



Female characters in Shakespeare's experimental comedies: An analysis

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Abstract

The research paper presented here intends to draw an analysis of Shakespeare's female characters in his experimental comical plays. The paper depicts the status of women during Shakespearian period and his presentation of women through his comedies. While his contemporaries projected the domestic image of women as per the society of those times, Shakespeare brought out the strong aspects of female personality which showed her as a bold and a decisive being. During the course of research, Shakespeare's comedies have been taken into account and the striking features of his female characters have been brought to the forefront.

Keywords: shakespeare, female characters, comedy, women, and plays

Introduction

Shakespeare embarked on his journey as a playwright doing odd jobs at theatrical companies, witnessing new characters and hearing novel storylines every day. When Shakespeare put his foot on the stage, women's influence was sharply felt and the general attitude towards them was keenly debated. Although the middle-class women in his times did not share Queen Elizabeth's scholarship, yet they were witty which was attributed to education. His female characters give us an insight into how heart

and brain were fused in a contemporary society- beloved, shrews, wanton seducers, prophets, witches, conspirators and so on.

Shakespeare's modernity in his treatment of women has always attracted attention among his contemporaries. While they present women in a traditional manner, Shakespeare breaks the lineage. Female characters in his works are self-emancipated, self-sufficient, decisive and resolute. He has explored the myriad facets of women through his shimmering heroines.

Shakespeare's Heroines in his Experimental Comedies

Shakespeare's apprentice work presents him as a witty and gentle playwright. Although, he was learning the art of writing the plays during this time yet his treatment of female characters is truly mature.

1. Love's Labour's Lost: In this play, the women have an upper hand as they fool the men who court the ladies secretly by making the men wait for a period of one year, to marry them.

a) **Rosaline:** She is one of the wittiest of Shakespeare's heroines. Her courtly jests, her humor of the men presents her as a victorious lady. "Although Berowne tries to run her down, yet she defends herself in the most effective way she can. Apart from this, she also breaks the artificiality of Berowne ^[1].

Rosaline: Which of the Vizards was it that you wore?

BIRON: Where? When? What vizard? Why demand you this? ROSALINE: There, then, that vizard; that superfluous case That hid the worse and show'd the better face.(V.ii. 428-431)

"She neither shows any softening of her attitude towards Berowne nor does she betray any sign of vulnerability ^[2].

Although, she defeats Berowne through her mocking moves yet she did not prevent him from exhibiting his genuine love for her. So, Rosaline wins against the male-dominated society in the very first comedy which was to continue till the last Shakespearian comedy.

2. The Comedy of Errors: As the play suggests, the play talks about the confused identity of the twin brothers who like any other human being commit error and succumb to the destiny. Adriana and Luciana, the two female characters offer contrasting views of womanhood. Adriana advocates equality with the male counterparts while Luciana submits to the male fancies.

a) **Adriana:** Adriana is a jealous lot, a common feature present in a wife. She shows her anger when her husband is late for the dinner.

Neither my husband nor the slave return'd, That in such haste I sent to seek his master! (II.i. 272-273)

While Luciana is sympathetic towards men who according to her, undertake the outdoor duties, resulting in this delay. But Adriana believes in equal rights for both genders. Thus,

Why should their liberty than ours be more?' (I.e. 10)

Luciana on the other hand promotes the view that women occupy a place below men. Adriana is quick to react rudely giving reason for Luciana's unmarried state. Also, Adriana is

too possessive about her husband and believes in the sanctity of marriage as a spiritual union. But all the elements of jealousy, wit and rage are present in Adriana.

- b) **Luciana:** Luciana injects romance and feelings, an element which is necessarily present in a Shakespeare's heroine, into a confused atmosphere. She believes that women are below men in degree.

Are masters to their females, and their lords?
Then let your will attend on their accords.(II.i. 24-25)

"Luciana thus invokes the concept of women's position which it would be the hardest for an Elizabethan or Jacobean feminist to refute without becoming a revolutionary overnight."^[3] The readers have more sympathy for Luciana than for Adriana, despite Adriana's views on equality as Luciana brings a range of sentiments as a romantic mermaid.

3. The Two Gentlemen of Verona: This play has the smallest cast list. Shakespeare disguises women as men in the play to further a plot like many of his plays. Here, lovers exhibit irrational and silly behavior. Shakespeare presents a strong message that true love is strong and steadfast while infatuation is weak and capricious. Julia wears a disguise to be close to Proteus while Silvia indirectly proposes her love for Valentine by dictating love letters.

- a) **Julia:** She is the only Shakespearian heroine having a mother. Julia is loyal to Proteus although he is infatuated by Silvia. "She disguises as a page to attend to her lover while acting as an intermediary between him and Silvia, her rival."^[4] She remains steadfastly disguised, hiding her emotions and affections. But she ultimately reveals her true identity and in return gains Proteus' love. She is depicted in varied moods, whimsies and vagaries. The following lines show disheartened Julia when she tears Proteus' letter:

Look, here is writ 'kind Julia.' Unkind Julia! As in revenge of thy ingratitude, I throw thy name against the bruising stones,

Trampling contemptuously on thy disdain. And here is writ 'love-wounded Proteus.' Poor wounded name! my bosom as a bed Shall lodge thee till thy wound be thoroughly heal'd (I.ii. 114-120)

- b) **Silvia:** Silvia represents the 'fair and wise' women who defy the illogical orders passed by the fathers. She escapes to Milan in search of Valentine. Silvia is depicted as a true planner who uses her wits to the extreme. She writes her own love letter persuading Valentine to deliver it to her. Silvia also demonstrates her capacity for kindness when she refuses to accept a gift from Proteus:

The more shame for him that he sends it me; For I have heard him say a thousand times His Julia gave it him at his departure. Though his false finger have profaned the ring, Mine shall not do his Julia so much wrong. (IV.iv. 142-146)

So the two pairs portrayed by Shakespeare give us an unexpected romantic comedy while displaying the strong traits of his female characters.

4. The Taming of The Shrew: It is perhaps one of the most controversial plays in Shakespeare's treatment of women. Katherine, the protagonist has been the 'shrew' who according to the plot needs to be 'tamed'.

- a) **Katherine:** Katherine is shown as a woman who is frustrated by a favored sibling. She is always seen in a dark light in front of the "goody-goody" Bianca. But she finally gets back to the sister who has been getting all the attention for years. She, therefore, plays the shrew only to dismiss the group of idiot suitors presented by her father.

(To Baptista) I pray you, sir, is it your will to make a stale of me amongst these mates? (I.i. 57-58)

As Judith Cook notes, "She is a girl of spirit and she is waiting for a man of spirit and an even stronger will than her own to get the better of her."^[5] By depicting the relationship between Petruchio and Kate, Shakespeare added an emotional and a psychological dimension to the play. Katherine gives credence to the idea that unruly wives/subjects threaten the very fabric of the family structure and are a kind of danger to the public.

Such duty as the subject owes the prince Even such a woman oweth to her husband; And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour, And not obedient to his honest will, What is she but a foul contending rebel (V.ii. 171-175)

- b) **Bianca:** She is viewed by men as the ideal 16th century woman. She appears to be chaste and obedient but fools her dad by flirting with her admirers in the name of private tutoring sessions. Bianca is a proof to the fact that appearances and outward behaviour can be deceiving. Bianca grows bolder, confident and more shrewish. She depicts her anger by taunting Kate to be an old maid without marriage prospects.

5(A). Midsummer Night's Dream: With his craftsmanship now moving towards an idyllic state, Shakespeare presents a romantic comedy in A Midsummer Night's Dream. The dominance of women in the fairy world is depicted in the play. Also, it presents Shakespeare as a master of new kind of comedy.

- a) **Hermia:** Shakespeare displays Hermia as a woman of strong will. When she finds both Demetrius and Lysander faithless, she reacts to this fickleness violently, being a true Shakespearian heroine.

So will I grow, so live, my lord,
Ere I will yield my virgin patent up
Unto his lordship whose unwished yoke
My soul consents not to give sovereignty" (I.i.79-82)

'She is his property, and so, he can "estate" her to anyone' shows the dominance of men over women in those times. Thus, she is left with little opportunity for happiness – marry

Demetrius, spend her life in a nunnery or die. But she is resolute to attain her true love. "She is warm-blooded & spirited, tender in happy love & hot & militant in anger", [6] scans Judith Cook.

b) **Helena:** She is very much feminine and is ready to follow the traditional social woven for women. She loves Demetrius while he thoroughly hates her and begs of love from Demetrius.

And even for that do I love you the more. I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius, The more you beat me, I will fawn on you: Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me, Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave, Unworthy as I am, to follow you. What worser place can I beg in your love, — And yet a place of high respect with me, — than to be used as you use your dog? (II.i. 577-585)

Helena is quite concerned about Hermia's hot temper which could label her as curs't and shrewish. She keeps on reminding Hermia on this aspect. Unlike, Hermia, Helena depends on the Providence to enable her to win love as she thinks this is beyond her. She portrays herself as meek, humble and retiring.

The contrasting characters of Hermia and Helena have been beautifully depicted by Shakespeare. The bold Hermia contrasts the submissive Helena.

Conclusion

Through Shakespeare's experimental comedies from Love's Labour's Lost to A Midsummer Night's Dream, we can see his art of blending different elements to produce great comedies. Love's Labour's Lost is a satire on romantic idealism and affectation where the women have an upper hand while The Comedy of Errors displays the two contrasting views of women on equality and submission to men. The Two Gentlemen of Verona reveals that women can go to any extent to attain their love whereas The Taming of the Shrew combines shrewish and bold nature of women. A Midsummer Night's Dream exhibits that Shakespeare is capable of handling mature plays with several interwoven plots. The female characters with varied emotions of tenderness and feminism present the bright and seamy side of life in romantic surroundings.

It can be concluded that heroines contribute a great deal to the blooming of Shakespeare's comedies and vice-versa. Shakespeare grows with his heroines while his heroines grow with his ever growing skills. He fills his heroines with shimmering individual virtues which show Shakespeare to be a true advocator of female characters.

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