



The Fort of Chastity : Feminine Identity In Some English Renaissance History Plays

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في عدد من مسرحيات

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الملخص

يؤكد هذا البحث أن تدريس نصوص أدبية أخلاقية يسهم إسهاماً فعالاً في عملية التوعية الاجتماعية، الأمر الذي يمكّننا من أداء دورنا التربوي والتوجيهي، وربط الجامعة بالمجتمع، ودفع عجلة التنمية في بلادنا. ولهذا الغرض اخترنا ثلاث

مسرحيات تشجع المرأة على التقيد بالعفة والطهارة اللتين كانتا سلوكين مفضلين ومحبيين في عصر النهضة الإنكليزية واللذين من خلالهما تستطيع المرأة بناء هويتها الشخصية والاجتماعية. وتدور المسرحيات المختارة حول موضوع حصار الملك لامرأة شريفة، ويبرز هذا الحصار امتحاناً لمقدرة المرأة على الحفاظ على شرفها وسمعتها.

ففي مسرحية (الملك إدوارد الثالث) يحاول بطل المسرحية إغواء كونتييسة ساليزبري لكنها تقاوم بعناد وإصرار كبيرين يجعلانه يشعر بخطئه ويسطر عفتها وإخلاصها لزوجها على صفحات التاريخ المجيد.

وفي مسرحية (الملك جون وماتيلدا) تؤثر تلك المرأة الموت على التخلي عن عذريتها وطهارتها، وتقاوم الملك كثيراً وتهرب منه مراراً، وتقاوم الرغبة في الحصول على المال والجاه وتفضل أن ترضي ضميرها الذي تشعر أنه يراقبها دوماً.

وأما في مسرحية (الملك إدوارد الرابع) فنرى أن السيدة شور تتخلى عن شرفها وضميرها مقابل الجاه والمال، فتفقد زوجها وسمعتها. وسرعان ما يزول هذا الجاه عند موت الملك الذي يحميها، فتطرد من البلاط الملكي وتلقى في الشارع، فتدرك أخطاءها التي تحاول التكفير عنها، وتطلب المغفرة من زوجها الذي تموت بجانبه، الأمر الذي يوحى، مجازاً بعودتها إلى الرباط الزوجي وإخلاصها لزوجها، ويشير إلى محاولتها بناء ما هدمته من خلال أفعالها المشينة.

وباختصار، من خلال هذه الدراسة يمكننا تعميق مبادئ العفة والطهارة التي تقوم عليها العلاقات الأسرية الناجحة والتي تعد أساس استقرار المجتمع والحياة البشرية.

Abstract

This article stresses the point that teaching moralistic literature can effectively contribute to the enhancement of social awareness, something, which enables us to perform our educational and instructional roles , relate academicism to life and hence accelerate the development of our society. For this reason , I have chosen to examine three plays , which encourage women to act up to the principles of chastity through which they can achieve a sense of personal identity. In these plays , women face a siege , which emerges as a test of their chastity.

In *Edward III* , the Countess of Salisbury resists the title character that seeks to seduce her. Her resistance prompts the king to align her to the system of fame and history , and hence , she constructs a sense of personal identity. Like the chaste Countess , Matilda , in *King John and Matilda* , does not surrender to the title figure. Her obduracy leads her into the domain of fame and history. In *Edward IV* , Jane Shore , on the contrary , fails to maintain her chastity , a failure that creates in her a sense of her shame , worthlessness and nothingness. It is through her chastity and repentance that she eventually seeks to brighten her name.

In brief , this study enables us to promote the ideals of feminine chastity and purity upon which successful familial relationships are based , and which are in turn the foundation of stability in society and human life at large.

Generally speaking , English Renaissance history plays present chastity as a framework within which women can construct a sense of personal identity. This idea powerfully occurs in the anonymous play *Lochrine* “Ladies must regard their honest name “
(1) The notion of “name” suggests the presence of a public

judgmental spectatorship whose work takes the form of creating fame and shame. These judgments (namely fame and shame) are imagined by chaste women to go down in history.

In endeavoring to look at chaste women's awareness of history as a preserver of fame and shame, I would like to present briefly the historiographic background to the English Renaissance history plays. To begin with, in his *polychronicon*, Ranulf Higden treats history as "a pure memorial" (2), that is, "the giver of immortality to both good and evil, fame and infamy." (3) Edward Hall quoted Cicero when he once more defined history as "the life of memory". (4) He saw history as the only means of fighting "the deadly dart," "the defacer", oblivion. (5) Like his fellow Renaissance historiographers, John Stow asserts that history gives immortality to men and events worth of remembrance. (6) But in *History of the World*, "the culminating document of Renaissance historiography in England" Sir Walter Raleigh translates Cicero's description of history as "the life of memory" into visual symbolism. (7) The frontispiece shows History as a female figure. Even as she treads down Death and Oblivion, she supports a globe, which is touched on one side by a winged, and laurel-wreathed Fama Bona (i.e., Good Fame), and on the other by a winged but foully-spotted Fama Mala (i.e., Bad Fame). (This emblematic presentation of history is interpreted in a poem said to be by Ben Jonson:

From *Death* and darke *Oblivion*)neere the same(
The *Mistresse of Mans Life*, grave History,
Raising the *World* to good, or *Evill* fame,
Doth indicate it to Etemitie.
Times Witnesse, *Herald of Antiquitie*.

The light of Truth , and life of Memorie. (8)

It is in view of these Renaissance attitudes to history as a preserver of fame and memory that we would best appreciate the women's incessant attempts at maintaining their chastity.

In the plays to be considered here , there emerges the metaphor of "siege" , a siege in that a king passionately seeks to seduce a woman. For the woman , the siege is a personal experience , a test of her chastity , a test that proceeds along the person – office framework. The "office" metaphor stands for all that court life promises : pomp , wealth and pleasure : vanities which fail to produce a sense worth and identity by reason of their externality and evanescence as we shall see. The "person" idea , however , suggests a solace within , a solace , which comes from , awareness that , through her chaste conduct, a woman enjoys a public and personal (internal) approval. A chaste woman enjoys a public approval in the presence of an imagined admiring spectatorship. She also enjoys an inner peace in that she feels at ease before her witnessing and judging conscience. A woman's surrender during a siege , on the other hand , is a defeat , a violation of her conscience and her chastity. This violation is imagined to bring about such visual metaphors as those of blemishing , "blotting" , and "staining." In its viewing and reading of these signs , a public spectatorship creates shame judgments , which spoil a woman's good name and eventually produce in her feelings of worthlessness.

In *Edward III* , the countess of Salisbury experiences a "beseege" at the hands of the title king. (9) This "beseege" , to quote her father's words , is a choice between "honors golden name" and "the black faction of bed blotting shame" (II. i. 456-7)

During this siege the countess shows every resistance. Her resistance (that is , her “words”) is both a process of self-presentation and a process of self-revelation.

King Edward. It is thy beautie that I would enjpy.

Countess. O were is painted , I would wipe it of ,

And dispossesse myself, to giue it thee.

(II. i. 228-30,227)

Her use of the word “painted” heralds her incessant attempts at ironizing the king through stressing his externality. Also , her assertion that her beauty is not “painted” suggests her interiority , that is , her conception of herself in terms of her “vertue” which is her “life” and “soul”. (II. i. 224,231,338) In unraveling her interiority , the countess moves to emphasize that her “bodie” is the “pallace” to her “soul” , “an Angell , pure , deuine , vnspotted” (II. i. 237,239,240).

If I should leaue her house , my Lord , to thee ,

I kill my poore soule and my poore soule me. (II. i. 241-2).

It is to be noted that when the king realizes that she cannot “lend” him her body to “sport with all” , he moves to ask for her “loue” (II. i. 234,247). Again , she ironizes him by fleshing out her constancy to her husband. “You ... prophane the holie name of loue”. she says to him.

That loue you offer me you cannot giue.

For Caesar owes that tribute to his Queene ,

That loue you beg of me I cannot giue.

For Sara owes that dutie to her Lord (II. i. 250-4).

And , in terms of her constancy and her conformity to “marriage sacred law” we would best appreciate her assertion that her husband (“who now doth loyall seruice in his warres”) “now lies fast asleep within (her) hart”. (II. i. 271-2. ii. 176-7)

Her obduracy emphasizes the sense of contentment , which she derives from her constancy to her husband , contentment already indicated in her celebration of her house :

Our house , my liege , is like a Country swaine ,

Whose habit rude and manners blunt and playne

Presageth nought , yet inly beautified

With bounties , riches and faire hidden pride. (II. i. 145-8)

Evidently , her house (which is symbolic of her constancy as a wife) is far better than “the polluted closet of a king”. (II. i. 433). And in an attempt to live up to her constancy , she “put (s)” the king a “choice” , an “either... or” choice :

Either sweare to leave thy most vnholie sute

And neuer hence forth to solicit me ,

Or else , by heauen , this sharpe pointed knife

Shall staine thy earth with that which thou would staine

My pore cahst blood (II. i. (183,184-8)

This virtuous “either... or” decision is basically a quest for identity : either in chastity or in posthumous fame , that is , “an honorable graue”. (II. i. 432) Her attempt at inscribing her name on the pages of history could be best seen in her assertion that her “chast blood” would turn into ink which would “staine (the king’s) “earth” or rather his renown.

It is to be stressed that her noble “either.. or” attitude towards herself greatly influences the king : it first awakens him to a sense of shame and then prompts him to celebrate her.

Arise , true English ladie , whome our Ile
May better boast of than euer Romaine might
Of her , whose ransackt treasurie hath taskt
The vaine ink of so many pens :
Arise , and be my fault thy honors fame ,
Which after ages shall enrich thee with (II. i. 194-9).

The king’s reference to the process of writing and fame-making indicates his attempt to align the Countess to the system of history , an attempt emphasized by his reference to the Roman Lucrece and her storied chastity.

Like the Edward III-Countess of Salisbury playlet , Robert Davenport’s *King John and Matilda* (1628-1634) proceeds along the “siege” metaphor. King John passionately pursues the love of Matilda who has already pledged to “live and die a maid”. (10) Matild’s offstage oath of loyalty to her late betrothed. Earl Robert Huntington , does not transform her into an emblem of the chaste maiden. This notion could be powerfully seen in her knowledge of King John , knowledge evident in her dismissal of his “too passionate pleadings” as coming from his “lust”.

Alas , great sir , your Queen , you cannot make me ,
What is it then instructs your tongue ? Oh sir !
In things not right ,
Lust is but loves well languag’d hypocrite. (I. i. 57,88-91)

Hence , Matild's struggle is a gainst a lustful king. Fending him off , she expresses a readiness to "fall a sacrifice to vertue" (I. i. 95-6) This readiness to sacrifice herself emphasizes the idea that she constructs herself in terms of her virtue or chastity. It is in this way that we would note that Matilda's struggle against John is a struggle for chastity , a struggle for identity , a struggle , which enlivens her praxis.

Her career as a "Celestiall Souldier that keep'st a fort of Chastity" begins with her escape to "Baynards castle" , her father's abode. (V. iii. 152-3, I. i. 115). "oh" , Matilda says ,

She had a violent need of Castles where a king

Layes such violent siege (I. i. -116-7)

But her real power during this siege stems from within , that is, from an inner space : oh truth ,

Thou art (whilst tenant in a noble brest)

A crown of Christall in ivory chest (I. i. 117-9)

Matilda's interiorization of her "truth" or "vertue" as a staying power soon develops. At Hartford castle , where the Queen severely tortures Matilda for refusing to attend on her at court , the latter display a heroic patience. The maiden asserts her inward victory , that is , her persistent resistance. She also asks the Queen (who later reveres her) to inform the king of the futility of his hot pursuit. "Forget not/To tell him this" , Matelda says ,

That woman in whose heart

Vertue and honoure stand a paire of Centinels ,

The sea may sooner flame , fire admit frost ,

Ere such a woman fall from heaven. (II. iii. 62-6)

“Vertue” is her chastity. “Honour” is her renown as a chaste maiden. It is in this sense that we would best appreciate her interiorization of her virtue and honours as sentries or rather defensive forts in the midst of this siege. It is to these forts that she retreats. “Vertue hath made me miserable” , Matilda says amid another capture at the hands of the king. (III. iii. 18) Following her deliverance at the hands of her cousin , however , Matilda suffers other captures. These captures emerge as personal experience , that is , trials or tests of her ability to face adversity and act up to her chastity. Matilda’s most poignant trial is externalized in her scene with Hubert and the Queen. In that scene , Hubert emerges as the “tempter” , that is , “lusts irreligious linguist” in view of his description of the attractions of the court. (IV. ii. 25) The Queen , on the contrary , attempts to uplift the languishing maid.

Queen. Matilda , where’s that spirit that kept thy
vertue valiant and bold ?

Matilda If vertue so ill pay us ,

Who would be virtuous ? (IV. ii. 5-7)

Despite the Queen’s uplifting words , Matilda cannot pull herself together amid this internal crisis (“I can resist no longer”). (IV. ii. 28) Her crisis is externalized as follows :

There is a voice

Of flesh and frailty in me , that still cries ,

Matilda take these pleasures , and I am now

The kings for ever. (IV. ii. 38-41)

This crisis does not last long. The voice of chastity triumphs , a triumph first implied by her silence and then expressed in her

entreaty to be escorted to a monastery. "Call her dissembling" , the Queen first says ,

No sinne , good heavens , for she is still a Saint. (IV. ii. 69-70) "Victorious Maid" , Hubert then says "rhetoric is poor in thy praise". (IV. ii. 98-9) Matilda's refuge in the Dunmow Abbey is a refuge from the king's "violent pursuit" , a retreat into her interiorized fort , that is , her "fort of chastity" (V. i. 13) Her chastity is wonderfully emblemized. Matilda , "a chaste Dove / That hath given up her name to heaven " , the abbess asserts , "stands / white as her spotlesse vesture". (V. i. 13-5) Likewise , Matilda's interiorized fort is exteriorized in that she enters above, that is , on the abbey's battlements. (V. i. 3) Her praxis as a votary is the consummation of her chastity. Her father's and the king's pleas that she yield to the temptation of the court emerge as an abortive attempt to shake her well-established solace and identity as a vestal. "She is past all recovery" , John fumes as he plots her murder. (V. i. 98)

In the midst of death throes , Matilda displays a sense of inward triumph. She first solaces herself that the afflictions that she has suffered through preserving her chastity will lead her into "eternity". (V. ii. 86-8) Adding to her heroic stature is the tone of defiance with which she breathes her last ;

O tell him I am past his strong temptation.

And though wild burning back'd his hot desire ,

Like perfect Gold I did outlive the fire (V. ii. 98-100)

This is a triumph of a "Celestial Souldier" over King John, a triumph of chastity and identity. But more interesting , however, is Matilda's other victory , that is , her attempt at blackening his name by aligning him to the system of history :

Tell him , when in stories he shall stand ,
 When men shall read the Conquerors great name ,
 Voluptuous Rufus , that unkind brother Beauclark ,
 And Lyon-hearted Richard , when they come
 Unto his name , with sighs it shall be said ,

This was King John... the murderer of a Maid (V. ii. 91-7)

Her reference to the “sighs” of posterity is telling because it is within these sighs that she will find solace and survival. Also , these sighs are intended as a gesture of slandering John. In this way , we would best note that John’s earlier appeal against an imagined spectatorship-

Time do not keep
 This Deed for story , Memory fall asleep
 In black oblivions Cavern , let this day
 Still skip the Kalend , and be wip’d away
 From all discourse.

Is of no avail as the play powerfully reveals. (V. i. 99-103)
 The Play’s celebration of Matilda’s martyrdom takes the form of a befitting funerary ceremony alive with prayer and song.

Heaven hath her pure part , whil’st on Earth , her name
 Moves in the Spheare of refulgent Fame. (V. iii. 113-4)
 And , besides embalming her , King John promises :
 We’ll pay
 To sweet Matilda’s memory and her sufferings ,
 A monthly obsequie... (Sweetened by

The wealthy wose of a tear-troubled eye)... (V. iii. 202-5)

Similarly , Mistress Shore undergoes a “siege” at the hands of the title figure in Thomas Heywood’s *King Edward IV* (1594-1599). “With a violent siege” Jane complains , King Edward “labours to break into” her “fairest jewel” , her “plighted faith” as a wife. (11) This siege causes some “paine” to Jane , a pain exteriorized in her confidential interview with Mistress Blague. (p.75) This interview amounts to an internal drama , a drama of choice. This choice is set within the “person-office” framework. “If you should yield” , Mistress Blague begins with this military term ,

Your vertuous name were soild

And your beloued husband a scron

And if not yield , this likely that his loue , ...

Will conuert to hate ,

And who knows not a princes hate is death ? (p. 73)

The term “soild” is indicative of the princes an imagined spectatorship that would slander Jane if she yielded. jane hesitates over the choice between shame and death :

Then counsell me what I were best to do. (p. 73)

Her hesitation is highly ironic in view of her assertion that “vertue liues when pomp consumes to dust”. (p. 74) Jane’s assertion (“virtue liues”) emphasises that through her constancy as a wife , a public spectatorship will immortalize her name. Again her hesitation is ironized in view of her awareness of her inward solace and content which come from her watching conscience :

Here do I lieu , although in mean estate ,

Yet with a conscience free from all debate.

Thus , Jane's choice could be summed up as follows. It is a choice between "the name of Mistress" (that is , chastity , solace , and hence identity) and the tole "Madam" (namely , shame , guilt and pomp – which "consumes to dust"). (p. 74) Jane's hesitation lends vigour to Mistress Blague's later assertion that the former was "ambitious" and faintly stood on terms of modesty. (p. 160)

Hence , Jane

Yeelded vp the fort ,

Wherein lay all the riches of my joy. (p. 84)

She did not "indure"

The longest and greatest siege

That euer battered on poor chastity. (p. 84)

Obviously , Jane is not an emblem of "chastity" or rather of "poor chastity". This point is shown in her dissimulation , that is , her assertion to her husband that she does not know the identity of the disguised king (who has already discovered himself to her). (p. 67)

However , corroborative indication that Jane is not simply a fallen "chastity lies in her revelation of her ambition for "the pleasure of the court" as well as in her awareness of her guilt. (p. 84) Jane's awareness of the guilt is voiced as early as her first scene where she enters clad in her "courtly robes". (p. 82) To Ayre (for whose son she has obtained a pardon) Jane says :

No , without gifts , God grant I may do good.

For all my good cannot redeem my ill. (p. 82)

Jane's awareness of her own "ill" ignites with her encounters with a public judgmental spectatorship , encounters which intensify her public humiliation. "All the coals of my poor charity" , she sighs , "cannot consume the scandall of my name". (p. 121) Jane's first encounters with a judging spectatorship takes the form of her conversation with her husband who first asserts to her that she is "now... nor widow , nor wife" and then renames her as King Edward's "concubine". (pp. 84,82) But her encounter with Queen Elizabeth , Edward's wife , is a more shattering experience for Jane. Elizabeth's mockery , namely , her "words" ("Queen shore" ... "Empresse Shore" ... "King Edward's bedfellow") awakens Jane to the enormity of her "fault" and "sinne" , an enormity that culminates in the former's later "mercy" :

Your princely pity now doth wound me more

Than all your threatenings euer did before. (pp. 129,130)

Jane's inward "wound" (that is , her awareness that her "fault" is now "more odious in (her) eyes") crystallizes into a sense of her worthlessness :

Oh , royall Edward ! Loue , loue thy beauteous Queen ,

The only perfect mirror of her kind ,

For all the choicest virtues can be named !

Oh , let not my bewitching lookes withdraw

Your deare affection from your dearer queen ! (pp. 129,130)

"Dearer" is best interpreted as "worthier" , an interpretation supported by Jane's reference to herself as "the worthlesse creature on this earth". (p. 131)

Jane's assertion of her worthlessness indicates her awareness of her loss of her worthiness that she derives from her chastity and name as a wife , and emphasises her externality. Her sense of externality is summed up in her reference to her "bewitching looks" which have attracted Edward , "her chiefest stay" and "the only staff she ... leane (s) upon". (pp. 130,144) It is to be emphasised that King Edward's death brings about a reversal of her fortunes. She is expelled from the court and sentenced to do public penance.

Jane's feeling of worthlessness intensify greatly in the midst of her "shameful penance" (p. 158) Shame , for her , does not disappear with the removal of the visual tokens of her punishment. It is internalized – it "sits branded on my forehead still". (p. 165) Jane's sense of worthlessness , however , increases when she thinks of her desolation. ("I have neither where to shroud myself , / Nor anyone to make my moan vnto"). (p. 166) But she soon finds "some recourse of succour" (p. 16) She tutors herself to be patient :

Come , patience , then and though my body pine ,

Make then a banquet to refresh my soule

Lat hearts deep throbbing sighs be all my bread

My drink salt teares , my guests repentant thoughts. (p. 166)

The notion of "repentant thoughts" as her "guests" suggests her attempt to re-form herself , an attempt that culminates in her reception of a prayer-book as

Food for my life ,

The soueraign balm for my sick conscience. (p. 167)

This “sweet prayer-book” , Jane hopes , will “be my soules pleasure and delight / to wipe my sins out of Jehouaes sight”. (p. 167) With this , we would note her solace before an imagined watching divinity , whom she believes to have sent her reielf in her misery. (p. 171) Jane’s solace , however , consummates in her last-minute reunion with her husband , a reunion that indicates return to her chastity and wedlock. Her

Oh. Liuing death ! euen in this dying life ,

Yet , ere I go , once , Matthew kiss thy wife

is a gesture of inner contentment and a moment of identity.

(p. 183).

This moment is emblemized prior to their deaths as follows :

Jane , sit thou there ! Here I my place will haue ,

Giue me thy hand , thus we embrace our graue. (p. 183)

Thus , we note that the chaste women view a king’s “most unholy sute” as a siege , that is , a trial or a test of their ability to face adversity and act up to their chastity. It is in terms of their chastity that the Countess of Salisbury and Matilda manage to engrave their honest names upon the enduring pages of history and fame. But , Jane Shore , as we have already seen , fails to construct a sense of personal identity because she does not maintain her chastity.

And , in brief , teaching such moralistic plays helps us to show that if women and men live up to the ideals of chastity and virtue, they can form healthy familial ties. This can also help women to perform their essential roles in the society whose half-if not more-they constitute.

Notes

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