The Legacy of Prof. Süheyla Artemel in Shakespearean Drama

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Professor Dr. Süheyla Artemel was not only an outstanding scholar in the field of Shakespearean drama, but for those who had the privilege of knowing her in person, she was also an exceptional teacher and human being who touched so many hearts and so many lives, including my own. Before discussing her contributions to the study of Shakespearean drama, I would like to point out that this term can be used in literary studies in a broader as well as a more specific sense. In its specific sense, it refers to the dramatic works of William Shakespeare, while in its broader sense, and perhaps more and more so in recent studies, it refers to the drama of the English Renaissance, the works of Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights. Here, the word 'and' between Shakespeare and his contemporaries should by no means posit an opposition. These dramatists often responded to each other's plays and often worked in collaboration with each other, and Shakespeare wrote some of his plays in collaboration with younger dramatists such as Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and George Wilkins. It is within its broader sense that I would like to start talking about Prof. Artemel and Shakespearean drama.

Süheyla Artemel was an internationally esteemed scholar of the English Renaissance, and her work covered not only the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporary dramatists but also those of English and European humanists of the period. I can with confidence affirm that her knowledge of the historical and social theories of Renaissance humanist thinkers is only comparable to those of such outstanding scholars as Irving Ribner, A.P. Rossiter or David Bevington. She completed her doctoral thesis at Durham University under the supervision of three eminent advisors: Clifford Leech, Reginald Foakes and Nicholas Brooke. It is no doubt a blessing for a student to work with such outstanding scholars but it is often a blessing on both sides, and I have no doubt that this is how these renowned academics would have felt about supervising such a superb student as Süheyla Artemel. The result was an outstanding study entitled *The Idea of Turkey in the Elizabethan Period and in the Early Seventeenth Century with Special Reference to the Drama* (1966). One must say that any research on the representation of Turkey in Renaissance England would be incomplete without reference to and acknowledgement of Prof. Artemel's contribution to the field. It is a seminal study, and even though access to theses is not always easy, this has not stopped researchers from recognising and acknowledging

its significance. Here I would like to share a special memory which dates back to the years when I was a doctoral student at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon. I spent a considerable amount of time working with the microfilm collection of the library, which included important manuscripts, early modern texts which were not readily available as books. While I was going through the catalogue, I saw that one of the items was Professor Artemel's doctoral thesis. Recognising the significance of her research, the Shakespeare Institute had obtained a copy of her thesis from the University of Durham to keep in their microfilm collection. I cannot find words to express how I felt at that moment: both proud, because she had been my supervisor, but also highly emotional because she was there, far away from Istanbul, and I could feel her presence with me.

For Prof. Artemel, a full understanding of a dramatic text required a knowledge of many other literary or non-literary texts of the same period such as sermons, pamphlets or historical documents. As those working in the area of early modern literature would know by experience, most of the time these works are not available in hard copy and especially in the years before computer technology entered our lives, the only way to read them was on microfilm. This meant spending long hours in front of a microfilm machine reading until your eyes could not cope any more. Of course, one has to remember that a great majority of these texts are in black print, the gothic letters in which Elizabethan texts were often printed. As someone who has spent years working with such texts, I know this causes physical and mental exhaustion. None of this was an impediment for Prof. Artemel, and one is amazed at the number of primary sources her studies cover and the meticulousness with which she writes about them.

Prof. Artemel looked at Shakespeare both as a genius in himself and also in relation to his age. I should note the difficulty of discussing what Shakespeare meant to her personally, because I know that to those who establish a bond with him, Shakespeare can speak in so many different ways. She believed that appreciation of Shakespeare's work was a gift. She used to say that Shakespeare does not speak to everybody, and if he has spoken to you, you are among the lucky few. She used to say to me, "You are so lucky, God has given you Shakespeare." One difficulty in which students of Shakespeare's plays sometimes find themselves is the compulsion to choose a position between two seemingly-contradictory approaches: between a historicist approach, which means viewing these plays within the broader context of their socio-political framework; and another which focuses entirely on the universal themes which Shakespeare's works embody.

Prof. Artemel, however, believed that a historicist approach to Shakespeare did not necessarily contradict an appreciation of the timeless values his work embodies. In fact, she was one of those rare scholars who was capable of combining both. There is a metaphor used by Maxwell Adereth in a discussion on the question of commitment in literature where he writes about the possibility of presenting eternal issues "in a temporal shell" (Artemel 125). Although Adereth's statement takes place in a totally different context (the question of commitment in French literature), Prof. Artemel found it especially appropriate to describe the way in which Shakespeare can present what is timeless, while at the same time responding to the socio-political and intellectual framework of his own age.

Prof. Artemel sees in Shakespeare's plays an "overriding sense of the basic unity of mankind" (Artemel 126). A common factor that unites humanity is our capability for evil, as example after example in the plays manifest themselves. However, she did not see this as conclusive of Shakespeare's attitude to humanity because she also noted that Shakespeare can present us with our potential for goodness and heroism. Prof. Artemel's observation evokes in the mind a phantasmagoria of characters from the plays ranging from villains like Iago whose very existence is fed by the harm they inflict on others, to those who are ready to sacrifice themselves to prevent evil like the simple household servant in *King Lear* who is killed while trying to stop the Duke of Cornwall in the scene where he and his accomplices mutilate the Duke of Gloucester. However, she warns us, Shakespeare's overriding emphasis on the basic unity of mankind should not lead to an assumption about his detachment from the problems of his own age: "Though we cannot identify Shakespeare as the spokesman of a specific political or religious group or as the exponent of a particular moral or philosophical creed, yet one cannot assume him to be the uninvolved bystander" (Artemel 126). We could not assume Shakespeare to be an uninvolved bystander, because this would be ignoring the depth with which his plays are embedded in the socio-political and moral discourses of his age.

Prof. Artemel was particularly sensitive to Shakespeare's ability to create ambivalence in his plays, which is partly due to the sort of training he would have received as part of his grammar school education. Rhetoric was an important component of the curriculum and the students were often given a topic and required to present speeches by discussing it from different angles. It could for example be expected from a schoolboy to present arguments both in favour and against the assassination of Julius Caesar (Jones 16). This is a skill which Shakespeare

would have acquired as part of his education, and combined with his mastery of characterisation this presents us with plays where an argument presented could at the same time be called into question. Prof. Artemel saw this as the highest skill in Shakespeare's dramatic art, which turns the plays into a site of contesting voices. Thus, for example, in *Henry V*, King Henry is viewed as a military hero by the English aristocrats who surround him. But this is juxtaposed against the misery of the common soldiers who are also allowed their voices in the play and who draw a picture of the pain and destruction this aristocratic game of war brings to the lives of common people. The effect "is not only to give rise to questions about the validity of war, but also to create an unresolved ambivalence in our response to the stature of 'the hero-king' himself" (Artemel 129). Perhaps it would be timely to mention in this context that she detected in Shakespeare's plays a particular sensitivity to the destruction brought by war and saw Shakespeare's sympathies lying with common soldiers who are its victims rather than the aristocrats who take part for selfish gains.

The struggle for power in Shakespeare's plays is a theme to which Prof. Artemel draws our attention, highlighting the ways in which Shakespeare puts human ambition and struggle for power in perspective. This was a theme which she discussed with us in a class on Shakespeare's history plays at Boğaziçi University, and she highlighted for us Shakespeare's treatment of this theme against the background of the idea of mutability, which was part of Shakespeare's medieval heritage. One of the primary sources she required as background reading was an early Tudor text entitled *A Mirror for Magistrates*. This is a collection of poems in which characters from history speak to future audiences about their lives. These characters are not ordinary people, but monarchs or important statesmen who speak to us from the realm of death, and what unites them all is that when they were alive, they were all slaves to their ambitions. It is a work written with a moral purpose and emphasises the futility of human greatness in a world dominated by mutability. This, Prof. Artemel informed us, was a major source of inspiration behind Shakespeare's treatment of ambition for power. In play after play, we are presented with the selfish pursuit of power and indulgence in this power for people blind to the suffering of those around them. It is therefore presented as an impediment to human perfection.

Shakespeare puts things in perspective when he juxtaposes worldly power against the background of the only unquestionable truth in our lives, that is, the reality of death. This is the only undeniable bond which unites all human beings. Prof. Artemel draws our attention to a

most exquisite expression of this in Shakespeare by citing the words of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin” (Artemel 130). A main focus in her lectures was the ways in which Shakespeare’s characters discover this fact for themselves and she emphasised that this only becomes possible through fall and suffering. Thus, for example, the agony to which King Lear’s soul is exposed after the treatment he receives from his daughters has a purifying effect on him, because only after intense suffering does he become aware of the poverty and misery to which his subjects have been exposed. Prof. Artemel also saw in Shakespeare not only an emphasis on the common bond of humanity, but also a larger bond which connects all living beings to each other. She detected in his work a deep love and compassion for non-human beings. There are two instances of such compassion she particularly liked sharing with her students, and both are from the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*. One describes the fears of a hare called ‘poor Wat’, who is running away from his hunters and his tragic realisation that the time of death has come for him; and again in the same poem, the description of a snail whose tender horns (that is his antennae) are hit and who therefore shrinks in his shell in agony. She referred to both examples as evidence of the depth of empathy with which Shakespeare described emotions common to all creation.

I never asked her whether she had a particular favourite among Shakespeare’s plays because I know so well that for one who is so deeply embedded in Shakespeare, this is one of the most difficult questions to answer. But among Shakespeare’s sonnets, many of which she could recite by heart, I know that one was particularly dear to her: that was Sonnet 64. I will never forget the time when she recited it to me on a rainy evening. The tone of her beautiful voice as she recited the following lines is still in my memory:

When I have seen by time's fell hand defaced
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;
When sometime lofty towers I see down razed,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;
When I have seen such interchange of state,

Or state itself confounded, to decay;
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate:
That time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose. (Shakespeare, 1609/1997)

Works Cited

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