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Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: A Quest for an Ideal Woman of His Own Concept

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Abstract

William Shakespeare, a genius for all ages, changed the name of drama in England. Women in Shakespearean plays always play important roles, mainly the leading roles. Whether they create the main conflicts and base of the plays, or bring up interesting moral and cultural questions, they have always been embedded in challenging situations. The women are more dominant than males, and their effect on the play is mutually different enough. They always surpass the male heroes. Shakespeare's plays are replete with cross dressing and gender bending. *Twelfth Night*, his loveliest comedy, depends on the turbulence and apocalypses that arise from Viola's character disguising her as a man.

This paper tries to ascertain how Viola in *Twelfth Night* accomplishes the quest for an ideal woman of Shakespeare's own concept. There may be many reasons why he keeps his female characters in dominant position. It may have been the Queen Elizabeth I on the throne, or a certain influence of his marriage with an older woman. Some modern critics claim that he is a feminist. However, Shakespeare's subjectivity can easily be seen at many places in the play. Viola's character represents many aspects of Shakespeare's personal life. Viola disguises her identity but reveals others' true nature that is hidden behind their melodramatic and self-involved behavior. Thus this article elucidates Shakespeare's concepts (hidden or revealed) of beauty, nobility, sincerity, and loyalty etc.

Keywords: challenging, interesting, melodrama, turbulence, apocalypses, influence, loyalty, embedded, disguises.

Introduction

William Shakespeare, who is known as genius for all ages, has changed the nature of drama in English world. Shakespeare's genius operates a very wide and unfettered range of human life and character in all its complexity and variety. "Shakespeare is the second most quoted writer in the English language-after the various writers of the Bible ..." [1] Shakespeare has enfolded all elements of human experience and segments of human sensibility. It is his affluent and matchless literature that has made him reach to the crest of popularity and he has made a permanent and paramount place in the heart of his readers throughout the world. William Shakespeare is truly known as synonymous with greatness for a numerous reasons. Thus Shakespeare has a special ability to take ordinary situations and make them intensely comical and interesting. He does it in such a way that relies almost completely on well-arranged dialogue to do so.

Shakespeare has become the cornerstone of classical education in English literature without achieving a university degree. His genius was not educated in school but natural, and yet his understanding and depiction of the complexity of human nature is a model of perfection. If speech is considered as man's greatest show on the earth, Shakespeare is undoubtedly the greatest showman in the world. Obviously William Shakespeare might not have been born great but having achieved greatness in spite of not being highly educated in his lifetime, he definitely died great. His intricacy of weaving of wisdom through words, has survived him as our contemporary today. Almost 400 years after his death, he lives on great, through every reading, every performance and every interpretation or adaptation of his works. Malvolio, the farce of puritan behaviour in *Twelfth Night*, reads the following lines (almost suited to Shakespeare himself) from a letter he finds:

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“...In my stars I
am above thee; but be not afraid of greatness: some
are born great, some achieve greatness, and some
have greatness thrust upon ’em.” (II, V, L 1165-1168)

Exposing the greatness of Shakespeare and the need of his works in USA, Philip Sherwell New York, writes an article in ‘The Telegraph’ on 24 April 2015 and takes a quote by Prof. Jonathan Bate, a leading Shakespeare scholar at Worcester College, Oxford. “Shakespeare remains the greatest author and most rewarding to study who ever lived. American students who do not study Shakespeare are missing out on the depth of his characterization, the brilliance of his language and the universality of his themes.”^[2]

Before studying Shakespeare and the role of his characters it is quite important to peruse the background and social conditions of his time. Women in Elizabethan age were considered not only inferior to men, but they were regarded as a male possession: from birth to marriage by their fathers or elder brothers, who decided over their daughter's future and marriage, and later by their husbands, to whom women should serve and obey in all matters. Female dereliction or defiance towards the male members of their family was counted as a crime. Several examples of female suppression, torture, and severe punishment are found in that era. They had no right to be the heirs to their father's property or titles. In brief the role of women in the sixteenth century was surd, a case of being seen and not heard. The main objective of this paper is to cite how women, in different roles, were considered inside Shakespeare's comedies.

Women, in Shakespearean plays, always play very dominant roles, mainly the leading roles. They have always been entrenched in challenging situations whether they create the main conflicts of the plays, or bring up interesting moral and cultural questions. The women are more dominant than males, and their effect on the play is mutually different enough. They always surpass the males/heroes. *Twelfth Night*, his loveliest comedy, depends on the turbulence and apocalypses that arise from Viola's character disguising her as a man. It is a authentic comedy and a constant spring of the gayest and the sweetest fancies. It is Shakespeare who has placed her female characters in the prominent position and exposed their different type of talents and capabilities.

Motive of the paper

This paper tries to ascertain how Viola in *Twelfth Night* accomplishes the quest for an ideal woman of Shakespeare's own concept. There may be many reasons, why he keeps his heroines in dominant position. The Queen Elizabeth I on the throne might be one of the reasons, or a certain influence of his marriage with an eight year older woman. Some modern critics claim that he is a feminist. However, Shakespeare's subjectivity can easily be seen at many places in the play. Shakespeare always puts his female characters in such ideal situation from where they can be speculated in various aspects of his own concepts. Through this paper I have tried to find out how Shakespeare wants to see an ideal woman in different fields i.e. beauty, loyalty, gentleness, or faithfulness. In his plays, especially in comedies, his heroines are perfect in all respects.

It is evident that the women's role in Shakespeare's comedies is unlike his tragedies. Shakespeare's women are empowered, that means they are mostly strong, independent, and capable,

despite the male-dominant society of Elizabethan England. But it is the reality that women are not given the opportunity to develop their intelligence to become better in their expertise. They are often portrayed as shy, uninspiring, obedient, and boring creatures who stand behind their husbands. Their main role is simply one as wife or sister, rarely ever deviating to be different and that reflects exactly on Shakespearean tragic female characters, along with all difficulties, struggle and despair.

Viola, the ideal woman of the play, is as strong and independent as a man without compromising her feminine identity. She is compared to the sea, one of the most universal powerful images, and her strength is tied to this metaphor and therefore to feminine energy. Her emergence from the shipwreck into new life in the strange country of Illyria is stirringly poetic. As she walks alone along the vast wideness of the beach, there is a question in the minds of every reader of what is to come next. Fall in love with the mysterious king Orsino, seems to be beyond the imagination as she is presented disguised as a man. The plight of identity becomes more poignant, reminiscent not so much of female suppression as the human yearning for freedom in authenticity. The necessity of this new adventure, which is an emblem of life itself, is the playing role for survival. Even if it is nothing but an actor's part, her life as Cesario will be a worthwhile adventure that will end in authenticity and love. It is the mystery of how life's energy makes what is otherwise a stilted performance come alive at the last minute. Viola's fake identity of Cesario the strong man will consolidate with her real identity of Viola the constrained female to produce Viola the heroine.

Viola's character represents many aspects of Shakespeare's personal life. Viola disguises her identity but reveals others' true nature that is hidden behind their melodramatic and self-involved behaviour. In the whole play most of the characters have double identities as their real identity is totally different from how they are presented. Thus, this article elucidates Shakespeare's concepts (hidden or revealed) of beauty, nobility, sincerity and loyalty etc.

Quest for ideal beauty

Shakespeare's women are often valued for their beauty, glow, and all physical features. In the Renaissance, “... the beauty of woman is more praised and esteemed than any other beauty... woman is given bodily beauty that she may be superior to man in this respect”^[3]. Women are considered the objects to be viewed with amusing affections, not with any sense of worth other than their beauty and attraction. It has been Shakespeare's practice to present his female character full competent for their roles. Besides beauty Shakespeare's heroines are witty, brave, ambitious, powerful, and firm determined though some of the critics think “... the only positive demand of the woman was that she should be beautiful”^[4]. Viola has been presented as the most beautiful character in the play though she has been shown in disguise of man. In the first communication with Viola Duke appreciates her/his beauty and uses the best and highest metaphors.

“... Diana's lip
Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman's part.” (I, IV, L. 279-282)

An ideal woman's character should have some special qualities such as chastity, modesty, shyness, steadiness, self-restraint, piety, patience, and kindness. All of the characteristics listed describe someone who has no authority in decisions and subscribes to being passive and obedient. Also, "her behavior was carefully prescribed. She was to tend to her household duties industriously . . . she must be silent most of the time and not speak out or argue . . . [and] she must never be witty or clever"⁵. Conspicuously, during the Renaissance period, the place of women was almost opposite than that of men. However Shakespeare has presented the character of Viola as the most beautiful lady though mostly she is in disguise of page boy of Orsino. It is Viola's beauty and attraction that convinces the Duke at the first sight. Without knowing the history or reality of Viola Duke accepts her/him as his page boy and reveals all the secrets of his life in the first visit.

"Thou know'st no less but all, I have unclasp'd
To thee the book even of my secret soul."
(I, IV L. 259-260)

Olivia's description of Cesario's beauty, both here and upon their first encounter, praises typically feminine qualities, but curiously doesn't question Cesario's gender. It's Viola's attraction and perfect personality, though unfortunately disguised as man, that attracts Olivia too much that she breaks all the limits of social norms as Olivia loves Cesario (Viola) too much,

"... by the roses of spring
By maidhood, honour, truth and everything
I love thee so that, maugre, all the pride
Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide."
(III, I, L. 1388-1391)

In Elizabethan age men were valued for their skill to classify or judge an object to be beautiful or not. During this era of great creative accomplishments, men may "... have taken to commerce or to drink, but as a matter of fact they took to visible beauty"⁶. They established beauty as an important quality of life, and only men had the capacity to judge the beauty. Though women are excluded from any position of meaningful authority in any realm of society, even then Olivia proposes first,

"... I woo thou therefore hast no cause, ...
Love sought is good, but given unsought is better."
(III, I, L. 1393-1395)

Finally Shakespeare questions the extent to which one must conform to the specific role prescribed for each sex. He realizes that the qualities possessed by each sex are fluid and not limited to one or the other. His brilliance and understanding of the human person is evident in his unconventional way of portraying the role of man and woman in his plays.

Quest for ideal wife for conjugal life

Shakespeare's numerous depictions of marriage in his comedies, histories, tragedies, and romances suggest the pivotal importance of this subject to his dramas. Contemporary scholars appreciate Shakespeare's style of depiction of marriage, which presents wedlock as the end of

comedy. Although marriage is universal in all of Shakespeare's works yet critics observe that it is undoubtedly the central concern of some plays. A study of Shakespeare's plays and poems depicts that Shakespeare refers to unhappy marriage or loveless marriage at many places. In such scenes we see the subjectivity as Shakespeare was also not happy with his married life. We do know that he lived apart from his family for about half of his life, which might have made Shakespeare unhappy.

In Renaissance the duties of husband and wife were explicitly defined and expected to be followed by both men and women. The role of the husband is dominant and as a commanding authority in the family as well as in society. Describing the role of a man Camden aptly writes,

"the first duty which the husband has toward the wife is to love her, . . . the next duty is to rule or govern his wife in all duties that properly belong to marriage, using his knowledge, wisdom, and judgment to maintain himself in the place that God intended him to have"⁷.

Women are thought as inferior in their skills to run a household and make moral decisions. A wife's duties and role in the family is also clearly defined. She must perform all the duties desired by her husband and she must please her husband in all respect. Camden adds, ". . . the wife must obey the husband."⁸. Women, who chose to become wives, which is the majority of the female population, agree to submit themselves to total control by their husbands. They always live under the control earlier of their fathers and later of their husbands. In marriage context especially in *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare has followed it as his heroines especially Viola in *Twelfth Night* is loveable, loves her husband Duke very much and she is also much obedient to him.

"And all those saying will I overswear
And all these swearings keep as true in soul
As doth a that orb'd continent the fire
That severs day from night." (V, I, L. 2471-2474)

The main theme of *Twelfth Night* is love or marriage; of course marriage is the fruit of love. Most of the characters in the play are in love. In major characters the Duke loves Olivia, Olivia loves Cesario (Viola), Viola loves Duke and so many other minor characters. The Duke's love is sentimental, artificial and also freakish and the same of Olivia. However Viola's love is true, sincere, firm and perfect though she is in dilemma due to her disguise as Cesario. In the end of the play the Duke suddenly transfers his love from Olivia to Viola simply on the plea that Cesario (Viola) is a woman and also because Olivia has been betrothed to Sebastian, Viola's twin brother under mistaken identity of Cesario. Sir Andrew's love for Olivia is totally commercial or materialistic and he fails to marry Olivia. Malvolio does not love Olivia at all but he is made believe that Olivia loves him, so he should love her chiefly to raise his status. Thus many couple got married in the whole play though many of them could not marry with the same to whom they loved.

Shakespeare considers Viola, the best character, who proves herself the best in all aspects i.e. best female character, the best wife for conjugal life. The subjectivity of Shakespeare's personal life can easily be seen in the words of Duke when he advises Cesario to marry with a younger woman.

“Let still the woman take
An elder than herself: so wears she to him,
So sways she level in her husband’s heart....”
(II, IV, L. 921-923)

Shakespearean comedy is known for its permeating fascination with marriage. In many instances single or multiple marriages are used to provide comic closure, as in *Twelfth Night* a triangle love with successful marriage is presented. Verily, marriage is the main theme in Shakespearean comedy that is presented in most of the plots. Many of Shakespeare's comedies have been written to express such performance and celebrations of the marriages that it seems to be real one, emphasizing on the experience of the group and opposing the individualist, isolationist emphasis of tragedy.

Quest for ideal loyalty (as an ideal messenger)

Viola, disguise as Cesario, plays the best part of love messenger of Duke Orsino and Olivia. As Cesario, a messenger deputed to convey her master’s love to Olivia, Viola shows herself as her best i.e. quick witted, sympathetic, tolerant, practically wise, and the most exquisitely psychological in the sense that she understands Olivia much better than Olivia understands herself. Viola pays all the compliments to Olivia but she remarks that Olivia is proud. How cleverly Viola ridicules Olivia’s love, just as she ridicules the Duke’s love for Olivia, is reflected in her reply:

“If I did love you in my master’s flame,
With such a suffering such a deadly life,
In your denial I would find no sense,
I would not understand it,” (I,V, L. 554-557)

Viola plays the love messenger’s role most marvelously though without any success as Olivia does not accept any offer of Duke’s love. When we analyse the conversation between Viola and Olivia, we feel at every step that both the women are very shrewd and intelligent but Viola is superior to Olivia. Viola outwits Olivia at every step. Olivia tries all her tricks to refute Viola but fails. Though Viola falls in love with Duke, but being a sincere love messenger she/he promises her/his master that she/he will leave no stone unturned to fulfill his/her duty. She is in dilemma but being loyal and dedicated to the work; she/he gives full priority to her/his work.

“I’ll do my best
To woo your lady:
... yet a barful strife!
Whoe’er I woo, myself would be his wife.”
(I, IV, L. 289-292)

As a successful and loyal love messenger Viola likes to disclose the text to nobody but to Olivia. Before disclosing anything she/he assures and convinces Olivia completely that only she (Olivia) will like the text. Also she/he begs pardon for the impoliteness at the door in the beginning.

“What I am, and what I
would, are as secret as maidenhead to your ears,
divinely, to any other’s profanation.”
(I, V, L 505-507)

Generally messengers take the benefits from both sides. They try to please both the lovers and get some gifts as a tip but Viola is totally different from such type of messengers. She/he believes to perform her/his duty perfectly and sincerely. Viola, full of self-respect and dedicated to work assigned, denies taking any money and says

“I am not fee’d post, lady; keep your purse;
My master, not myself, lacks recompense...”
(I, V, L. 577-578)

Quest for ideal love

Viola is the most amiable and amicable figure presented in *Twelfth Night*. From the beginning to the end of the play Viola is the only character whose love seems to be the most genuine and authentic. Her love is admitted by all as true love chiefly because Viola never makes any fuss about her love - she keeps it concealed in her own breast although she feels the pangs of deep and one way love for the person who happens to be her master and with whom she is in close company as his page (in disguise). It is not an ordinary ordeal for Viola to remain and serve in the male disguise and to work as a love-messenger on behalf of the man whom she loves and yet we find that she performs her task nobly and successfully without any envy of a young lady. This shows that Viola's love has dignity and sincerity, depth and intensity much more than the love of Olivia or the Duke. Viola makes no promise, profession or pretension of her love on any occasion: she is always calm and composed. This is the main reason why she succeeds in winning the same person for her husband to whom she loved in the very beginning unlike Olivia or Duke Orsino who have to change their choices and accept their life partners about whom they never thought earlier. Viola describes the love of her sister which is nothing but reflection of her own love for the Duke, and this sort of love, in our opinion, is a kind of ideal love which Viola cherished in her heart of hearts for Orsino.

“She never told her love,
But let concealment like a worth in the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: She pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?
(II, IV, L. 1011-1016)

Conclusion

In most of Shakespeare's comedies we find a wide range of very strong female characters who do what they are supposed to follow and do not play their role according to the rules imposed upon them. In some case women disguise as male in order to achieve their goals while other characters dare to speak their mind in spite of the fact that this type attitude is counted to be defective for the female characters. Shakespeare, thus, seems not to be afraid of facing his audience with matchless female characters who manage to make the action of the comedies much stimulating, bustling, and more stirring.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to claim that Shakespeare wants to underline and reaffirm women's equality to men as some feminists would have it. In Shakespeare's comedies heroines are represented stronger than the male characters and they play their role with a different purpose. Many characters go out of their way to create the best source of

humour because unexpected behaviour or cross-dressing compulsorily lead to confusion and humorous encounters with other characters and Shakespeare deliberately does it in his comedies.

Thus we can conclude that Shakespeare deliberately presents his female characters who do not follow the rules imposed upon them and thus he turns the situation into a source of humour. But after letting his women have their own way, he proclaims their traditional role in society by putting them back in their place, by getting married at the end of the plays, and by leading a happy life in submission to their husbands. It cannot be denied that during Shakespeare's times women were far from being equal to men and that this attitude is also reflected in many of Shakespeare's works.

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