



The Woman In The Scene

English Literature and
Drama Studies

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INTRODUCTION

I worked on the presentation and performativity of gender in Shakespeare's plays, specifically his last tragedy 'Coriolanus'. My focus was on how gender affected characters actions and reception; for example, how power operates within the play when it belongs to Coriolanus, the hyper-masculine tragic hero as opposed to Volumnia, his possessive mother.

(now here)

GENDER STUDIES AND JUDITH BUTLER

When Judith Butler published her seminal work on gender studies in 1990, *Gender Trouble*, she proposed that gender was performative, a series of repeated acts that society would say is male or female. Topics of trans and non-binary identity are at the forefront of gender and queer studies today, breaking away from traditional ideas of gender roles in favour of a more fluid understanding of what it means to be 'male' and 'female'. The discourse surrounding gender roles before the 20th century frames them as rigid and perpetually there. However, I applied Butler's ideas of gender performativity onto Shakespeare's plays (which predate her work by nearly 400 years).

WHY CORIOLANUS?

Coriolanus is one of the less performed plays of Shakespeare's canon. It follows a single-minded war hero who is being forced to vie for a political position by his overbearing Mother. Within the play there are clear gender roles throughout; the three women first appear "sewing" (I.iii.1) and discuss "[playing] the idle housewife" (I.iii.70) while the male characters are returning and embarking for war. Coriolanus in particular embodies a lot of the traits we typically deem as 'masculine': he is strong, brave, athletic, strong-minded, and confident. Throughout the play multiple characters even call Coriolanus a "Worthy man", reinforcing that image of 'ideal manliness' that manifests itself through Coriolanus' character. However, Coriolanus ultimately does not integrate back into Roman society and is relegated to a "boy" (V.vi.101) just before his death.

(on you go)

ANALYSIS EXAMPLE

Shakespeare here is emphasising the bond between Coriolanus and the women he will portray in destroying Rome, however he focuses on the gendered aspect of this argument. Other characters plead for the lives of the consul but to no avail; it is the plea that the women in Coriolanus' family will be "more unfortunate than all living women" that is a key point of hers. Furthermore, by re-enforcing the societal roles they serve to Coriolanus through mirrored listing ("mother, wife and child" to "son, the husband and the father") Shakespeare emphasises not the emotional ties between them but the socially constructed connections.

WHAT DID I FIND?

My work showed that while the characters certainly acted out their respective gender stereotypes, they also consciously manipulated them to gain control over the events of the play. This can be seen in Volumnia's speech during Act V when she is convincing Coriolanus not to destroy Rome. Keep in mind that almost every other male character has tried (and failed) to stop him.

VOLUMNIA:

Should we be silent and not speak, our raiment
And state of bodies would bewray what life
We have led since thy exile. Think with thyself
How more unfortunate than all living women
Are we come hither: since that thy sight, which should
Make our eyes flow with joy, hearts dance with comforts,
Constrains them weep and shake with fear and sorrow;
Making the mother, wife and child to see
The son, the husband and the father tearing
His country's bowels out.

(V.iii.105-116)

WHY IS THIS USEFUL?

In challenging the stereotypes we have about gender throughout history we can enrich our own understanding of the topic. If Shakespeare and his audiences were self-aware about the performativity of gender and the key role it played in determining societal structures then it suggests that concepts of gender fluidity and spectrum are not as new as we might think.

(almost there!)