

"...not so much wrinkled, nothing so aged as this seems": The "Stone Statue" of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* and Critical Feminist Gerontology

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Abstract

The paper seeks to reexamine the character of Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* - her trial in the hand of the sexist patriarchal authority in Early Modern England, her transformation into a stone statue for sixteen long years and her final coming back to life from the viewpoint of Critical Feminist Gerontology. Feminist Gerontological researches form a critical perspective to analyze the conditions under which women grow older in our society and how their age is governed by the patriarchal assignations of social and gender roles. The term "old woman" carries with it the unavoidable aura of negativism as opposed to "old man". The term leads us to the unmistakable cultural association of an old woman with menopause, wrinkles, gray hair, the body, beauty and sexuality or to the biomedicalization of a senior woman in terms of her physical deterioration. From this point of view, Leontes's suspicions of his pregnant wife cheating on him with his friend, King Polixenes, is closely related to the Elizabethan assumption that women are promiscuous and unfaithful by nature (remember Donne's assertions in "Goe, and Catche a Falling Starre"). The construction of gendered identity in family which is basically a patriarchal construct relied largely upon the normative stereotype of women being inferior to men and set to perform the household roles and childbearing being unconditionally faithful to the patriarchal gender prerogatives. Naturally, a young woman is all flesh and the old woman is all stone. The first reaction of Leontes after Paulina unveils the curtain from Hermione's stone statue is not one of joy or remorse but a realization of her being wrinkled and aged. Hermione also accepts her fate curtly and calmly because the security of a family is important for an old woman. Her gesture refers to the unmistakable truth that the process of aging for a woman is significantly different from the process of aging for a man.

Keywords: Gerontology, feminism, ageing, Shakespeare, embodiment.

Over the last decade, "age" and "ageing" have substantially emerged as cultural concepts. Critical gerontology is a discipline that arises in the sphere of gerontology itself that goes beyond the stereotypical explanations of age and ageing in society and the discipline of gerontology to probe into the underlying processes that structure the social, political, economic, cultural and individual experiences of growing old. From this point of view, stories of ageing or narrative or literary approaches to ageing become at bottom a study to point out how the aged in our society is not an acultural or apolitical identity being consistently responsive to the time and socio-cultural milieu he/she lives into. D. Shenk, B. Davis and L. Murray in their essay, "In their own words: Using narratives to gerontology" opine that-

Narrative gerontology allows us to illustrate how theories of aging are socially constructed, moving learners beyond a single approach to the stories and meanings of aging. (Shenk, Davis, and Murray 2008, 241)

Critical Feminist Gerontology comes close on the heels of this socio-cultural dimensions of gerontology and attained prominence with the publication of *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology* (edited by J. Twigg and W. Martin) in 2015. The book reflected two broad impulses governing age studies- epistemological and socio-historical. The epistemological turn tends to consider the female and the queer experiences of ageing as something different from the common and, often, generalised approach to ageing which Gerontology and Geriatrics deal with. The socio-historical study, on the other hand, presents a kind of "understanding of ageing and its embodiment" (Gilleard and Higgs 2013, 87) thesis that reexamines the changing perspectives of age in terms of demography, time, society and culture. Actually the term "old woman" carries with it an unavoidable aura of negativism as opposed to "old man". It leads us unmistakably to the cultural association of an old woman with menopause, wrinkles, gray hair, the body, beauty and sexuality or to the biomedicalization of a senior woman in terms of her physical deterioration. This paper is basically an attempt to reassess the character of Hermione, the wronged queen in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, from the perspective of Critical Feminist Gerontology and especially from the viewpoint of its preoccupation with the body image and gendered ageism which is mainly a patriarchal construct.

Hermione's trial in the hand of patriarchal authority in Early Modern England, her transformation into a stone statue for sixteen long years and her final coming back to life have been the focal point of *The Winter's Tale*. Leontes's suspicion of his pregnant wife cheating on him with his friend, King Polixenes, is closely related to the Elizabethan assumption that women are frail, promiscuous and unfaithful by nature. In this connection we can readily remember John Donne's famous assertion in his song, *Goe, and Catche a Falling Starre* that "Nowhere lives a woman true and fair". The construction of gendered

identity in family which is basically a patriarchal enterprise relied largely upon the normative stereotype of women being inferior to men and set to perform the household roles and childbearing being unconditionally faithful to the patriarchal gender prerogatives. Naturally a young woman is all flesh and the old woman is all stone. This preoccupation of the play with female beauty and body and the change of patriarchal response towards the female "body image" with the advancement of age becomes evident in the first reaction of Leontes after Paulina unveils the curtain from Hermione's stone statue which is not, quite surprisingly, one of remorse or joy but a realisation of her being wrinkled and aged. But before going for a detailed analysis of these possibilities in the play let's have a look into the problem of body and embodiment which of late has turned into one of the most significant issues in the corpus of Critical Feminist Gerontology.

Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin in their essay, "The Challenge of Cultural Gerontology" refer to the gradual recognition of body as a central theme of cultural gerontology-

Over the last 20 years, a large literature has emerged across the humanities and significant parts of the social sciences addressing the body and embodiment (Schilling, 2012; Turner, 1991). Initially, social gerontology was reluctant to engage with this, regarding the body as a potentially retrogressive subject that threatened to undermine the gains of the Political Economy or Critical Gerontology schools that has emphasized the ways in which old age was socially rather than psychologically constituted. More recently, however, the complex interplay between the body and its social and cultural constitution in age has come to be recognized as one of the central themes of cultural gerontology. (Twigg and Martin 2014, 3)

From the context of Feminism the body image of a woman becomes a matter of socio-cultural importance being controlled and dictated by patriarchal idioms of beauty and female sexuality. The experiences of an aging body, the loss of physical attractiveness and the decline of functional abilities can be interpreted from the point of view of Jacqueline Rose's theory of female sexuality and its patriarchal visual representation in her 1991-book, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. When the male sexuality is thought to be forever functional, feminine sexuality is represented and played out to unravel the ideologies of domination and hegemony. Consequently a close link between sexuality and the body image can be discovered where images situate and represents women as fantasies and "looking good" makes them acceptable to men. This position of women as fantasy or a sex-object or an object of male desire is described by Rose as a "particular economy of vision". So the physical realities of aging is integrally related to social context. In the words of Chrisler and Ghiz (1993)-

Although body image does not alter from day to day, it should not be considered 'fixed' or 'static'...It develops throughout life as a result of sensory and behavioral experience, physical appearance, somatic changes, societal norms, and the reaction of other people. (Chrisler and Ghiz 1993, 68)

The victimization of Hermione can be seen as an instance of her embodiment in the hand of patriarchy. J. Rodin contends that-

Of all the ways we experience ourselves, none is so primal as the sense of our own bodies. Our body image is at the very core of our identity. Our feelings about our bodies are woven into practically every aspect of our behaviour. Our bodies shape our identity because they are the form and substance of our persona to the outside world. (Rodin 1992, 60)

Again this body image is highly gendered and structured by socio-cultural norms about gender roles. Brown and Jasper argue that-

Historically, women's social value has been inseparable from their bodies. Their social role has been identified with and expressed through their bodies: in bearing children, in satisfying men's sexual needs, and in the labour of caring for men's and children's emotional and physical needs. (Brown and Jasper 1993, 18)

Feminist gerontological researchers often go for a study of female life-course to show how the different stages of their life are governed by the patriarchal assignments of gender roles. Leontes believes in this traditional Elizabethan concept of male primogeniture where the husband plays the authoritarian role, domineering and, often, willfully cruel. So, even when he himself tells her beautiful wife, Hermione to persuade King Polixenes, his childhood friend to stay in Sicilia for some more days, his culturally constructed mindset leads him to suspect a liason between the two. His early modern prejudices succumb to the stereotypical representation of women as lascivious and sexually intemperate. Shakespeare builds upon the stereotype of women as lustful in many of his plays like *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet* and *Cymbeline* and also in his Dark Lady Sonnets. Leontes's jealousy can easily be interpreted as a gendered preoccupation because a young wife of exceptional beauty must be lustful and she should be faithful only to her husband. When Paulina rebukes Leontes for his crime against his innocent wife, this culturally structured mindset of Leontes comes to the fore. He publicly mocks Antigonus, Paulina's husband, as a cuckold saying, " What, canst rule her?" (II. iii. 46)

Maurice Charney in his book, *Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare* comments-

In folklore a cuckold is usually a comic figure. He is generally depicted as a old man- the *pantalone* of the commedia dell'arte-who has married a young and beautiful wife whom one feels he is incapable of satisfying sexually. Shakespeare is thus working against the grain in both *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*- at least in the first half of the latter play- in making the protagonist tragic. (Charney 2009, 98)

Towards the beginning of the play Leontes cannot be considered to be an old man because if we keep in mind his own assumption that he and Polixenes were of Mamillius's age (i.e. seven) some twenty three years back. But the cultural associations of gender roles lead Leontes to victimize Hermione as an adulteress. Her bodily beauty or embodiment plays a vital role in this-

"You, my lords,
Look on her, mark her well. Be but about
To say she is a goodly lady, and
The justice of your hearts will thereto add
'Tis pity she's not honest, honourable.
Praise her but for this her without-door-form-
Which on my faith deserves high speech-and straight
The shrug, the hum or ha, these petty brands
That calumny doth use- O, I am out!" (II. i. 64-72)

He goes on with madness and fury-

"... .I have said
She's an adulteress, I have said with whom.
More, she's a traitor, and Camillo is
A federary with her, and one that knows
What she should shame to know herself,
But with her most vile principal, that she's
A bed-swerver, even as bad as those
That vulgars give bold'st titles;..." (II. i. 87-94)

Again, Hermione herself is aware of the culturally constructed reproductive role of her body and in the trial scene she gives vent to her fear of a possible loss of it when she will be barred from playing the roles of a mother and a wife in her lonely imprisonment-

"Sir, spare your threats.

The bug which you would fight me with I seek
To me can life be no commodity;
The crown and comfort of my life, your favour,
I do give lost, for I do feel it gone
But know not how it went. My second joy,
And first fruits of my body, from his presence
I am barred, like one infectious. My third comfort,
Starred most unluckily, is from my breast,
The innocent milk in it most innocent mouth,
Haled out to murder; myself on every post
Proclaimed a strumpet; with immodest hatred
The childbed privilege denied, which 'longs
To women of all fashion; lastly, hurried
Here, to this place, i'th' open air, before
I have got strength of limit. Now, my liege,
Tell me what blessing I have here alive,
That I should fear to die. ..." (III. ii. 89-106)

Actually here Hermione is hinting at a kind of symbolic death of her womanhood when her body cannot perform the cultural roles assigned to it. Interestingly enough her physical death is reported soon after in Act III when she hears her son is dead. Hermione collapses and is carried offstage. Paulina reports her death and in Antigonus's dream of her ghost this death is almost confirmed. From this point of view, the appearance of Hermione's stone statue in Act V, Sc. iii is often marvellous but her stony image can be taken as a kind of symbolic old age where the female body has lost its sexual functionality and reproductive abilities. Hermione's transformation from flesh to stone can be taken as a symbolic transformation from youth to old age.

This stone image of Hermione has repeatedly featured in the novels and short stories of A. S. Byatt where it stands for the barren, invisible and markedly marginalised identity of an old woman. Aging and petrification have been the major concepts in her famous short story, "A Stone Woman" which features in her collection, *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003). In the story Ines, the "Stone Woman" of the story, transforms into a stone statue but this transformation carries with it the unmistakable marks of old age like wrinkles and grey hair. A woman's biological progress through old age is symbolised through the powerful image of ageing. But this connection between old age and petrification becomes more evident in her novella, "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" (1994) and in her novel, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) where she directly draws analogies between the aged protagonists' old age with that of the stone statue of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. Brian J. Worsfold in his book, *Acculturating Age: Approaches to Cultural Gerontology* states-

Two of the most telling examples of such narratives are the novella "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" (1994), and the quartet, especially in its intertextual connection with William Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale* (1623). A. S. Byatt's monumental series, which was published between 1978 and 2002, incorporates among its central characters the figure of Winifred Potter, an ageing woman who is seen by her family and by herself as " [a] silent female form ", " withered " " like a dried-up stick ". Significantly, one of the defining traits of Winifred, whose " days for childcare were over, her body no longer fit to bear more ", is her sympathy for Shakespeare's Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*- And what about Hermione, [...] All the years of her womanhood gone, and her two children, one dead, one vanished, and no feelings required but gratitude and joy. [*The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1978) 1994: 111] (Worsfold 2011, 179)

Again in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, Gillian Perholt, the narratologist, relates her "largely irrelevant" and "past childbearing" life with that of the stone statue of Hermione in course of her lecture on *The Winter's Tale* in Turkey.

It is a well-known fact that Shakespeare modelled his *The Winter's Tale* on Robert Greene's *Pandosto: The Triumph of Life* (1588) and, naturally, Shakespeare has introduced the character of Time in Chorus in Act IV to situate a gap of sixteen years. Soon after we come across Polixenes and Camillo speaking of old age and time warp. Naturally, the wrinkles evident in Hermione's statue stand for her growing old. The first reaction of Leontes after he sees the image of his long absent wife after a gap of sixteen years is also, therefore, a vindication of the culturally constructed notion of the unavoidable relationship between an old woman with her bodily deterioration-

"But yet, Paulina,

Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing
So aged as this seems." (V. iii. 27-29)

The patriarchal response to the embodiment of an elderly woman clearly shows that it is her beauty and physical appearance that led to the victimization of Hermione. Actually Hermione's coming back to life and the final reconciliation in *The Winter's Tale* is devoid of the aura of celebration that marks the last scenes of other last plays like *The Tempest* and *Pericles*. The scene is curt and ending is to some extent hurriedly done. Perhaps Hermione's acceptance of her fate with calm resignation stands for her search for the safety and security of a family which is the prime need of an old woman. She was invisible for sixteen long years and, now, another course of invisibility begins. Her life reminds us Kathleen Woodward's description of "the virtually invisible subject of older women in western culture"(Woodward 1999, x) in the introduction of her book, *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (1999).

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