

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

LOOKING FOR DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHAKESPEARE'S DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN THE HISTORY AND HIS OWN VIEW OF WOMEN

Dr.POOJA GOEL

Assistant Professor, Alankar P.G.Girls' College

Jaipur, Rajasthan

drpooja.goel55@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7119.459>



Dr.POOJA GOEL

ABSTRACT

In the Medieval and Renaissance Ages, many women were considered chattel and property. Women were the weaker sex, not educated, and considered weaker not only of body but also of mind. Correspondingly, women were not allowed to perform on stage, giving rise to the speculation that women characters were given short shrift by the playwrights. Not so, Shakespeare, although using boys to play his female characters, gave his female roles the depth and breadth of human experience. These women were not browbeaten or broken, but were high-spirited, witty, and intelligent beings. Shakespeare's heroines have long been remembered for their impact in many plays. They have been representations, stereotypes, and even emotionally moving individuals. All of these women have been created in the confine of Shakespeare's literary worlds. Some of these restraints, however, were a result of the demand of Shakespeare's own time and society. In Renaissance society, chastity was the quality most frequently praised in women. Chastity was the greatest gift a woman brought from her father's to her husband's. Shakespeare does give female protagonists power within many of his plays. In his comedies, female protagonists act in authoritative ways with success. Yet, these plays do not address the role of women royalty. If we judge the position of women in the English Renaissance society by the examples Shakespeare offers us in some of his comedies, we may believe that women were emancipated and admired for their wit, self-confidence and self-reliance. However, some historians and some sixteenth-and seventeenth-century documents suggest that although there were streams of thought more friendly towards women in the Renaissance and although there were exceptions from the rule, the ideal to which a woman was to aspire was an obedient, modest, chaste, silent and passive creature never forgetting her subordination to men, especially her father and husband.

Compared to other writers of his time, Shakespeare introduced an extraordinary amount of deep female characters in his plays. Because Shakespeare lived in a time when men played the major part in society and the role of women was

basically limited to the household, one could easily come to the opinion that he was a reformer whose views ahead of the Elizabethan times.

If we judge the position of women in the English Renaissance society by the examples

Shakespeare offers us in some of his comedies, we may believe that women were emancipated and admired for their wit, self confidence and self-reliance. However, some historians and some sixteenth and seventeenth century documents suggest that although there were streams of thought more friendly towards women in the Renaissance and although there were exceptions from the rule, the ideal to which a women was to aspire was an obedient, modest, chaste, silent and passive creature never forgetting her subordination to men, especially her father and husband.

'Elizabethan women were not only considered inferior to men, but they were regarded as a male possession: initially by their father, who decide over their daughter's future and marriage, and later by their husbands, to whom women should serve and obey. Regarding females in this way meant that males used to treat them as an item to bargain and at the same time, women were also considered a symbol to reflect to outsiders their family's status, power and reputation. A good example is what the protestant leader John Knox wrote. "Women in her greatest perfection were made to serve and obey man". The church supported this belief and made sure the continuity of this principle. Female disobedience towards the male members of their family was seen as a crime. They were severely punished, in some case beaten into submission. They did not have the right to be heirs to their father's titles, everything was inherited from male to male. The role of women in the sixteenth century was, in short, voiceless, a case of being seen and not heard.

Yet in Shakespeare's comedies we find different heroines and the audience applauded them, even though they were nearly everything a women should not be dynamic, active both physically and verbally, assertive, independent. However, the Renaissance was a period of transformation: the authority of the old system was undercut, a new system was not fully established yet, and the society was trying to cope with an amalgam of contradictory ideas. Attitudes towards women were also in transition: the traditional hierarchical model in which women lived in submission to male authority was being challenged

by the idea of partnership.

The characters of Renaissance plays were not intended to offer a realistic picture of the society. A comedy was not documentary but served as an entertainment. Yet even comedies could not go completely against the values ruling the society. Shakespeare's comedies deal with love and romance, while his tragedies are tales of ambition, power, bloodshed and revenge. Young and energetic women with a lot of passion fit well into the framework of comedies, whereas strong and ambitious men with complications of head and heart people the world of tragedies. Unlike the heroines of Shakespeare's tragedies, the comedy heroines do not bring about destruction or self-destruction by their activity, they act as forces of renewal and harmony. Their motivation for active behavior differs some are active for the fun of it, some have no other choice but to defend their life and their rights in the hostile world, some assert their right to be treated like partners or to choose their future husbands themselves.

Yeats finds ample support for his theories in Shakespeare's plays. To him, "Shakespeare is always a writer of tragi-comedy."¹ In "Autobiographies," Yeats writes, "Tragedy is passion alone, and rejecting character it gets form from motives, from the wandering of passion, from comedy and you get farce. Farce is bound together by incident alone. In practice most works are mixed: Shakespeare being tragic-comedy."²

From the social point of view, cross dressing in the Renaissance had an important aspect: as women were considered inferior to men and had fewer rights as in "Poetry and tradition," Yeats writes: "Shakespeare's persons, when the last darkness has gathered about them, speak out of an ecstasy that is one half the self surrender of sorrow, and one-half the last playing and mockery of the victorious sword before the defeated world."³

Cross-dressing presented an important change. Both male and female cross-dressing was a pretence, a potential threat to the order of the society. Yet if a woman pretended to be a man, she was, in fact, assuming more rights than she was entitled to, thus threatening the order more

dangerously. Apart from several exceptions in the real life, it was only in fiction and carnivalesque festivities that cross-dressing was allowed as a temporal escape from everyday reality. In the comedies if a woman is crossdressed, she usually becomes a boy of a lower status (Rosalind, the heiress to the throne, becomes a humble owner of a herd of sheep; the rich heiress Portia becomes a junior, though wise lawyer; the noble woman Viola becomes a page boy). Although generally a cross dressed man was more acceptable than a cross dressed woman, in Shakespeare's comedies we seldom encounter men in women's clothes.

Shakespeare examined their natures under the powerful microscope of his imagination in the "Rape of Lucrece." When in her pleadings, Lucrece pointed out to Tarquin that lust has blinded him to the essential difference in their natures; as man and woman :

"For men have marble, women waxen minds"⁴:

And hastily adds to explain that

"Though men can cover crimes with bold stern looks

Poor Women's faces are their own faults' books."⁵

In Shakespeare's comedies, there are several female characters who use cross-dressing as a strategy to achieve their goals. Besides safety and greater freedom of movement, the masculine attire also offer greater freedom of expression "Behind comedy there is always tragedy (indeed, since the days of Romantic irony, behind tragedy there is comedy); and sometimes by the author himself its shadow is permitted to fall upon the scene."⁶

The dramatic use of disguise is one of the most ancient elements of the European theatrical tradition, and is found in comedy, above all as a means of misunderstanding, intrigue and confusion. Besides, the use of disguise implies one of the most important conventions in Shakespeare's times, which is the topic we are going to deal with: the feminine character is obliged to adopt a masculine role due to different issues. Sex⁷, according to the

accepted modern usage is "the distinction between male and female: the characteristic, by which an animal or plant is male, or female, gender, the female sex, women generally, usually with the def: Art."⁸

Shakespeare uses this convention in five of his comedies, such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *Cymbeline*. But we are going to deal with three of these comedies:

The Merchant of Venice, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night* and we will try to analyze the relevance of this fact within them. Women disguise as men, most of the times as page boys. Therefore, the use of the disguise has several connotations which include aspects like the production, the external perception of the other characters towards the disguised character, the disguise effectiveness, the dramatic tension, the character's motivations, or the linguistic features. As for the production, in the Elizabeth theatre, feminine roles were played by young men. So the fact that a young lady, as a main character, decided to disguise as a man, created a difficult play of identities: the young actor will end playing a woman who is playing a woman who is trying to play a young man at the same time. Moreover, this leads to an interaction between appearance and reality. However, actresses disguised as men seem to be a provocation for the church.

It is well known fact that women during the Renaissance and for a long period throughout history were viewed as inferior to men who were considered intellectually superior. But maybe this inferiority has been to exaggerated throughout history. Portia from *The Merchant of Venice* annihilates that myth. When Shakespeare introduced her in Scene II, Act I, we immediately notice her quick wit, originality, sharpness and smartness. Her speech is eloquent and reveals a high level of education. Portia does not fit well into the conception of "Submissive woman inferior to man." Portia's vocabulary is characterized by richness and she makes use of original comparisons, metaphors and similes. But despite all this we see how women were limited in their rights to their

titles, to choose a husband and in general to behave in accordance with their own free will. Fathers are often described as tyrants and egoists considering themselves as masters of their daughter's lives. In *The Merchant of Venice* we deal with such a father. According to Portia she may *neither choose whom she would nor refuse whom she dislikes*. The situation is doubly ridiculous because her father's dead, but even so she must obey. Literally her will "is curbed by the will of a dead father." Before his death Portia's father put her portrait in a leaden chest for the men willing to marry her to choose among 3 chests (made of gold, silver and lead). He sought intellectual fulfillment for his daughter. We see that he did everything he could to cultivate her mind. So in all probability he wanted Portia to have a place for herself within a masculine world. He wanted to prevent men from treating Portia as an inferior being or as a means to obtain comfort, luxury etc.

When Bassanio, his chief aim was to come fairly off from the great debts by means of a woman. That is why he seeks a rich heiress to become his wife. Here a woman was viewed as an object useful to obtain a comfortable life with a lot of money and plenty of comfort. Bassanio while describing the lady he is supposedly in love with. A woman had to be rich enough in order to buy a husband and not the other way round. But although Bassanio chooses the leaden casket, he seems to be more than interested in Portia's gold. When she learns of Antonio owing 3 thousand ducats to the Jew, she is ready to pay "Six thousand double six thousand and then treble that." Once again Shakespeare seems to draw our attention to the inequality between Portia and Bassanio. She decides to leave her father's home against his will.

It can be said that Shakespeare underlines Portia's worth and merit. In that sense Portia, being a woman can ever be viewed as superior to a wide range of noble men from all over the world. Portia's sense of humor and witty remarks confirm this suggestion. There is no doubt that Portia is intellectually higher than any of the candidates mentioned above. So in Shakespeare's plays in general and in *The Merchant of Venice* in particular, women show higher intellect and have a more

instinctive decision-making style. Men, unfortunately do not display an equivalent intellectual performance. This description echoes the ideal of a lady established in Shakespeare time which was also the time of queen Elizabeth reign: blonde hair, pale skin, bright eyes, etc. As:

"Women in their natures are much more gay and joyous than men, whether it be that their blood is more refined, their fibers more delicate, and their spirits more volatile, or whether, as some have imagined, there may not be a kind of sex in the very soul..... As vivacity is the gift of woman, gravity is that of man...Nature has given all the little arts of soothing and blandishment to the female so that she may cheer and animate her companion."⁹

It is not the man or woman, who produce the peculiar traits, which each generally possesses, but the qualities of the soul or the mind which produces the internal symbol and external symbols, which to the man in the street stand for the difference between the man and the woman; "It is not the physical maleness and the femaleness which makes the essential difference; but the spiritual qualities that essentially constitute the differentia."¹⁰

In both plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*, the main female characters, Portia and Rosalind, appear disguised as men on the stage. So they are real men, the actors, who are playing a female role who is, at the same time, disguised as a man in the plot of the play. Rosalind, the heroine of *As You Like It*, has more lines than any of Shakespeare's female characters.

"Shakespeare gave sex the central place in human individual and social life Freud is significant and least surprising."¹¹

Much of the fun in Shakespeare's comedies comes from the sexual confusion of the character in the plays. Rosalind is the daughter of the exiled Duke Senior who has been banished and has gone to the Forest of Arden. She and her cousin Celia, disguised as Ganymede, a Youngman, and Aliena, a peasant girl, escape to the forest. Rosalind enters the Forest of Arden in search of freedom but the costume also gives her freedom. It was a patriarchal

society in which women were under male control so becoming a boy gives her a kind of freedom she had never felt before. The place of women in renaissance society was limited to specific rules and limitations, guided by lessons of virtue and demure conduct. In her boy's disguise, she escapes the limitations of being a woman. She learns a great deal about herself, about Orlando, and about love itself which she could not have done within the normal conventions of society.

The disguise is very obvious to the audience but is unnoticed by the characters in the play. Cross-dressing, sexual identity, and the performance of gender are among the most hotly discussed topics in contemporary cultural studies. This play is a better example of Shakespeare's uses of the heroine in male disguise-man-playing-woman-playing-man. And at the same time, seeing a woman dressed as a man would be extremely comic. It is comic when Rosalind tries to swagger and come across as convincingly male, but the audience, who know the truth, notice how awkward her attempts often are. In this play we can observe the importance of the convention of costumes at theatre and the sex confusion scenes in Shakespearian drama.

The comedy depends on an actor's ability to transform himself through costume, voice and gesture into a young man, Cesario. In *Twelfth Night*, clothes do not simply reveal or disguise her identity; they partly constitute identity or so Viola playfully imagines making her a strange hybrid creature. She understands perfectly well the narrow biological definition of her sex. The play's delicious complications follow the emotional crosscurrents the Viola's transformation engenders. Shipwrecked on a strange coast and bereft of her twin brother, the disguised Viola finds a place in the service of Duke Orsino with whom she promptly falls in love. When Orsino send Cesario to help him with the Lady Olivia, Olivia not only rejects the Duke's suit but falls in love with his messenger also. Discomforted to learn that is the object of Olivia's love, Viola reflects on the plot's impassioned triangle. These misunderstandings, of course, are largely her creation, in the sense that they mainly derive from a disguise that confounds the distinction between male and female.

Having women dress up as men was a popular device in Shakespeare comedies, in part because all women's roles were played by boys in the first place. That extra level, a boy playing a woman playing a man, is something seldom seen nowadays, but the gender-bender comedies take on a different level of complexity altogether when performed by woman's will, which turns the Elizabethan convention of all male caste on its head. Now a heroine dressed up as a man has to make her way in a world of men, who also happen to be played by women, and it becomes doubly important to draw a distinction onstage between the women playing men and women playing women dressed as men.

Shakespeare is an encyclopedia of human happenings. Shakespeare's characters are more real and happily more honest than men and women in real life. They are models for shaping our life. They show how to avoid, or meet pitfalls in life, and courageously to struggle against hurdles in the way of our life. Consequently, man and particularly, woman imbibed the dramatic teaching, not by what it creates to teach by what it creates to reach. The modern woman has succeeded in teaching man to develop the proper attitude to the wonderful gift of sex and it's wide ranging sacred activity so that Wordsworth could sing some four centuries later:

"A Perfect woman nobly planned,

To warn, to comfort and command"¹²

In Shakespeare's time women married the man her parents stated. Women had no say in the matter. As the play is a comedy, it has a happy ending and their parents finally take notice of her will, so she marries the man she wants. Generally, this did not happen in real life. Women were considered as a mere instrument in social, political and public life, as is clearly shown throughout Shakespearean works.

During the Elizabethan period women's and men's spheres were strictly separated from each other. Men were the ones in power, the people who took all the important decisions, while the perfect woman had to be obedient and loyal to her husband/father, to trust his wisdom and ability to

judge the situation rightly and then to take an accurate way of action. It cannot be denied that during Shakespeare's times women were far from being equal to men that this attitude is also reflected in many of Shakespeare's works, which thrive with loving and loyal women such as Desdemona. Nevertheless, it would not be accurate either to deny that in some of Shakespeare's works, women have the courage to take their fate into their own hands and subvert male authority, even if this occurs within a very limited space of action.

Throughout Shakespeare's comedies we are confronted with a whole range of very strong female characters who refuse to act according to the rules imposed upon them, but differ in their behavior from the ideal that attire in order to be able to go for their goals while other characters dare to speak their mind in spite to the fact that this behavior is considered to be inaccurate for the female gender. It is obvious that Shakespeare is not afraid of confronting his audience with extraordinary female characters who manage to make the action of the comedies much livelier and more thrilling.

Thus we can conclude that Shakespeare deliberately makes his female characters break with the rules imposed upon them and thus converts them into a source of humor. But after letting his women characters have their way, he reaffirms their traditional role in society by putting them back in their place. We cannot deny that Shakespeare was undoubtedly deeply steeped in the discourse of his time and that probably the time was not yet ripe for a female character who could be viewed as being an equal to her male contemporaries.

References

1. Essays and Introductions, p.240.
2. Autobiographies, pp. 470-471.
3. Essays and Introductions, p.254.
4. Walter Dias, *Shakespeare: The Tragic world*, S. Chand and Co. Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, P. 4.
5. Ibid, p.5.
6. Elmer Edgar Stoll, "Art and Artifice in Shakespeare," Methuen & Co. Ltd; London, p.150-151.
7. *Encyclopaedia of Sexual Knowledge* by Dr. S.A. Costter, A- willy and others, P.3.
8. Walter Dias, *Shakespeare: The Tragic world*, S.Chand and Co. Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, P.1.
9. Ibid, P. 4.
10. *Physiological Psychology*, Clifford. T.Morgan and Elliot Stellar, London, 1950, P. 429.
11. Dover Wilson, *The Essential Shakespeare*, Cambridge, 1938, P.57.
12. Walter Dias, *Shakespeare: Assorted Research Papers*, S. Chand & Sons Pvt. Ltd, P. 181. English at the Threshold of 21
13. Ibid
14. Century: Challenges and Response