

# Shakespeare was undoubtedly a figure of subversiveness english literature essay

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From a theatrical perspective it was imperative that the action of the play took place within the dramatic framework of the history, tragedy or comedy. Shakespeare could not appear overtly radical as a playwright and it was vital that he complied to convention as 'the action of the scenes had to be larger than life' (Wright, C. C. (1993) p. 4) it had to 'take the normal life of London to the extreme' (Wright, C. C. (1993) p. 4), the main function of his plays after all was to entertain, not to offer a running social critique. He was an 'astute writer who knew that a play containing very liberated women would be insulting, shocking, and unpopular with the majority of theater-goers.' (Wright, C. C. (1993) p. 9) Consequently the issue of gender, in particular the status of women and women as the inferior gender is subtly yet profoundly highlighted throughout Shakespeare's plays.' Shakespeare's contribution to the debate on women is his perception of the artificiality of gender.' (Cunningham, J. (1997) p. 118) Gender is a performance and Shakespeare uses a variety of female characters within his plays in order to offer a running critique of Elizabethan and Jacobean society to emphasise his view that men and women are equal 'albeit in a world which declared them unequal.' (Cunningham, J. (1997) p. 116) Shakespeare's female characters offer us numerous interpretations of gender performances. In King Lear Cordelia is presented in opposition to Goneril and Regan for the duration of the play. As a character Cordelia represents all that was considered virtuous about feminine nature. She is a devoted daughter who loves her father 'according to my bond; nor more nor less' (I. i. 93). She is honest in her display of affection towards her father and as a result is banished from Lear's kingdom. Her performance as a stereotypical female achieves nothing and

she becomes a literal victim of the unjust, patriarchal society in which she lives. Goneril and Regan on the other hand present themselves as much more aggressive female characters intent on succeeding within male dominated society. They are cunning and manipulative and are willing to stop at nothing to achieve control over Lear's kingdom. Both women represent females with strong, almost masculine personality traits resulting in their portrayal as 'two pernicious daughters' (III. ii. 22) who are 'most serpent-like' (II. iv. 159). These women are breaking free from the oppressed norms of the male dominated society in which they live and they appear to be succeeding. However at the plays close their desire for advancement and progression within the society they live in ultimately results in their demise. In my opinion this is a subliminal critique of the unequal position of women in society. Shakespeare is presenting us with a world in which women cannot prosper, they cannot win. Even when they possess the same traits as men they succumb to failure. A woman acting like a woman cannot succeed and a woman acting like a man will also ultimately face failure. Shakespeare is reinforcing the presence of the boundaries which existed for women during the era of his writing. Through his characterisation he brings clarity to his opinion that regardless of what women try to do they will eventually fail as a result of the unjust nature of Elizabethan and Jacobean society. Shakespeare cleverly uses the character of Ophelia in the play Hamlet in order to illustrate the detrimental effects of this oppression on women. Ophelia's unstable mental state and impending madness arise as a result of the psychological pressure of oppression. Ophelia 'fell in the weeping brook' (IV. vii. 175) and although she had time to save herself she exhibited a state of paralysis akin

to someone who had no apprehension of the danger she was in or else someone who was accustomed to danger and saw no reason to fight for safety; 'As one incapable of her own distress, Or like a creature native and indued' (IV. vii. 178). However by offering a criticism of this oppression and the limits placed upon women he is also once again reinforcing their existence. Her madness may have been as a result of the unjust society in which she lived, nonetheless if she was not a weak woman she could have saved herself from death as it is remarked that she had enough time to sing 'snatches of old lauds' (IV. vii. 177) before she sank to the bottom of the brook. Ophelia may have been broken by society but she was still afforded the opportunity to save herself however her female frailty caused her to succumb to death. The character of Viola also serves to emphasise the gendered boundaries that Shakespeare is attempting to draw the audience's attention to. Viola's soliloquy in act two scene two 'has both specific relevance to the play in question and clear extradramatic implications for the audience-at-large' (Cartelli, T. (1986) p. 2). Within the soliloquy Viola is commenting on how easily Olivia has fallen for her as Cesario and attributes this to be the same kind of frailty that killed Ophelia. She characterises the frailty as a gendered concept, part of the compulsory gender performance forced upon women. 'Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we! For such as we are made of, such we be' (II. ii. 29) Shakespeare's approach to gender in the play Twelfth Night is unique in that 'he did not divide human nature into the masculine and the feminine, but observed the individual' (Cunningham, J. (1997) p. 118) The character of Viola is accepted as both male and female within the confines of the play. Olivia falls for her as Cesario and the Duke

Orsino intimately confides in her male persona as a friend. This acceptance highlights that the main differences in the treatment of women at the time were not as a result of a difference in nature as Viola is a complex character who embodies 'desired personality traits' (Wright, C. C. (1993) p. 158), both 'male' and 'female'. This proves that Shakespeare viewed gender as a social construct and that he was of the opinion that men and women were essentially the same in substance. The technique of cross dressing is an important theatrical device employed by Shakespeare in the play Twelfth Night in order to engage with the issue of gender. By dressing up as her brother and asserting herself as a member of the opposite sex Viola is enabled to overcome the boundaries unjustly placed on her as a woman. Personally I feel that Shakespeare's use of cross dressing is a subversive attempt at offering his audience a critique of their society. Through the success of Viola as a man he subtly proves to the audience that women can exert their authority in society. However once again Shakespeare 'makes himself the servant of the very structures he sets out to subvert' (Cartelli, T. (1986) p. 22). The cross dressing woman in Shakespeare's play Twelfth Night can only exert herself under the guise of men and ultimately relies on men for her salvation as at the end of the play Viola relies on her brother Sebastian to liberate her from the predicament she has created. It is only when she is reinstated into her role as a female that order and balance are restored within the play as she assumes her position in a heterosexual relationship with Duke Orsino and Olivia with Sebastian. Contrastingly Portia is an interesting female character from William Shakespeare's play The Merchant of Venice as she is an example of how women can successfully

rebalance the gender tables and overcome their powerless position in society. Similarly to Viola, Portia dresses up as a man in order to employ the power of the opposite sex which enables her to transgress the boundaries placed upon her as a female. Under the guise of a male she works within the conventions of law in order to make the justice system work in her favour and outsmart Shylock in the courtroom. In my opinion this offers us a clear framework for how Shakespeare deals with gender in his plays. Portia proves that anyone can break the rules but that often more resonating results can come from working within the conventions and finding loopholes and Shakespeare attempts to mirror this perspective when dealing with the issue of gender by manipulating the conventions of theatrical performance in order to make them work for him. From a detailed analysis of Shakespeare's plays it is obvious that he does attempt to transgress and undermine conventions with regards to the issue of gender, but at what cost? I believe that Shakespeare presents us with a sophisticated insight into feminist theory through his plays which focus on 'the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender' (Thompson, T. (1994) p. 72) within his contemporary society which rendered women unequal and oppressed. However I feel that that by challenging the boundaries placed upon women his main achievement often lies in the fortification of these limits. As a playwright he 'may think beyond his culture, but he must think by way of it, too' (Wright, C. C. (1993) p. 127) resulting in his plays losing much of their radical and rebellious nature from the beginning.