Courtly Love: Shakespeare’s And Rochester’s Use Of Stock Characters

This essay is going to focus on Shakespeare’s and Rochester’s use of stock characters and is going to look at both pieces in terms of courtly love. The differences and similarities of the stock characters within the pieces will be explored, alongside the characters’ adherence or defiance of these types, including the Libertine as a form of character. Queen Elizabeth I and King Charles II play important roles within this essay in terms of providing a context for the two texts. Both rulers could be said to have influenced the work of Shakespeare and Rochester and this essay will investigate the ways in which this has taken effect.

In King Lear there is evidence of stock types being deployed, but more commonly none of the characters completely fit the definition of a single stock type, and most actually defy this. Goneril for example, defies stock types. Firstly, she does not adhere to the courtly women type because though she guides Cordelia towards obeying her husband at all times, she loathes her own husband and constantly reminds him that the only authority he has is through his marriage to her and so essentially without her he is nothing. This play was written just years after Queen Elizabeth I’s death and therefore could be argued to be a significant factor in the less than traditional actions of both Goneril and Regan. ‘Elizabeth referred to herself in terms that recognised the boundaries of gender but twisted them into a testimony to her unique ability to surmount them.’ (Cole, 1999, p. 170) Queen Elizabeth knew her gender provided her with boundaries, but she used that as an opportunity to challenge the boundaries and overcome them, instead of holding her back. Goneril’s tendencies towards violence break gender stereotypes as a result of her portraying more violence than any of the men do. Women are expected to be soft, loving and subservient, not violent and powerful. In addition to this, she often gives out instructions and demands as imperatives, such as ‘Come, sir, I would make use of that good wisdom’, which further connotes her unusual level of power within society. (Shakespeare, 1997, pp. 1, 4,741) In the same way Regan challenges patriarchal stereotypes throughout the play as a whole but especially so when she takes the sword which can be identified as her taking the masculine role in her household – ‘Give me thy sword. A peasant stand up to thus?’ She takes a sword and runs at him behind’. (Shakespeare, 1997, pp. 3,7,212) This goes against the traditional stock type of innocent and weak feminine characters who have to rely on males because they are unable to do much for themselves. (Gay, 2017, pp. 8-9) Regan’s death is caused as a direct result of her promiscuous and disloyal desire for Edmund, highlighting that her behaviours that would be considered typically masculine, are damaging and dysfunctional for a woman and are therefore what led to her demise. In this way, she can be seen as a villain. Having said this, Regan does adhere to the stock women stereotype where women are expected to be caring and compassionate when Cornwall is injured. ‘How is't my Lord. How look you?’ (Shakespeare, 1997, pp. 3, 7,92) connotes that she is not completely selfish or unable to feel compassion, despite that the rest of the play portrays her in this way. This instant of consideration could depict the underlying stereotype that despite everything else that makes her defy gender stereotypes, she cannot help but feel concern, because she is a woman.

Queen Elizabeth I revitalised the courtly love model to encourage courtiers to flatter her. She upheld control over a patriarchal society because, in order to increase political favour and

increased affluence, Elizabethan aristocrats and middle-class gentlemen had to admire Elizabeth in this manner. Sir Walter Raleigh is an example. In 1587, he petitions the queen to remain her favourite following the Earl of Essex's promotion to master of the horse, 'Fortune hath taken away my love, My life's joy and my soul's heaven above. Fortune hath taken thee away, my princess, My world's joy and my true fantasy's mistress. Fortune hath taken thee away from me; Fortune hath taken all by taking thee. Dead to all joys, I only live to woe: So is Fortune become my fantasy's foe. (Elizabeth, 2002, pp. Lines 1-8) Elizabeth dismisses Raleigh's fantasies and in doing so reiterates her status as Queen. Both Regan and Goneril uphold some form of control and this could be said to have been strongly influenced by Shakespeare's knowledge of the Elizabethan period and how gender was being redefined by the first woman to rule England.

'During Shakespeare's time the play fitted within a controlled sense of monarchy and hierarchy and of institutionalised Christianity which ensured that loyalty and spirituality would be rewarded with support and comfort, either in this world or in the next.' (Loppolo, 2003) King Lear destroys all authority in England by giving away his authority to his unworthy daughters and, as a result, the hierarchal order falls apart. This ultimately leads to him being seen as weak as he has been emasculated by his daughters and adheres to the antihero stock type. 'O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars are in the poorest thing superfluous. Allow not nature more than nature needs, man's life's as cheap as beast's.' (Shakespeare, 1997, pp. 2,4,259). This quotation suggests that humans are really no different than animals, only that as humans we have evolved to need more than the vital requirements of life to be happy and that in Goneril and Regan's stripping Lear of the trappings of power, they are reducing him to the level of an animal. 'Cheap as beast's' shows that Lear believes his life now to be inferior and less valuable than a human as a result of this. Lear needs his men as knights and assistants more for what their presence represents than the actual service they provide him with – his identity as a both a King and a human being. However, it could also be argued in stripping Lear of the 'trappings' of power, his daughters actually give him the opportunity to be free and not be bound by his title as a King. When Kent says, 'Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here,' (Shakespeare, 1997, pp. 1,1.185) it appears to be a cruel exclusion commanded from his daughters, but more importantly, it gives the impression of a faithful servant doing the King a favour. It could also be argued that King Lear adheres to the stock type of the sympathetic villain because despite his clear flaws early on in the play, he is abandoned and loses everything, making audiences empathise with him regardless of the fact that he is seen as a villain in the beginning of the play.

Throughout King Charles II's reign, the libertine was a familiar figure as a sexual adventurer and as a radical questioner of social and political values. In Rochester's Satire on Charles II the King is portrayed as a character who flouts the stock type of a moral, responsible King. Public performance of transgressive activities was at the heart of what it meant to be a libertine and the King greatly adhered to this through his reputation of infidelity. 'Charles had many mistresses in both France and England. Charles also had liaisons with many actresses' (Pritchard, 2015). As opposed to being a wilful, firm decision making leader the King is described as being easily swayed by those who please him and can be persuaded by jesters or mistresses – 'Nor are his high desires above his strength: his sceptre and his prick are of a length…' (Wilmot, 1673, pp. lines 10 - 11) This also suggests that the king does not lack power, but lacks the competence to rule. The extended metaphor of sexuality may provide an interesting insight into the King's struggle between the passion he has for his country and his inability to rule – 'Satire' referring to the King's inadequacy as a leader rather than his

scandalous sex life. In addition to this, the courtly love poem could be said to express Rochester's political criticism; 'The picturing of Charles as a comic emblem of misrule suggests indirectly but forcefully: that Rochester's preoccupation with the discords and confusions of his world reflects his comprehensive sense that the Restoration has in fact been the reverse of what his contemporaries hoped and claimed – there has been anything but the establishing of order in society with the return of Charles to the throne.' (Cousins, 1500-1900, pp. 432-433)

'Yet his dull, graceless bollocks hang an arse'. (Wilmot, 1673, p. line 28) This line shows the King's decline from powerful to powerless and impotent. Both King Lear and King Charles decline from positions of power to impotence within the pieces as a result of impulses of selfish pleasure, making both protagonists not only sympathetic villains, but libertine figures as well. Both of these men are publicly shamed, something that is extremely important in terms of their titles and reputations, leading to Rochester being banished from Court and King Lear being exiled – leading to more public humiliation. In the same way, Rochester's courtly writing challenges what's appropriate in terms of language, making him a libertine through the very act of writing in a way that challenges authority and is seen as anti-establishment. Yet the obscene language characterises an honest and direct speaker, potentially highlighting to audiences that they don't have to agree with the King's choices that affect them just because he is the King. It could be argued that Rochester himself is a stock character as a libertine through his confrontational and subversive poetry, simply acting in a way that brings him pleasure despite the effect his actions have on others – the very thing he is criticising the king for doing. In terms of Rochester, his banishment could be said to have added to his reckless act and improve his reputation as a libertine.

In conclusion, both Shakespeare and Rochester portray the defiance of stock characters, but also follow them within their work and both texts have a focus on courtly love. Within Shakespeare's work Goneril and Regan defy the powerless women stereotype and are instead seen as powerful villains. The sisters also challenge courtly love conventions through their violence towards their husbands and, most recognisably, through Regan's act of taking the sword – the key act of masculinity in the play. Having said this, Regan does adhere to the stereotypical woman type as a result of her moment of compassion when Cornwall is injured. King Lear himself is seen as a sympathetic villain. In a similar way, Rochester as a writer and King Charles II are portrayed as sympathetic villains too. All of the male 'characters' featured in this essay could be said to follow conventions of a libertine as a type of act/character as a result of putting their own personal pleasure above that of others and showing a lack of care or compliance for the law. This essay argues that the unique characters of Goneril, Regan and King Lear have been shaped through Queen Elizabeth I's strong and influential leadership as the first female to rule. Similarly, King Charles II's not quite as successful ruling influenced the creation of the courtly love poem by Rochester, possibly explaining the extended metaphor throughout as a jibe at the King's inability to rule effectively.