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Treatment of the Elderly in Shakespeare

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The ideologies of a nation are not in historical textbooks but in the everyday literature of the time. During the Renaissance period, the “everyday literature” was plays held in theaters like The Globe. Shakespeare, although seen as a literary genius, still gave into the misconceptions and beliefs of his audience by reconfirming their prejudices through his works. An ideology that is prevalent in Shakespeare’s plays (such as Romeo and Juliet, Richard II, and Hamlet), therefore in the minds of the English, is “Age is unnecessary [the elderly have no worth]” (King Lear, II, iv, 150). Shakespeare’s plays, especially King Lear, reveal the English fear of aging, death, and ugliness through the dismal treatment of the elderly.

Elderly males and females of the Renaissance had differing criteria to be categorized as old. Herbert S. Donow, in his article To Everything There is a Season “Some Shakespearean Models of Normal and Anomalous Aging,” addressed how old men experienced a gradual process towards old age. They were, for instance, Lear, “portrayed as figures of diminished power,” (Donow 734). Old women, on the other hand, were judged in terms of their gender. When they could no longer procreate and/or lost their beauty, they were deemed old. From this stance, women would always “age” before men, for power is easier to sustain than beauty and one has no power over one’s body. Shakespeare in his play, King Lear, displayed the “diminish[ing] power” of the elderly man very well. Lear went from having absolute power to begging his children for a place to sleep. Combe and Schmader summed up Lear’s continued loss of power when they stated, “Lear blunders his way from public sway to a solitary, private death” (Combe 39).

In almost all of Shakespeare’s plays, there is violence and usually it is the young, strong man who is the victor. Claudio, from Much Ado About Nothing, is a prime example of the Elizabethan ideal man: he “hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing in the figure of a lamb the feats of a lion” (I, i, 12-14). Throughout the play, references are made to Claudio’s youthfulness and strength; it makes one question how those who have “suffered” aging are viewed. Are they approached with respect and deference or with scorn and disgust? The answer to this question is found in King Richard II, Act Two, scene one, when Richard says of the dying John of Gaunt, “And let them die that age and sullens have; / For both hast thou, and both become the grave” (139-40). The elderly had no true place in English society, except for its outskirts and graveyards.

The phrase “majority rules” takes on a new face when looking at the piteous way the elderly view themselves. Because the majority of Englishmen, and Shakespeare’s plays, portray the aging as weak, they begin to internalize and believe it of themselves. Lear, who by anyone’s standards is strong, gives into “society’s deleterious stereotype of old age as a second childhood” when he reveals that he “thought to set [his] rest on her kind nursery” (Deats 25). Society burdened the aging with its beliefs that they were useless invalids. They could either fight against these erroneous accusations or accept them as penance for their failing youth. Even a man of Lear’s stature and power placed himself below another because of his age: “Here I stand your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak, and despi[ed] old man” (King Lear, III, ii, 19-20). If Lear would go so far as to refer to himself as a “slave,” where does that leave those who have no status and therefore more degradation to look forward to? It leaves them in the slums with only the grave to be their haven. Shakespeare ALIVE! says the aged poor were “forced to walk the country from place to place”; it continues on to say “as they are driven from one parish to another, [they] just die, some in ditches, some in holes, some in caves and dens, some in fields...like dogs” (7). The contradictions between the treatment of the elderly in Shakespeare’s time and the ideologies about them are endless. Although they believed the elderly to be physically weak with bodies “that shak[e] for age and feebleness” there was no place for them to relax in their last days. The English thought of them as children, or as Jacques states, in “the second childishness....” yet no one protected and provided for them as they would children (As You Like It, II, vii, 165). The aged were left to their own devices “to die...like dogs” (Papp 7).

Not only was the physical strength of the elderly questioned, their mental ability was also doubted. For everyone knew that “old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with the most weak hams” (Hamlet, II, ii, 196-99). King Lear adds to the gerontophobia of the English because Lear is mentally unstable.
Shakespeare augments the audience's existing prejudices since not only is Lear mentally feeble, but his actions cause the tragic ending. In a way this view of the elderly as mentally feeble is to their benefit. It gives them some leniency in their actions. Lear realizes he has wronged Cordelia and instead of directly apologizing he blames it on his age: "I am a very foolish fond old man, I fear I am not in my perfect mind...You must bear with me, my daughter, for I am old and foolish" (King Lear, IV, vii, 60, 63, 84-85). On the negative side, the views and thoughts of elderly persons, no matter how sensible, are not heeded and put off as foolish. Commonly, the only time Elizabethans believed an elder was when he was uttering his last words, which were always taken as being the truth. Despite this belief, Richard, ever refuses to listen to the dying John of Gaunt! York, trying to assure Richard's ire, tells him, "I do beseech your majesty to impute his words/ To wayward sickness and age in him" (King Richard II, II, i, 141-42). If John of Gaunt had been listened to, the tragic events of the play would not have unfolded.

Shakespeare, because of the superstitious tendencies of the time, makes a correlation between age and devilry. Many elderly people were killed because they were deemed witches; this title was not restricted to women. The common criteria to be a witch was to be "ugly, poverty-stricken, disheveled, and diseased, or as a contemporary put it, "commonly old, lame, bleary-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles" (Shakespeare ALIVE! 43). In Shakespeare ALIVE! there is a story about a young man who calls an elderly woman a witch because she was "foul-looking" (42). Her response to his radeness was to curse him; when he became ill the old woman was put to death. Stories similar to the aforementioned abound. They show how youths could disrespect and ridicule the elderly and because of their age and/or appearance the aged person would suffer. There was no tolerance for those lacking in youth and beauty. Shakespeare contributed to this intolerance when in Macbeth, Banquo says, "What are these. /So withered and so wild in their attire" (I, iii, 38-39). Perhaps, because of their severe gerontophobia, Englishmen used the title of "witch" to disengage themselves from the fact that they too could age. For if the only people who look hideous are witches, then they, in all of their "purity," have nothing to worry about.

Another part to the issue of age equaling devilry stems from how one ages. Anomalous (unsuccessful) and normal (successful) aging determine if an elderly person will be accepted by society. Successful aging is defined as "conformity to societal expectations, often displaying an inability to affect the outcome of events" (Donow 733). Unsuccessful aging is demonstrated when "[Lear and Falstaff], deviating from these behavioral norms, dominate the action of their respective plays" (Donow 733). Lear, more so than Falstaff, dominates his play. His "personal catastrophe in the grips of old age forms the main action of the play" (Combe 39). At the beginning of King Lear, Lear demonstrated successful aging. He did not try to wield his power; however, as the play progresses he becomes a more dominating figure. Lear transferred from normal to anomalous aging. Falstaff also portrays anomalous aging. He represents the medieval triple threat, the world, the flesh, and the devil, because of his shape (glabrous), fat (the flesh), and vice (the devil). Because of his actions, constantly eating and drinking, Falstaff is pronounced "as that villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan" (Henry IV, II, iv, 439-40). In contrast to the widely held view that Falstaff is denounced by Hal because of his actions, Donow believes that "Falstaff is rejected not so much because the old man is a sinner but because the sinner is an old man, and because the old man has failed to adapt successfully" (736). If one were to believe what Donow says, then society's perceptions rely more on one's age than one's actions. Maybe it is not a "devil" that haunts [Hal] in the likeness of an old fat man, but the stifling constraints of society (Henry IV, II, iv, 425-26). Falstaff, because he is, in essence, an old man is not allowed to have fun. By Elizabethan standards he is supposed to be withering away, praying for his timely death.

The elderly, to the English, represent death and dying are mentioned thirteen times. A place in Shakespeare's works could be a warning to the audience that if they do not change the way society perceives and receives the elderly, they will soon find themselves in the same predicament.

say that old age is "mere oblivion" (As You Like It, II, vii, 165). The elderly are the forgotten entity, the forgotten population, and as such their needs are not thought of.

The English disrespect of the elderly knew no bounds. Usually the status of a person would give him some insurance of benevolence, no matter how fake, by his counterparts. However, this rule did not apply to the elderly, who were held in such distaste. Many aristocrats, and those as high up as the King, found themselves looked down upon. Lear's rule was never a good one; however, his misfortunes are attributable as much to his age as his character, as his daughter Regan realizes "'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slantly known himself" (King Lear, I, i, 292-93). Lear's situation profoundly demonstrates how status does not influence kind treatment if one is old. Lear, a king with the power of armies behind him, because of his maltreatment announces to the Gods, "You see me here, you gods, a poor old man./As full of grief as age, wretched in both" (King Lear, II, iv, 267-68). Society's prejudices had the power to diminish a king, to make him belittle himself.

Even John of Gaunt in Richard II despite his power and status, suffers because of his age. He tells Richard that because his child (Bolingbroke, exiled by Richard) has gone "thou made me gaunt. /Gaunt I am for the grave, gaunt as a grave" (King Richard II, II, i, 81-82). In Act Two, scene one alone, words pertaining to death and dying are mentioned thirteen times. A person's age had such influence over whether they would be accepted by society that no elderly person was safe. Richard's disrespect for the elderly was so great that, although he knew Gaunt was dying, he says to his attendants, "Now put it, God, in the physicians' minds/To help [Gaunt] to his grave immediately!" (King Richard II, I, iv, 59-60).

Using Shakespeare, and the other playwrights of the Renaissance, as referents to normal living conditions, we find this kind of un­}

Works Cited


