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CLASSICAL SOURCES OF THE CONCEPT OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS

This paper is dedicated to Professor Ryszard I. Danka, who like the main protagonists of my argument has always revealed himself as an advocate of women's rights and equality. His appreciation of women goes beyond a traditional male admiration for the feminine mystique. Independent from feminist ideology, he has reinforced women for both competence, self-concept and happiness in society in his private and his professional life, *Ab imo pectore* – thank you.

„Frailty, thy name is woman”, exclaims Hamlet (1, 2), deftly expressing another male stereotype opinion about women, popular since antiquity. Famous as this misogynist edict is, it has lost its influential edge at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, nowadays even the sturdiest representatives of the dominant patriarchal system take Hamlet's pronouncement with a pinch of salt, since „frail” women have often proven themselves and have been widely recognized as capable, reliable, and efficient in almost every public and private sphere. Feminism, which became an organized social and political movement only in the nineteenth century, has helped in raising the consciousness of women's equality, by continually drawing attention to the fact that for centuries women's roles (more often than men's and in different ways) have been restricted, stereotyped, and minimized¹.

Masterpieces of World Literature have been permeated by the theme of restriction, stereotyping, and minimalization of women's roles. And although the definition of the predicament of women and the vision of what should

¹ Closely connected with its mother – „The Women's Movement” – feminist literary criticism is one of the latest manifestations of feminism on the scene. And although some quarters of academia still respond nervously to feminism as such, no one can afford to ignore the significance of feminist literary criticism which has already acquired the status of a critical methodology in its own right. It is impossible to envision literary studies without the overwhelming presence of feminist slant.

and can be changed has varied and varies with time and place, the literature informed by feminist sensibility has exposed and exposes the development and continuities of change, or at least the recognition that such a change is needed.

Quite recently the Shakespeare feminist literary critics have begun to investigate the often contradictory, competing play of cultural texts that generates it. Since culture, on stage and off-stage, is full of contradictions, slippages, differences ever in motion, any rigid binarism and monolithic thinking is belied by a more fluid social reality. In exploring the interconnections between the literary texts and contexts as well as revealing the discrepancies between various cultural definitions of the woman's (and the man's) place, their work has revealed patriarchy to be hardly a monolithic, coherent entity – either liberating or oppressive².

My intention is to do just that: to examine Shakespeare's sources of his concept of female characters taking into account both the tensions and traditions of the womanhood and the marriage during the antiquity and in Shakespeare's life. In antiquity I will apply these insights mainly to Plutarch of Chaeronea (ca. c.e. 46-c.e.120), one of Shakespeare's favorite authors. He stands out among classical writers for his respect for women, and above all for his belief that men and women can and should be partners in marriage³. Further I will present Shakespeare's appropriation of Plutarch's philosophical stand injected with the Renaissance biases and norms.

The three great cultures of the Mediterranean world in classical times, the Greek, the Roman, and the Hebrew-Christian, all relegated women to a place in the scheme of things below that of men⁴. The evolution of warfare and the development of these societies into warrior cultures explains the subordination of Europe's women by the time writing occurs.

² This tendency in feminist approaches, is in a way, the of the general Shakespeare criticism shift toward new historicism and materialist analyses. As these two theories – new historicism and cultural materialism – absorb the issue of gender, it becomes increasingly difficult to decide what to call „feminist” criticism. In some historicist analyses that discuss gender issues, the issue of sexual inequality is not necessary a primary focus or motivation. See: K. Kujawińska-Courtney, *Feminist Literary Theory and Shakespeare Studies: A Survey. British and Cultural Studies in Honour of Prof. Adela Styczyńska*, ed. I. Janicka-Świdorska, Łódź 1994, p. 87–92.

³ It is possible that Plutarch might have found a precedent for his thinking in Plato (*Republic* V and *Laws* III), and Xenophon (*Oeconomicus*). Dorothea Wender points out, however, that Plato did not like women and never married, and that Xenophon's persona is „affectionate, but patronizing and smug, most pleased with himself for his daring Socratic kindness to the little woman”. Plato, *Misogynist, Paedophile, and Feminist. Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers*, eds. J. Peradotto, J. P. Sullivan, Albany 1984, p. 225.

⁴ M. B. Arthur, *The Origins of the Western Attitude Toward Women*, [in:] *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers*, *ibid.*

Most Mycenaean objects found, for instance are weapons or portray warriors. Once a warrior culture developed, it became an almost inviolable system. It ensured the group survival in what had become to be seen as both natural and inevitable.

The earliest writings of European civilization do this. The Greek epics of Homer (composed in the eighth century B.C.E.), the Twelve Tables of Ancient Rome (c. 450 B.C.E.), and the Tentateuch of the Hebrew (written down between c. 1150 and c. 250 B.C.E.; primarily known today as the first books of the Old Testament of the Bible) all portray warrior cultures in which the subordination of women is well-established.

The Greek admiration for the virtues of *philia* placed it firmly above the values of heterosexual love; and one married in some circles in classical Greece reluctantly, and exclusively for purposes of procreation and family lineage⁵. Robert Flaceliere, an ancient culture historian, states that free born women in fifth-century b.c.e. Athens had no more political or legal rights than slaves⁶. Even then some men were aware of the difficulties women had to struggle against in their life; Hilarion advises his pregnant wife: „If your delivery is successful, and if you have a boy, leave him; if a girl, expose her”⁷.

In Rome it was scarcely better six centuries later in Plutarch's time, though marriage was supposed to be based on *affectio maritalis*, it was not for love. „It was the idea of the service of the family and the State that lay at the root of the union”⁸. Roman women had little status in marriage, which in practice meant the exclusive control of the husband (*manus mariti*)⁹. Since in the new family their legal status was analogical to the status of a daughter, women lacked rights over their property (except in some circumstances over their dowry¹⁰). They had no say if sued for divorce and no rights by modern standards.

In the early centuries of the Republic, wives were spoken of as having a sacred and morally powerful position in the household, of playing the role of „Juno Juga”¹¹. Yet, at the same period, in practice wives were subject to laws that gave their *pater familias* absolute control over their

⁵ R. Flaceliere, *Love in Ancient Greece*, New York 1962.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁷ *Epistulae private Graecae. Słowo jest cieniem czynu, czyli Grecy i Rzymianie o sobie*, red. L. Winniczuk, Warszawa 1972, p. 177.

⁸ W. W. Fowler, *Social Life at Rome in the Age of Cicero*, New York, 1909–1915, p. 135–167.

⁹ *Manus* had various forms: *confarreatio*, *coemptio* and *usus*.

¹⁰ W. B. McDaniel, *Roman Private Life and Its Survivals*, Boston 1924, p. 42.

¹¹ P. Grimal, *Love in Ancient Rome* (trans.: A. Train, Jr.), Norman, London 1986, p. 50. There is significance in the derivation of the Latin word for marriage, *matrimonium*.

life and death¹². Capital offence included consuming wine and obtaining forbidden duplicates of their husbands' keys¹³. One critic says that wives might well be compared to domestic pets-cats and dogs-which are property, though often made much of and treated affectionately¹⁴. What authority they had in their homes ended abruptly at the domestic threshold¹⁵; they lacked official status in the world at large, though some historians have been able to trace records of exceptional cases in which matrons singly or in groups took public action¹⁶.

The moral status of women in the third ancient culture, the Hebrew-Christian world was strictly determined by religion. It should suffice to recall the subordinate position of wives advocated in St. Paul's „First Letter to the Corinthians”:

But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and a husband the head of his wife, and God the head of Christ... [H]e is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; nor was man created for woman, but woman for man.

(11, 3, 7-10)

Similar to the Greek and Roman cultures, the Hebrew-Christian culture practiced misogyny blaming the first woman for bringing evil into the world.

¹² For the particulars of *pater familias* (and *patria protestas*) its evolution see: *Mala encyklopedia kultury antycznej A-Z*, eds. K. Kumaniecki, K. Michałowski, L. Winniczuk, et al., Warszawa 1990.

¹³ S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, New York 1975, p. 150-154.

¹⁴ A radical alternative can be found in the mythic/symbolic interpretation of Shakespeare's Rome by Valida Dragovitch, which reasons without reference to the history of Roman social life that Rome in Shakespeare is a mother-figure tracing ultimately to the myth of the suckling of Romulus and Remus (V. Dragovitch, *Roma Materna: Rome et le personnage de la mere dans les tragedies romaines de Shakespeare*, Paris 1989). Further, Guy Fau finds in the rise of strong and assertive women in the first two centuries of the Empire evidence of an emancipation of women from the bondage of the past that may be said to parallel the emancipation of women in our own era (G. Fau, *L'emancipation feminine dans la Roma antique*, Paris 1978). Some other writers represent a different stand. William W. Fowler points out that this feminist movement was limited to the upper classes and that it exacted a heavy price in the collapse of family life (*Social Life at Rome in the Age of Cicero*, New York 1909-1915, p. 135-167). Danielle Gourevitch's learned account of Roman women's daily lives from a strictly and frankly medical point of view evokes more horror than optimism, esp. about gender-based medical care (*Le mal d'etre femme: La femme et la medicine dans la Rome antique*, Paris 1984).

¹⁵ See for example the chastising of women demanding equal rights by Livius, „Dzieje Rzymu”, XXXIV, 1-8; *Słowo jest cieniem czynu*, op. cit., p. 186-187.

¹⁶ B. S. Anderson, J. P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe From Prehistory to the Present*, New York 1988, p. 24-66.

The Hebrew writings, possibly because of Greek influence (see: Pandora)¹⁷, made Eve into a figure of a woman who gave in to temptation and did that which God had forbidden-eating and persuading Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of God and Evil. „From a woman sin had its beginning”, wrote Joshua ben Sirach in the second century B.C.E., „and because of her we all die”¹⁸. The Hebrew also created the legendary figure of Lilith, formed simultaneously with Adam to be his first wife, before the creation of Eve. Lilith refused to be subservient, left Adam, and took vengeance by menacing children and infants¹⁹.

One reason women were criticized in the Mediterranean cultures was for using their sexual attractiveness to influence men. From their earliest writings, men had expressed fear of the power of women's sexual attraction over them. The solution of these cultures to this problem consisted in trying to divide women into two separate and distinct categories: the wife and the whore. A wife should be obedient to her husband and follow his lead, even in bed. Independent female sexuality was stigmatized as characteristic of a prostitute.

Even Plutarch²⁰ states that a wife: „ought not to shrink away or object when her husband starts to make love, but not herself to be the one to start either. In the one case she is being over-eager like a prostitute, in the other case she is being cold and lacking in affection”.

¹⁷ At the end of the eighth century b.c.e., the Greek poet Hesiod wrote an account of creation that supplied images to later European culture. In it, man is created first and lives happily until, in punishment for Prometheus's stealing fire, Zeus creates the first woman Pandora. Beautiful to look at, she is

the hopeless trap, deadly to men:

From her comes all the race of womankind.

The deadly female race and tribe of wives

Who live with mortal men and bring them harm.

No help to them in dreadful poverty...

Women are bad for men, and they conspire

In wrong, and Zeus the Thunderer made it so.

Hesiod and Theogony (trans. D. Wender), New York 1973, p. 42, 62.

¹⁸ Included in the Apocrypha as Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, Chapter 25, 24.

¹⁹ J. A. Phillips, *Eve. The History of an Idea*, New York 1984, p. 39; H. S. Robinson, J. K. Wilson, *Myths and Legends of All Nations*, New York 1961, p. 24.

²⁰ *Plutarch's Moralian Fifteen Volumes*, eds. T. E. Page, E. Capps, W. H. D. Rouse, et al., Harvard 1927-1960, Vol. 2; *Advice to Bride and Groom* (*Conjugalia Praecepta* - trans.: F. C. Babbitt), 3; *Bravery of Women* (*Mulierum Virtutes* - trans.: W. C. Helmbold), 4; *On the Fortune of the Romans* (*De Fortuna Romanorum* - trans.: F. C. Babbitt), 5; *Of Isis and Osiris* (*De Iside et Osiride* - trans.: F. C. Babbitt), 6; *On Brotherly Love* (*De Fraterno Amore* - trans.: W. C. Helmbold), 7; *Consolation to His Wife* (*Consolatio ad Uxorem* - trans.: P. H. DeLacy, B. Einarson), 9; *The Dialogue on Love* (*Amatorius* - trans.: W. C. Helmbold), (Quotation from), *Advice to Bride and Groom*, p. 240.

Crude as his words may sound, in general, Plutarch's extolment of women's capacities and talents was indeed exemplary. He argued in his „Amatorius” for the primacy of heterosexual love over *philia*, and in his „De Fraterno Amore” he propagated the family as a major arena of personal virtue. One sees a standard of reasoned mutuality in the marriage relationship in his „Conjugalia Praecepta”, but in that work the implied alternatives to such conjugal rationality offer an excellent account of the unpleasant norms of husband-wife relations in Greek tradition²¹.

In his radical way of thinking, Plutarch was influenced by the Germanic and Celtic cultures, the peoples of which were a challenge to the Roman Empire from the time of Julius Caesar, and which represented an equal challenge to Roman gender relations. They had inherited a very strong, even polyandrous, matriarchalism from their immemorial traditions. Plutarch included in his „Mulierum Virtutes”²² a story about a group of Celtic women who once made peace between warring tribes of Celts by injecting themselves between the armies and daring the men to kill them. Those women not only made peace on this occasion but were, Plutarch says with admiration, in future given the authority to arbitrate disputes between the Celts and their allies²³.

The Romans in Plutarch's times were yet presented with another alternative to their gender relations: the traditional, female-centered political and religious institutions of the Egyptians. Generally the Romans regarded the female-dominated society of Egyptian tradition with exotic and quasi-erotic interest, a set of patronizing imperialist and frankly touristic attitudes that Shakespeare captures admirably in the attitudes of his Roman soldiers and politicians toward Cleopatra in his *Antony and Cleopatra*²⁴. Plutarch was an exception²⁵, especially in his later works.

²¹ Wives hardly ever saw their husbands except in the bedchamber, as they were confined to the *gynea*. Flacellier, p. 120.

²² Though the essay was written in Greek, it has like the other essays in the *Moralia*, traditionally held Latin name given to it by the Roman scholars who were the first editors of Plutarch. I enjoy the unintended (?) pun in this title „Mulierum Virtutes”, as it can mean „The Manly Virtues of Women”, because Latin *virtus* derives from *vir* – „man”.

²³ The Germanic and Celtic worlds to the North and West of the Rhine and the Danube were worlds in which women ruled (often via their brothers or husbands), inherited property, chose their love partners, and were the arbiters of the culture in which they lived, Tacitus, Plutarch's contemporary, was impressed with the Germanic social order in which men respected women, and which advocated equality between men and their partners. *Germania: The Earliest Beginnings and the Land of the Germans* (trans.: E. H. Warmington, E. H. Warmington at al.), Vol. V, 17–20, 46 et passim.

²⁴ K. Kujawińska-Courtney, *Th'Interpretation of the Time, The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Roman Plays*, Victoria 1993, chpt. 3.

²⁵ Cleopatra was not the ancient writers' „darling”. Horace, in *Nunc est Bibendum* (Odes I, 37) proposes a toast to the defeat of Antony and his Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium, and Plutarch himself somewhat uncharacteristically portrays Cleopatra as the

He had visited Egypt as a young man, and there he acquired an interest in the goddess Isis²⁶ which stayed with him all his life. In „De Iside et Osiride”, he presented an allegorical devotion between the male and the female stressing her domination²⁷. Though the cult must have been a reproach to all the Romans and Greeks who held culturally sacred attitudes about their traditional relationships to their wives, Plutarch did not feel threatened by the feminist aspects the Egyptian religion.

In the first place he had an affectionate friendship with his wife, Timoxena, which shows in the tenderness of his epistle to her consoling her over the death of their two-year-old daughter. His „Consolatio ad Uxorem” has been praised, even taught, as a model of epistolary consolation, but what it shows about Plutarch and his wife may be more important than what it shows in literary and rhetorical skill²⁸. He treats her with respect and their relationship reveals mutuality.

In his writing about women, Plutarch found a middle ground between the extremes of matriarchy and patriarchy and in that middle ground built a philosophical edifice of marital partnership. Though Plutarch's biographers sometimes praise his attitude, for the most part they regard it as a mere curiosity in the homogeneity of Greek and Roman misogyny in the early Imperium²⁹.

Egyptian „reef” on which the ship of Antony's Roman fortunes was „wrecked and crushed”. „On the Fortune of the Romans”. *The Fortuna Romanorum* (trans. F. C. Babbitt); Plutarch, *Ethical Essays (Moralia) op. cit.*, Vol. 4, p. 47. For a comprehensive account of ancient portraits of Cleopatra see: L. Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions*, New York 1990.

²⁶ The cult of Isis had been prominent in Greece from Hellenistic times; she was a strong goddess with innumerable attributes, as one of the hymns written in the first century c.e. testifies:

I gave and ordained laws for men which noone is able to change

I am she that is called goddess by women,

I divided the earth from the heaven,

I brought together women and men.

I ordained that parents be loved by children.

I revealed mysteries unto men.

I caused women to be loved by men.

I made an end to murders.

I am in the rays of the Sun.

I am the Queen of War.

I am the Lord of Rainstorm.

Quoted by R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Greco-Roman World*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978, p. 32-33.

²⁷ See: also the matriarchal aspect of the cult-even Isis's recreation of Osiris-her chosen mate. S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddess, Wives, Whores and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, *op. cit.*, p. 214-217.

²⁸ C. J. Gianakaris, *Plutarch*, New York 1970, p. 130.

²⁹ Compare: F. C. Babbitt, *Introduction - 1. Plutarch's Life and Writings*, Plutarch's *Moralia in Fifteen Volumes, op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. IX-XVII; C. J. Gianakaris, *Plutarch, op. cit.*, p. 146.

I believe that there is an urgent need for a comprehensive study of this unorthodox aspect of Plutarch's respect for women in his time and its influence upon the generations to come. Ironically enough, to the extent that his „Mulierum Virtutes” was an antecedent to Giovanni Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Plutarch himself may be said to have helped create the medieval view of heroic womanhood that is thought of as the watershed between classical and modern views³⁰. Further, by an entirely independent route, Plutarch, through Shakespeare, contributed to the modern view of woman as soul mate, partner and friend to the man she is paired with.

Next to his *Moralia*, *The Parallel Lives*³¹ are a mine for portraits of women in an ideal sense. One of the most interesting of these portraits is Porcia, the daughter of Marcus Porcius Cato who married Marcus Junius Brutus, an assassin of Julius Caesar. Her unsuccessful struggle to rise to the challenges of a role as co-conspirator with Brutus in the tyrannicide he was planning is well known. Shakespeare makes much of it in *Julius Caesar*, and he also borrows from it for scenes in *The Rape of Lucrece*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry IV Part 1*, and *Macbeth*³².

Mutuality in marriage is a concept that appears in various Renaissance texts from Erasmus to Castiglione which were descendants of Plutarch, and Shakespeare was exposed to these ideas in his life time. Though Plutarch was indeed one of Shakespeare's favorite resources, one of the few most responsible for shaping his thinking, the others were for instance Ovid, the Bible, Raphael Holinshed, medieval and Renaissance novellas and romances³³. Since, Shakespeare was never a slavish imitator of the traditions he studied, he amalgamated Plutarch's vision of women and of marriage with at least two other traditions: Christian and Platonic.

Further, he was also influenced by the culture of his time. Although it was commonplace in the Renaissance to describe society as a set of vertical layers and to uphold obedience to the *status quo*, several forces militated against this, producing an alternative world view that was progressive, dynamic, and developmental. The new discoveries-geographical, scientific, medical and astronomical-undercut the credibility of the old system, daring

³⁰ Compare: C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, London 1936, p. 1-23.

³¹ Thomas De Quincy was one of the first critics who noticed the influence of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* upon Shakespeare's presentation of women. „A Summary Survey”. *Shakespeare Criticism: A Selection*, ed. D. Nichol Smith, Oxford 1916, p. 379-394.

³² J. W. Velz, *Nothing Undervalued to Cato's Daughter Plutarch's Porcia in the Shakespeare Canon*, „Comparative Drama” 1978, 11, p. 303-315.

³³ V. Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning: An Inquiry Into the Growth of His Mind and Art*, San Marino, California 1953.

people to seek adventure, innovations and even social mobility. Changes in religion were equally unsettling.

During Shakespeare's time, attitudes about women and the family were in transition. Though traditional sources defined love as obedience in woman's relationship with her father or husband, in progressive discussions companionship in marriage was emphasized, and the wife was called a friend and helpmate. Shakespeare's lively and independent women of the comedies – Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* – present a dramatic contrast to the static model of feminine perfection. Like Plutarch in his time, Shakespeare in his, went against the official grain.

Most marriages in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were arranged by parents or guardians, since like in the ancient world children were all often used in marriages designed to increase their parents' economic or political power³⁴. Yet, Shakespeare's depiction of young love was progressive, his portrayal of marriage reveals the echoes of Plutarch's writings and the influence of the Puritan and humanist reformers. Even when his young lovers fall in love at first sight, and they think about their love as:

something of great constancy;
But, howsoever, strange and admirable.
A Midsummer Night's Dream (5.1.26–27)

In his young lovers, we have an alternative to the traditional assumptions of the unconditional obedience from wives: a relationship of commitment and trust, love and loyalty.

Shakespeare appropriates the notion of ideal male-female bonding in marriage and applies it not only to some chaste marriage, but also to the exotic and unlegitimized love. In *Antony and Cleopatra* explains this concept in the first scene of the play:

The nobleness of life
Is to do thus: when such a mutual pair, [*Embracing*]
And such a twain can do't, in which I bind,
On pain of punishment, the world to weet
We stand up peerless.

(1.2.36–40)

Though this pair is capable of mutual betrayals, and violent arguments, when all is lost and Cleopatra is facing her death, she comes back to the concept of such a marriage as Plutarch would have put into his stories about heroic women of manly virtue:

³⁴ L. Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, New York 1977.

Husband I come!

Now to that name my courage prove my title.

(5.2.286–287)

In her death she achieves in some figurative sense the status of a wife in an ideal bonded relation to her husband. Though Plutarch said in several places that an unrestrained carnality is not enough to make a real marriage, in the general dramaturgical pattern of *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare daringly appropriates the Plutarchan ethics.

The ethics of mutuality finds its way into *Measure for Measure*: Juliet, a young woman who is pregnant by a pre-marital sexual union with her lover Claudio bravely replies the Duke/Friar in the prison scene that their sexual love was not unilateral and selfish. It was „mutually committed” (2.3.28): a shared pleasure and a shared responsibility. Here the Plutarchan philosophy of sexuality and gender relations meets and as it were melts with Christian ethics, when Juliet says that she loves „the man that wronged [her]... as [she] love[s] the woman that wronged him” (2.26–27). She echoes the cardinal injunction of *caritas*: „Love thy neighbor as thyself”.

Sonnet 116 is built around the concept of „the marriage of true minds”. It condemns any professed love that fades as age takes its toll on the beautiful body, assuring that a mutual relationship is more in the mind than in the demanding flesh. Since Plato ranks behind Homer as the second most-often-referred-to Greek author in the Plutarchan canon³⁵, the idea is Platonic, but it is also found in Plutarch’s *Ethical Essays*.

Shakespeare’s characters constantly speak of Platonic Love, that love that transcends the flesh to reside in the spirit and that abides as the future fades into the past. Sometimes the love is the same-sex friendship, that *philia* that the Greeks valued so highly. In *Merchant of Venice* the values of friendship and the values of romantic and marital love bend as Portia uses its concept to explain the enormity of her love toward her newly wedded husband (3.4.11–20).

It seems likely that the moral design of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies such as *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* reproduces the melding of Platonic same-sex love with marital love. *Twelfth Night* may serve here as an example of the girl-as-boy motif which has fascinated feminist critics; Juliet Dunsinberre has reasoned that disguise as a boy offers Viola a chance to transcend the limits of acceptable female behavior³⁶. Other feminists are titillated by the hints of lesbian attraction in Olivia’s love at first sight for Caesario, who is Viola beneath a male appearance³⁷.

³⁵ C. J. Gianakaris, *Plutarch, op. cit.*

³⁶ J. Dunsinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, New York 1975, p. 308.

³⁷ M. L. Ranauld, *A Marriage Binds, and Blood Breaks: English Marriage in Shakespeare*, „The Shakespeare Quarterly” 1979, 30, p. 68–81.

In my interpretation, her gender disguise serves as catalyst for attaining a perfect marriage of equal partners in friendship and in love. Disguised as a boy, Viola has the chance for confidential and serious friendship with Orsino, the man she loves. She becomes his loyal companion and even his friend before they move to the status of lovers, since Orsino declares a heterosexual love for „her” at the very end of the play. The girl-as-boy motif enables us to accept the idea of a future for their love: their marriage is based on love that has grown from a morally sensitive friendship. In this comedy the connubial love is not only not the rival or even the enemy of friendship. But it depends for its mutuality on a friendship between man and woman that is based on Plato’s *philia*, a love that Plato understood as transcending the flesh to a level entirely ideal.

In an era like our own when so many people believe that love begins in sexual attraction and sexual congress after which and out of which if a couple is lucky love grows – in such an era Shakespeare must be regarded as a counter-cultural writer. This is because he reasons partly with the help of Plutarch that a married couple must be friends before they are lovers.

Plutarch and Shakespeare reflect to a certain extent the epistemological crisis of their times, offering a redefinition of those values and commitments essential to human society. Shakespeare’s fathers, for example, personify traditional values, demanding unconditional obedience from women, crushing their individuality with patriarchal authority. But while traditional compliance leads Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Desdemona in *Othello* to their deaths, their comic counterparts choose new life.

Women like Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Ann Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* affirm their integrity and individual rights. Their marriage commitments are more personal and more caring; Shakespeare’s comedies present a progressive view of marriage as partnership. This view goes back to Plutarch who advocated mutuality in marriage, moving beyond authoritarian coercion to the more personal bonds of love and trust as the basis for any enduring human relationship.

Carl Jung attributed most of society’s problems to an „incapacity to love”. A compulsive cycle of physical and psychological violence is the result of general mistrust: „whole love stops, power begins, and violence, and terror”³⁸. Plutarch’s writings and Shakespeare’s works present a panorama of men and women who seek new ways of loving and relating. Those who succeed in their quest become paradigms of balance and integration. Though separated by centuries, Plutarch and Shakespeare seem to have the same moral agenda; they teach us how to love with respect, without

³⁸ C. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Princeton 1968, p. 107.

compulsiveness, fear, or domination, offering a hope that beckons like the light in Portia's window in *The Merchant of Venice* across the darkness of an often confused, competitive, and violent cosmos. Their lesson in love and marriage binds together human society, promising peace to their worlds – and our own.