Bad Girls: Romantic Feminine Rebellion in Renaissance Drama

Molly Cooper

Faculty Advisor: Professor Douglas Lanier

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of University Honors in Major in English Teaching
Casting the Bad Girl

The nobleman’s daughter is one of the characters usually found writhing under the thumb of the patriarchy in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama. The looming threat of the arranged marriage provides the force on the female protagonist that seemingly crushes her in the tragedy and must be narrowly escaped in the comedy. Roger Stilling describes the tenets of this practice of arranged marriage by saying, “The central characteristic of this convention (in society and in drama) is that such a marriage normally victimizes the woman involved, and, indeed, the practice could probably not have arisen without a wide-spread feeling among males that women were chattel” (Stilling, p. 34). Despite this apparent world-view on women, there are repeated instances of women who refuse to be catalogued as chattel in Renaissance drama. The nobleman’s daughter in particular stands directly in the path of this perception of women. Here I’ve examined Bel-imperia in The Spanish Tragedy, Juliet in Romeo and Juliet, and Rose in The Shoemaker’s Holiday to see how Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare, and Thomas Dekker structured their nobleman’s daughters in the face of such pressure. The character sketch that emerges from these three women is far from the wilting lady who allows herself to be victimized by the patriarchy. These nobleman’s daughters are each rebellious and resolute and using wit and willpower they negotiate the male dominated world around them without compromise.

It is not a new notion that some of the women in Renaissance drama are resourceful enough to challenge their marginalized condition but there are competing ideas of when and how. Lisa Hopkins believes women start to take on heroically tragic
roles from about 1610 onward, largely based on changes in performances after *The Maid’s Tragedy* hit the stage. She sees suicide, such as that found in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, as a result of the mechanism in which the dominant power structure acts upon powerless women. She writes, “In sharp contrast to this passivity and victimhood, the majority of the female characters in the plays (that she examines) neither seek nor welcome death” and of the ones who do meet their end in her selected plays, they “eventually accept death, but only on their own terms and only because this is clearly a more dignified attitude than continuing to resist” (Hopkins, p. 2). The three plays examined here, *The Spanish Tragedy, Romeo and Juliet,* and *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* were all believed to be performed in the 1590’s, which leaves them well outside of the window in which Hopkins refers to the emergence of the female tragic hero. It is also probably safe to say that Bel-imperia and Juliet were not overly concerned with being terrifically dignified when they met their deaths and poor Rose as a comedic character wouldn’t even make it into the running for this definition of heroism. But why should heroism be limited to the tragic figure wrapped solidly in her stoicism? Is there a reason to find relevance today for the more passionate and less dignified rebel that was a pre-cursor to Hopkins’ tragic ladies?

Some critics do side with pre-1610 evaluation of women in tragedies as heroic figures. Stilling lists Gismond, Bel-Imperia, Dido, Bethasabe, Juliet, and Mellida as “all genuine heroines with whom one has to side precisely because their authors side with them themselves or present them with the kind of dramatic objectivity that makes prurient disapproval impossible” (Stilling, p. 4). It sounds like this point of view supposes that what it takes to become a heroine is the backing of the audience. But, he bases this
largely on the idea of love. In Stilling’s equation the characters that believe and participate in love get the backing of the audience while the non-believers become the villains. Stilling arranges the heroine as a champion of love who captures the heart of the audience. He places the arranged marriage and the romantic marriage on opposite sides of a moral compass, the first standing for money, and social stratification (the women as chattel model) and the second “implies the acceptance and celebration of the beloved’s individual humanity” (Stilling, p. 34). Thus the expression of love itself is the way to subvert the power structure of the patriarchy. The point that the romantic wedding provides a moral model is an excellent one but in some ways it sells the heroine short. It rewards her ability to fall in love but it leaves out the question of what kind of bull-headed willful woman would be so audacious as to “look to like” (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.3.99) in the first place. Love doesn’t just happen to these women they take an active role. Underneath that loving exterior lies a rather Machiavellian character who acts on her own behalf no matter what rules she breaks. With Stilling’s methodology these women would not be heroines when they act on their own behalf outside of the umbrella covered by love. Bel-Imperia for example would be admired for her great love for Don Andrea and later Horatio but without acknowledging her finely orchestrated manipulations that result in her execution of revenge on Balthazar.

The playwrights themselves could not only sympathize with the station of women but also found themselves equally despised as inherently threatening to morality. It seems very likely that the authors of these plays would be able to see the flawed evaluation of the station of women and write accordingly. But it seems that these plays must have also been relevant to the society in which they were presented or their success
would be limited by the intentions of the author. The plays do not just contain the identity of the author but they also contain the appetites of the larger society that engaged in theater as entertainment. It is then historically relevant to understand the nature of these women in their rebellious roles. Philippa Berry writes, “Certainly it seems that the thorny question of the relationship between text and history still haunts literary studies of the Renaissance” (Berry in Callahan, p.358). The Renaissance as a still frequently taught section of literature in schools maintains cultural relevance today but the text is accompanied by the ingrained attitudes of four hundred years ago. In this kind of literature an entire community is reflected. These mores need to be brought to the surface and examined, Jeffrey Maston writes “Any reading of these materials must address the fact that texts are produced within a particular sex/gender context and that gender and sexuality are themselves in part produced in and by texts” (Masten, p. 5). Analyzing the gendered roles of this time period offers insight into the way that we structure our sexual identities. In a dynamic relationship Renaissance theater acts upon its audience just as much as the audience accepts or rejects it. In turn our ability to evaluate literature that we are still teaching is meaningful in modern gender identity.

The examination of Bel-Imperia, Juliet, and Rose is inherently an examination of gender roles because these are women that break rules that men made. However, they are also women that are structured to question the very essence of what is man and what is woman. At any given time these three women will use the tactics that men use in order to manipulate their environment. All of these plays were written when a woman dressing as a man was considered an attack on morality as Dusinberre writes, “Wearing breeches and learning Latin might be different ways of saying the same thing but the breeches
were the more outspoken intrusion on the male world” (Dusinberre, p. 235). It makes sense that authors like Kyd, Shakespeare and Dekker would have to be very careful in constructing a character that could best a man without becoming a man. There is a tension between being a model lady, a romantic female lead, and being a powerful woman. The solution was to structure women that could intellectually match men. These characters “learned the Latin” rather than “wore the breeches” and attacked the patriarchy with their minds. This allowed them to keep their non-threatening female gender role which could be read as passive victimization such as Hopkins perceives. But, the truth is that anyone who considers the three ladies examined her to be passive has fallen prey to their own ability to mask their true voice. If “Pacifism in women is cowardice in men” (Dusinberre, p. 243) as Dusinberre writes, then the reverse would be that what are extreme actions of women are expected actions of men. By taking action the nobleman’s daughter crosses gender identity into the world of men.

There is an increasing amount of critical analysis challenging the position of women on the stage because their parts were played by men. The homoeroticism of the Renaissance stage has provided a wealth of opportunities to speculate into the sordid sexual world of the theater as well as negating readings that claim the Renaissance challenges rather than promotes the oppression of women. The men playing women scenario goes against the feminist reading that is “Interested in how the plays may reflect real women as well as how they help produce and reproduce ideas about women that then shape, perpetuate, or even disturb prevailing conditions of femininity” (Callahan, xii). After all how could a man writing for a man who is playing a woman possibly give an accurate portrayal of real gender issues? Can real historically relevant meaning really be
constructed out of this point of view? The dominant role of theater as entertainment answers these questions. The role of the viewer was just as strong as the role of the writer because success was based on popularity. These women met the desires of what women wanted to see. Women may not have not been allowed on the stage themselves, but they did decide whether or not they would buy a ticket. I think Dusinberre said it best about women and the stage, “Of course, physically they were not there. But to assert that is, in my view, to say nothing. Because none of the shadows on Shakespeare’s stage are there. There are no kings, queens, murderers, monsters, fairies, politicians, wise counselors, or even fools. There are only actors” (Dusinberr in Callahan, p. 251).
Bibliography


