Feminist Interpretation of Shakespeare's Plays

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Abstract: Shakespeare, the cultural giant of the Renaissance, created a series of vivid and glorious female images in his comedies, which were loved and praised by readers from different countries and different classes. Feminist thought first appeared in Shakespeare's plays; The feminist literature that originated in this period is bound to go far-reaching under the influence of the continuous development of feminist literary criticism. This paper attempts to analyze Shakespeare's three love tragedies-Romeo and Juliet, and how the heroine in The Merchant of Venice fought and rebelled under the oppression of patriarchy, how to subvert the traditional female image and break through the prejudice against women in feudal society. They control the discourse power and destiny of the hero and attack the traditional patriarchal social structure. This paper mainly discusses how the three heroines bravely resisted the bondage of patriarchal feudal tradition to women and realized their self-consciousness from the perspective of feminism.

1. Introduction

In the history of human civilization, no matter in the East or in the West, women's status is coincidentally below that of men. Although there has been a history of matriarchal society in Chinese history, it is still a short moment in the long history of human development; No matter how the godmother of Western Christianity is worshipped, or how the medieval knight tradition preaches "women first", women are just a sacred and idealized object[1]. Although feminist literature, as a literary school, did not really emerge until the 20th century with the Western feminist movement, the beginning of feminist literature can be traced back to the Renaissance, and feminist thought, as a part of humanistic thought, was vividly reflected in Shakespeare's dramas [2]. Shakespeare is a humanist. In his works, he always vividly displays the experiences of the heroes and heroines, to show the depth of the story's contradictions, to reveal the depth of the characters' thoughts and personalities, and to give readers a deep feeling of thought and a great shock to the soul [3]. Especially in the portrayal of women, Shakespeare broke away from the influence of feudal churches and various feudal thoughts, and created a new realm of describing women. He emphasized women's intelligence and strength, advocated that women have the right to pursue wealth and happiness, opposed the ascetic thought of Catholicism, opposed feudal oppression with "universal love", and opposed the medieval hierarchy with praise of love, friendship and personal morality [4].

Shakespeare was a great writer who truly recognized the status of women in his time, described and praised women equally. As one of the pioneers of Shakespeare's Renaissance, his creative style is not only influenced by the characteristics of the times, but also his creative content is bound to be based on the social conditions at that time. Therefore, his works must also reflect the real social conditions at that time [5]. From this point of view, The Merchant of Venice, through Shakespeare's description, deeply excavated the social status of women at that time, and put forward new thoughts on feminism in view of this situation. Shakespeare's original intention of creating The Merchant of Venice is to emancipate women's minds, promote the awakening of feminism and call for women's freedom and equality [6]. Therefore, we say that the value of Shakespeare's works lies not only in his literary attainments, but also in the influence of his works on people's minds. His works Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Macbeth and The Merchant of Venice have already become well-known

classics. These works not only reflected the social reality in Europe at the end of 16th century and the beginning of 17th century, but also promoted the prevailing humanistic movement at that time, and portrayed a series of vivid characters with their profound brushstrokes, such as Romeo, Juliet, Hamlet, Sherlock and so on. It is through the incisive depiction of these characters that the complexity of human nature is revealed and their works have eternal value [7]. At the same time, his plays also describe many characters, who have become the symbols of that era. As Goethe said, Shakespeare is a master of human nature record. In the 37 plays he created in his life, he successfully created 128 female images, some of whom were portrayed as tender and beautiful beauties, others were insulted and damaged people waiting for men to save them, and others were pleasure-seeking sluts or evil and jealous witches [8].

Therefore, the issue of women in the marginal position of the male dominated society has always been a concern. Although feminist literature, as a literary school, did not really emerge until the 20th century with the Western feminist movement, the beginning of feminist literature can be traced back to the Renaissance, and feminist thought, as a part of humanistic thought, was vividly reflected in Shakespeare's plays.

2. Female Images in Shakespeare's Works

2.1 Women's Images Pursuing Personality Liberation and Love Freedom

The play The Merchant of Venice basically revolves around Portia's mate selection and court debate. The story mainly narrates that Antonio, a businessman, mortgaged his merchant ship to borrow usury from Shylock, a Jewish businessman, in order to help his best friend Bassanio propose to Portia, and signed a vicious agreement of "cutting off a pound of meat if he can't repay the loan on time" [9]. Humanism, as the core of the Renaissance, advocates human rights, the liberation of humanity and individuality. Human beings can change the world by controlling their own rationality and eliminating external interference according to their own wishes, so as to achieve success and happiness [10]. Then women, a special group that has been oppressed and bound for a long time, will become a good material for humanists to publicize their ideas. The typical story of how a female character tries to overcome the obstacles of the objective environment and finally gets her own happiness by portraying the image of a female character provides powerful evidence for the humanistic thought, which is the original intention of the humanists. It is an independent female image that can respond calmly and rationally in an emergency. She pretended to be a young lawyer, cleverly dealt with Shylock and saved Anthony. In this sense, many literary works in the Renaissance have already taken on the color of feminist literature. The second chapter of the book studies the formation of female writing perspective, mainly introduces the transformation of women's social roles, and also studies the use of the first person in female writing. As shown in Figure 1.

Fig.1 The Merchant of Venice Theatre

Since ancient times, there have been works created by women in China. However, the contents and methods of these works basically revolve around male chauvinism, and they have not really liberated women's thoughts, which has an important relationship with the social environment and class environment at that time. Although female literature is the literature created by women, it not only refers to gender literature, but also the works created by women under the new historical conditions. Therefore, women's literature not only calls for the perfection of human nature, but also longs for women's liberation. In order to find true love, Portia violated his father's last wish of "choosing marriage in three boxes". Portia pursues freedom of love, and her mate selection condition is not family status and wealth, but personal character, appearance and talent. Therefore, like the women in previous literary works, they still come and go in a hurry in historical events and fictional stories. Their traces have been washed away by the river of time and history.

2.2 Feminist Consciousness in Shakespeare's Works

From the point of view of modern philosophy and social movement, feminism originated from the enlightenment thought in the 18th century. For a long time before this, women had been on the edge of mainstream society, and their subjective consciousness was seriously lacking. With the development of society, women are gradually aware of the inequality of status and have a sense of awakening. However, in the 20th century, with the vigorous development of the women's liberation movement, the feminist movement reached its climax, women's consciousness was constantly awakened and their status was constantly improved. Under the influence of this social trend of thought, feminist literary criticism has emerged one after another and developed rapidly. Rather than saying that feminist thought is a part of humanistic thought, it is better to say that the author chooses love related to women, and the topic of marriage is to better publicize his humanistic thought. Taking The Merchant of Venice and Romeo and Juliet as examples, Portia's brave behavior is not due to the requirement of her own consciousness, or that she realizes that as an independent woman, she must be able to calmly and bravely deal with it at critical moments. In The Merchant of Venice, Portia knows very well that she is in a patriarchal society. Therefore, when she rejects people she does not like to her father, she does not blindly rebel, but retreats. She will take the initiative to explain the importance of rational marriage to her pursuers, and tell her father about the adverse impact of choosing this marriage on the family, Use your wisdom to let your father and your pursuers give up on their own initiative. In the patriarchal society at that time, Shakespeare noticed that women were the biggest victims under the feudal autocracy. He sympathized with them, lamented their misfortunes in his works, and at the same time, he exposed the evil of feudalism by creating new women to express the humanistic feelings of freedom and equality.

Shakespeare's plays in the middle period are more based on reality, and his realistic view of drama has been formed. His intention is to "reflect life", to make the drama "the epitome of the times", and to "show the true nature of good and evil, and show its times its own model of evolution and development". Its core lies in opposing the absolute binary cultural opposition model, subverting the traditional patriarchal society, calling on the society to pay attention to women and strive for women's rights and interests, so as to achieve a harmonious and balanced state between women and men in a common society. William Shakespeare's play The Merchant of Venice, through the portrayal of female characters such as Portia, on the one hand, affirmed the various abilities and wisdom of women themselves, and reflected the reality that women could make a difference under the social conditions at that time, thus eulogizing the greatness of women. On the other hand, it pointed out sharply that in the patriarchal society at that time, women still could not fully realize the embarrassing situation of self-reliance.

3. Limitations of Feminist Consciousness in Shakespeare's Works

3.1 Towards Diversified Feminism

In Shakespeare's time, tolerance, obedience and silence were the virtues of women. Women obey their father's wishes before marriage; Obey her husband's instructions after marriage. In

Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, although we can't see Portia's father, his power and influence are everywhere. But Portia, who lives under the patriarchal system, still can't get rid of the influence of social tradition, and she can only accept it helplessly. However, her maid still comforted her and said, "Your father is such a virtuous man, and all the saints have been blessed by gods before. Besides, the three boxes of gold, silver and lead designed by him, who understood his will and chose you, undoubtedly loved you very much." When Bassanio, the lover in her heart, was lucky enough to choose the box with Portia's head in it, Portia said with great joy and humility, "I am an uneducated girl and have no knowledge. I am glad that she is not old, and she can learn. Her kind qualities will follow your guidance. You are her master, her king, and everything that belongs to me belongs to you. I am now the owner of this building, the owner of my servants, and my own queen. From Portia's passage, we can detect this humility and obedience. She has fully accepted her subordinate position in the family, which is also what her society expects. She finally integrated into the society and formed a harmonious relationship with the society, her father and her husband. So Portia's marriage and her attitude towards Bassanio have always been the object of western feminist criticism. She was not only a very beautiful person, but also an energetic person. She was indifferent to many courtiers with old ideas at that time, because she needed to find love in her heart. What she needs is a kind of pure emotion recognized by her heart, rather than material feelings and marriage. Therefore, in the eyes of some people with humanistic flavor, such women are very beautiful and outstanding. Their struggle is more spontaneous than conscious. In fact, women's consciousness of rights has not penetrated deeply into their thoughts. Then, the contemporary American feminist historian Elizabeth Fox Genevies believes that this concept ignores the different political and economic interests among women due to their different races, classes and nationalities. Charla Ti Mohanty, a feminist scholar in the Third World, has a famous saying: "In addition to sisterhood, racism, colonialism and imperialism naturally exist." Therefore, she believes that patriarchy has always been in collusion with colonialism and imperialism, and we cannot just oppose patriarchy. As shown in Figure 2.

Fig.2 Portia's Confrontation with Her Father

In the process of criticizing western feminism, more and more feminist scholars in the third world realize that there is a huge gap between the experiences and concerns of women in the third world and those of women in western developed countries. More and more third world feminist scholars emphasize that world feminism should develop in diversity. "Feminism is worldwide, and its purpose is to liberate women from all forms of oppression, and to promote the unity among women in all countries. At the same time, feminism is national. It aims to consider the key points and strategies of women's liberation in the light of the specific culture and economy of each country." Therefore, we call on feminists not only to liberate Portia, the victim of patriarchy in

western mainstream culture, but also to sympathize with Jessica, the Jewish daughter of an alien girl, so that she can not only get rid of the oppression of patriarchy but also rescue her from the cage of racial discrimination.

3.2 The Image of Women Striving for Liberation

In Shakespeare's works, many women are brave, rebellious, and full of hope to pursue their desired happiness. However, due to the influence of the times, even if these women are brave and rebellious, even if they dare to confront the feudal forces of the old society, they still live in the patriarchal era and the world of men. Throughout many of his works, many female characters with these characteristics eventually became victims of family traditional ideas and various conspiracies. On the surface, these women are all very great and successful in history, but in fact, they are only marginal female "others", that is, the "denizens" mentioned by Butler in the theory of gender performance. She said, "I must obey my husband." For her, the patriarchal gender norm has actually become an exercise instruction. The use of ghost symbols makes the play free from the constraints of real time and space, reflecting the gender oppression suffered by women in different regions from ancient times to the present. These ghost images show the universality and continuity of women's gender identity, making the audience reflect on women's issues across time and space. Although Shakespeare's female images in his plays reflect his humanistic consciousness, including the humanistic interpretation of the concept of love, Shakespeare's creation must show certain limitations because it is deeply rooted in patriarchy. Women disguised as men pointed out the problems of the male society in male identity and language, and then returned the power to men. In this process, women were still seen as objects, and they just had the opportunity to share some of the male rights. This did not solve the problem, but improved the male society. Although feminist literature did not get real development in this period, this earliest start had a profound impact on the development of later feminist literature. Since then, until the emergence of feminist literature in the 20th century, any ideological liberation movement or revolutionary movement, women's problems will be concerned. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution awakened women's awareness of striving for equality. Influenced by them, feminist literature began to emerge.

Under the social background at that time, women had almost no educational opportunities, so no matter how she dressed, she could not be competent for the role of a judge without full ability. What's more, all the men including Shylock kept silent in the court, and only applauded. It can be seen how brilliant the female brilliance of Portia was. At this moment, Portia became the embodiment of "wisdom", while men, including her husband Bassanio, looked bleak. Although Portia looked brilliant at that moment and became the object of admiration of many men, all this was done in Portia's "male coat". It can be seen that in the society at that time, the supremacy of men was still unshakable. To some extent, it was the male superiority that gave Portia some rights and freedoms as a woman. Women should live for themselves, which is an important idea advocated by feminism. The key is that women should have an understanding of their living conditions, that is, they should have an understanding of the background environment of their society and times at that time. Most of the women in Shakespeare's works have a superior life. Their lives come from their parents, so their understanding of their father is a supreme existence. Naturally, they don't think of fighting against their father, and the deterrent power of their father is equivalent to the rights of men in a patriarchal society, so they don't realize the root of the problem from the bottom of their hearts. Therefore, they ended up with a miserable fate.

4. Conclusions

Many female images in Shakespeare's works have been endowed with the quality of a new era. From the perspective of feminism, they are all brave women who dare to pursue their own happiness and freedom. It lies not only in its rich literary value, but also in its ideological value. The Merchant of Venice, as a representative work of Shakespeare, not only reflects the secular state of European society during the Renaissance, but also records the social and historical changes in a literary way, and reveals the complexity of human nature and faltering with changing ideology

through the shaping of many vivid characters. He reappeared the contradictions of life and the characteristics of the times in a series of female images, and his contribution can not be ignored. But at the same time, through his description of some women's behaviors and language, we found that he did not completely get rid of the traditional concepts of the middle Ages, nor could he have the idea of complete equality between men and women. It was Shakespeare's male perspective that gave the tragic fate of the female images in his tragic works. It expresses postmodern feminism. The alienation effect of this style of politics can also enable the audience to re-examine and reflect on women's issues and promote women's liberation.

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