

The Exploration of Gender Roles in Shakespeare Plays

T. Dinesh Rani¹, A.Rama Devi², B. Velangini³

¹MA(Eng), B.Ed, PG Dip in Value Education.

²MA(Eng), M.Ed, (M.Phil).

³MA (Eng), B.Ed.

ABSTRACT

In shakespeare's days, female parts were played by male actors. Shakespearean performance is an arena for exploring desire sexuality and gender roles for challenging audience expectations. It had become increasingly common by the turn of the twentieth century to the star actresses to take male parts which are often called "Breeches" roles. Shakespearean theatre have the habit of exploring gender's multiple possibilities, women's central involvement is not a recent phenomenon. Shakespeare has become an authoritative figure for writers to kick against in despair. Much of this fear and much of this energy of shakespeare's cross-dressed dramas depends on desire. Close to the stage, yet truly on it offers a glimpse into the ways costume and gender roles could be exploited both on and off stage.

KEYWORDS: *Gender, Performance, Expectations, Authority, Feminist, Costume, Theatre, Despair, Windication of woman, Cross- Dressing and Gender identity, Disguise, Homoerotic.*

FULL PAPER

William Shakespeare was born on 1564 in stratford-on- avon, England. The extend to which he has been familiar with the works of such ancient classics is unknown, but studying Shakespeare's plays and long poems suggests that he had atleast a degree of knowledge about them in their original forms not merely translations. All we know for sure is that by 1592, Shakespeare had arrived in london leaving his family behind and had begun the most successful literary career the world has ever known. Between the years of 1588 – 1613 he wrote 38 plays. His dramatic work is commonly studied in four catagories:----

- comedies
- histories
- tragedies
- romances

Shakespeare is also well known for his sonnet sequence written in the early 1590's which is comprised of 154 interconnected sonnets dealing with issues such as love, fidelity, mortality, and the artist's power and voice.

In Shakespeare's day, female parts were played by male actors. In HAMLET, a woman is positively no more capable of beating out the music of Hamlet than is a man of expressing the plaintive and half – accomplished surrender of OPHELIA. Over a century later, MAXINE PEAKE'S interpretation was widely praised though reviewers still focused on the presence of a female HAMLETS and interrogating the opportunities open to women in theatre in the early 21st century.

The french actress, SARAH BERNHARDT, crossed gender boundaries when she played the male hero in HAMLET.

The feminist principle that skilled female actors should have equality of access to meaty theatrical parts lay behind the all-female production of JULIUS CAESAR. This production deliberately offered its reformer's a far greater range and number of roles than the standards usually allow.

When HAMLET was first staged in 1600-01 and JULIUS CAESAR in 1599, female roles were taken by a small cohort of highly trained boys. The small number of female roles in each play have shaped and constrained opportunities for actresses on the modern stage.

Shakespearean theatre's habit of exploring gender's multiple possibilities and indeed women's central involvement in this exploration, is not a recent phenomenon.

The first theatrical woman is a notorious London underworld figure the cross-dressing FENCE MARY FRITH (1584-1659). Once the play was over, FRITH took up a lute, played, sang and taunted the crowd that

“ many of them were of opinion that she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they should find that she is a woman”

The second theatrical woman emphatically takes centre stage. Queen ANNA OF DENMARK (1574-1619), wife of KING JAMES, commissioned and performed in the theatres.

On the court stage, ANNA and her women took silent symbolic roles creating meaning through the display.

Shakespeare challenges the social norms of gender roles in his comedies but he also challenges the ambiguity of sexuality.

In AS YOU LIKE IT, ROSALIND runs away to the forest of Arden, dressed up as a boy named GANYMEDE. PHOEBE falls in love with GANYMEDE, who is unaware that it is actually ROSALIND. The homoerotic relationship in the play between the female characters PHOEBE and ROSALIND but also on the stage by the two male actors portraying women. This is the remarkable transformation in the representation and placement of female characters. Paradoxically the female characters are ennobled and they are also disempowered. On the other hand women are much more sympathetically portrayed.

Shakespeare represents the entire French kingdom as a woman to be conquered by the masculine force of the English army. History has changed, bringing to light a long and energetic tradition of women's involvement in Shakespearean theatre against which we can judge the interventions of our own day.

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