

Role of women in twelfth night and hamlet by shakespeare research paper

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The treatment of women in Shakespeare's plays has been a subject of debate for a long time. Some scholars have criticized his portrayal of women as unbalanced while others praise his deep understanding of human nature, which is apparent in his characters. Whichever way one looks at it, most of the female characters in Shakespeare's plays are subjects of lingering controversy. In most cases, his female characters do not conform to the socially accepted stereotypes of women.

They refuse to accept the subservient role expected by the society and, instead, assert themselves as people with a strong sense of self. They are seen challenging the norm and taking on characters that are considered unacceptable for women folk.

This assertiveness and strong will create heightened dramatic effect and contributes to the overall success of the plays. Interestingly, despite this show of dissatisfaction with societal roles, they do not lose their feminine touch and towards the end of the plays, most come to accept their true identity and place in society.

The purpose of this study is to compare specific women characters in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night and Hamlet and to explore their similarities in terms of their passivity, relationships with other characters and roles.

To achieve the above purpose, the following question will be considered:

Is there similarity between specific women characters in Twelfth Night and Hamlet? To answer the question, the research will focus on the traits that are common in different women characters in Twelfth Night and Hamlet.

The information used to answer this question was gathered from the texts and also from secondary sources like articles and commentaries on the issue.

The women characters in Twelfth Night and Hamlet appear to be playing double roles. There is the nature they show to the world and another nature they constrain within them. Viola, in Twelfth Night, is a woman who refuses to settle for what life offers her as a woman. When she finds herself shipwrecked on the coast of Illyria, lonely and with no protection in an unfamiliar country, she desires to enroll in the service of the Countess Olivia.

However, she is assured that this is impossible. This is because the lady is devastated after the loss of her only brother. Therefore, she locks herself out of the vicinity of all men and does not want any association with any man (Muir 63). After realizing this, she remembers hearing her father speak with admiration about Orsino, the Duke of the country. Viola discovers that the Duke is not married and, therefore, it would not be appropriate for a woman to be in his court (Loske 15).

She convinces the captain to dress her as a man as a form of protection against uncivil comments, till she can hear something about the whereabouts of her brother. Viola takes the step of disguising herself in order to protect herself in her endeavor to track down her brother.

What stands out in the character of Viola is her strength and intellect. She is able to maintain her cover for a long time irrespective of the challenges she

undergoes trying to fill a role she has no idea how to play. She manages to play two roles; a man on the outside and a woman on the inside.

Muir (20) observes that this warped presentation of the woman is advanced in Hamlet. Through the eyes of Hamlet, women are presented as having two natures. They are portrayed as being pure on the outside but darkened with corruption and sexual desire on the inside. Ophelia is a good case in point. Of all the main characters in Hamlet, Ophelia is the least developed. The most probable reason is because Ophelia herself is not as important as her image of the dual nature of women in the play.

Ophelia's main role is to portray Hamlet's distorted perception of women as heartless sexual predators on one hand and the innocent and virtuous on the other. The addition of Ophelia in the play shows the extent to which Hamlet feels betrayed by. The furious feelings of Hamlet towards her mother can be directed toward Ophelia, who is, in his estimation, disguised in a mask of impeccability which within she is callous.

Through Ophelia, we see how Hamlet evolves into a man convinced that all the women are whores; that the women who appear most are inside corrupt and full of sexual desire. Then, if all women are harlots, then they must have their procurers. Ophelia is made a whore by her father. , on the other hand, was made a whore by Claudius. Polonius plans in Act II to use the alluring Ophelia to decipher the curious behavior of Hamlet.

Though Hamlet is not in the room, it seems obvious from his words that he had overheard Polonius taking advantage of his daughter's charms to suit his

deceitful purposes. In Hamlet's distressed mind, he concludes that Polonius prostitutes his daughter. Hamlet tells Polonius so to his face, calling him a "fishmonger".

However, Hamlet's perception of Ophelia, which to a large extent is blinded by hurt and rage, is not completely correct. According to Granville-Barker (95), Ophelia is the epitome of goodness. She is also childlike and naïve. Compared to Queen , Ophelia has a good reason to be oblivious of the realities of life.

She is very young and has lost her mother, possibly at birth. Her father Polonius and Laertes, her brother, love her very much and have sacrificed a lot to take care of her. She does not involve herself with matters of state; most of her time is spent in needlework and flower gathering. She reciprocates the love Polonius and Laertes show her immensely, and couples it with deep and unwavering loyalty.

Despite the fact that her love for Hamlet is strong, she heeds her father's advice not to see Hamlet again or accept any letters that Hamlet writes. She is a girl who is pure at heart and even instances where she does something dishonest such as lying to Hamlet that her father has gone home when indeed he is behind the curtain; it is out of genuine fear.

Ophelia refuses to let go of the memory of Hamlet treating her respectfully and tenderly, and she defends him lovingly to the very end, irrespective of his brutality. She is not able to defend herself, but through her timid responses, we see her suffering clearly. Her weakness and innocence work to

her disadvantage as she cannot cope with the unfolding of one traumatic event after another. Hamlet, Ophelia's darling, is responsible for all her emotional pain throughout the play.

When Hamlet's hate leads to the death of Ophelia's father, she cannot endure more pain and goes insane. But even in her insanity, she is a symbol of incorruption and virtue to everyone but Hamlet. The rude songs that she sings in front of Laertes, and Claudius are indicators that the corrupt world has taken its toll on the pure Ophelia. These songs show us that it is only in insanity that she lives up to Hamlet's false perception of her as a lascivious and lewd woman.

In many instances, Getrude does not speak the truth. She even lies to herself about the consequences of her actions, and also lies to those around her. However, the lies are not malicious but meant to achieve a greater good. They are white lies that she feels obliged to tell in order to keep her and those around her safe physically and emotionally.

For example, she must tell the king that Hamlet must kill Polonius, but also make the effort to help Hamlet, telling Claudius that Hamlet is remorseful because he has realized that he has done something bad when clearly she does not (Burnett 25).

The relationship of the women characters in the plays is complex. Most of the times, they are understood for who they are not or misjudged for who they are. Viola well exemplifies this. She is engaged in the service of the Duke, whom she finds "sick" with love for Olivia. We can infer from what is

hinted in the first scene that this Duke has had numerous achievements and has an attractive personality.

He has a soft spot for music of all kinds and is very tender although there is no reciprocation of the love that he shows. He is also an interesting character and uses a lot of poetry in his communication. As a result of his interesting personality, he had already elicited interest on Violas imagination (Muir 80).

When Viola comes to play the confidante, she is treated favorably by the duke. It may be expected that she should be touched by a passion made up of pity, tenderness, gratitude and admiration. However, she does not in any way detract from the innocent pleasantness and delicacy of her character.

Viola becomes a favorite of the Duke and becomes his messenger to Olivia and the interpreter of his sufferings to the beauty who seems inaccessible. In playing the role of a youthful page, she attracts the favor of Olivia, and awakens the jealousy of her lord. She finds herself in a very critical and delicate situation. It is amazing how viola plays this and goes through the ordeal with an inward and spiritual grace of modesty.

The playfulness of Viola is assumed as part of her disguise as a court-page, and she guards it strictly. Viola does not allow her own incognito excites her, but she strives to ensure that she retains her cover. It is interesting how she manages to cover her feminine side within the guise of masculine appearance.

However, there are instances when her femininity overcomes her feigned masculinity. The feminine apparent cowardice of Viola, which will not allow her to draw a sword, is very natural and characteristic; and produces a most humorous effect, even at the very moment it charms and interests us. The position of Viola is further complicated when Olivia starts to develop feelings for her taking her for a young man.

Equally complicated in her relationship with other characters is Getrude. She is a woman who appears well acquainted to speaking lies. She goes to the extent of lying to herself about the consequences of her own actions, and also lies to those around her. However, she lies to protect. Her lies are not malicious and wicked falsehoods; they are white lies that she feels obliged to tell in order to protect those around her from physical and emotional hurt.

When tells the King that Hamlet has killed Polonius, she does her best to save Hamlet. She informs Claudius that Hamlet is emotional after realizing that he has done something terrible. This is a fabrication that bears no truth. Without a deeper look at the play, it is hard to explain the deep devotion of Hamlet, his father, and Claudius to Getrude.

However, the qualities that distance her from condemnation together with Claudius are subtly woven into the play. Underneath her shallow exterior, she adores Hamlet and shows great emotion when he confronts her. is not aware of what she has done to make Hamlet so furious.

Despite the fact that Hamlet attacks her with all the rage he can muster, is not moved in his faithfulness to him. She, therefore, continues to protect him

from the king. Although 's love for Claudius is morally wrong, she is now his queen and remains committed to him. Considering her actions in wanting to protect Claudius from the mob, we see that she has potential for great love.

Also she cares deeply about Ophelia and Polonius, and shows great concern for Hamlet in the duel even though she does not know that it is a trap.

It is ' s innate propensity for doing what is good that redeems her. Despite her superficial and sensual nature, as portrayed in her addictions to comfort and pleasure, the men around her forgive her because they see that she is free from premeditation. However, sad as it is, it seems to fit that dies from drinking from a poisoned Goblet demanding that she tastes what is in the beautiful cup, as trusting as a child.

According to Evans-Lloyd (67), the women characters in Twelfth Night and Hamlet are portrayed as people who cannot stand on their own without the support of men. Although some characters, like Viola, put up a fight to challenge the status quo, at the end, they still fall at the mercy of men. She is able to keep her disguise as a strong man, but her passion for a man overcomes her at the end.

Ophelia also seems almost completely at the mercy of the male figures in her life. She is portrayed as a victim figure. Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia moves between protests of undying love and rage such as his cold and accusing speech in one of the scenes as the play continues.

It is apparent that Hamlet throughout the play makes use of Ophelia as a tool to accomplish his revenge plan. It can be concluded that it is 's behavior that has instigated Hamlet's harsh treatment of Ophelia. She oversteps the societal bounds of femininity by marrying so soon after her husband's death. This makes Hamlet convinced that all women are inconsistent and untrustworthy. He uses a metaphor that suggests that frailty and being feminine go hand in hand (Burnett 50).

Hamlet projects at Ophelia the evil she believes exists in Getrude. Ophelia becomes a victim to Hamlet's patriarchal view of womanhood. Potential self-will is somehow seen at the onset of the play when we discover that Ophelia has entertained Hamlet without the consent of her father. This trait is immediately stifled by Polonius and Laertes - the two voices of the patriarchy - telling her that she has unsuitable behavior and that she is naïve.

Ophelia is frightened by the comments of her father. She assumes that they necessarily know better and she replies simply says that she is ready to act in obedience (Bradley 100). Shakespeare shows, however, that the submission of Ophelia leads to her own destruction. Ophelia silently and obediently accepts the oppression of male power, which leads her into madness.

The presentation of female characters in Hamlet and Twelfth Night is intriguing. They seem not to fit well in any cast. In some instances, they

portray will-power and assertiveness but, in other instances, they are weak and at the mercy of their male counterparts.

Their role in the plays is integral and helps in mirroring the character of men, even as they help in heightening the crescendo of the drama. It is their relationship with other characters that reveal to us the true nature of people. Without Viola, we would not know much about the Duke; without Ophelia, the true nature of Hamlet would remain mysterious to us.

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