

Introduction

The study of literature readily transforms into an exploration of one's own identity. For those immersed in it, interpretation of literature becomes a very personal matter. Delving into the world of Shakespeare attempting to understand the interior and exterior landscapes of his female characters, female scholars quite understandably come to feel that their own 'being' is rich in literary parallels. For any scholar concentrating on female identity in literary works, feminism becomes an ineluctable gateway opening onto broad political, social and cultural avenues of pursuit – including its influence on literature and Shakespearean studies. It is clear that feminism has had a significant effect on Shakespeare criticism, and has contributed much to both the interpretation of Shakespearean plays and the creation of feminist adaptations of Shakespeare. Both Shakespeare and feminism provide readers and literary critics with universal topics connected with self-expression, self-discovery, both of them offer questions that encourage thought and deed.

The scope of this monograph is to explore and analyse female identity in feminist adaptations of Shakespeare. When deciding on the work's title, it became evident that it is crucial to clarify some basic terminology, such as feminism, adaptation, feminist adaptation and identity as such, in order to properly delineate the central theme and purpose of the work, to set clear goals and, finally, to obtain (at least some) adequate answers. Similarly, one must scrutinise what it means to be female, what it means to be a female literary character, and what it means to be a female literary character in a feminist adaptation of Shakespeare.

The monograph consists of seven chapters and has two major objectives. One is to introduce and outline the basic theoretical background for feminist Shakespeare criticism and to compare and contrast the great diversity of theoretical standpoints on adaptation, feminism, female identity and feminist Shakespeare criticism, itself. The other is to apply the theoretical background to concrete literary works. This is to be accomplished by combining the theoretical dimension with close reading techniques and textual analyses in order to analyse female identity in three specific feminist adaptations of Shakespeare: *Ophelia* by Bryony Lavery, *Lear's Daughters* by the Women's Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein, and *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*, written by Paula Vogel.

One of the key initial steps was differentiating between feminist interpretations of Shakespeare – feminist accounts and opinions, the revisions of Shakespeare – and feminist adaptations of Shakespeare – new, independent plays penned by feminist playwrights. The intention of this dissertation is to prove that all feminist adaptations incorporate a broad, thorough study and feminist interpretation of Shakespeare; *Ophelia*, for example, could not have been written without a feminist interpretation of *Hamlet*, which means that feminist adaptations of Shakespeare are rooted in and closely connected with feminist interpretations of Shakespeare, though the two must never be confused.

The first chapter concentrates on the nature and understanding of adaptation. It examines terms such as adaptation, source, intertextuality and quotation, and gives special attention to authorship, text, social and cultural context and the phenomenon of adapting, recycling Shakespeare. In order to reveal what a feminist adaptation means, one is blatantly obligated to first investigate what feminism stands for. Chapter 2 is devoted

to the complex and challenging enterprise of defining the basic concepts and essence of feminism, then moving on into feminist literary criticism.

Feminism is definitely an integral part of today's society and culture. Both men and women have been exposed to and formed their own, personal understandings of it. It is an issue that concerns not only women but the whole structure of society, which per force includes men. Feminism has evolved to such extent that it can now embrace differences rather than fight for equality or sameness. It aims to build new models based on tolerance and diversity. Feminism continuously revises concepts and notions such as identity, sexuality, sin, death, literature, choice and power. It deviates from the traditionally accepted viewpoints and analyses these concepts from an entirely different angle. However, it is difficult to define feminism universally, since different historical periods, cultures and political beliefs all suggest something different and betray a divergent focus towards feminism and feminist criticism. The second chapter intends to prove that there is no single definition of feminism, as it overlaps several theoretical fields or critical schools, such as deconstruction, poststructuralism or psychoanalysis. An outline of feminism's historical development underscores how the goals of feminism have varied throughout the decades and how it has been, and will likely continue to be inseparable from political, social and cultural issues. A subchapter focuses on the relationship between feminism and literature, examining such notions as gynocritics, 'common female experience' and the reading process. It examines theories on the differences between reading as a woman and reading as a man, and differentiates between female and feminist reading.

One of the most crucial debates within feminism is whether gender entitles a writer or any other person to see the world differently, to accept or understand a scientific fact differently. Does being a woman writer have an impact on the final product of the writing process? Does being a woman reader influence the reading process and the interpretation of the text? The most basic feminist definition holds that women suffer from unfair treatment in society and have been socially, politically and sexually oppressed, a proposition which leads to the conclusion that this sense of exclusion, social 'injustice' and discrimination definitely does contribute to giving women a different platform on which to stand, a particularly distinct perspective on mainstream values and reality. Differences among feminists stem from the extent to which they treat sex as a determining trait and the ways they treat or react to the roles of women and the spaces women inhabit in literature, culture and society.

Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks of this monograph is accomplished in Chapter 3, which is devoted to the exploration of female identity. Here, the objective is to establish a definition and identify the core components of female identity. The chapter introduces and expounds on various approaches to defining female identity, while at the same time grouping them according to their primary focus or emphasis. It ties together feminist theories that pay special attention to historical development of female identity, theories that emphasise the social construction of identity, that focus on the female body. The chapter underlines the differences between collective and individual identity, presents, compares and contrasts the different understandings of the sex/gender system and the place of female identity in this system with special attention to the poststructuralist theory in feminism on sex and gender. One of the most frequently discussed issues within feminism is the connection between identity and language. This facet of feminist theory is discussed in a subchapter which focuses on the notion of language acquisition,

the relation of language to society, and the links between feminism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. An additional subchapter narrows the topic of female identity down to the more specific issue of female identity in a literary text.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the intersection of Shakespeare and feminism. Here various feminist approaches to Shakespeare are grouped, categorized and differentiated; inconsistency within feminist criticism of Shakespeare is also highlighted. Special attention is devoted to a historical feminist approach to Shakespeare and to Juliet Dusinberre's provocative idea that Shakespeare was actually a feminist. This chapter also examines and analyses various text-based approaches to Shakespeare and outlines their scope of study and focal points. A special subchapter is devoted to feminist adaptations of Shakespeare and probes the differences between feminist performances of Shakespeare and feminist "rewritings," the adaptations of his works.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 reflect the practical application of the complex dynamics that emerged in the theoretical investigation of the preceding chapters. Primary focus is placed on the examination of female identity in feminist adaptations of three of Shakespeare's plays: *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*. These chapters mirror the initial assumption of the research that analysing female identity in a feminist adaptation of Shakespeare necessarily involves an analysis of the adapted Shakespearean play or, better stated, a feminist interpretation of the particular play. Each chapter starts with an analysis of feminist reactions to Shakespeare's original play and draws attention to its implications for the feminist adaptation. The three plays, *Ophelia*, *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* and *Lear's Daughters*, form a chronological triangle, each utilising a different choice in chronological setting: *Ophelia* takes place after, *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* during, and *Lear's Daughter* before the action of their respective Shakespearean counterparts.

Chapter 5 explores the nature of tragic female identity, the redefinition of tragic endings, death, sin and sexuality. The limitations of literary identity and how Lavery's character of Ophelia challenges the interpretation of Shakespeare's Ophelia are also discussed. This chapter analyses the social aspects of identity and recognizes multiplication of identity in the case of Lavery's Ophelia.

Chapter 6 investigates the different feminist treatments of *Othello* and their interpretations of the way women are represented in this tragedy. The aim is to show the influences of these theories on the creation of the female characters of Vogel's play, *Desdemona*. Throughout its analysis of female identity, the chapter's primary reference point is the nature of identity as a construct. It discusses notions of social background, class, religious beliefs, the relationship between race and gender and the influence of this relationship on female identity. Chapter 6 strives to show that female identity as depicted in Vogel's *Desdemona* challenges the more general concept of common female identity and concentrates instead on the complexity of individual female identity.

Chapter 7 deals with the colourful variety of feminist approaches to *King Lear* and their respective interpretations of female identity. This culminates in an analysis of female identity in *Lear's Daughters*. The chapter highlights the presentation of female characters in different subject positions and examines representation of female power and the consequences of that power. Lastly, the analysis concentrates on the absence of male characters, the influence of language and family structures on the formation of female identity.

The basic expectations and the over-arching aims of the monograph are to prove that feminist adaptations of Shakespeare are closely linked with the feminist approaches and interpretations of Shakespeare, that for example the investigation of the identity of Lavery's character Ophelia is not possible without a thorough investigation of the feminist interpretation of Shakespeare's Ophelia. Furthermore, the monograph aims at proving that adaptation always melds with theory, that feminist adaptations and the depiction of female identity of feminist adaptations are deeply politically motivated and inseparable from contemporary social, political and cultural issues, social realities that determine the formation of female identity. The final hypothesis of the monograph is that female identity in feminist adaptations of Shakespeare is pictured as a construct, the outcome of the interplay between the interior and the exterior, the private and the public, an entity, which is many times trapped by social forms, but is capable of change, is able to choose and possesses the power to change the outside, social norms and forms.