

WITH TIME COMES AGENCY:

The Evolving Role of Women over Time as Seen in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "Of Beren and Lúthien," and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

DANNY TETLOCK

In his first-year essay "With Time Comes Agency: The Evolving Role of Women Over Time as Seen in *Much Ado about Nothing*, 'Of Beren and Lúthien,' and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," Danny Tetlock analyzes not only the way that the role of women has changed over time, but the way that the tropes and conventions writers use to portray women have changed. Drawing on conventional images of women ranging from Scandinavian medieval valkyries to early-twentieth-century suffragettes to popular television heroines such as Xena, Danny focusses on the ways in which William Shakespeare, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Joss Whedon not only reflect the changing images of women across times, but also participate in the change. In the end he argues that art does not merely reflect reality, but that works of fiction can actively change the way society envisions women.

Dr. Kathy Cawsey

In the Western canon of arts and literature, the portrayal of women is often indicative of the historical period in which these stories take place. In William Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* (hereafter shortened as *Much Ado*), the role of women – in the case of Hero –

is as negotiable property, whereas Beatrice acts as a foil to this notion, rejecting the patriarchal norms and, in so doing, is perceived as another of Shakespeare's shrews to be tamed. Three centuries after Shakespeare, J. R. R. Tolkien's "Of Beren and Lúthien" features a warrior elf princess who breaks conventional expectations of women as passive, contrived damsels in distress in the nostalgic medievalist Adventure/Fantasy genre. On the eve of the twenty-first century, the eponymous character in television's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (hereafter shortened as *Buffy*) asserts the changing character and perceptions of women playing heroic roles. In summation, the portrayal of women in these three works is a sign of the times in which they were written – regardless of contradictory historical precedents – be they tired tropes meeting expectations of women or progressive heroines breaking with tradition and redefining what has customarily been expected of them.

In *Much Ado*, despite two of the main female characters' strong familial ties as cousins, their personas are at odds with one another. In this literary period, a woman's importance stems only from her association with honourable men, and Hero is essentially

discussed among the men (particularly between Leonato and Claudio) as a commodity rather than as a person of agency (4.1.30). This was a culture that employed scare tactics of shame on women who were not chaste. In fact, a man's own reputation relative to a woman's behaviour was more important than that woman's reputation or her word against slander (4.1.39-109). Stephanie Chamberlain notes that Hero is compared to fruit and the process of valuing this commodity based on ripeness and rotting:

Not only does it explicitly connect marriage to the early modern marketplace, but it [also] taps into the market's system of valuation as well. In pristine condition, the orange constituted a somewhat prized food commodity. In a bruised and moldering state, however, it necessarily lost all value as an object of exchange. While the unsullied Hero may well represent one of Leonato's most prized assets, she becomes virtually un-exchangeable once her sexual chastity is called into question. (1)

It is a key point to note that calling chastity into question could be based on "real or, in the case of Shakespeare's Hero, perceived sexual indiscretion" (Chamberlain 4). Not giving the benefit of the doubt to the "woman wrong'd"

suggests that pursuing the truth of her innocence is less important than the stain of dishonour brought upon the men attempting to transact her marriage, and indeed, “[a] woman’s shame, in other words, constituted household shame, and fathers and husbands necessarily shared in its negative consequences” (Chamberlain 5). The male characters are quick to libel Hero, and only once Beatrice says of her cousin: “she is wronged, she is slandered, she is undone” (4.1.318-19). Benedick becomes the first man in the play to make an effort to convince the other men of Hero’s innocence. Needless to say, Shakespeare does not appear to allow Hero the agency in this world of men to stand a fair trial.

Given her fervent denunciation of ill-spoken words involving Hero, Beatrice does not play the complaisant female, but is rather very independent in nature. Moreover, she possesses wit to equal that of any man, as exemplified in her myriad disputes with Benedick, which prelude their eventual coming together in the end and – arguably make their relationship stronger, given that she converses with him as an equal rather than as a subservient female. Perhaps such a contrast in characters stems from what novelist and

scholar Marilyn French sees as a transition period for the Bard and his works:

[W]hile Shakespeare began his career with great respect for masculine qualities and some suspicion of feminine ones, in his later works "He had come to fear and deplore the power and capriciousness of the masculine principle and to idealize certain aspects of the feminine."
(French qtd. in Chamberlain 2)

Whether French's words give Shakespeare more credit than is due – given that he may not consciously intend Beatrice to be a progressive and independent woman – he nonetheless makes her so. Though she intends to marry Benedick in the end (5.4.90-93), it is a hard fought battle because she not so much plays hard-to-get as she is selective; this is fairly incongruous with what a woman's choice is supposed to be in her time period: a yes, no questions asked, if he is a man of honour. While Hero is prized as a commodity to be bartered for, Beatrice takes it upon herself to obdurately secure her own future and, in so doing, she gives rise to female characters with personal manifest destiny in a time when it is unheard of to do so.

Tolkien's "Of Beren and Lúthien" is written in a style of storytelling in the vein of both Old English legendaria and Norse eddas and sagas, and Tolkien's more developed female characters are in tune with traditional representations of warrior women, such as valkyries, in Old Norse and Germanic tales:

Representatives of heroic modes and motivations, women characters [. . .] [are] most appropriately understood as agents of power and influence who develop their empowered literary contexts from that pivotal perspective through which Tolkien asks us to look fully into the future only by gazing intently into the medieval past. (Donovan 129)

Furthermore, Tolkien's writing tends to "transcend the conventions of medieval heroic literature, [and his] valkyrie-associated themes transform the characters [. . .] from mere literary accessories to figures whose words and actions carry intrinsic importance" (Donovan 129). When we examine the Norse and Old English folkloric influences in his writing, it comes as no surprise that Lúthien is not a woman who will sit and wait to be saved; rather, she appears as an almost ethereal being

to match the strength of any man, and she heartily engages with danger.

Lúthien is an elven princess both in control of her own destiny and strong enough to equal the strength of male characters around her, both in combative skills and in temperament. The strength exhibited by Lúthien and other female characters of influence in Tolkien's works fits well with the institutionalisation of suffrage and the post-modern feminist movement in the twentieth century, and he and his iron maidens exhibit "attitudes toward power that are quite compatible with, if not identical to, the attitudes of many who define themselves as feminists" (Crowe qtd. in Donovan 106). Like suffragists pushing for representation outside of the domestic sphere, Lúthien too exists in multiple spheres: she not only assumes the function of a courtly princess, but also plays an active role in scenes of peril. "Power in the works of Tolkien is often to be found in the hands of a woman" (Hopkins qtd. in Donovan 106), which rings true when considering that Lúthien is not prone to rely on Beren to rescue her when she is held against her will, as in the house in Hírilorn, where she instead uses various enchantments to escape on her own

(Tolkien 202). She even comes to Beren's rescue after Sauron has cast him into the dark pit (201-202). There exists some criticism of Tolkien's work involving minority representation, but one should remember that, "[d]espite the conventionally, even doctrinally, male-centred aspects of Tolkien's world, he also bucked that same system [. . .] by creating active heroines" (Armstrong 250). While "Of Beren and Lúthien" is a Fantasy centred around and fuelled by a love story, "women in Tolkien are not portrayed solely in the light of their relationships to men" (Hopkins qtd. in Donovan: 106). With the character of Lúthien, Tolkien creates a well-rounded heroine, in that she is not only surpassing in beauty, but also a skilled warrior, with or without a man's assistance.

In the transition between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Buffy is, like Lúthien, an active participant in her own destiny and a protector of a town ravaged by numerous manifestations of evil. However, she holds no regal power of influence and is instead an average, middle class, young woman. Women are often inherently pacifist in stories featuring combat, whereas men are generally bellicose, but Buffy challenges these

gender conventions with her combative prowess, intelligence, and wit in a world usually dominated by male warriors. Her role as a transgressive heroic figure can be compared to other women who have challenged gender norms, such as her contemporaries from other popular television programs (e.g., Xena and Nikita), and at other times to historical figures such as the Celts, whose views towards female agency and equality were historically well ahead of the sociological curve (Early 11).

Buffy also has great influence on youth. The protagonist leads as an example for girls and women, both as a booster of self-esteem and as a person refiguring the image of youth in popular culture. The program also helps impress upon young boys and men changing attitudes towards women. In the episode "Hush," which seems to embody the gist of the *Buffy* series as a whole, Buffy confronts the Gentlemen in the abandoned clock tower in the episode's final showdown. Though she is greatly outnumbered by the Gentlemen's straight-jacketed minions and requires Riley's help in the fight, she is by no means passive in her efforts. And because she arrives after Riley does, the chronology also goes against the

grain of conflict seen in most stories, in that she comes to his rescue, preventing a potentially fatal blow from being struck on him. *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon says that

If [he] can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening [. . .] it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism." (qtd. in Bellafante 83)

True to that belief, Riley's reaction to being saved is equal parts relief and surprise. *Buffy's* character further illustrates the shift towards women not only achieving greatness, but also achieving it in a more modest small-town-America setting, which gives agency both to everyday women and to youth culture as a whole in shaping their own world, and she manages to challenge male perspectives of women's roles within her own world as well.

There have historically been real women such as Boudicca and Joan of Arc who have broken the glass ceiling by being almost anachronistic; simply put, they do what men do, thus rejecting the patriarchal model of what is expected of women in their respective time periods. However, art does not always reflect life; rather, art can be an instrument of

shaping life and people's perception of gender roles (Holland 36), despite both contemporary and historical examples of enfranchised women who act in contrast to the portrayal of women in fiction. In Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, the treatment of Hero is akin to chattel, typifying women as an economic staple, whereas Beatrice breaks with this expectation, instead acting as a defiant opponent of patriarchal injustice. Tolkien's "Of Beren and Lúthien" raises the character of Lúthien to a heroic status with powers equal to her paramour Beren, and *Buffy* further echoes the warrior woman theme, albeit in a late twentieth century setting. The perception of women and how they are portrayed in the aforementioned works evolve with each new zeitgeist, and this artistic trend of growth will ideally lead culture on a trajectory aiming for gender equality to move from theory into practice.

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