

Bc. Michaela Válková

The Role of Women in William Shakespeare's Roman Tragedies
(MA thesis, ÚALK, FF UK, Praha 2022, 110 pp.)

Reader's review

Michaela Válková's thesis can be read as a vigorous and complex polemic with a whole array of reductive gender-based interpretations of female characters in Shakespeare's Roman plays. Most expressly, she takes issue with the assumption that, in keeping with the Early Modern model of gender roles which identifies the domestic sphere as women's proper domain, these highly political plays inevitably relegate their heroines to the margins of action and deny them agency. This is her focus in the analysis of Portia and Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*. However, it is clear that other female characters in view – Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, and first and foremost Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* – need no such defence. Especially in the last case, Michaela Válková's argument targets the more traditional interpretations of the heroine as a specimen of "fickle woman", concentrating on reductions performed in accord with a negative perspective of putative "feminine characteristics". Against the view of Cleopatra's love as a destructive influence on the upright, manly Mark Antony she offers her interpretation of the relationship as mutual and balanced as regards the demands and manipulations each of the partners exercises on the other, arguing against what she perceives as an inappropriately gendered understanding of Cleopatra's character. Lastly, she looks with a critical eye at the simplifying perspective of women as passive victims of the patriarchal system when she identifies an active investment in the patriarchal values in Lavinia, the by far most victimised and passive character in the plays under scrutiny. This sensitivity to the nuances in characterization of the heroines of Shakespeare's Roman plays is undoubtedly the greatest asset of the thesis, perceptible also in the analysis of other female characters which appears to be prompted more by the desire to do right by the complexity of figures such as Volumnia or Tamora than by any consistent theoretical approach.

The conception of a theoretical framework for the analysis is what I see as problematic about the thesis. On the one hand, feminist criticism of Shakespeare's Roman plays is invoked as a point of reference and inspiration in its more abstract statements (e.g. "feminism has no investment in identifying the complex subjugation of women in patriarchy with mere victimization. Nor can the position of women be reduced to or elided with all other forms of social hierarchy." quot. p. 30 – relevant for the analysis of Lavinia), on the other, its emphasis on the period context tends to be dismissed as reductive ("if criticism concentrates too much on the historical circumstances, it may risk focusing on a historians' account of truth rather than the actual atmosphere in Shakespeare's society", p. 29). In fact, this positioning is based on a misrepresentation of the notion of period context (dissociating the Early Modern "assumptions about women" from actual social realities of Shakespeare's time, as if understanding "woman" as "a malleable cultural idea as well as a lived reality" quot. pp. 27-28 did not represent its two complementary aspects). It would appear that some of the concepts the thesis sets to oppose are actually constructed for the sake of argument rather than representing authentic accounts of their authors' theoretical positions. Ultimately, the body of the thesis seems to proceed alternately along with and against the feminist readings; not something inconceivable, to be sure, but definitely demanding a more rigorous engagement with the secondary sources. There is one point mentioned in the theoretical chapter that would be worth closer attention in the analysis: the need, in the event of an all male cast, to rely on conventional ideas of femininity to "flesh out" the female characters. This might tip the balance more in favour of period conceptualizations of femininity at the expense of the actual

realities as regards women's social position as an influence on the portrayal of the female characters.

As regards the formal aspects of the thesis, I would recommend a more frequent employment of paraphrase as regards secondary literature; it appears that the author considers only direct quotation as worthy of reference. Sometimes this approach results in syntactically awkward constructions ("Novy introduces this polarisation when she contrasts two views on Shakespeare: a daring statement that "Shakespeare saw men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal" and "other early feminist critics maintain that the plays promote the subordination and exclusion of women." " p. 32); sometimes it leaves a position unreferenced ("the critics have emphasised Cleopatra's Lady Macbeth-like manipulation with Antony...", p. 92).

The following issues should be addressed in the defence:

- 1) While the analysis of *Julius Caesar* represents a unified interpretation of the plays' female figures, the reading of *Coriolanus* and *Titus Andronicus* treats the empowered and the submissive characters (mostly) separately. I would like to hear what sense the defendant makes – with respect to Early Modern conceptualizations of femininity – of the foiling of the passive/active, transgressive/conforming characters in the two plays: Volumnia AND Virgilia, Tamora AND Lavinia.
- 2) Michaela Válková states that Lavinia is "the only one who actually fits the oversimplified assertions [...] about the passive, domestic roles of women in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies". However, much the same has been claimed for Virgilia in *Coriolanus*. Is there a difference in the portrayal of two characters? How would the defendant compare them?
- 3) With respect to the theoretical grounding of her thesis, how would the defendant interpret Lavinia's investment in the patriarchal values in her interaction with Tamora? She seems to suggest that this problematizes Lavinia's status as a sympathetic character; are there alternative interpretations?

In conclusion, despite the reservations voiced above, I consider the thesis to be fully in conformity with the standards for an academic work on this level. I recommend it for defence with the provisional grade of **very good (velmi dobře)**.

Prague, 3 June 2022

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