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Plato's Loves and Shakespeare's Women: Tamora and the Dark Lady

PLATO SPOKE OF TWO kinds of love: the first, represented by heavenly Aphrodite or Urania, is sexual, but virtuous, uplifting, lasting and creative; and the second – also sexual, but profane, corporeal and short-lived kind, is under the protection of earthly Aphrodite, or *Pandemia* (*Symposium*, 180-88).¹ Plato's notions of good love underpinned later ideas that love was a key element of the spiritual development of the pure and virtuous human; that love for a beautiful fellow human being was the beginning of the transformative journey towards spiritual fulfilment.² Under the influence of Christianity, Florentine Neoplatonists redefined it as heterosexual and asexual, and the importance of this shift for European culture cannot be overemphasised. Marsilio Ficino described sight and hearing as 'spiritual senses', the only senses allowed to participate in good love associated with the transcendent,³ and sexual appetite was equated with animality.⁴

For Plato as for his followers alike, however, desire was defined as the 'divine lack', the motivator for the human soul to create, and, through creation, overcome suffering and reach for the transcendent – heights that it would not be able to scale without love's help. It is the yearning, the pain of desire, that makes love difficult; but it is this pain that leads to the need to create and to live fully. This duality of love is at the basis of philosophies governing the cultural approaches to love in the Middle Ages and Europe, such as the poetics of courtly love and Petrarchism, and at the root of the way we still think about love today. The suffering and challenges associated with love define any love worth its salt, and the same can be said about literature.

Although aspects of thought on love in Persia and the East are very different to those that reigned in Medieval and early-modern Western Europe, some – like the ability of love to make the soul grow and seek transcendence, symbolised by the ladder or the ascent; the thought on governing the passions, symbolised by wild animals, to name a few, are very similar. Another similarity lies in the idea that love is dual: good and bad, its capacity to bring us closer to the Divine and to destroy our morals and our soul, thrived in the East as well as in the West. Correspondences between Platonic thought on love and medieval Sufism are indeed striking:

in . . . the Sufi paradigms of love . . . The concept of love is closely associated with the concept of ma'rifa (gnosis) and the concept of God.⁵

The Lover, by virtue of Love's inspiration, is always nearer than his beloved to the Gods. (*Symposium* 180 b)

Plato considered love madness the highest form of human madness – *enthusiasmos*, or altered state of mind, and, as a concept based on virtue, the source of the highest good, personal, political (*Symposium* 178 d) and transcendental. Love elevated the

human mind by being hard, complicated, confusing, deeply challenging, inspiring and confronting, but also by being a life-changing experience (*Phaedrus* 251d, e).

As I have written on the ramifications and the vast influence of these ideas in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance elsewhere,⁶ I will not elaborate further here on the nature of love. But I propose that it was questions about the nature of love that Shakespeare was grappling with when he was building his characters and their conflicts. His interest lay primarily in making all his characters believable and interesting; but his main female characters are particularly significant. They represent beloveds, or love-objects, of the main male characters. They reflect ideas on love held by the male characters who love them and male members of the Renaissance audience. Principal female characters often make or break the main male protagonist, and, as such, hold the key to a love that is larger than life, that that has the potential to build or destroy, yet must be believable.

There is some evidence from his work to suggest that Shakespeare was acquainted with Platonic ideas. The most famous example is, 'the discussion of the divine madresses from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which can be meaningfully compared with Plato's ideas:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold –
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven.
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
(*The Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1 8-17)⁷

And in the divine kind [of madness] we distinguished four types: [1] the inspiration of the prophet [...] that of the mystic, [...] that of the poet, and a fourth type, which we declare to be the highest, the madness of a lover.

(*Phaedrus* 265b)

Shakespeare's plays and poetry abound with evidence that he was well aware of philosophical questions governing considerations related to love in poetry, medical and religious discourse, and society. He would have been aware of the views that upheld love as divine, represented in Petrarchan poetry, by which Shakespeare's own sonnets were influenced, and the Protestant teachings on the virtue of companionate love and sex in marriage. Luther and Calvin both saw sex in wedlock as one of the goods of marriage. Calvin describes it specifically as *remedium concupiscentiae*, a remedy against immoral



Plato charming the wild beasts.

From a manuscript of Nizami, *Khamsa*, dated 915–16 (1509–10), Astarabad.
State Library of Victoria, RARESF 091 N65K, fol. 354r.

urges, no longer sinful among baptised Christians; marital sex becomes something holy and good, allowing man and wife to foster their mutual affection.⁸ Paul Siegel has also argued that Shakespeare relied on a pagan, medieval concept of desire as a force to drive reproduction, a representation of the divine on the Earth, when he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*.⁹

But Shakespeare would also have been aware that love was a dangerous medical or spiritual condition and a threat to Man's peace of mind, sanity and salvation. The fear of love is the second most important attitude to love in Medieval and Renaissance societies, diametrically opposite to the attitude which idealised it, and Medieval Renaissance medical and theological treatises consistently portray love as a physical or spiritual condition which can lead to weakness and death.¹⁰ For different reasons, but with similar social results when it comes to a discussion of passion, the influence of Stoicism, which privileged reason over emotion and skill over inspiration, can also be shown to be relevant to the public discourse of the Renaissance.¹¹ Shakespeare's plays show that he was fully aware of the medical arguments on the faultiness of female gestation: as the one in Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals* and one in Baldesar Castiglione's *The Courtier*; theological arguments that women were not made in the image of God, such as the ones in St. Augustine's *On the Trinity and Literal interpretation of the Genesis*.¹² Early-modern notions of the Great Chain of Being which described men and women's unequal positions in the early-modern Universe perceived as natural law.

A few caveats are in order. I am not proposing that Plato's two loves, as Plato described them, hide in the plotting of Shakespeare's plays or in his text. Instead, I suggest that Shakespeare constructs his women in a way which combines varying, often conflicting traits of good and bad loves, in order to outrage and inspire. It is this contrast that makes his women not only fresh in the dramatic offering of the time, but unforgettable and life-like characters that still speak eloquently to us today.

I argue that Shakespeare showed interest in social views on love and gender in their complexity, and used the idea of love's duality to build characters which would question the philosophical and ethical value of love, while also engaging with the questions on the position of women in society and their constructed gender roles as objects within their love relationships. Although Shakespeare's women are characterised primarily by one type of love, Shakespeare's approach appears to be far from formulaic. Each character includes aspects of the opposite type of love in a proportion very carefully determined to provide a well-balanced, intriguing individual character and question the 'primary' reading. It is precisely this fine balance of the good and bad loves in the personalities of Shakespeare's women that makes them interesting, individual and vital enough to make their men's love and its consequences both important and believable. This may sound simple. But we only need to look at the women characters written by Shakespeare's contemporaries, to see how revolutionary Shakespeare's approach really was. Shakespeare would have used the implied division into two kinds of love much as he used ideas from other sources: to bend them to his purpose. He would not cite them, but

weave strands of meaning and snippets of insight and societal belief, synthesising them into complex visions of loves worth fearing and worth having.

To illustrate this claim, I will look at two principal female characters, Tamora from *Titus Andronicus* and the Dark Lady from *The Sonnets*. On careful consideration, both women show evidence that Shakespeare's characterisation combines indications of dangerous, predatory and immoral character traits, associated in the Renaissance with a deplorable lack of femininity and virtue, and indications of fruitfulness, desirability and social grace, associated with ideal femininity. Most important of all, the feeling that these ladies inspire in their men shows links with the platonic philosophical purpose of the notion of good love as the ultimate personal and political good, which, by its ability to inspire and revitalise, offers the ultimate gateway to personal and social happiness.

What do Tamora of *Titus Andronicus* and the Dark Lady of the *Sonnets* have in common? They appear to be portrayed as bad loves: whether because they are viciously evil (Tamora), or dark-skinned and immoral (the Dark Lady). And yet, as I will show, both women are shown to be more attractive, deserving or splendidly womanly than ordinary women, including 'ideal' ones. They display different degrees of genuinely redeeming qualities that can serve not only to open the discussion on the nature of love, but also to tip the very meaning of bad love on its head.

Tamora from *Titus Andronicus* seems to be the epitome of bad love. Hers is the personality of a self-indulgent male tyrant: she is cruel, self-serving and inflexible, and keeps a slave for sexual pleasure, yet uses her marriages to further herself politically. In addition to these masculine traits, she is also possessed of a number of traits that, to the Renaissance viewer, would appear to be the worst aspects of being a woman. She uses wiles, manipulation and lies to get her way, and, most unattractively, she is aware of the power of her sexual attraction over others, and does not hesitate to use it:

SATURNINUS

But he will not entreat his son for us.

TAMORA

If Tamora entreat him, then he will,
for I can smooth and fill his aged ears
with golden promises that, were his heart
almost impregnable, his old ears deaf,
yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue.

(*Titus Andronicus*, 4.4.93-8)

Not only is Tamora cruel, but she also incites others to cruelty. In that respect, she is shown to be the most unwomanly, or, to use Lady Macbeth's phrase, 'unsexed' woman of all. Not only does Tamora encourage her two sons to rape and then cut off the hands and the tongue of Lavinia, a young girl who had never caused her harm personally for no other reason but to punish the girl's father, Titus Andronicus, who is Tamora's enemy. She shows Lavinia no mercy when she begs her, woman to woman, for the privilege of being killed rather than raped:

LAVINIA

Tamora . . . keep me from their worse than killing lust,
And tumble me into some loathsome pit
Where never man's eye may behold my body.
Do this, and be a charitable murderer.

TAMORA

So should I rob my sweet sons of their fee.
No, let them satisfy their lust on thee.

(Titus Andronicus, 2.3.179–80)

Although already a mother, she reveals her 'unsexed' cruelty when she asks Aaron, her black slave and father of her illegitimate baby, to 'Christen it at his dagger's point' (4.2.70).¹³ As the baby is black, unlike Tamora's emperor husband, this points at her infidelity and may endanger her political career. Janet Adelman places her in the context of the male fear of being suffocated or engulfed by the mother figure, and being annihilated and taken back into the body from which he emerged. Tamora, who dominates Saturninus as a sexualised mother figure, who threatens her newborn male child, and who, literally, although unknowingly, consumes her sons at the end of the play, is, Adelman argues, an embodiment of these fears.¹⁴ She is explicated as a part of the play's equation of the pit, the womb and the devouring mouth,¹⁵ analysed in terms of trauma she causes and revenge she wreaks,¹⁶ or seen to be reminiscent of the iconography of ungrateful Rome,¹⁷ best expressed in *Coriolanus*:¹⁸

MENENIUS

Now the good gods forbid
That our renowned Rome, whose gratitude
Towards her deserved children is enrolled
In Jove's own book, like an unnatural dam
Should now eat up her own!

(Coriolanus, 3.1.291–5)

There can hardly be any question that, in creating Tamora, Shakespeare has created an epitome of bad love, the embodiment of every man's fear: a cold, manipulative, unmotherly and unwomanly she-Devil, the very opposite of the Renaissance notions of ideal womanliness, and, therefore, desirability.

Things would be simple indeed – if only Tamora were not so desirable. Tamora's beauty is reflected in the effect she has on men around her; but she is also softly spoken, sweet and good at sounding supportive towards the men she wishes to deceive. Shakespeare's characterisation is subtle: she has the womanliness required to see the need for, and to construct, a public identity of womanliness. If we did not know it to be contrived, for instance, we would not be able to see through the speech in which Tamora pleads to her husband, emperor Saturninus, for the life of her arch-enemy, Titus Andronicus, and feigns to support her husband's political cause. She is very convincing indeed:

TAMORA

Not so, my lord. The gods of Rome forfend
I should be author to dishonour you.
But on mine honour dare I undertake
for good lord Titus' innocence in all...
then at my suit look graciously on him,
lose not so noble friend on vain suppose,
nor with sour looks afflict his gentle heart.
[Aside, to SATURNINUS]
My lord, be ruled by me, be won at last...
you are but newly planted in your throne:
lest then the people, and patricians too,
upon a just survey take Titus' part.

(Titus Andronicus 1.1.430-43)

Her persuasiveness in private is coupled with immaculate behaviour with the precepts of good feminine behaviour in public. When a person comes to her with a query, she graciously cedes control, answering: 'Empress I am, but yonder sits the Emperor' (4.4.41). Always the lady, she honours her husband in public as she supported him in private. Douglas Green asks the question to what extent Tamora has been falsified by the fact that Shakespeare's world was shaped by male fantasies, a question of which Green argues Shakespeare was aware.¹⁹ I also think that the question that Shakespeare asks here is broader and more important (and revisited in Sonnet 138): what is at the root of a happy marriage, a happy organisation or a happy country: the truth, which could be damaging, or a deeply pleasant, but fictional, perfection?

Not only by way of her social graces, but also in terms of biological makeup, Tamora possesses a preternatural desirability. Tamora belongs to a small group of Shakespeare's 'fatal women', queens in their late-30s or early-40s, characterised by unfading beauty, magnetism and fertility marked by extended child-bearing years (this group of women also includes Cleopatra and Gertrude, Hamlet's mother). Tamora has three grown-up sons, and yet, she not only wins the heart of any man who as much as looks upon her, but also conceives easily, carries uneventfully and births easily. Most importantly, she gives birth only to boys, a clear marker of a superior woman.²⁰

Quite clearly, Tamora is, biologically, sexually and socially, the ultimate in desirable femininity ('good love'). And yet, we also know that, when it comes to her morals and her heart, she is also the ultimate in unfeeling, unsexed, unfeminine devilry ('bad love'). No man would want to have her – yet no man could possibly resist her. It is the skill with which Shakespeare handles this ethical contrast that put fear of women in the hearts of his early-modern viewers.

Without going into the question of whether Shakespeare's *Sonnets* can be treated in the same piece of writing as Shakespeare's plays, and without broaching the enormous

question of the genre of the Shakespeare's *Sonnets*,²¹ in this discussion of good and bad loves I could not go past Shakespeare's construction of the Dark Lady of the *Sonnets*. She interests me because she comes closest to a Petrarchan beloved that Shakespeare had ever constructed, or, perhaps I should say, the closest that Shakespeare ever came to questioning that notion.

Every sonnet sequence is based on praise of a beloved. But, in *The Sonnets*, Shakespeare engages with praise a way that is highly innovative. Shakespeare constructs the character of the young man by using overt praise that conceals insult; conversely, he constructs the character of the Dark Lady on insult which conceals praise. The Dark Lady is overtly represented as a bad love, one the speaker loathes for her lack of 'fairness' – in the combined meanings of darkness of complexion, dishonesty and immorality – as well as because of the hold she has on him. Yet he also loves and desires her; and this desire makes him creative, and describes the humbling journey of the self through the humbling experience of love, reaching for the elusive transcendence of inner peace: the very essence of good love as Plato understood it.

By constructing his beloved along the lines of conflict between good and bad loves, Shakespeare does a few original things with the genre of the sonnet sequence. First, by focusing on the lady's imperfections, he ironises the rhetoric of praise. The speaker is not attracted to the Dark Lady because of her physical, intellectual and moral excellence, but carefully constructs his love as inexplicable by either sensual desire, or reason.

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,
For they in thee a thousand errors note;
But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,
Who, in despite of view, is pleased to dote.
Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune delighted,
Nor tender feeling to base touches prone;
Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited
To any sensual feast with thee alone.
But my five wits nor my five senses can
Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee
(141:1-10)

Shakespeare's speaker's ambivalence occurs outside the classically Petrarchan stand-off between the body (*pro*) and mind (*contra*). He is experiencing intellectual and sensual reluctance, pitched against an utterly inexplicable emotional craving. This is bad love; nevertheless, it elicits sympathy, even envy, in its readers, and leads to magnificent creativity ('good love').

On one hand, the lady is represented as dark and ugly – so convincingly, that Katherine Duncan Jones describes her as 'little more than a sexual convenience' ('bad love'); and on the other, this darkness of body and soul, as well as the turmoil they leave behind in the mind of the speaker, are described by Shakespeare as special, unique gifts

that makes the Lady more memorable than any other woman:

And truly, not the morning sun of heaven
Better becomes the gray cheeks of the east,
Nor that full star that ushers in the even
Doth half that glory to the sober west,
As those two mourning eyes become thy face. (132.5-9)

Shakespeare writes of the lady's gaze; but while other Petrarchan ladies use their gazing in order to entice, reject and destroy, Shakespeare's Dark Lady hurts by turning her eyes *elsewhere*. The speaker is not frustrated by the lady's unavailability; on the contrary, she is fully available and makes no pretense of coyness; but she does not lie about her curiosity about other men either. Shakespeare's speaker loathes the woman²² and his dependence on her, yet cannot escape it ('bad love'); but in the end, he embraces the pain and the contagion of desire, and it makes him write – and his obsession yields rare, if dark fruit ('good love').²³ Shakespeare's bad love morphs into art, the ultimate purpose of good love as defined by Plato.

It is also possible that, by describing the unearthly effect of the lady's earthly appeal, Shakespeare is also engaging with the Renaissance Neoplatonic views that argue that love is the only thing that has the ability to transcend both senses and reason. Shakespeare's approach is revolutionary also because the objective of his sonnets is no longer consummation: he has won and physically enjoyed the woman (which has been acknowledged as soon as decent, in the third sonnet of the series). His focus has moved on to achieving peace of mind and satisfaction in a turbulent relationship: learning to live with mental subjugation coexisting with erotic involvement; sexually aware thralldom to the unpleasant truth of his relationship, rather than to imaginings. And this is very new. *The Sonnets* were not a popular work – there is very little by way of contemporary response – and what there was, is baffled and negative.²⁴ His other poetic works were immensely popular and reprinted many times; but *The Sonnets* are met by silence. I think this is because, in the whole sequence, but particularly in his treatment of the Dark Lady, Shakespeare brings good and bad loves too close for comfort, and people can no longer tell them apart. It brings self-knowledge – of the kind that is true, and uncomfortable.²⁵ This is deeply disturbing. In merging two loves into a powerful vision of the humiliating and ennobling journey of the self through the complex experience of love, Shakespeare fulfills both Platonic and Petrarchan purposes. He is well ahead of his time, talking to 'eyes not yet created', who will, hopefully, be able to recognize his vision. He is talking to us.