

Gender Roles in William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night

Posted on October 18, 2024

William Shakespeare, an ingenious poet and writer, renowned for his literary universals, has the ability to create romantic, comic, and tragic as well as controversial plays. The reason for amalgamating all such things into one is that Shakespeare's era dates back to the time when social norms were patriarchal. During Shakespeare's time, male figures of society were the centre of the societal nucleus who had control and power over the family and society as a whole. On the other hand, females were like peripheral entities that society considered nothing without a male, especially the husband. Building on the idea of gender roles presenting females as the weaker sex and males as the powerful ones during the 1600s, Twelfth Night is a Shakespearean play that emphasizes a radical change in gender roles as Shakespeare manipulates a female character by adding male characteristics to it in order to send a powerful message to Elizabethan society.

Background

The 17th century was the time when women were considered inferior beings, even though the country was ruled by a powerful woman of her time, Queen Elizabeth. They were seen as the weaker sex who were only bound to domestic or household chores and were not allowed to take part in the economic stability of the country. They were not only supposed to provide housekeeping services, but marrying on their own will was also considered a taboo in society. Females were not permitted to choose their mates, and when married, they were supposed to take care of their families and children. Contrary to women's role in society, men were considered the powerful beings and heads of the family, who had all the opportunities to be employed, take part in politics, perform in theatres, and manage all the financial duties. Even if a female was highly educated, she could not get a profession because all the fields of business were highly dominated by men of that time. In contrast with the previous eras, women under the rule of Queen Elizabeth had very few opportunities and advantages, which only included writing literature from the comfort of their homes. In Twelfth Night, Shakespeare takes all of these circumstances of women, changes gender roles, breaks a bit of taboo, and gives the character the freedom to challenge societal norms.

Discussion

Shakespeare's idea of switching gender roles has a loose end in the play, Twelfth Night, as the addition of a female character who is capable of challenging societal norms through a distinctive gender perspective contrasts with the main important norms that were evident during the Elizabethan

society. The play has an underlying exploration that the switching of gender roles makes characters' sexual identities unstable, and gender fluidity challenges the societal norms of the time. The theme of gender roles and how gender switches regulate gender expectations in society is readily apparent in the play *Twelfth Night* through the character of Viola, disguised as Cesario, who learns firsthand how an individual is treated by men and women of society when she assumes the identity of a man. She is able to circumvent the limitations and restrictions in the guise of a man, a young gentleman called Cesario, which are predetermined in Elizabethan society for men and women. Viola's cross-dressing in male attire reflects how women are treated in the society of that era, which emphasizes the importance of gender-switches in a restrictive society (Daulay). Moreover, the way Viola is being treated and perceived by other individuals in the play demonstrates how differently both males and females are related to one another on the basis of preconceived differences between the genders. The way Viola acts while taking on the male persona, also in order to obtain a job, demonstrates how gender identity plays a crucial role in how an individual is treated by other men and women in society.

The way the main character, Viola, disguises herself in the persona of a man communicates Shakespeare's idea and intention to the audience, as she, being a woman, believes that there is not a single way she would be able to find work or a job in order to survive in society. Her male persona for earning a job position is able to shed societal expectations, as men could afford more freedom to take on a variety of jobs, whereas women are expected to marry, stay at home, take care of the family, and raise their children during the Elizabethan period. This depicts how differently men and women are being treated and favoured when looking for work during Shakespeare's time. Viola ends up working for Duke Orsino, who is madly in love with Olivia, but Olivia ironically falls in love with Cesario, disguised Viola in a man's attire. Shakespeare in *The Twelfth Night* places love and feelings related to it above any other social norm, as both Malvolio and Duke Orsino succumb to Olivia's desires, but she rejects them both in expectation of marrying Cesario (Viola). Shakespeare contradicts the social norms when Cesario declares his/her love to Olivia, switching between the genders to actually speak for Viola, who has a desperate but impossible love for Duke Orsino.

Shakespeare, through the crucial character of Viola, creates prominent differences between both perspectives, love for females and love for males. Viola in the guise of Cesario takes the advantage to liberate her necessity and feelings of love "Hallow your name to the reverberate hills / and make the babbling gossip of the air / Cry out 'Olivia!' O." The alliteration of "o" in "Out/ Olivia/ O" shows a strong feeling of inner preoccupation for the secret name that starts with O, referring to Orsino (Thomas). Viola's intention to speak up about her love symbolizes Shakespeare's ability to create a contrastive reflection of the society in which women of Elizabethan times are not allowed to express their emotions of love, but only when the gender roles are switched.

William Shakespeare through his play, *Twelfth Night*, attempts to show the readers of his time and beyond that society needs some modifications to be made or else consider them as an option to overcome the inequalities between each gender roles embedded in the fabric of Elizabethan culture. He takes on the medium of his literary work to reflect that men and women were seen as being completely different during the time of Shakespeare. Furthermore, the reflective work of *Twelfth*

Night presents the idea that switching gender roles will go against the prevailing cultural attitudes of the time if a woman tries to take a man's role in society. Casey Charles in "Gender Trouble in Twelfth Night" claims that Shakespearean time under the rule of Elizabeth was more patriarchal and misogynistic than the time before and today's society.

However, he reinforces that strict roles assigned to each gender hide a deep-seated fear that decides "anxiety about what is feared to be the actual gender fluidity". This strengthens Shakespeare's idea and intentions that men and women are not really different from one another in their roles enforced by a certain society when cultural responsibilities are stripped away (Charles). The idea Casey Charles argues that gender roles could be fluid threatens the idea of Elizabethan society, in which the way men and women relate to each other is based entirely on traditional gender roles. Viola represents the idea of gender fluidity as she walks the line between a man (Cesario) and a woman (Viola herself), which masks the polarized view of gender while blurring the distinction between traditional male and female gender roles.

The element of disguise is effectively used in Shakespeare's artistic creation, which allows the writer to play and readers to reflect on the social and gender borders. Viola, disguising herself as Cesario, is the most prominent example of it as she tells Olivia at a couple of points in the play, "I'm not what I am" and "I'm not what I play," which puts forward how the idea of gender forms an individual's identity at a superficial level. She is in constant surprise and wonder at the rules of gender roles assigned by society, as Olivia falls in love with Cesario, who is in disguise, but not with Duke Orsino, who tries to win her constantly throughout the play.

As the story unfolds and Shakespeare continues to create confusion among different characters when a woman is mistaken for a man despite his female looks, readers tend to question the definition of gender as confusion wins over identity. In Elizabethan society, Viola is expected to be reserved as a female, but in disguise, as a male, her role is reversed, and she has all the freedom to express herself, love in particular, in a society where expressing love on the part of women is considered taboo. By exchanging gender identity and roles as both Olivia and Viola transgress their character in the play, the former expressing her love for Cesario, Viola in disguise, and the latter expressing her love for Duke Orsino, Shakespeare creates a fusion of possibilities. Arias Doblas argues this idea that Cesario's feelings for Orsino can be considered as homoerotic because Viola, at that time, is taking on the role of a young gentleman, Cesario. Moreover, Viola's feelings for Olivia, as the play reads "Viola's successful wooing of Olivia," could also be seen as having "homosexual connotations" because Viola is actually a woman and Olivia becomes attracted towards her due to her attire as a man (Doblas). Thus, the characters, including Viola putting on her dress, Olivia marrying a real man, and Malvolio re-establishing his personality, all challenge the ideas of strict gender roles of Elizabethan society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the idea of [gender discrimination](#) and gender fluidity presented by Shakespeare in The

Twelfth Night still relates to the modern culture of contemporary society, where men and women are still treated and favoured differently based on their gender roles, like the men and women of Elizabethan society. Even though attitudes and behaviours regarding gender roles are beginning to change, females are still considered weaker beings compared to their male counterparts. In the workforce, women are usually not assigned tasks such as decision-making, management, financial responsibilities, or authority, as men are still seen as the stronger sex when it comes to choosing between male or female as competent or inferior ones. Shakespeare, in his play, colors the way individuals relate to each other based on the different stereotypes of each gender role, as Viola, who would be considered less capable as a female, is now a competent one in certain professions and activities, while she disguises herself as Cesario (Lewis). Moreover, the theme of gender roles in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night is a universal theme that is still very much part of today's modern-day culture. Hence, Shakespeare's legacy continues to influence contemporary culture, proving the body of his writing works as a literary universal that common people of his society could relate to and continue to relate to and reflect on even today.

Works Cited

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