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**THE MOTHER, WHO IS NOT ONE: REFLECTIONS OF
MOTHERHOOD IN SHAKESPEARE'S *ROMEO AND JULIET*, *THE
TEMPEST*, AND *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW***

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***Abstract:** The lack of proper motherhood in Shakespeare's plays has been a point of attraction for many feminist critics actively engaged in emphasizing the patriarchal aspect of Shakespeare's plays. This paper aims to analyze motherhood and the lack of mother/mother-figure in *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Taming of the Shrew* through Luce Irigaray's theory of gender and the work of other feminist critics. The issues of gender, father-daughter relations and the reflections of the absent mothers will be discussed. Male/Female Subjectivity will also be questioned, in view of Irigaray's conceptualization of gender by relating it to Subject.*

***Keywords:** deconstruction, feminism, gender, motherhood, Irigaray, Shakespeare.*

1. Introduction

In many of his plays, Shakespeare opted for focusing on daughters instead of mothers, despite the *phallogocentric* view which associates

women with and defines them through motherhood. Nevertheless, the lack of proper motherhood (or, alternatively, the *aporetic* mother-figure) in Shakespeare's plays has been a point of attraction for many feminist critics actively engaged in emphasizing the patriarchal aspect of his plays. This paper aims to analyze motherhood and the lack of mother-figure in *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Taming of the Shrew* through Luce Irigaray's theory of gender and the work of other feminist critics. The issues of gender, father-daughter relations and the reflections of the absent mothers will be discussed.

In *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest*, Janet Adelman interrogates the missing mother-son relationship, making reference to the oedipal position which regards maternal affinity as a threat to the formation of masculinity. However, a review of Shakespeare's plays makes it evident that the mother-son relationship is not the only bond to be suffocated. Mothers, especially women-mothers, are absent in many of the plays. Daughters are also left motherless. In *Where Are the Mothers in Shakespeare?* (Rose 1991), Mary Beth Rose provides a historical overview of the English Renaissance in relation to the socio-cultural image and legal status of motherhood. Although Rose initiates her analysis with empirical/textual evidence regarding the presence of influential mother figures and representations in Shakespeare's works, she nevertheless claims that the absence of a mother is necessary for masculine maturing:

That the desirable adult society construed as motherless helps us to understand the absence – or, more accurately the complete elimination – of mothers from Shakespeare's romantic comedies. (Rose 1991:301-302)

Thus Shakespeare's preference for creating powerful masculine characters while burying mothers and female 'subjects' is not simply misogyny or a mere direct reflection of historical reality. In other words, the missing *maternal genealogy* in Shakespeare can neither be simply understood as historical reflection nor blamed on the playwright. On the contrary, the absence of motherhood in Shakespeare points to a problematical issue that has never been satisfactorily resolved: the absence of female subjectivity or the phallogocentric objectification of femininity. It is for this reason that this study will suggest a reading of some of Shakespeare's plays that focuses on an exploration of the modalities in which masculine subjectivity is constructed via suffocating maternal genealogy.

At this point, I will provide a concise review of Luce Irigaray's deconstructivist-feminist approach in order to stress female subjectivity. Irigaray is chiefly known for her opposition to Freud and to Lacan; as a psychoanalyst herself, she criticizes the tradition of psychoanalysis with the claim that the oedipal or the masculine subjectivity is established via the objectification of the feminine. Her criticism further emphasizes that the language we use is also a masculine one which construes the whole of Western culture within a patriarchal structure. She therefore indicates the possibility of an alternative: "Societies other than patriarchal ones correlate to traditions in which there is a female cultural order, transmitted from mothers to daughters" (Irigaray 2007:9). In order to supply this alternative, she returns to the ancient myth of Hestia, relating this name to being and dwelling, as discussed in Heidegger's philosophy:

[...] Being and dwelling are related to the name of Hestia, the female divinity who guarded the flame of the domestic hearth. The divine is therefore watched over by the woman at home. It is transmitted from mother to daughter. (Irigaray 2007:11)

Irigaray points out that the significance of goddesses such as Hestia has been neglected and effaced in favor of male Gods, which leads to a break with *female genealogy* (Irigaray 2007:11). As a result, within the masculine lingua-culture the feminine is defined not as a different sex but as the non-masculine, negatively (*she is not he*). Thus female subjectivity has never been possible. The silence of the feminine and the absence of female genealogy is equally evident in Shakespeare's plays.

2. Reflections

The Tempest is a significant example of a Shakespearean text in which the loss of motherhood is depicted in a tragic way. Miranda is literally motherless and ruptured from maternity. Irigaray explains:

[...] when a child is given a proper name, it already replaces the most irreducible mark of birth: the navel. A proper name, even a forename, is always late in terms of this most irreducible trace of identity: the scar left when the cord was cut. A proper name, even a forename, is slipped on to the body like a coating - an extra-corporeal identity card. (Irigaray 2004:39)

It is clear in *The Tempest* that Prospero has raised Miranda on the island all by himself:

Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit
Than other princesses' can, that have more time
For vainer hours, and tutors not so careful. (Shakespeare 2007:1138)

Additionally, Miranda has no memory of her mother but only of her nurses. We are told nothing about her mother's fate. The audience does not even know whether she is dead or alive. Prospero mentions his wife, Miranda's mother, only once in the whole play, and this reference is itself but a reinforcement of his fatherhood. When Miranda asks if he truly is her father, Prospero somewhat enigmatically replies: "Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter [...]" (Shakespeare 2007:1136).

To all appearances, the idea of a 'virtuous' mother could be described as a phallogocentric attribution. Miranda herself, detached from her mother, is another de-subjectified figure, with almost complete obedience to the father sustained by a complete rupture from the maternal genealogy. Her identity is shaped and nurtured by Prospero; for example, she fulfills *his* wish when she falls in love with Ferdinand. Her father's will defines and governs her life.

The murder of the mother finds its place in *The Tempest* in literal terms in the account of Sycorax, Caliban's mother, who is declared an evil witch by Prospero and killed. Prospero thus achieves dominion over the island by eliminating the female authority. Caliban aptly summarizes this tale of disempowerment and loss: "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou takest from me" (Shakespeare 2007:1140). For Caliban, described as "hagseed" and "bastard", the son of the last mother mentioned in any Shakespeare play (Adelman 2008:237), the bond with his mother is somehow preserved; however, his mother is represented as a monstrous and cursed creature and is therefore killed. It is only by means of "exorcising the witch-mother" that *The Tempest* constructs the image of absolute paternal authority (Adelman 2008:194).

Romeo and Juliet is Shakespeare's first and probably most famous tragedy. In contrast with Miranda's mother, Juliet's mother, Lady Capulet, is present in the play. She acts as the voice of Capulet, Juliet's father. Lady Capulet's own agency is silenced, if not suffocated. Consequently, her relationship with her daughter is far from close. Even the Nurse has a more obvious bond with Juliet than Lady Capulet has. When Juliet expresses her feelings about her planned marriage to Paris to her mother, Lady Capulet answers: "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word: Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee" (Shakespeare 2010:92).

Juliet is an interesting female character. Despite her mother's patriarchal attitude, she attempts to position herself as a subject against the law of the father. Her relationship with Romeo and the secret marriage clearly contravene her father's will. She is another Shakespearean daughter who is psychologically ruptured from matriarchal genealogy, with a patriarchal or *phallic mother*. In Irigaray's words: "So what is a mother? Someone who makes the stereotypical gestures she is told to make, who has no personal language and who has no identity (Irigaray 2004:50).

The quotation might sound harsh, yet it stresses the desubjectification of mothers. In this order of sexuality, where women cannot posit themselves as separate, independent subjects, the mother-daughter relationship is inevitably problematic. In addition, mother-son as well as man-woman relations are disrupted since there can be no space for their "intersubjective relations" (Irigaray 2007:11). It is this lack of intersubjectivity that sheds light upon the behaviour of Lady Capulet acting as her husband's ventriloquist. It is another well-known claim of feminism that 'logos', as rational speech, is something possessed by men and from which women are excluded. When we take into consideration this male

domination of logos, it is no longer surprising that we find a dearth of women's and women-mothers' voices in Shakespeare's plays.

The Taming of the Shrew is yet another Shakespearean play, this time a comedy, in which motherhood is deterritorialized. The word 'mother' is mentioned only once in the entire play, and again it comes as a reinforcement of fatherhood, as in *The Tempest*:

Vincentio:

Art thou his father?

Pedant:

Ay, sir; so his mother says, if I may believe her. (Shakespeare 2007:354)

The male voice, the pedant, refers to the mother for the proof of his fatherhood (it is unimportant to mention that in this particular instance he is not in fact the father) and reiterates the unreliability (or suggestion of it) of the feminine.

Apart from this 'reference' to motherhood, there is no information regarding the presence or non-presence of mother. The play revolves around Katharina, Bianca, and their father Baptista. Katharina, a substantially heterodox female figure, is judged and criticized, mainly by male characters, including her father and Bianca's suitors. Her obstinacy towards men lies at the heart of the play; it is this that causes Baptista to fear that he will never be able to marry off his daughter. By contrast, 'silence' is put forward as the acceptable qualification for women, as Lucentio states when he gives Bianca as an example: "But in the other's silence do I see / Maid's mild behaviour and sobriety" (Shakespeare 2007:333).

In the absence of valid representations, a potential women-subject such as Katharina is perplexing and threatening to the patriarchal order. For this reason, the 'taming' of this heterodox female figure becomes obligatory. Petruchio undertakes the taming of Katharina, who cannot bear it and struggles to escape from the shackles of marriage. Nevertheless, the process of taming is relentlessly begun and undertaken by all possible means, including physical coercion. Petruchio dominates Katharina by starving her and by unreasonable upbraiding:

Thus have I politicly begun my reign,
And 'tis my hope to end successfully.
My falcon now is sharp and empty;
And, till she stoop, she must not be full-gorged.
For then she never looks upon her lure. (Shakespeare 2007:348)

Undoubtedly the taming action initiated and carried on by Petruchio is highly abusive. However, historical evidence demonstrates that his method, which stops short of physical violence, can be evaluated to be a relatively civilized one. In Emily Detmer's words: "I argue that the play signals a shift toward a "modern" way of managing the subordination of wives by legitimizing domination as long as it is not physical" (Detmer 1997:274).

This legitimacy is justified in relation to and within the patriarchal order, as is the code for being an agreeable young lady. The absence of female subjectivity blocks any alternative evaluation for/ the character of Katharina and coerces her into the patriarchal trap. Shortly after her marriage she is tamed - in other words she is desubjectified, suffocated, although not killed as Juliet is. Petruchio wins the full obedience of his wife,

as is clearly portrayed in the final scene, in Katharina's – or Petruchio's – speech:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labour both by sea and land... (Shakespeare 2007:358)

The excerpt from the final speech is an impressive presentation of patriarchal power and domination. The taming of Katharina is a uniquely representative process that demonstrates how the feminine is desubjectified and silenced and how 'the mother is killed'.

3. Conclusion (or 'Absence of Representation')

In conclusion, both the absence of mothers in Shakespeare and the lack of representations of female subjects definitely point to a historical reflection of patriarchy founded on the oppression of women. This situation leaves no room for maternal presence. The mother or the women can easily be tolerated if they are desubjectified (as shown in Katharina's case) or paternalized (as with Lady Capulet); Juliet, who overtly contravenes the patriarchal rule, is killed.

It is my contention, inspired by Irigaray, that this failure to provide powerful representations of women-subjects is not a fault of Shakespeare's. It is the social order, our culture, that wants it to be this way: the mother must remain "forbidden", "excluded" (Irigaray 2004:39). It is the patriarchal culture which has suffocated mothers and women in general: "They are

excluded and denied by the patriarchal linguistic order. They cannot be women and speak in a sensible, coherent manner” (Irigaray 2007:13).

The Father can only have full authority in the absence of women-subjects and women-mothers. The rupture from maternal genealogy provides space for paternal domination:

Patriarchal power is organized by submitting one genealogy to the other. Thus, what is now termed the oedipal structure as access to the cultural order is already structured within a single, masculine line of filiation, which doesn’t symbolize the woman’s relation to her mother. Mother daughter relationships in patrilinear societies are subordinated to relations between men. (Irigaray 2007:8-9)

The subject, once established as masculine, takes over the governance of life, lives with all its aspects, whereas the object – she – is attributed non-reason. Thus the female is left speechless and silenced and, perhaps more significantly, the female or the mother subject is perceived as a threat, both to the son and to the daughter. Since in the patriarchal understanding the female is linked to impotency and weakness, maternal contiguity is responsible for the son being prevented from substantiating and maturing himself as a mature male. In addition, a proper mother-daughter relationship is ruled out from the beginning. For Irigaray, the killing of the mother can be explained by reference to Orestes’ matricide. Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon for reasons that include jealousy, fear, and the fact that he sacrificed their daughter. She in her turn is murdered by Orestes for the sake of his father. Irigaray explains:

He kills his mother and goes mad as a result, as does his sister Electra. Electra, the daughter, will remain mad. The matricidal son must be saved from madness to establish the patriarchal order. (Irigaray 2004:37)

If this emphasis of Irigaray's is taken into consideration, it becomes easier to comprehend a history of mad women, or women being labelled as mad. The dangerous mothers, the mother-subjects, have been subjected to death, imprisoned for madness, silenced and suffocated. The result, painfully visible even in today's world, is a historical, cultural amnesia when it comes to maternal genealogy. Unless we attempt to shred to pieces the phallogocentric curtain hanging ominously over the past and to some extent the present, the future mothers will remain dead.

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