MRS. SHAKESPEARE: MUSE, MOTHER, Matriarch, Madonna, Whore, Writer, Woman, Wife—Recovering A Lost Life

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ABSTRACT

**MRS. SHAKESPEARE: MUSE, MOTHER, MATRIARCH, MADONNA, WHORE, WRITER, WOMAN, WIFE—RECOVERING A LOST LIFE**

What if an extraordinarily gifted woman, of humble birth, were born in Elizabethan England and circumstances conspired to give her rare access to a world of privilege and the opportunity to learn how to read and write; how might such a clever woman have worked the system to her advantage? The absence of information about her life provides a space for speculation about Anne Hathaway.

The methodology of this dissertation includes elements of traditional scholarship in chapters and footnotes relating to theory and historical evidence, interspersed with a fictocritical narrative, allowing the inversion of modes and stylistic features of discourse considered feminine with modes of discourse long associated with the masculine. The alternating academic chapters explore the literature and particularly the sonnets, to address the central issue raised by the narrative: Why select a female candidate as the “real” writer of Shakespeare’s works? And why Anne Hathaway? Readers are invited to adopt a willing suspension of disbelief and for a brief time embrace the contrary notion that Anne Hathaway wrote the work attributed to her husband as they consider her story and the supporting theoretical arguments.

The content of the scholarly chapters is objective, logical, authoritative—“hypermasculine”—while at the same time they are written in a style coded as feminine
with non-linear diversions that explore a multitude of issues, incorporating sudden changes in direction and, at times, conflicting positions and the use of personal pronouns. The narrative chapters blur the distinctions between the importance of public and private talk in an approach coded as feminine—though they are written in a linear style, coded masculine—in order to explain how Anne Hathaway was able to acquire the necessary skills, education and experience to write as she did.

Although this study risks alienating (a) traditionalists, including documentary historians who believe that you must be able to prove Shakespeare didn’t write Shakespeare—using historical documentation; (b) feminists and advocates of cultural studies, who in recent years have successfully fired a few canons, including Shakespeare’s, because they were written by misogynistic dead white males; (c) Maya Angelou, who announced in 1985, “I know that William Shakespeare was a black woman”; (d) heretics who believe it was Oxford/Bacon/Marlowe or one of more than sixty various combinations of individuals who are purported to have written the works attributed to Shakespeare; (e) queer theorists who might fairly argue that a theory of female authorship is just one more attempt to deflect attention from the obvious—Shakespeare was either gay or bisexual; (f) postmodernists, who, like Barthes, don’t think it matters one way or the other who wrote it—or like Foucault, believe that the focus of inquiry should be on the writing and what it reveals about the power/knowledge system within a particular historical era and the resulting sexist, racist and imperialistic practices in place—or like Kristeva, would argue that the attempt to transform the world through a narrative blinds us to the void we embrace; (g) countless scholars who have built their reputations and livelihoods on their
study of the lad from Stratford; (h) bardolators who fetishize the iconic significance of William Shakespeare; (i) and institutions that have a financial interest in the authorship question, such as the township of Stratford-on-Avon, which enjoys a bustling tourist trade as the birthplace of England’s most famous literary son—it should be pointed out that the tension existing between these divergent structures of thought and the human imagination that fosters new forms of life and growth is nothing new. In order to keep alive the paradoxes that characterize creative life, we can pay tribute to the value of systems that provide us with ways of thinking, while at the same time embracing those critical moments when we do not grow unless we depart from the very comfort zone those systems provide. Recent experiences in—for example—the reconstruction of conquered countries reveals that it takes a lot more than analysis or linear thinking to win the hearts, minds and inspiration of people who are involved in making such projects come to successful fruition.

In 1978 Judith Fetterley argued that “the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader,” and she urges readers to enter “an old text from a new critical direction” (The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction, 1978, xxii). This work goes one step further—authorship becomes the text and the focus of a revisionary re-reading of the Shakespeare canon.

Feminist criticism began as resistance to a patriarchal heritage that excluded the feminine voice. For women, one of the advantages of being outside the power structure is the ability to look around and see the “other” marginalized members of the community
camped outside the fortress of power/knowledge—a view obscured to the power elite by the very walls they built to exclude gender, classes, religions, races, nationalities and individuals deemed deviant due to their perceived sexual preferences.

This dissertation examines the relationship between the historical silencing of women's voices and recent feminist-inspired efforts to discover and, in some cases, re-appropriate the work of lost and forgotten women writers.

At the same time women, because of their proximity to power—through fathers, brothers, husbands, sons or lovers—have been in a unique situation to influence the patriarchy, an advantage denied to other minorities. However, this privileged position also risks blinding women to the needs of these same minorities, as can be seen in early feminist writing which focused unreflectively on the needs of women—excluding issues of class, race and sexual orientation.

The narrow scope in this study, which is largely limited to the consideration of feminine authorship, is both a conscious choice and a necessary strategy for the specific purposes of the hypothesis proposed herein. At the same time, readers and like-minded scholars are invited to appropriate the strategies and tactics outlined here in order to create their own alternate theories that—in a non-hierarchical brave new world such as cyberspace—should eventually be able to co-exist without fear of paradox.
The story of Anne Hathaway provides a neutral playground where opposing ideologies can practice playing together instead of perpetually attempting to annihilate one another. Combined with laughter, learning to embrace a contrary notion can ease our passage between the Scylla of a moribund academy and the Charybdis of academic anarchy.
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Although I was initially unable to gain entrance to the Folger Shakespeare Library reading room in Washington, D.C.—the library officials suggesting that I be content with a microfiche copy of the journal kept by Anne Cornwallis—they did kindly relent in the
end, allowing me to examine V.a. 89, under close supervision, for an entire afternoon on
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My father continues to inspire me, through his own example, to challenge the status quo. Just before retiring after a fifty-year career as a minister, church administrator and college
president, my father ordained the first woman to receive the same credentials as a man, despite an official church policy forbidding such action.

Finally I dedicate this dissertation to my mother—for reading to me every night when I was a child; for refusing, to this day, to have a television set in her house; for introducing me to Chaucer and Shakespeare from the tender age of five; for editing this dissertation—several times; for arguing with me about the ideas in this dissertation; for taking up yoga at the age of seventy-four and staying forever young in her thinking. I love you. Happy Mother’s Day.

Walla Walla Washington
May 9, 2004
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the work contains no material previously published or written by any other person except where reference is made in the text itself.

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Marilynn Kaye Loveless

CITATION

This study examines the relationship between the historical silencing of women’s voices and recent feminist-inspired efforts to discover and, in some cases, re-appropriate the work of lost and forgotten women writers. Employing a methodology that includes traditional scholarship combined with a fictocritical narrative, the study integrates modes and stylistic features long considered masculine with those associated with the feminine, in telling the story of how Mrs. Shakespeare acquired the necessary skills, education and experience to write the works appropriated by her husband, William.