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REVISIONISM IN FEMINIST WRITING: ANN-MARIE MACDONALD'S RECONSIDERATION OF SHAKESPEAREAN HEROINES IN GOODNIGHT DESDEMONA (GOOD MORNING JULIET)

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Abstract

The second half of the 20th century marked an increase in revisionist writings, not only in historical material, but also in feminist literary output. The feminists, writing during this era known as the Second Wave of Feminism (1960-1990), started to rewrite traditional male-authored fairytales and plays that depicted women as helpless victims and established stereotypical passive images of women. The woman/victim in male-authored tragedies falls prey to the treachery and wickedness of her patriarch or the society in which she lives. As a result, death becomes inevitable, either through suicide or murder. The feminist writers' reevaluation of these traditional images is part of their feminist agenda to change the public view towards women as damsels in distress, who are often in need of being rescued by a powerful patriarch. Their new woman characters are adventurous, powerful and independent. This research focuses on Ann-Marie MacDonald's debut drama *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* as an example of this trend of revisionism in feminist writing.

Keywords: Desdemona, feminism, Juliet, rewriting, Shakespeare, women.

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Introduction

Contemporary dramatists have shown an extraordinary interest in rewriting Shakespeare's plays, approaching them from different perspectives and attempting to make them apt means to address key social and political issues (Rozett 1994). Feminist authors and critics question the nature of Shakespeare's women, accusing him of misogyny because of his passive portrayal of women in his plays, especially the tragedies (See Fischlin and Fortier 2000, 47-8). The female characters' victimhood, in his tragedies, is the result of their helplessness and inability to choose for themselves. They are dominated by cruel and selfish fathers, husbands and lovers who demand them to meet the societal expectations of female virtues as obedient girls, wives and mothers. This exploitative phallocentric environment denies them the right to speak and forces them to accept their tragic circumstances submissively. For instance, both Desdemona and Juliet in the Shakespearean original texts are controlled by parental surveillance and are in love with men whom they are not allowed to marry. Their defiance of the patriarchal system culminates in tragic ends. In *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case states:

> [The] New feminist theory would abandon the traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notions of form, practice and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in the art, support their liberation from the cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorisation of the male gender. (qtd. Hengen 1995, 98)

In *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance* (1999, 5), Marianne Novy states that the scarcity of feminist adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, especially the tragedies, in the past was due to the hegemony of the patriarchal literary canon and the limited number of women dramatist. With the emergence of new female playwrights during the last

quarter of the 20th century, the number of feminist revisions of Shakespeare's plays increased. Feminist adaptors find in Shakespeare's marginalised female characters a rich source of inspiration that motivate them to reconsider these woman victims in new plays that reinforce their radical feminist discourse.

Female characters, like Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), Ophelia in *Hamlet* (1599-1601), and Desdemona in *Othello* (1604), figure as contemporary protagonists and are given new challenging roles, different from the submissive roles assigned to them in their original Shakespearean versions. Notable examples of these feminist rewritings are Melissa Murray's *Ophelia* (1979) and Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1987). These feminist playwrights intend to transform Shakespeare's female characters by liberating them from their stereotypical roles and giving them voices to speak of their marginal existence in their oppressive male-dominated societies. Their modification strategies include changes in the plots and alterations in the character roles: the male characters are given minor roles while the female characters are spotlighted. Their female protagonists are not necessarily presented as rebellious women who defy the patriarchal structure, but they have a new perspective on their limited agency within the Shakespearian social milieu. The heroines are given a chance to articulate their suppressed desires and "interior psychological motives" (Laurie Osbourne 2007, 116). This article deals with Ann-Marie MacDonald's revisionist approach to Shakespearean tragic heroines, specifically Juliet and Desdemona, in her 1988 drama, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. It highlights the playwright's feminist subtext and her perspective on the patriarchal portrayal of women who lack the agency and strength the male characters enjoy in traditional drama.

Constance Ledbelly's Journey Towards Liberation

First performed in Toronto in 1988, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* guaranteed MacDonald's international fame as one of the prominent contemporary Canadian playwrights. In this play, MacDonald explores feminist issues related to women's identity and rights in a male-dominated society. She denounces sexism in contemporary culture. Her protagonist, Constance Ledbelly, reconsiders the fate of two of Shakespeare's tragic heroines in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, namely Desdemona and Juliet, as she tries to finish writing a doctoral dissertation on Shakespearean tragedies. Her metafictional attempt to reimagine these traditional dramatic figures and the Elizabethan times as she writes takes her into subliminal interactions with Desdemona and Juliet and helps her understand herself and learn from the characters' experiences.

MacDonald's reevaluation of these female characters is intended to change the prevailing opinion in the academic world and Western culture that views them as passive and weak characters. The contemporary society MacDonald depicts is also repressive and patriarchal. It exploits women and feeds on their vitality and efforts (Burnett 2002, 8). Unlike, Desdemona and Juliet, Constance has a chance to pursue her academic education and work as an assistant professor of Shakespearean studies at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. However, she also suffers from the same limitations women were enduring in the past. Constance toils to do her academic work, but her efforts are used by Professor Claude Night, a man she loves, to guarantee a job for himself at Oxford University and for his academic promotions. He treats her as an object and even calls her his "pet" and his "little titmouse" (MacDonald 2012, 15). To him, Constance has "little mind" despite her invaluable contributions and service (ibid, 17). She is jilted by him when he starts a new relationship with a young student. This marks the turning point or the epiphany in her life. It is the beginning of the end of her submissive existence in this sexist world.

When the play opens, Constance struggles with her sense of insignificance and her lack of confidence in her life and work:

> Oh I'm not, I'm, I'm not the least bit special, I'm, I'm just one flawed and isolated fragment of a perfect infinite mind like anybody else… no I'm not special– unique maybe, in the, in the sense that a snowflake is unique, but no more valuable than any other flake… (ibid, 16)

She is frustrated with her marginal existence and thinks of quitting her office at Queen's University:

> I'll call the Dean and resign. I'll go back to my apartment and watch the plants die and let the cats copulate freely. I'll order in groceries. Eventually I'll be evicted. I'll smell really bad and swear at people on the subway. (ibid, 20)

In her Ph.D. treatise, she attempts to deconstruct the main belief that *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* are tragedies and prove that both plays are originally "comedies by an unknown author, comedies that Shakespeare plundered and made over ersatz tragedies! It is an irresistible—if wholly repugnant—thought" (ibid, 15). She also doubts the academic belief that Desdemona and Juliet are weak characters who are responsible for their tragic fate. Moreover, she believes these female characters are not blamable for the tragic ends of the men in the plays.

Disappointed by her inability to write properly and to impress her hard-to-please professor/supervisor, Constance throws all her writing stuff into the wastebasket which swallows her, taking her on a subconscious adventure into the world of Shakespeare. She plays the role of the saviour who can change her life and the lives of Desdemona and Juliet, who have been viewed as literary and cultural icons of passive and helpless victims. She interferes with the events and endeavours to prevent the heroes and heroines from committing violence.

Meeting a Powerful and Violent Desdemona

Constance's first destination is Cyprus, the place where Othello kills Desdemona, believing that she is unfaithful to him. MacDonald makes use of some clues and gaps in Shakespeare's *Othello* and uses them in her new handling of Desdemona's character. Despite her feminine and submissive nature, Shakespeare's Desdemona willingly accompanies her husband to the war-stricken Cyprus and even arrives there before her husband. These are signs of her dashing and adventurous spirit. When Constance informs her of her stereotypical passive image in *Othello* as "a doomed and helpless victim" (ibid, 38), Desdemona defends herself, saying:

> Did I not flee my father, here to dwell beneath the sword Hephaestus forged for Mars? Will I not dive into Sargasso Sea, to serve abreast the Amazons abroad? Will I not butcher any cow that dares low lies to call me tame, ay that I will! So raise I now the battle cry, *Bullshit!!* (ibid)

MacDonald's Desdemona is different from Shakespeare's. Constance discovers that Desdemona is a strong female character, who is belittled by the patriarchal mainstream in playwriting. She volunteers to fight with Othello and she even invites Constance to stay with them and fight their enemies. When Constance refuses, saying that she cannot shed blood, Desdemona tells her "That's a fault," and that, as a woman, she "must study to be bloody" (ibid, 32).

In MacDonald's version of the play, Desdemona is presented as a belligerent woman, who accepts to marry Othello, whom she calls her "fair warrior," because of his victories (ibid, 27). She is strong and can even venture at times to indulge in sword fights. Her bellicosity is evident in her wish to be a man to be able to fight and be victorious like her husband: "My sole regret that heaven had not made me such a man; / but next in honour is to be his wife" (ibid). She is overjoyed to hear the blast of cannons and the impending battle with the Turks: "This Volley heralds battle with the Turk./ Lets to the sea wall and enjoy the fray!" (ibid, 32). She has "a

taste for blood" (ibid, 32) and "has [a] backbone and one heck of a fiery temper" (Friedlander 1990, 4). She even wishes to be an Amazon and "join these ranks of spiked and fighting she's …" (MacDonald 2012, 30). Constance also admires the way Desdemona defends herself against a man if he thinks to betray her or fail her in love. She compliments Desdemona's fierce nature in such situations, saying that "she'd kill him in cold blood and blank verse, then smear the ivied walls in scarlet letters spelling 'thief'" (ibid, 46). Though she is sometimes impulsive and desires tragic ends, Desdemona's strength puts her in stark contrast with Shakespeare's timid version of the character.

MacDonald's Desdemona inspires Constance in her quest for knowledge and experience. Constance praises her character, saying that she is "magnificent" and "capable of greatness" (ibid, 38). Impressed by her strength and self-confidence, Constance desires: "I wish I were more like Desdemona" (ibid, 45). She learns from Desdemona how to act in critical situations and how to value her aptitudes as an educated and independent woman. When Constance introduces herself as a scholar, Desdemona is surprised to find that a woman can work. She is also excited when she learns from Constance that a woman in her age is not married:

DESDEMONA As real as thou art, Constance, Queen of Academe.

CONSTANCE Is that my true identity? Gosh. I was just a teacher 'til today.

DESDEMONA A learned lady? O most rare in kind. And does your husband not misprize this knowledge?

CONSTANCE Oh I'm not married.

DESDEMONA [Aside] Most unnatural!... A virgin oracle!… Brave agèd maid, to wander all alone! (ibid, 28)

Laurin R. Porter argues that the Shakespearean characters whom Constance encounters appreciate her academic achievement, something that encourages her to see her worth:

> Because they come to Constance with no preconceptions or stereotypes, Desdemona and Othello are able to see her value. MacDonald, of course, manipulates the plot to make this possible, using especially the character of Desdemona to turn liabilities, as Constance's culture would perceive them, into assets. The fact that she is a scholar, unmarried, traveling alone, even that she is a vegetarian, which Desdemona declares 'meet in vestal vows'—all these qualities are set in a new context and admired. (1995, 362)

Initially, Constance acknowledges her lack of confidence and courage: "I can't even kill a mosquito!" (MacDonald 2012, 32). She laments her previous existence at Queen's University and the years she has spent as "an inky slave in paper chains" (ibid, 36). Following Desdemona's example, Constance manifests her strength when she swordfights with the villainous Iago, and enjoys her fearless act, exclaiming:

Dear God, …
I saw a flash of red before my eyes.
I felt a rush of power through my veins.
I tasted iron blood inside my mouth.
I loved it!" (ibid, 47).

Unlike the traditional version, Desdemona's fate is changed, thanks to Constance's intervention when she informs Othello of Desdemona's fidelity and Iago's intrigue.

MacDonald's New Juliet

When Constance moves to Verona, her next destination, she disguises herself as a boy in her effort to transform the tragic course of the events. She finds out that

the passionate Romeo and the romantic Juliet are not as ideal as they are presented in Shakespeare's play. Though MacDonald follows the same conventions used by Elizabethan dramatists, she depends on parody to criticise the idealism of love and false emotions of the star-crossed lovers that confine women within traditional patterns and present them as helpless victims in a patriarchal world.

MacDonald changes Juliet, the icon of romance and delicacy in English literature, into a fickle woman, who struggles with her inconstant emotions towards Romeo. Later, Constance is astounded to see that Juliet is not the supposedly virtuous Shakespearean maiden: "Heavenly days, what's come over you?!/ You're supposed to be all innocence" (ibid, 68). In MacDonald's version, it is Juliet, rather than Romeo, who woos Romeo on the balcony.

Constance intrudes between Tybalt, Juliet's rush and turbulent cousin, and Mercutio, Romeo's cousin, to prevent the feud and the ensuing tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*. She informs them that Romeo and Juliet are now married and the conflict between the two men will lead to no avail.

Unlike the diffident Shakespearian Juliet, MacDonald's Juliet is a strong-willed woman, who can test her feelings towards Romeo and even shift her interest to another man when she realises that she does not love Romeo sincerely. Like Desdemona, she is also obsessed with tragic ends and self-destruction. Juliet's tendency to die reflects a romanticised version of death that reveals her immaturity and absurd attitude towards life. She contemplates suicide at the end before Constance helps her change her pessimistic view towards life and see things differently. Her obsession with death is evident in her speeches. For instance, following her first night of the wedding, she expresses her depression and grief caused by her hasty loveless marriage to Romeo. She views Romeo's wedding gift, a "pretty box," as a coffin and wonders "if it take[s] the measure of my corpse?" (ibid, 56). She even asks her Nurse to "entomb it with the rest" (Ibid).

However, like Desdemona, Juliet helps Constance overcome her sense of imperfection by encouraging her to be proud and confident of herself and her achievements as an academic when Constance tells her that her students call her "The Mouse" (ibid, 30) and describe her as a "laughingstock" (ibid, 37) and a "big joke" (ibid, 45).

MacDonald's Revisions and Her Feminist Subtext

Written at the end of the Second Wave of Feminism, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* focuses on feminist ideas and the place of women in the late twentieth century. In an interview, Ann-Marie MacDonald declares: "I'm a feminist through and through" and "in a play like *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*…the entire situation is a feminist situation" (Much 1990, 134). Even if the imaginary events take place "within the zone of the unconscious mind" (MacDonald 2012, XII), or as it is stated in the epilogue "one subconscious dreamy thought" (ibid, 89), the play reveals the playwright's revisionism and her feminist beliefs. By journeying through the past to the Elizabethan times, MacDonald gives her audience a chance to evaluate the problems and the position of women both in the past and in the present. She intends to show whether or not there is a substantial change in the role of women in society, which is dominated by misogyny and gender bigotry. Professor Night is presented as an exploitive villain, taking advantage of Constance's intellectual achievements. Meanwhile, Othello and Romeo, though commonly established as tragic heroes, are overshadowed by the powerful female characters in MacDonald's adaptation of the plays.

MacDonald turns the traditional tragedies into a "feminist comedy" with "the potential for real social or political change" and a better future life for women, exemplified through the experience of the three female characters and their journey towards autonomy (Hengen 1995, 97). Richard Knowles states that MacDonald "uses comedy to mount an attack…on dominant patriarchal, white, capitalist

forces…an attempt to create a unifying sense of community in order to empower a group that is marginalised by these forces" (1994, 276). MacDonald gives these marginalised female characters a voice to defend themselves in the light of the common public opinion that views them as timid and helpless victims.

MacDonald reestablishes a new comic ending for her play, something unmatched in Shakespearean comedies, which often end in marriage. Her female characters realise that the solution to their problems comes not through despair and suicide, but through their understanding of their inner worth. This encourages them to value their lives above all. In the crypt scene, where Juliet commits suicide in Shakespeare's version, the three women, Juliet, Desdemona, and Constance, meet. As Juliet and Desdemona fight, encouraging Constance to "come and kill… stay and die" (MacDonald 2012, 86), the latter reprimands and prevents them from indulging in violence. She informs them that though "life is a hell of a lot more complicated than you think," they should tolerate and form a sisterly bond necessary for survival in this man-centered world (ibid):

For those who have the eyes to see:

Take care-for what you see, just might be thee.

Where two plus one adds up to one, not three. (ibid, 88)

Ultimately, Constance realises that she should not allow anyone to manipulate her through ghost-writing or fake love. The confidence and self-esteem that she attains at the end testify to her Bildungsroman development as a three-dimensional protagonist, epitomised in the symbolic ending: "She feels her pen behind her ear, removes it, and looks at it. It has turned to solid gold, feather and all" (ibid).

Conclusion

In her feminist handling of Shakespeare's tragedies, MacDonald brings the heroines to the forefront and gives the male characters marginal roles. Her Juliet and

Desdemona are different from their Shakespearean counterparts. Shakespeare's ideal image of Desdemona as an innocent and obedient wife belies her inner strength and reinforces the patriarchal belief that women are powerless and submissive. In MacDonald's revisionist drama, Desdemona, is transformed into a valiant female whose aggressive and bellicose nature puts her in stark contrast with the passive and easy-going Shakespearean maiden.

Instead of the Shakespearian passionate damsel, MacDonald's Juliet is flighty and emotionally inconsistent. She is more down-to-earth than Shakespeare's ideal and romantic female. Juliet's preoccupation with death is also ridiculed by MacDonald to demonstrate male-author's unrealistic portrayal of female characters. The fact that MacDonald has made a comedy out of two tragedies, underscores the implied feminist message of the necessity of change in women's lives. Women, who are put in difficult situations and whose lives are ravaged by the men in their phallocentric society should not necessarily adopt the same tragic fatalism or pessimistic vision towards life.

Through her imaginary adventures into Shakespeare's times, Constance undergoes a transformative journey of self-discovery that helps her overcome her self-destructive tendencies and the emotional crisis caused by her unrequited love for the opportunistic Professor Night. Her interactions with Shakespeare's iconic females, who become her positive role models, assist her in rediscovering her courage and to forge a new identity as an independent woman.

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