power instead — either by deferring to a stronger man, remaining virginal, or by marrying someone weaker and controlling him — she would have had a better chance to grow like the other characters. Although Desdemona married someone with strong military prowess, she chose him based on his stories — based on his soft side. The combination of these errors led to Desdemona's demise.

In the early Renaissance, many kings and nobles gave their daughters a strict set of guidelines to follow — especially in terms of marriage — in order to protect the future of their dynasties. By remaining virginal, Elizabeth creatively challenged the system. This challenge raised questions of propriety and of woman's place. Historically, Elizabeth foresaw the full impact her decisions could have had on her country. Therefore, instead

of allowing other women to follow her example, she persuaded and punished them in order to make them follow the traditional order. In a sense, she became a man in order to rule both men and women. Nevertheless, the question loomed. As Shakespeare's strong female characters and the Virgin Queen continued to support and reflect each other, the ongoing debate of the woman's sphere shifted. A new dialogue was created, one to which the current, male-dominated, society was not ready to respond. As the new dialogue grew, Shakespeare continued to address it with his dramatic reflections of the Queen.

"It serves to remind us," wrote critic Lisa Jardine, "that it is a matter of considerable patriarchal importance for social stability to celebrate brilliant exceptions to the female 'rule' only reluctantly, and then as exceptions" (56). As a ruler, Elizabeth made claim to her inner qualities as a man. Mirroring this, boys portrayed women — sweet victory for the woman who presented herself as a male king. "Woman" was not equated with gender, but rather as "a set of social codes and mannerisms executed by a boy (on-stage)" (Jardine, 131). Elizabeth flipped this equation in her definition of "king," making the position not one of male gender but of male social codes and mannerisms.

The ideology of hereditary leadership is important for gaining equality in political theory: Daughters have nearly always been able to carry on in external spheres like their male counterparts, but it often takes the man's absence to prove it. Jardine points out that "authors ... who have in mind ... prosperous noblewomen are delighted to suggest that the daughters ... should share the new cultural treasures first extended to their brothers" (39). However, Jardine also acknowledges that at the time, the permitted education "conveniently distracted able women from any studies which might have led them to notice... possibilities for emancipation in social and political fields" (52).

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Faculty comments

Joseph Candido, Ms. Nichols' faculty mentor speaks highly of the complexity and sophistication of her project. In his letter to the publications board he says:

I am happy to be able to write in support of Phyllis Nichols's scholarly submission to *Inquiry*. Ms. Nichols has an ambitious project, one which creatively combines her twin interests in literature and political science—the representation of strong women on the Shakespearean stage who must try somehow to find self-realization in the shadow of dominant father figures. Ms. Nichols contends, moreover, that these characters are not merely interesting stage types, but that their stage dilemmas are sharply reflected in contemporary Elizabethan society in the person of the most visible woman of the age—Queen Elizabeth—herself a strong woman who must fashion her own identity as a female political leader in the shadow of perhaps the most dominant father in English history, King Henry VIII. For her main focus, Ms. Nichols has chosen three of the most problematic Shakespearean heroines in the canon, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Miranda in *The Tempest*, and Desdemona in *Othello*. The originality of her project lies not only in its determination to cut across generic distinctions by seeing comedy, tragedy, and romance as linked dramatic enterprises, but in its even more ambitious intention to see contemporary English politics and political ideology through the medium of theatre. Most students would be content with the traditionally arbitrary categories of "art" and "politics" and confine their investigation to either one of these areas as discrete fields of study, but Ms. Nichols rightly refuses to confine herself to such simple schemes. She sets a high bar for herself—one that embraces complexity rather than simplicity—and is committed to clearing it. I believe that her project has the chance to bear real fruit.

Conrad Waligorski of the political sciences department is interested in the political content of Ms. Nichols paper. He makes the following comments:

Ms. Nichols is an outstanding student — thoughtful, hard working, and intellectually alive, with a good, inquisitive mind. She is also articulate and able to grasp complex problems and theoretical claims. Moreover, Ms. Nichols has good sense, fundamental decency and is a fine, considerate person. She is a person who contributes passion for learning and genuine inquisitiveness to her classes. Moreover, she can be relied upon. A conscientious person, she always carries out all assignments and responsibilities that she takes upon herself; she has great determination. I have a very high opinion of her.

Although Ms. Nichols has only completed one course with me -Political Science 2003H, an honors course in

American National Government — she is currently enrolled in Political Science 3933, Contemporary American Political Thought and is doing her usual superb work. She has also regularly kept me apprised of her interests and work. Ms. Nichols' exams and papers in American National Government were intelligently written, and showed insight and understanding, as is reflected in her work to date in her current course with me. She was the class leader in terms of ability, class discussion and commitment to her work. She can focus on the issue under discussion and present evidence to support her conclusions. Her written work and class participation demonstrate initiative, sound perception, and extended reading, making her a delight to have in class. Her class questions and comments are always pertinent and often penetrating. Ms. Nichols will raise questions about anything that is unclear, troubling, or simply something she wants to know more about, yet she always advances relevant points, sticks to the question being discussed, and remains focused on the issues at hand.

I am the out-of-department representative on Ms. Nichols honors thesis on women in Shakespeare. Ms. Nichols' thesis proposal is interdisciplinary and intriguing. Her effort to connect gender and dominance themes in Shakespeare with the emerging republican and early liberal political theory of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries deserves support. Conflicting political ideas dominate this period. The older medieval ideal of one empire and one church has collapsed. The medieval emphasis on contract and natural law is under assault by centralizing monarchies and their apologists for ideas of divine right, ideas that never became dominant in England. Counter arguments, drawing on dawning individualism and evolving notions of individual rights, are developing. Ms. Nichols' thesis unites the most important writer of this period with appreciation that his audiences understood his plays—which generally supported the Tudor view of the world—as more than entertainment, but also, as with the ancient Greeks, commentaries on their world.