

Women in Shakespeare

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Abstract: In the 16th century, English societies were defined by notions like “feudatory” or “hierarchy”. People were unaware of gender but apprised of boundaries between males and females. Cross-dressing in that era was particular to theatrics, yet Shakespeare deliberately utilize that element in his comedies. By analyzing two Shakespearean romantic comedies, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, I aim to show that cross-dressing plays a big role in driving the plot and assisting Shakespeare to express female stories with the voice of men. This essay further studies Shakespeare's female characters and their thoughts on grief, death, marriage, human nature. In summary, it appeals to Shakespearean literature to remind readers of the ultimate goal of feminism and the impact of theory.

1. Introduction

Why did Shakespeare adopt cross-dressing in his comedies? Back in the 16th century, cross-dressing was still considered by many as a queer deed against social norms, yet due to a severe lack of actresses, male actors were forced to chant in dresses. Shakespeare of course knew those briches roles were never meant to be male actors exclusive. But the way he allowed men to dress in high-heels and women to expose their ankles, managed to tell that human sexuality is not correlated with humanity.

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare discloses how people react to grief or death in the same manner. At the beginning of the play, Viola took a boat to a place called Illyria. When she recovered from the coma, she realized that she lost her brother, Sebastian. She was immersed in great trauma of losing her brother and coming to a totally strange island. The first thing she reacted after the grief yet is to dress up like a man to work for Duke Orsino[1]. She asked the captain for help, expressing her determination to disguise: “For such disguise as haply shall become the form of my intent.” She wanted to drive the pain away by finding a replacement as she believed that “[she] can sing and speak to him in many sorts of music.” [2]

The plot itself more or less echoes Shakespeare’s life experience. Shakespeare was once in Viola’s shoes as well because just a few years before he wrote the play, Shakespeare lost his beloved small son Hamnet Shakespeare. This accident lays the foundation of the somber tone at the beginning of the play *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare expressed his undertone via his parables of human nature, the grim death, and loss through the character of Viola. Female’s reaction to death seems to prove that when we speak of human nature, everyone needs a bailment to place their love and miss until they gradually accept the fact that they have lost someone important. In *Twelfth Night*, the grievance was conveyed by the character of Viola, telling all the audience that pretending ourselves to live as our lost families is how most people react to death, and this reaction to death has no correlation to gender.

Similarly, in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare proved to us again that human nature is far beyond the difference between biological genders. This comedy is written as a romantic story between Rosalind and Orlando. Rosalind fell in love with Orlando during a ball; however, when she met him the next time in the forest, Rosalind did not express her love to him directly even though she already knew that Orlando was obsessed with her. Instead, she dressed up like a man and questioned Orlando many questions about love. She stayed calm and wise toward love all the time and asked Orlando to realize what is love she wanted (Shakespeare, 1599). Rosalind disguised herself as Ganymede to tell

Orlando how to get her love and trust. She started by first complaining about women's worries as what she said as a guy[3.4].

2. Comparison between "as You Wish" and "Twelfth Night"

"I thank God I am not a woman, to be touched with so many giddy offenses as he hath generally taxed their whole sex withal" (Shakespeare, ACT. 3 SC.2).

She then asked Orlando to woo her when she pretended to be a demanding Ganymede, a male friend of Orlando who wants to help him find his love. She asked Orlando to be respectful, responsible, and never let her down, and it seems it is easier for Rosalind to speak out about her ideal love when she does not speak as a woman. For Orlando, Rosalind's disguise as a man makes him easier to comprehend her needs as well because he takes these words as a friend's suggestions to gain his love, but not requirements from his lover. When communications between lovers are not sexually-oriented, we somehow can talk to one another through a veil of ignorance, as if personal traits were not barriers anymore. Sometimes we say the love is blind; yes indeed, the love is blind as love is normally driven by sexual hormones. Despite the sweetness of love, we still need rational communications between two lovers to maintain and protect their relationship, and this is where we need to break the boundary of gender and listen to the voice from our heart.

Shakespeare created this almost androgynous character to illustrate what is the best way to deal with love and marriage. Treat herself as an outsider, Rosalind thinks about her love from the perspective of a gender-neutral person and communicates and negotiates with Orlando to find balanced and equal love. This reminds us how to process discussion between men and women which needs to be calm and objective, and the men and women can only reach an equal agreement when there is a third personality talk between them. People normally define love as something emotional, but the real communication that happens inside love should not be emotional, but rational. When people are not limited by their genders, there are purely humans with the same traits of human nature.

Comparing As you Like It with Twelfth Night, the story of As You Like It is more relaxed and chill which is contributed by Shakespeare's happy marriage during that time. He married to Duchess who gave him freedom and support to further develop his talents. His marriage is certainly a model of extreme respect and equality during that time. Being affected by his life experience, Shakespeare creates As You Like It to originate human's materialistic form, and with the help of gender-neutral character, he stresses the importance of empathetic thinking while understanding human nature needs an active avoidance of over-simplification. While in Twelfth Night, though Shakespeare also encouraged female actresses to play briches role, he explores the ultimate meaning of death and how we human beings react to death. Female characters are critical in both of these two works, working as a media to achieve his creating aim. Forgetting about genders, rationality and objectiveness assist humans to solve everything throughout their lives.

As the plot goes on, two lovers, Rosalind and Orlando, were discussing their future wedding; however, the play does not purely express the perfect ideals, which normally means a "living happily ever" story. Early in Act 2 Scene 7, Jaques has already revealed what a person's life or marriage really looks like through his speech. He believes that a man has 7 stages during his life, from premature to desirable person then to premature again. In his speech, everyone has a theatrical life and there is no distinct difference between one another since we are all actors in the play of lives. Jaques points out something sorrowful that no matter who we are, and we are treated equally; "all the men and women merely players" who "have their exists and entrances" being decided. The seven stages of life remind us that we are actually unable to live for ourselves since death will take away everything at the very end of our life journey.

The speech points towards the idea of nihilism as whatever we gain, death will demolish all the possession to own things away. Life is not perfect but sad as we are determined and powerless to fight back. We can imagine our life as a vault: we are beautiful and rich at the beginning of life, but when we get old, pieces of gold are being taken away, leaving the vault with no value but a barren space. We are living toward the same end, death, which destroys everything we had and leaves

nihilism to us. To be specific, Jaques' speech implies that love is something romantic, but when it comes to marriage, we will gradually walk toward an ending status just like our lives. People intend to think there is a certain job for men or women like women should take care of the family while men should earn more money. But according to Jaques' idea and this play, the fact is that both males or females have the equal expectation for their lovers. Marriage should be more like the process for people to know what they truly want, but not a defined job for each person.

3. Comparative Analysis

These two works together reveal what it means to be a comedy and the ultimate goal of feminism. Referring to the feudal societies in the 16th century, Shakespeare chose to eulogize humanitarian ideals through comedy because at that time, noble people remained undereducated. The comedy is definitely more acceptable for them even though they might not get the gist at stake. In a different sense, comedy better contributed to the effect of sarcasm. Through the voices of thousands of characters, Shakespeare criticizes the reality and wants to arouse people's thinking about the topic of human nature. *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* are more like serious theatrical plays than comedies if we dive deeper into the theme of these two works. They call for equality and liberty which are precisely what today's feminism groups are seeking. He points out the way for women to resist: as women, we must talk. We use words and dignity to gain the dream love and needs. After all, there is no gender differences when facing human nature, and there should not be a representative voice for any group-individuals are equally important.

4. Conclusion

Today we should treat Shakespeare's comedy in a more serious way like never before because Shakespearean plays shed light on numerous significant topics like death, equality and human nature. These two works empower women to speak up for themselves and establish the fundamental idea for feminism except for those modern women do not need to disguise themselves into male-looking people anymore.

References

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