

Elizabethan Era and Fascinating Heroines of Shakespeare: Study of the “*Merchant of Venice*” and the “*Twelfth Night*”

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Abstract:

To talk about William Shakespeare, is to show light to the sun. Known as ‘Bard of Avon’, William Shakespeare now has become a voice depicting the universal feelings. He, in his plays, has depicted everything which is possible under the sun. Every aspect of his plays is still relevant in 21st century. Characters depicted by him present the best possible in a human being. But one thing which is beautiful and different about his plays is depiction of his female characters. Clever, witty, full of sense of humour and powerful heroines of his dramatic creations are eternal. Not all the female portrayals are powerful but some heroines by him are far ahead of their conservative times. This present paper will discuss the witty and intelligent heroines which would have done great if the society could have allowed them. Heroines both in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Twelfth Night* are intelligent than their male counterparts but they didn’t get the recognition because of their being females. Viola in the *Twelfth Night* and Portia in the *Merchant of Venice* save their heroes in tough times. But even to help them they have to disguise themselves as men because in those times females were not allowed to do the things they have done to help their loved ones.

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To talk about William Shakespeare, is to show light to the sun. Whole world knows about the beauty of Shakespeare’s fictional dramatic world. A person who got nothing to do with literature can tell something about his plays. Though born in England, known as ‘Bard of Avon’ but a person who belongs to any part of this world can relate himself to his dramatic characters. Born in 26th April 1564 and died in 1616, it feels as if Shakespeare still lives among us in its real form. His characters are life-like and it’s obvious for a reader to match him or her with the hero or heroine of the play. Where his tragedies unveil the wicked mind of a being, his comedies come with the light vein human mirth to the surface. His romances give catharsis to the emotions of lovers and dark comedies bring out the possible weakness of people. He can draw emotions and relationship between father and daughters, lovers and their beloveds. He has mastery in portraying relationship of a son with his mother and can depict the female condition in that rigid society. It seems as if he himself has lived life of all of them. The facts regarding the life of William Shakespeare have always been in

controversy. Mere speculations make us believe that Shakespeare had an unhappy marriage and problems in his personal life but his dramatic works present entirely different and colorful picture of his personality. Lush green imageries of fields and beautiful conversations of characters make readers flow with the mirth in lines. It is believed that Shakespeare has written 39 plays, 154 sonnets and two long narrative poems. World's greatest tragedies *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* still have the power to captivate the reader's mind even after centuries.

Though Shakespeare has carved so many characters in his dramatic fiction but some female characters are memorable and portrayal is eternal. This study aims to explore some characters out of that rainbow of beautiful, sagacious and disguised heroines. It will include the two romantic comedies: *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare has given a distinctive place to very famous heroines like Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Cordelia in *King Lear*, Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Rosalind in *As You like It*, Juliet in *Romeo Juliet*, Desdemona in *Othello*, Portia in *Merchant of Venice* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*. All these heroines do have some particular power in them, they may have used for good or bad. They play with other's mind because all of them got the ability to reach to the core of other's mind. The present study is focused on heroines in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Twelfth Night*.

Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is the protagonist who is rich, beautiful and intelligent heiress of Belmont. Though she is controlled by the terms set by her father for her marriage, still she has some desires which she knows will get fulfilled with some tricks. Nerissa, who is Portia's lady-in-waiting and confidante knows what Portia thinks and plans. To her, Portia opens her heart and tells her that how she is bound to her father's words. Her father's last wish was to find an intelligent man for his daughter. So he dictates to have three caskets and orders to give potential suitors chance to win Portia if they choose the right casket. But there was another warning for them that if they choose it wrong, they will leave and will never get married. Though Portia wants to marry Bassanio but she cannot win him by cheating. Portia seems to be prejudiced for those suitors from Africa but she still possesses softness for human beings in her heart. She has to behave like this in order to follow the society. She feels cheated that her father by putting all the conditions regarding her marriage has made difficult for her to come out of doubts. Her confidant, Nerissa assures her that her father was an intelligent man with her best interests at heart. Portia feels herself caught in dilemma because of the conditions laid by her father. This incident tells that despite of the fact that Portia is capable to save intelligent and brave men, her father doesn't find her capable to find a suitable match for herself. She couldn't calm her her mind and explains to her confidant Nerissa in a monologue:

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that

follows his own instructions. I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree: such a hair is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband. O me, the word' choose!' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?(Act I, scene II)

Many suitors try to woo Portia for marriage and try their luck in choosing the casket. Prince of Morocco chooses the golden casket, which contains the skull and a note telling him that "all that glitters is not gold." Another suitor Prince of Arragon chooses the silver chest, which leads him to the picture of a fool. The best thing about this game was that Bassanio, her love interest chooses the lead chest which brings out the picture of Portia. Then they tie knots in marriage and take oaths to be together forever. Through these gambles one can assume that difficult was for a girl to think beyond what her parents think.

Portia is not only intelligent but also understands the friendship. Just the day, she gets married to Bassanio, she comes to know about the troubled position of her husband, Bassanio's friend Antonio. Instead of forcing her husband to stay with her, she insists him to go to his friend to help him by all means. Bassanio told him that how Shylock who gave Antonio 3000 ducats for Bassanio, is not ready to take three times more of the original amount and wants a flesh of pound from the body of Antonio. Here Portia understands that time demands from her to do something to save Antonio. So she decides to fight the case as a lawyer in guise of her cousin Balthasar. In spite of her little knowledge about law, she tricks Shylock by trapping him in his bond he made for Antonio. She is so clever and intelligent that she first proposes money to Shylock and warns him that he cannot step back if the judgement comes against him. With her sharp mind, she brings solution to a problem which was not easy to sort out even for the cleverest man of Venice. In that conservative society of Elizabethan era, she was forced to hide her identity in spite of being so intelligent. She is fond of witty dialogues, word plays and proverbs which further prove her to be more intelligent than any man in Venice and Belmont.

Another heroine from the dramatic world of Shakespeare which easily captures the mind is Viola. She unlike other characters in the play, full of wit, humour and warm feelings. Like Orsino jumping from Olivia to Viola, Olivia jumps from Viola to Sebastian and Sir Toby's marriage to Maria is devoid of real feelings, Viola's love for both her brother and Orsino is genuine and she makes efforts to earn that love. She is not pretentious either like Countess Olivia or Duke Orsino. Orsino in the very opening scene of the play says: "If music be the food of love, play on, give me excess of it..." Through these lines, Duke Orsino tries to show

that how immersed he is in love for Olivia but it turns out to be fake when he realizes the hardships in courting Olivia and his love for Viola. Viola in order to find her brother, whom she gets separated after a ship- wreck, goes to Illyria to find him by disguising herself as a man. She is fully aware of the fact that it would be tough for her to find her brother without disguising herself as a man. Viola is in the list of heroines by Shakespeare who in order to achieve something important, disguise themselves as a man because they know that it is not allowed to them to be independent and free. The whole plot revolves around the fact that she poses an identity which doesn't belong to her but to some Cesario. She cross-dress as a boy in the play which is common in Shakespeare's plays. She safely can be called as the hero and heroine of the play because of her being Cesario, who becomes the hero of Olivia and after the disclosure of the fact that she is a girl, she becomes the heroine of Orsino. She alone takes the whole plot to the climax. She knows from the very beginning of the play that both Orsino and Olivia are pretentious still she tries to calm down everything between them. Olivia, on the other hand decides to keep her in veil to mourn the death of her brother, but when she sees Cesario, she breaks her oath. She falls in love with Cesario instantly. Through this play, we can assume that what a woman is capable of. Viola, who is not a rich girl, has a heart which has warm feelings for all whereas Olivia pretends to be like her.

While analyzing these two female characters portrayed by Shakespeare, we feel that they are very intelligent, sensitive and witty but they have to show their skill just by standing behind a man. She has to have a male with her to prove that she is beautiful and desired. The time when Shakespeare was writing, that Elizabethan period was conservative for females. Renaissance happened, but the free 'Man' concept in that period was not meant for females. Popular theatres were established but the roles of females were not allowed to perform by females. Shakespeare had created some women characters which are powerful and demand equality but such are very limited one and are special too.

It was like that in Elizabethan period, Queen Elizabeth inspired Shakespeare to create characters like her, but they were limited and cannot behave prudently in front of others. She can do practice her skill only in disguise. That time was not in favour of strong female characters, though Shakespeare has tried his hands very well in bringing change to the stage. Female characters like Portia, Cordelia and Viola were new for that society to digest. It seems as if Shakespeare was aware of this mentality, so he gave power and skill to them in his dramatic fiction, but with some restrictions. One can imagine the things they could have done, if the society would have allowed them to do. Portia defending men with the power of her mind was a new thing and then Viola knowing the fact that she should hide her identity and be a man, clearly shows that though the world was changing but for females it was still a dark place where Shakespeare brought some light and that makes him the first modernist in making changes in the position of females. There are certain women characters which earned hatred as well but it seems as if it was his effort to bring woman out from a lovey -

dovey image which is true in its form. Shakespeare's drama brings out the contradiction about the position of females despite the England having a female monarch. The condition of these women characters reminds us of Virginia Woolf demanding place for a woman to do creative thing which was denied to women in that century of Shakespeare. In Elizabethan times, Shakespeare's heroines must have been inspiration for the females coming to watch the plays and thus he prophesied the strong women of modern times in his dramatic fiction.

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