Applying Twentieth Century Feminism to Shakespeare's Plays

Lorraine Helms, in her piece, "Playing the Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism and Shakespearean Performance," identifies places in Shakespeare's plays she finds require a feminist remodeling that can be revised through modern-day performance. Helms refers to Shakespeare as a "patriarchal bard" who implanted an ideology in his writing that has to this day restricted the roles of women in his plays; Helms focuses on Shakespeare's textual feminization of the soliloquies spoken by certain female characters, in the versified stage directions that resulted from having men play all women's parts, and in the masculinist perspective through which the female characters of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* were written. Although Helms' suggested revisions could be viewed as a positive movement towards the equal representation of women and men in Shakespeare's plays, many of Helm's arguments can be contradicted when examined through a lens more deeply analytic of Shakespeare's habits and technicalities.

Helms' arguments regarding the "soliloquies" performed by female speakers offers the most room for contradiction. Most notably, the term "soliloquy," as Helms defines it, is incorrect; she states how in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the male protagonists remain on stage during Ophelia and Lady Macbeth's soliloquies. Technically, such a situation should be referred to as a "monologue" rather than as a "soliloquy," since soliloquies require actors to be alone on stage, unmediated, subject to the audience. This is significant because Helms repeatedly states how the male presence interferes with the female speaker's "opportunity to communicate directly to the audience" (194), when in fact this "opportunity" she is referring to is not a requirement of a monologue, therefore invalidating her complaints.

Another weakness of Helms' argument is in how she claims that the insertion of end-stopped rhymed couplets into female soliloquies "distances the actor from the character" and has

a “calculated artificiality” which only reaffirms the idea of women playing roles as dishonest and eroticized objects (193-194). However, Helms supports her argument by looking at the “soliloquy,” or more correctly, “monologue,” of Helena in a *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a play that contains much more prominent variations of verse Shakespeare uses to differentiate characters. Shakespeare, though more frequently used blank verse than rhyme in his soliloquies, wrote in iambic pentameter to suggest themes and characters of importance, nobility, and seriousness, and specifically to *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, sometimes wrote in trochaic tetrameter to signify the mystic beings of a fantastical world. Helena’s monologue is written in iambic pentameter, therefore suggesting that she of upper rank and intelligence in contrast to the “erotic commentator” into whom Helms claims the couplets transform her (193). If the monologue were written in trochaic tetrameter, however, there could be more room for Helms’ feminist criticism.

Helms also supports her claim with most examples from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, all “soliloquies” that are in actuality monologues. It is important to note that *Troilus and Cressida* has been known as one of Shakespeare’s problem plays, in which he wildly experimented with moments of bawdy comedy and tragic bleakness that resulted in an audience unknowing of how to respond to the characters. Even Helms comments on the contradictions of this play when she notes how Shakespeare’s “elliptical syntax” confuses Cressida’s opinions regarding sexual desire, violence, and “male hegemony” (194). The fact that this play involves more contemporary and experimental aspects allows it to be more accessible for a twentieth century feminist critique; however, since it not one of Shakespeare’s strongest or most understood plays, it could be considered a weak source of evidence for supporting Helms’ argument.

Helms also discusses the masculinist perspective through which the roles of the fourteen women of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* were written, paying particular attention to the role of the Jailer's daughter. The daughter, young and highly sexual, after not receiving a sign of mutual affection from her love of a higher social rank, Palamon, begins to go mad, an event that Helms believes Shakespeare created to "make a mockery of her sexuality" and vulnerability (197). Helms seeks to revise this character's weakness by looking to the physical presence and strength of the actors who play her, which she finds will "turn the madness of the Jailer's daughter…not to prettiness, but to power" (200). Helms' suggested adjustment of the portrayal of the Jailer's daughter offers some criticism, firstly in the fact that she uses one actress' performance, Imogen Stubbs's, as justification for the complete effectiveness of such a presentation. Helms also contradicts herself; she admits that simply in the writing of the female roles of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* there exists feminine heroism and a breaking of sexual stereotypes. Emilia "in resisting heterosexuality, exposes the symbolic violence of dynastic marital rites" while the Jailer's daughter "illuminates the intersecting hierarchies of class and gender" (198), and more importantly attempts to break those boundaries. It could also be concluded then that Helms finds more power in a woman's physical strength than in challenging social barriers, acting upon emotion, or embracing one's sexuality. Overall, though Helms has progressive intentions, many of her critiques on Shakespeare are weakly justified due to faulty terminology, obscure sources of evidence, and even possibly by a narrowed scope of feminism.

Works Cited

Helms, Lorraine. "Playing the Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism and Shakespearean Performance." *Theatre Journal* 41.2, Power Plays (1989): 190-200. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 July 2015.