Obedience, Beauty, Virtue: a Feminist Examination of The Tempest

A “traditional gender role” brings to mind 1950’s sitcoms. A beautiful wife in pumps and pearls does housework all day and tends to all of the needs of her children and never complains. Her husband, the bread-winner and the great Voice of Reason, comes home, has dinner made for him, and the two happily sleep in their separate twin beds. By definition, “traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson 85). June and Ward Cleaver from Leave it to Beaver come to mind. Rewind history 300 years before the happy nuclear family graces American television. What does the picture look like then? William Shakespeare is perhaps the most well-known, frequently-quoted, revered writers of all time. So his image of a “perfect” woman ought to have a lot of sway. Some of his plays, like Twelfth Night or The Merchant of Venice have received great acclaim from feminist critics for their strong female characters. One would assume that Shakespeare would progress in feminist critique through the course of his career. His last work, however, often called his “final masterpiece” falls short of a positive feminist analysis. Rather than break traditional gender roles, it conforms to them. Shakespeare’s The Tempest reinforces the patriarchal ideology of traditional gender roles through patriarchal male Prospero’s extreme need and exercise of control of his daughter Miranda, the patriarchal female, whose best (and only) good traits according to the text are that of obedience, beauty, and virtue.

Prospero, the protagonist of the plot, and the manipulator of elements according to his will, is a prime example of the patriarchal male. He is determined and driven; he controls every aspect of his island, and his punishments for perceived infractions are detailed and harsh. This control is not only exerted through his magical abilities, but also through his subordination of
Ariel and Caliban, whom he frequently refers to separately as his servants. In the second scene of the play, when Ariel inquires about his freedom, Prospero retaliates with anger and the threat: “If thou more murmur’st, I will rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails till / Thou hast howled away twelve winters” (I.ii.294-96). It seems an extreme punishment for one question: to be imprisoned into a pine tree for twelve years. Similar situations happen often in the course of the play. When Caliban wishes ill on Prospero and Miranda, Prospero goes so far as to curse him:

For this, tonight thou shalt have cramps,
Side-stiches that shall pen thy breath up. Urchins
Shall forth at vast of night that they may work
all exercise on thee. Thou shalt be pinched
As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging
Than bees that made ‘em. (I.ii.326-331)

His threats are thick with pain and they always illicit the response he desires. This one forces Caliban into a submissive state. Perhaps Prospero issues these inhumane threats with such ease because Ariel and Caliban, while male, are not expressly human. Ariel is defined as “an airy spirit” and Caliban as “a savage and deformed slave” by the list of roles (McMullan 45). Because they are not human, they cannot be on the same level as patriarchal male Prospero. This similar use of threat and manipulation is exerted on Ferdinand later in the play, as Prospero “uneasy makes” his courtship with Miranda (I.ii.453). Enslaving him, Prospero tells Ferdinand, “I’ll manacle thy neck and feet together./ Sea-water shalt thou drink. Thy food shall be/ The fresh-brook mussels, withered roots, and husks/ Wherein the acorn cradled” (I.ii.462-66). He does this to Ferdinand to manipulate the love and compassion of Miranda “lest too light winning/
Make the prize light” (I.ii.453-454). In other words, because Prospero fears that an easy courtship won’t create real love between the couple, he imprisons Ferdinand in much the same way Ariel and Caliban are imprisoned, thus controlling not only the actions but the emotions of the two. This, however, is only the tip of the iceberg of Miranda’s regulation by her father.

Miranda, as the only present female in the play, embodies a patriarchal woman, one who is defined as an object, her worth asserted in the supreme importance of obedience, beauty, and virtue. Her singular representation of women places heavy significance on the way she acts and is treated. Prospero refers to his daughter as a “wench” three times in the two hours of the play (I.ii.139). According to the comments in McMullan’s edition of the play, “In Shakespeare’s time, this was primarily a term of endearment for a girl or young woman. The word could also be a derogatory term for a woman” (66). The double-edged nature of the word represents a double-edged dynamic between father and daughter: while the two certainly love each other, they are also confined by a patriarchy that limits their relationship and ultimately puts Miranda beneath her father and every male that comes into her life.

As mentioned before, one of Miranda’s most striking aspects is her supreme obedience to that patriarchal influence over her life: her father. Most of the time she spends on stage, she is often simply doing what Prospero tells her to do. In the second scene of the show she attentively listens to Prospero’s long tale of exposition, she sleeps when he tells her to, she looks at Ferdinand when he commands. Prospero even directly tells her, in the first lines of their interaction, “Obey and be attentive” (I.ii.38). This command to obey seems to extend beyond just that moment, but throughout the play and the relationship itself. The few times Miranda steps out of the patriarchal line, Prospero’s punishment is swift and harsh, similar to how he treats Caliban and Ariel. When Miranda begs her father not to harm Ferdinand, Prospero responds, “Silence!
One word more/ Shall make me chide thee, if not hate thee /… Foolish wench” (I.ii.477-482).

To “hate” is an extreme punishment for an innocent girl who is trying to save someone she cares about. Especially when one considers that this care is exactly the kind of response Prospero is seeking. In addition, it is possible that the term “wench” is not used in this line as a sign of endearment but as a derogatory term. This conveys a certain message, both to Miranda and to Shakespeare’s audience: Prospero loves her on the condition that she fulfills her role as a patriarchal woman. Knowing this, Miranda still disobeys Prospero by going to visit Ferdinand in Act 3, but her fear seems to plague her visit. She thinks about her father in strange moments. Once revealing her name to Ferdinand, she laments, “O my father, I have broke your hest to say so” (III.i.36-37). She also leaves this romantic scene somewhat promptly, perhaps for fear of her father catching them. Even though Prospero watches the encounter, he seems unsettled by her disobedience, perhaps as discussed above, he desires the affection between the two, and sees himself as the controller of the situation.

Miranda’s second emphasized quality is her beauty. Her name itself means “to be wondered at” in Latin, which casts Miranda as an object, something to be done to, rather than a decision-maker herself (McMullan 54). Her apparent beauty and its significance are established throughout the play. She is referred to as a “goddess” by both Ferdinand and his father Alonso upon first seeing her (I.ii.423, V.i.187). Ferdinand praises her incomparable beauty when the two talk privately. He says,

For several virtues

Have I liked several women. Never any

With so full soul, but some defect in her

Did quarrel with the noblest grace she owed
And put it to the foil. But you, O you,
So perfect and so peerless, are created
Of every creature’s best! (III.i.39-48)

There is an interesting double standard brought to light here. Ferdinand, having seen, even liked many women seems to be very proud of his ability to judge them, as one might judge a pure-bred dog at a show. The dog show comparison is only emphasized by his use of the words “defect” and “creature.” In contrast, however, Miranda has known no one but her father and Caliban. Her inexperience matters little when they, the patriarchal male of her childhood and the patriarchal male of her future, can make the choice for her. Caliban is even aware of Miranda’s beauty when he speaks of her to Stephano: “That most deeply to consider is / The beauty of [Prospero’s] daughter. He himself/ Calls her a nonpareil [or, thing without equal] ” (III.ii.95-96). Even Caliban, the least human of The Tempest’s characters, is aware of the importance of female appearances.

The last and possibly most significant aspect of Miranda is her virtue. The first time the topic is mentioned is when Prospero, speaking to Caliban, angrily says, “thou didst seek to violate the honor of my child” (I.ii.348-349). “The honor” here is implicitly Miranda’s virginity: it is implied that Caliban attempted to rape her. In response, Caliban remembers, “Would’t had been done! Thou didst prevent me. I had peopled else this island with Calibans” (I.ii.350-352). Interestingly, this statement demonstrates the purposes for his attempt: not for pleasure, or power, or revenge, but for breeding purposes, to create more of himself. This little exchange between master and beast simultaneously establishes the extreme importance of Miranda’s virtue and its purpose, that of procreation. When Miranda and Ferdinand meet, the first question the prince asks the girl displays what is important to him and to his time: “My prime request,/ Which
I do last pronounce is—O you wonder!—/ If you be maid or no?” (I.ii.427-429) According to the McMullan edition, there are “Three possible meanings [to this line], all in play: (1) a human woman as opposed to a goddess; (2) a young, unmarried woman; (3) a virgin” (92). Ferdinand desires to know immediately if she is human, unmarried and a virgin, because these things are all prerequisite for his interest in her. There can be little debate of whether her purity is of interest to Ferdinand as he says later in the same scene, “Oh, if a virgin, / And your affection not gone forth, I’ll make you/ The queen of Naples” (I.ii.449-451). Again, this demonstrates the extreme weight Miranda’s virtue has on their relationship: on her virginity rests his proposal of marriage.

Caliban and Stephano emphasize this quality in their plotting to rule the island. Not only is she beautiful, as mentioned above, but according to Caliban, “She will become thy bed, I warrant, / And bring thee forth brave brood” (III.ii.100-101). According to Caliban’s assessment of Miranda, her prime significance lies within her appearance and her ability create Stephano’s future “brood”. Prospero issues an extensive threat regarding Miranda’s virginity when he ceremoniously engages her and Ferdinand to be married in act four. Speaking to Ferdinand, Prospero threatens,

If thou dost break her virgin-knot before
All sanctimonious ceremonies may
With full and holy rite be ministered,
No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
To make this contract grow, but barren hate
Sour-eyed distain, and discord shall bestrew
The union of your bed with weeds so loathly
That you shall hate it both. (IV.i.14-23)
Prospero’s threat is detailed and extreme. This threat could be indicative of his patriarchal obsession to control. McMullan’s edition elaborates on the significance of virginity in Shakespeare’s time: “Without the maintenance of her virginity prior to the legal rite of marriage and thus without the guarantee of legitimacy for children, Miranda would cease to have value as an object of exchange between families” (188). Further emphasizing Miranda’s role as an object is how she is referenced in the play by the other characters. Once she and Ferdinand are together, she is not directly spoken to again, only spoken about despite her presence in almost every scene. Even in the quote above, Prospero is speaking to Ferdinand in his daughter’s presence as if the decision lies entirely with him, with no say from Miranda. She has become the object traded, and, as such, has lost a voice of opinion. In act four, after the couple has decided to wed, Prospero only addresses Ferdinand through the entire scene: in fact, he does not address Miranda at all again in the play, although he often speaks about her. In a very literal objectifying, Prospero gives Miranda to Ferdinand in marriage. He tells the prince, “As my gift and thine own acquisition/ Worthily purchased, take my daughter” (IV.i.13-14). The suggestion of the words “gift,” “acquisition,” “purchased” all connote Miranda as an object to be traded away. Even when Miranda is revealed to the rest of the company, Alonso asks Ferdinand “What is this maid with whom thou wast at play?” rather than asking Miranda herself (V.i.185). Moreover, the use of the word “What” rather than “Who” in speaking of the girl further suggests her objectivity.

Prior to the shipwreck of The Tempest, Miranda is separate from all characters except Prospero and Caliban. There are no women on the island—even after the ship wrecks—and she has no memories of women. She tells Ferdinand, “I do not know/ One of my sex, no woman’s face remember” (III.i.48-50). Because there is no woman for her to model herself after, either in
presence or in memory, she is completely dependent on the “absent” female characters—those that are spoken of, but do not appear in the play—to teach her how women should act and look. Miranda’s mother is one of those absent characters. It is unknown why she is not in the play, if she has died or otherwise. Prospero, at the beginning of the play, makes one mention of her, “Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and/ She said thou wast my daughter” (I.ii.56). This is the only mention of Miranda’s mother, arguably the most important figure to both the protagonist of the story and his daughter. Prospero, almost as a jest, comments only on her virtue. This alone demonstrates to Miranda and the audience a wealth of information on the significance of virtue in a woman.

Sycorax is another absent character, but unlike Miranda’s mother, she is described in detail, but not in a positive light. As Prospero describes her, Sycorax represents all that a woman should not be. She is ugly: described as a “foul witch” and a “hag” (I.ii.268-269). She is disobedient: “from Argier… was banished,” presumably for some kind of “abhorr’d” action (I.ii.265-266). Finally, she is seemingly without virtue, having been “brought with child,” the bastard Caliban, to the island years before (I.ii.269). She is the sort of thing June Cleaver would go faint at the idea of. She represents a foil to sweet Miranda. Where Sycorax is ugly, disobedient, and without virtue; Miranda, as established by the text, is a beautiful, obedient virgin. With these two models of behavior, her mother and Sycorax, it is clear why Miranda would act the way she does.

It is perhaps relevant to say that it is not all strict obedience, punishment and reward between father and daughter of this story. There seems to be genuine love one for the other. Prospero’s praises of Miranda are frequent and very sincere. He credits the girl with their survival of the usurping that landed them on the island. He happily tells her, “Oh a cerubin/
Thou wast that did preserve me. Thou didst smile/ Infused with a fortitude from heaven” (I.ii.152-154). When he gives Miranda in marriage to Ferdinand, he seems genuinely disappointed at the idea of losing her. He explains to Ferdinand, “Thou shalt find she will outstrip all praise/ And make it halt behind her” (IV.i.10-11). Miranda’s strict obedience seems less the actions of a drone simply carrying out orders and more of an attempt to display her love for this man who has raised her. In fact, Miranda is a very intelligent and educated woman, taught extensively by Prospero, possibly more than most princes according to the man himself: “Here have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit/ Than other princes can that have more time/ For vainer hours and tutors not so careful” (I.ii.172-74). This is a statement one could hear Prospero saying often, as Miranda rolls her eyes at him: “Yes Dad, I know.” The two are certainly close.

Father and daughter, however, are limited by the traditional gender roles they have cast themselves into. It is a wedge that separates them from an even closer bond because it places one above the other. Miranda, while loved by everyone she comes in contact with, is confined by the “good girl” attributes defining her. When a woman’s worth is defined by obedience, beauty, and virtue, her worth will necessarily diminish over time, as age takes her beauty and children take her virtue, leaving her only with obedience. Miranda is in for a difficult future in Italy. Not only is she limited by her lack of experience, but also by her ingrained role as a patriarchal woman. Her relationship with Ferdinand will necessarily emulate her relationship with her father, and it will suffer. The traditional gender roles limit themselves and their relationship one with another. While the Cleavers from Leave it to Beaver looked happy in the 1950’s, one wonders what kind of family they really were, and what kind of family Miranda and Ferdinand can look forward to. One with pumps and dinner waiting and separate twin beds?
Unfortunately: that picture, while inaccurate in Shakespeare’s time, seems to represent what their future as a couple holds.
Works Cited
