

Zainab AINaki

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Dr. Hanan Muzaffar

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Man-womanly Writers and Androgynous Texts: an Analysis of William
Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*

Women have long been neglected in literature and the reasons for this are countless. It would not be honest to say that these reasons do not matter, for they do matter, because through them we can be able to understand the male minds of previous times which chose to be so condescending. However, the fact that it cannot be claimed during this Post-modern age that women are inconspicuous is indeed a wonderful achievement: women have finally proven themselves amongst the most distinguished writers the world over.

Virginia Woolf, one of the most prominent British writers of the twentieth century, wrote an extended essay called *A Room of One's Own* to explore this matter. In it, she argued for the feminine cause in an admirable way, managing to illustrate many examples, most of which are convincing. Her book (which to begin with was merely a shorter essay she had prepared for a lecture at Cambridge University) is made up of several chapters, each concentrating on a particular matter.

The sixth and final chapter in Woolf's book, entitled 'Androgyny,' is definitely one of the most interesting. It discusses the neutrality of the minds of both sexes, and describes the proper way to achieve this neutrality- to Woolf's mind at least-, for to her, "the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two [sexes] live in

harmony together, spiritually cooperating" (Woolf 1025). In other words, when either a woman or man writes, their written text should not give any clues which would enable a reader to discern the sex of the writer: women should write with "womanly" minds and men with "man-womanly" minds. She uses the nineteenth-century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's term "androgyny" to describe this said state (hence the chapter's title).

Although her argument is meaningful, it is quite harsh; she attacks major literary figures like Leo Tolstoy and William Wordsworth, all of whom are canonical in their own right, saying that they lack the attributes of which an androgynous mind consists. Conversely, she praises others like John Keats and William Shakespeare for the share of women in them.

Woolf's choice of examples is excellent because all the figures she mentions are popular. For instance, it is very difficult to find a person who is not at least partially familiar with the celebrated Bard, and it is an undeniable fact that his poems and plays probably rank above all other contributions to not just English literature, but to the literature of the whole world. That his works are so well-loved even four centuries later is proof that people- whether men or women, young or old, native English speakers or foreign, literature students or not- can relate to the issues he discusses. The fact remains, however, that despite his fame and the genuine pleasure readers receive from reading his works, Shakespeare did not have as androgynous a mind as Woolf appears to give him credit to.

Some of Shakespeare's work is characterised by critics as being misogynous. Even without knowledge of the plays themselves, one often hears during the course of one's life lines quoted from Shakespeare's plays, for he did write about almost all conceivable subjects after all. An example of such a line (which is misogynous) is

this: "Frailty, thy name is woman." (*Hamlet* 1.2.146) This perfectly outrageous line does not require an explanation as it is quite clear that it is intended to be heard by a woman who is, in turn, meant to be insulted.

Woolf herself declares that it "would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women" (1026), and this does seem rather self-contradictory. However, assuming that he did think in a man-womanly way, it should be safe to pick any of Shakespeare's plays or sonnets at random and analyse it to prove that the playwright is indeed blessed with an androgynous mind. *Cymbeline*, one of Shakespeare's less performed plays, would be a fine example to experiment with.

Like many other Shakespeare plays, *Cymbeline* has two plots, one of which is more prominent than the other; it is therefore unnecessary to delve too deeply into the goings on of both. The story begins with two gentlemen conversing about how Cymbeline, the king of Britain, is angry with his daughter Imogen for secretly eloping with the low-born gentleman Posthumus instead of his wicked step-son Cloten. To punish their elopement, Cymbeline banishes Posthumus from the country to keep him away from Imogen. Already, signs of overpowering males can be seen. Not only did Cymbeline choose a suitor for his daughter without consulting her, his choice- had not she been intelligent enough to think for herself- might have left Imogen a miserable woman for as long as she remained married to her father's choice of husband, i.e. Cloten. Cymbeline did not take it upon himself to try to discover Cloten's character. He instead relied on his second wife's untrue, conceited and selfish judgement.

When Posthumus is banished, he goes to Italy to live. He takes with him a ring meant as a token of his darling wife's love (he in exchange gives her a bracelet). There he meets an Italian nobleman called Jachimo who leads him to believe that all

women are false and none of them can be trusted. After diligent insistence that his wife "holds her virtue still" (1.4.62), Posthumus succumbs to Jachimo's bet: he will go to Britain to find Imogen, then woo and seduce her to prove to Posthumus that she is just like all other women. Jachimo is confident enough to even promise to bring the bracelet Posthumus gave to Imogen (which, incidentally, she promised to keep forever). Posthumus, in his turn, promised Jachimo that he may keep the ring Imogen gave to him, despite its immense monetary and sentimental value, provided he can carry out what he had set out to do.

So far, the attitude towards females is not quite as neutral as it should be. The negative opinions are weightier than the positive and the readers/audiences already expect the worse from Imogen.

In Britain, Jachimo manages to find the princess. He confesses in a soliloquy that there is a chance that she might be different from other members of her sex by being "furnished with a mind so rare." (1.6.16), but quickly discards this thought. Although the incredible lack of faith in women which Jachimo shows does not necessarily reflect Shakespeare's mind, it can be used against him because the playwright does not present a clever enough female counterpart to equal Jachimo's verbal outbursts and unwelcome physical contact. As soon as Imogen starts to feel insecure, she resorts to the help of Pisanio (the male servant Posthumus left behind) as though to prove that a woman cannot fend for herself.

Contrary to what Jachimo initially thought, Imogen does not succumb to his wooing. Nevertheless, being the chauvinistic, thrasonical male that he is, he does not allow this to deter him. He cunningly hides in a trunk which is brought to Imogen's bedroom at around midnight, only to come out after she sleeps to spy on her. He goes as far as taking notes of specific details of the room itself, and of

Imogen (even noticing a particularly private detail: a mole on her left breast). He also takes the bracelet off of her arm. Throughout all of this, Imogen, a victim of the meticulous planning of men, sleeps soundly, without the merest suspicion of the unfortunate events which are about to take place that will hurt her very deeply and even change her.

Back in Italy, Jachimo reports his valuable findings to Posthumus. The latter, although gullible, does not accept the false news immediately; he at first denies its legitimacy, saying that Jachimo could have obtained details of the place where Imogen lives from anyone who has seen it. However, when Jachimo reveals the private detail he had discovered and presents the bracelet he had stolen, Posthumus yields to Jachimo's devious tactics. He erupts in a considerably bitter speech about the female sex. Here, perhaps in more than any other part of the play, an anti-androgynous theme emerges.

If to have an androgynous mind means not to be biased in one's writing and not make the characteristics of one sex more prominent than the other, then Shakespeare is not an androgynous writer, as he fails to do so in *Cymbeline*. Posthumus expects Imogen to be "as chaste as unsunned snow" (2.4.165) while Imogen does not expect him to be anything. This is unnatural: it is clear that Imogen feels oppressed, for she speaks her mind quite freely when she is alone, with a maid, or even with her male servant Pisanio. Despite this fact, Imogen does not say anything out of the ordinary, and she certainly does not attack in the way females do when they are wronged. In this, Shakespeare does not "[transmit] emotion without impediment" as Woolf claims (Woolf 1026). Imogen's verbal accusations do not even come close to Posthumus's. This following soliloquy of his is particularly harsh, quite unpleasant, and even offensive to the female sex:

"...Could I find out
 The woman's part in me – for there's no motion
 That tends to vice in man but I affirm
 It is the woman's part: be it lying, note it,
 The woman's; flattering, hers; deceiving, hers;
 Lust and rank thoughts, hers, hers; revenges, hers;
 Ambitions, covetings, change of prides, disdain,
 Nice longing, slanders, mutability,
 All faults that name, nay, that hell knows, why, hers
 In part or all, but rather all." (2.4.171-180)

Posthumus's list goes on several more lines and ends with "The very devils cannot blame them better." This ruthless criticism of women is unmatched by any other speech in the whole play.

In his rage, he sends a letter to Pisanio which contains orders for him to kill Imogen. In this he is very much like the man who was the cause of his unhappiness: his father-in-law. Just like Cymbeline, he does not attempt to find out whether or not his wife did betray him, but chooses to trust a fairly new acquaintance instead, ignoring his instincts and his knowledge of Imogen's personality and temperament.

As though it were not enough that Imogen appears to be a frail person who lives up to the female reputation of being the "weaker sex," she is forced to disguise herself as a boy (Fidele) to be able to live in virtue until her problems are solved. (The benevolent Pisanio could not find it in his heart to kill her because he, unlike his master, can think rationally and wisely, even when confronted with difficult events.) She goes into hiding in a cave in Wales, and it is there that she disguises herself, but not even as a male does she receive equal treatment.

In her hiding, she stays with three other men: Belarius, a gentleman banished by Cymbeline, and his two supposed sons Polydore and Cadwal (who are in reality the sons of Cymbeline, originally called Guiderius and Aviragus respectively, but were abducted by Belarius as an act of revenge for his banishment). They do not treat her with the callousness men usually treat boys with; on the contrary, they treat her with the very gentleness which would become a female rather than a male, even if he is young- at least to Elizabethan standards- and they confess to loving her for reasons unbeknownst to them.

When Imogen rebels against men's way of life ("I see a man's life is a tedious one" (3.6.1)), she does so because her inferior female body is too feeble to allow her to rest properly. Sleeping on the ground in a cave for two days tires her. To her, men's way of life is "incomprehensible." It is as though all a woman can ever think of is her physical state and not her emotional or psychological one, for she does not complain about the way men are supposed to think, and it makes her appear to be a very shallow person, even though she is probably far from being that. Since men's way of life is "incomprehensible" to Imogen, it also becomes incomprehensible to the readers/ audiences.

According to Woolf, if the world of men, their virtues and values are described with incomprehensible emotions which do not permeate a text, then the text is not androgynous (Woolf 1028). If the opposite applies (which it must, because equality is the basis of Woolf's argument), then *Cymbeline* is not androgynous, because this characteristic is not present in it.

Imogen continues in her disguise as the boy Fidele until just before the end of the play. A complication in the plot leads both she and her husband to believe that the other member of the pair is dead (Posthumus regrets ordering Pisanio to kill

Imogen after he believes her to be dead because he starts to miss the mere thought of her), until Imogen's identity is revealed after a fight which takes place in the final scene. When matters become clear and all problems are solved, everyone is forgiven and audiences/readers get the happily-ever-after they have been expecting throughout the play. Imogen and Posthumus forgive each other and Jachimo too; Belarius exposes the truth about Guiderius's and Aviragus's ancestry and they realise that they had a "motive"- to use Belarius's word- for the love they bore for Fidele, and Cymbeline's traitorous step-son is replaced by two much worthier ones; the order of Belarius's banishment is removed and all is well again.

One last reconciliation which takes place is the death of the Queen, the King's second wife. If one were to trace the source of all the mischief which takes place in *Cymbeline*, one would realise that it is actually the Queen who is the cause. It was she who filled Cymbeline's head with malicious thoughts of marrying Cloten to Imogen, her main aim being, of course, for herself to be the mother of the future king (Cloten, had he married Imogen). Before she dies, she confesses all to the apothecary Cornelius who reports everything to the king. Cymbeline realises the vast mistakes he committed because of her, but can only offer this as an excuse: "Who is't can read a woman?" (5.5.48) He maintains that he was not completely mistaken in marrying her for she was a beautiful woman to behold.

By the time one reaches the end of it, *Cymbeline* appears to be anything but an androgynous text! Men are clearly made out to be the worthier characters, and women the petty ones who barely even have a say. In the play, a mere 23.9% of the lines is spoken by female characters: out of a total of 3295 lines, only 787 (594 of which are spoken by Imogen herself) (*The Shakespeare Miscellany* 145), and

Imogen's role is the third largest female one out of all of Shakespeare's plays (*The Shakespeare Miscellany* 99).

There is no evidence that a harmonious mind which thinks in a man-womanly way wrote it. In writing *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare by no means shows any "special sympathy with women" (Woolf 1026), nor does he take up "their cause or [devote himself] to their interpretation" (Woolf 1026). Nonetheless, this does not prove the whole of Woolf's argument wrong, for her following quote is certainly accurate: "Shakespeare's indecency uproots a thousand other things in one's mind, and it is far from being dull" (Woolf 1027).

It is an indisputable fact that the stories around which Shakespeare's plays revolve are not his own creations, but were taken from older sources and rewritten by himself, and *Cymbeline* is not an exception. Perhaps this is the reason which hindered Shakespeare's work from "transmit[ing] emotion without impediment" (Woolf 1026). This characteristic- it being a constituent of an androgynous mind and simultaneously missing from this play- means that the fact that Shakespeare was an androgynous writer can be eradicated.

Nevertheless, this has not rendered the Bard's work "fatal" as Woolf predicted. It has been and still continues to be well-loved by many (a copy of *Cymbeline* was actually laid in the poet laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson's coffin because it was his last read). It is generally agreed upon that Shakespeare's memorable sonnets and plays are "brilliant and effective, powerful and masterly" (Woolf 1029) - descriptions which Woolf makes of the unfortunate sexless literary works which are destined to be forgotten. However, Shakespeare's works have neither been forgotten, nor have they "ceas[ed] to be fertilised": his plays are still being republished and reproduced into theatrical productions and motion pictures. In

fact, one can safely say that Shakespeare might never die out as long as literature is a part of people's every day lives. Either way, however, the fact remains that one should not "turn back to Shakespeare" for he was not an androgynous writer.

Perhaps it is possible that some minds are androgynous, perhaps it is a talent one is born with, and perhaps it is an art which can only be achieved after many years of practice. One fact is certain, however: whether or not androgynous minds do exist, literature is closer than it has ever been to equalising the depiction of the two sexes, just as Woolf prophesied.

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