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Feminism in Shakespeare

Many of Shakespeare's plays contain cross-dressing, with either a man dressing as a woman or a woman dressing as a man. In all, about one fifth of Shakespeare's thirty-eight known plays contain gender disguises. The effect of this gender confusion was certainly enhanced by the fact that during Elizabethan times, women's roles were played by young male actors. While no one can know why Shakespeare was so intrigued by the idea of cross dressing, there seem to be two general theories: Either Shakespeare enjoyed the comedic element of a man dressing up as a woman dressing up as a man, or he was secretly a feminist. While the humor of the situation can't be ignored, the fact that many of Shakespeare's female protagonists are strong, intelligent, capable women who go against the grain suggests that he was the 16th century equivalent of a feminist.

William Shakespeare wrote during the Elizabethan Era, otherwise known as the "Golden Age." This time was a brief period of peace in England and because the citizenry wasn't focused on fighting wars, theater, art and music flourished. Women had specific roles. Girls who were in noble families were highly educated and taught by the older women in their house, yet they were not allowed to enter into professions. Women were expected to be housewives and teach and care for their children. In families, everything was passed down to the sons, and girls were married off to men that their fathers picked. Ironically, the only exception to these rules of succession was the royal

crown, which could be passed to a daughter. Because the Queen was a woman, she encouraged fathers to educate their daughters and hoped that all men would strive to educate the women in their lives.

Shakespeare seized the idea of intelligent, capable women and seemed to recognize that societal restrictions were not always fair. He used the device of cross-dressing to show that many women are actually as competent as men. Some examples of female Shakespeare characters who spend much of the play as men are: Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*. In each of these plays, the women dressed as men so that they could perform a task that they would not normally be able to do as a woman.

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola dresses as her twin brother after they lose each other at sea. It was very dangerous for a woman to be on her own, so Viola dresses as her brother to enable her find work and provide for herself. She continued her deception because she fell in love with Duke Orsino and wanted to stay close to him. Dressing as a boy seems to embolden Viola, and allows both her and the Duke to show their true characters as they fall in love.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia dresses as a man so she can travel to Venice and enter the courtroom as a lawyer to save her husband's best friend, Antonio. While this is a courageous move, Portia's assumption of a male identity also transforms her and allows her to take control of her own destiny. She starts out as a woman who is controlled by her late father's wishes, but by the end of the play, has taken control of her own destiny by testing Bassanio's fidelity to her.

Julia first dresses as Sebastian in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* so she can safely

travel by herself to Milan to follow the love of her life, Proteus, who was set to Milan to study. But then instead of revealing her identity when she arrives, she takes a job as the pageboy for her lover Proteus. Similar to Portia, she enjoys the freedom to play a role she never could as a woman, and the measure of control she gains over her life by pretending to be a man. By pretending to be a pageboy, she gets to have a job that she would have been ineligible for as a woman, and thereby has control over the situation of her lover pursuing another woman because of his father.

The comedy of gender confusion is most evident in *As You Like It*, where Rosalind runs away to the forest to get away from Duke Frederick. Because it is scary to be alone on a journey through a forest, especially as a girl, she decides to disguise herself as a man named Ganymede. She then falls in love with Orlando but continues the farce. Rosalind does anything for her love, including having her disguised identity, Ganymede, pretend to be a girl for Orlando to practice his courting skills:

Were it not better,
 Because that I am more than common tall,□
 That I did suit me all points like a man?
 A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
 A boar-spear in my hand; and, ---- in my heart
 Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will, ----
 We'll have a swashing and a martial outside,
 As many other mannish cowards have□
 That do outface it with their semblances. (Act 1 Scene 3)

Despite the societal restrictions on women during the time of Shakespeare, the women in his plays were just as competent as the men. The comedy of cross-dressing seems to be simply a side effect of what was surely a deeper theme by Shakespeare. Women were able to complete the same tasks men did just as well as the men, and sometimes, even better. Portia, for example, not only argued her case successfully in the courtroom, but she taught Bassanio a lesson as well.

Despite their strength, however, Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines never let us forget they are women at heart. Even though each of them shows masculinity through how they dress and act, they still have the physical and emotional characteristics of a woman. This is a problem sometimes. For example, when Viola is challenged to duel with Sir Andrew Aguecheek, she is afraid that she will not be able to match up to him because of her lack of strength. Each woman also retains a compassion that is typically reserved for female characters, as we see in Portia when she begs for mercy for Antonio.

The cross-dressed women always tend to be independent, strong and determined instead of passive. Each woman takes the steps required of her in order to reach her goals. They travel alone and enter into situations most women wouldn't dare, especially when it is for love. They are able to do so without losing their essential femininity, and perhaps that is the best argument that Shakespeare was an early feminist. He recognized that women were ruled by men, and that their place in society was a difficult one. His plays showed that without the Elizabethan-era societal restrictions, women could actually compete with men in any arena.

Even though the women in Shakespeare's plays went against the rules of being a women in the society of his time, is it fair to call him a "feminist" when feminism wasn't

even a thing during the span of his life, nor did it come around for hundreds of years later? Should we look at Shakespeare's work with through the lens of modern feminism? In the end, men were still playing the roles, and technically it was a man pulling off a woman being a man, so some critics may conclude that it is not fair to look at William Shakespeare as a true feminist. The problem is that it is nearly impossible for us to look at a play from the perspective of one who was watching the same play in the Elizabethan era. We can try, but we can't completely forget the events of the past 350 years and entirely disregard what we have learned and now know. We look at just about everything through the mindset of a person who lives in modern times. So, because it is nearly impossible, we are bound to look at his plays with the ideas of underlying racism or feminism or some other major idea that is prevalent in our modern world..

The key word connected to feminism is *idea*. Feminism is just an idea we have developed. Just because the word itself did not exist during Shakespeare's time doesn't mean there weren't strong women before, or that Shakespeare didn't have a thought that maybe women were worth more than what his society allowed. Perhaps he thought that women were just as strong, capable and intelligent as men were. Gender roles play such a major theme in almost all of Shakespeare's work, it's possible to think that he believed in an idea akin to modern day feminism. Instead of coming out and saying something about a woman's role in society he used gender roles in his plays to show the audience that a woman is capable of conquering a mans role.

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