

A feminist perspective on the female characters of william shakespeare assignment...

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Throughout Man's history, women have always been at a disadvantage socially, economically, and politically. Shakespeare realized this and sought to bring the controversy that comes with Androgynous issues??? to life. Through strong female characters and the implications of disguises, Shakespeare exposes gender issues. Many critics believe Shakespeare poorly represents women in his plays through intentional exploiting of women with his boy-girl-boy disguises.

When in fact, I see Shakespeare as exploiting how women were/are treated through that very use of disguises and??? the strength he gives his female characters, especially that of Portia (Merchant of Venice) and Viola (Twelfth night)??? is representative of his personal admiration of intelligent, strong women. It is also important to mention that the idea of a transsexual theme did not exist during Shakespeare's time, as in the same sense that one would have now. Men playing the part of women??? playing the part of men was simply accepted by the audience.

Shakespeare was able to use this acceptance as an opportunity to give female characters strong and important roles. Portia is so strong of a character, she would have been considered a devil woman in the eyes of her peers??? humor for the boy-girl-boy disguise for the audience of the time. Yet, Shakespeare's portrayal of Portia and Viola, is heroic in today's terms. By the mid-eighteen hundreds, Shakespeare's female characters were starting to be analyzed. Shakespeare was over two hundred years ahead of his time on gender issues.

Although Shakespeare also used “feminine men” to illustrate the characteristics given to men were also confined to certain social critique, he focused more on the roles women played, or were not socially nor by way of law allowed to play, during his time. Through the will, strength, virtues, and intelligent mind of Portia to the will, sweetness and deep need for survival of Viola, Shakespeare embraces Androgyny and exposes his own feminine side for future generations to analyze and feminists to explore.

Robert Kimbrough, in his 1982 essay: *Androgyny Seen Through Shakespeare's Disguise*, provides several definitions of Androgyny. The definition most fitting to the contemporary time is, “Androgyny is the capacity of a single person of either sex to embody the full range of human character traits, despite cultural attempts to render some exclusively feminine and some exclusively masculine” (1). Some believe androgyny is a secular dream and unattainable, but through structural change of institutional and social organizations??? it can be attained. How does

Shakespeare then expose his audience to androgyny? What was his purpose for doing so? A partial answer could be that Shakespeare believed in total equality for men and women and through characters in his plays he could take on the forbidden taboos of gender crossing within his social society. Sex does not equal gender. Through Anthropology we know that every culture has their own Modal Cultural Personality definition, one for the male and one for the female. Modal Personality is static in nature and ascribes women and men certain roles. Women do women's work and men do men's work, for example.

This was necessary for primitive society to survive but stigmas of these role requirements linger still today. Women are still socially required to look pretty, wear make-up, smell nice, be virtuous, motherly, sisterly, feminine, show little to no masculine traits, and the all important nurturer.

Shakespeare used Portia and Viola's character's to liberate women from one certain set of characteristic traits by broadening their human characteristic traits through their male disguises. In a sense then, Portia and Viola are liberated "from the confines of the appropriate" (1).

Portia and Viola are both aware of the social posturing of men. Each is very careful to hide her true self. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia devises a scheme to protect her wealth, status and power she has become accustomed to love. She uses trickery to get what she wants in the end which is two gains; protection of her status, wealth and power and she ends up the heroine. Portia is careful not to reveal her intelligence to the men in the play until she has completed her tasks. An English woman during this time period would most likely not have acted the way Portia acted.

Shakespeare transforms Portia's character, from at first appearance, a spoiled rich woman??? to an intelligent, self reliant female. She was caught within the confines of her father's wishes and could not openly deceive her dead father. She had no choice given the time period but to follow the guidelines her father placed prior to his death. In Portia's first act of self survival, she guides the man she loves, Bassanio, to the right casket her father had hidden her picture in. It is however, the scenes in which Portia

dresses and acts like a male that liberates her and allows for Shakespeare's thoughts on androgyny to come forth.

Portia assumes the role of Ballario and becomes the salvation for herself and Antonio and her husband. Ballario is well spoken, passionate about the law and well educated. Portia is for the first time in her life accepted on an intellectual level. She is not only equal to the men but even more respected as a learned law professor. She seems to enjoy this as she carefully chooses her words and long speeches in the court room scene. Portia trespasses on traditionally male ground making the court room scene one of the first scenes of its kind.

Julie Hankey, in her 1994 essay: Victorian Portias: Shakespeare's Borderline Heroine, explains Portia's masculinity in the court scenes, " the whole style of her woman??? her rational, unemotional composure, her methodical manner of speech and argument, her independence, not only of mind but of action??? encroached on traditionally male ground" (2). Portia's longest speech in the court scene completes the above thought: The quality of mercy is not strained. It dropeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes The throned monarch better than his crown. His scepter shows the force of temporal power, The attribute to awe and majesty, Wherin doth sit the dread and fear of kings. But mercy is above this sceptered sway; It is an attribute to God himself; And earthly power doth then show likest God's When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew, Though justice by the plea, consider this, That in the course of justice

none of us Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy, And that same prayer doth teach us all to render The deeds of mercy.

I have spoke thus much To mitigate the justice of thy plea, Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice Must needs give sentence ' gainst the merchant there. Shakespeare has filled Portia's mind with words of great wisdom, wisdom that women of his time could not share with others. He liberates Portia into the role of an equal, logical, witty individual??? which was not a females gender role at this place in time. Portia carefully states her thoughts on mercy and the role mercy should play in the hearts of not only the court but...of the accuser.

She makes it clear to acknowledge that Antonio did break the contract and therefore the law would land on Shylocks side; however, she is telling him in the above speech that being merciful is, in the eyes of God, a virtue to be twice blessed. To be merciful will have much greater rewards than satisfying vengeance. Shakespeare gave these concepts to Portia's character to show that regardless of a person's biological make-up, the mind can function on multiple levels encompassing multiple roles. A person should not be limited to specific gender roles, and moving toward androgyny is a step in the right direction.

In my eyes, Viola is also a heroine. She represents strong women, and how we too can survive while maintaining a sweet and gentle nature??? the kind of nature that should be instilled in all people. Shakespeare gave Viola an ability to adapt to situations quickly without missing a step. She is witty, sweet and clever. From a feminist stand point, her will to explore the “

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unexplored" is one of the strongest in all of Shakespeare's characters. Upon finding out her brother is supposedly dead, she reacts quickly to avoid being sent home by Orsino.

Shakespeare liberates Viola by giving her freedom through a male disguise. Here she talks the captain into helping her: I prithee, and I'll pay thee bounteously, Conceal me what I am, and be my aid For such disguise as haply shall become The form of my intent. This allows Viola to discover herself on a deeper level. Kimbrough presents Viola's self-discovery as more proof of androgyny. Speaking of a specific scene in *Twelfth Night*, he explains that "true of heart as we," means human kind??? causing the word we to become truly androgynous (1).

Viola is able to shed any trace of gender, she is neither masculine nor feminine. The entire play does revolve around the theme that identity is confusing. Shakespeare uses Feste's character to present the idea that identity can be confusing. Shakespeare was telling us that the very essence of identity is in our mind. Bonos dies, Sir Toby. For, as the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said To a niece of King Gorboduc, "That that is, is"; so I, Being master Parson, am Master Parson; for what is "that" but "that," and "is" but "is"?

With Feste's lines, Shakespeare not only provides his audience with comedy but he metaphorically ponders the idea of identity and gender. Androgyny was defiantly a passion of Shakespeare, as we have seen. Through his use of disguises, Shakespeare was able to present his audience's??? then and now??? with important gender issues that were obviously way ahead of their

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time. He was a master of double meanings and creating atmospheres that he could drive points home from within. He created strong female characters to show female stigmas of his time.

Shakespeare should be considered one of the founders of feminist views. He believed in equality among the sexes. His liberation of women through disguises gives us so much insight to the atmosphere of the times regarding gender and women's roles in society. Women are still fighting these same society imposed characteristics and the only solution is to get as close to androgyny as a society without giving up our own identities. We must eliminate gender bias' and focus as one whole unit...it's what Shakespeare wanted.