Women’s voices in 16th century literature.
By Kelly Korim and Professor Victoria Burke.

Introduction

In William Shakespeare’s Love’s Labour’s Lost, the women demonstrate superior rhetorical skills and more intellectual freedom than modern readers would expect for females during the sixteenth century. By comparing this play to Sir Philip Sidney’s prose romance the Old Arcadia and Baldassare Castiglione’s dialogue The Book of the Courtier, it becomes clear that Shakespeare was not the only author interested in female intelligence. This study, however, focuses on how unique Shakespeare’s portrayal of female characters is in comparison to other authors during the sixteenth century. It also examines how these political women outwit their male counterparts by doing a close reading of each individual text. While this research does prove that other authors were engaging with intelligent female characters, it is apparent that Shakespeare allowed the women exceptional rhetorical wit and freedom in comparison to the male characters.

Passage Analysis

Love’s Labour’s Lost

“Princess of France: We are wise girls to mock our lovers so… / None are so surely caught when they are / caught / As wit turned fool, folly in wisdom hatched / Hath wisdom’s warrant, and the help of / school, / And wit’s own grace, to grace a learned fool” (Love’s Labour’s Lost 5.2.58-72).

In this passage, the Princess of France discusses with her ladies the ways in which they will outwit their ridiculous male counterparts. The Princess’s repetition of words helps emphasize her point as she repeats words dealing with intelligence such as “wise”, “wit” and “fool”. The use of mirroring and anadiplosis in line 70 highlights the men’s lack of wisdom, despite their education by accentuating the words “wit”, “fool”, “folly” and “wisdom”. Another rhetorical device the Princess uses is a chiasmus in line 72. She does this by “criss-crossing” two separate ideas creating an ABBA effect (“wit”, “grace” and “grace”, “learned”).

Old Arcadia

“. . . under her lips of those armed ranks, all armed in the most pure white, and keeping the most precise order of military discipline . . . his promise began to have but a fainting force . . . so that rising softly from her, overmastered with the fury of delight, having all his senses partial against himself and inclined to his well beloved adversary, he was bent to take the advantage of the weakness of the watch and see whether at that season he could win the bulwark before timely help might come” (Old Arcadia 177).

Here, Pamela sleeps on Musidorus’ lap, after they have sung stylistically balanced verses to one another, which demonstrates their equal intellect. Despite promising her to wait until marriage to consummate their relationship, Musidorus attempts to rape her. Sidney’s use of diction highlights the cruelty of the scene as he uses military language to describe the act. Pamela’s lips are described as “armed ranks”, which keep “the most precise order of military discipline”. Musidorus’ desires are also described with military language, but Sidney makes him the attempted conqueror. The language used to describe Musidorus’s intentions describes the invasion of a city’s defensive wall, just as he wants to invade Pamela. Despite his promise to wait to consummate their relationship, and their eloquent and well balanced verses prior to this passage, Musidorus’ unsuccessful attempt at rape demonstrates his disregard for a woman’s expressed desire.

The Book of the Courtier

“I say that for her that liveth in Court, me thinketh there beconeth unto her above all other things, a certain sweetness in language that may delute, whereby she may gentle entretain all kinds of men with talke worth the heavynge… accompanying with sober and quiet maners and with the honestye that must alwaye be a stay to all her deedes, a readye livelines of wit, whereby she may declare her selfe far wide from all dulnesse: but with such a kinde of goodness, that she may be esteemed no lesse chaste, wise and courteise, then pleasant, fast conccited and sober’ (The Thirde Booke of the Courtier 217).

Here, Lord Julian discusses some of the traits required for a proper and respectable female courtier. While he does believe that women require “a certain sweetness” and wit in language, he argues that these qualities must come with “sober and quiet maners” so she does not appear less chaste. While he does believe that courtly women require intelligence and wit, he puts constraint on their ability for free speech by requiring women to respect certain sets of manners. The diction in this section highlights this belief as Lord Julian lists all the qualities she must have alongside her wit. It is important to note however, that while women could be constrained by their necessary manners, a woman oversees this dialogue. She is therefore placed in a position of power throughout the debate.

Conclusions

All three texts read for this research project allow women wit and intelligence, however Shakespeare gives women the most rhetorical freedom in Love’s Labour’s Lost. Throughout the play, the Princess of France and her ladies constantly outmanoeuvre the men intellectually and prove their superior rhetorical abilities. While Pamela’s verses stylistically match those of Musidorus in the Old Arcadia, he undercuts the importance of her intellect and desires with his attempted rape. In The Book of the Courtier, Lord Julian argues in favour of intelligent and witty courtly ladies, but restricts their rhetorical freedom by enforcing the manners expected from a woman. Overall, the men in the Old Arcadia and The Book of the Courtier limit their female counterparts’ intellectual capabilities, whereas the Princess of France and her ladies in Love’s Labour’s Lost do not allow the men the opportunity to dictate their speech and point out their foolish behaviour. Shakespeare therefore created the most progressively witty female characters, which sets Love’s Labour’s Lost apart from other sixteenth-century texts.

Methodology

Read and analyze three sixteenth-century primary texts (a play, a prose romance and a dialogue)

Apply different critical theories including:

New Criticism
which allows for a close reading of the texts

New Historicism
in order to place the texts in their respective historical period

Feminist Theories
which will look at the performance of gender

Research and examine secondary, peer-reviewed sources which deal with the individual texts

References


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Contact

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