

## **Shakespeare's Women Characters: Perennial Valour and Emotions**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to describe the valour of Shakespeare's Women characters and establishment of the female identity reigning supreme in all respects. Shakespeare's supreme gift is his universality and he is for not one age, but for all times, because his characters are true to the external aspects of human life and not necessarily to any specific contemporary society. Shakespeare has presented women's varied emotions to the world through his plays to exhibit their courage and strength of livelihood.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, women characters, valour, humanism, reconciliation, love of beauty, disloyalty.

It is universally acknowledged that Shakespeare's greatness, as one critic said, lay in his "comprehensive soul." That is the most poetic summation of a dramatic genius that has never been equaled. But if Shakespeare's plays and sonnets are the monuments of a remarkable genius, they are also the monuments of a remarkable age. His greatness was partly due to the work of his predecessors. Spenser and Sydney mastered the verse. Christopher Marlowe excelled in theatrical management of character and situation. Literature in that era became an instrument of reason and the English language became its dignified medium. The era of Shakespeare began with the culmination of Spenser's concept of heroic idealism, of Johnson's superb satires, Bacon's introspection in the scientific philosophy and Donne's subtlety of poetry.

No dramatist can create live characters without bequeathing the best of herself or himself into their work of art, scattering among them a largesse of their own qualities, their own wit, their comprehensive cogent philosophy, their own rhythm of action and the simplicity or complexity of his own nature. Shakespeare's predecessors and contemporaries all excelled in one or more of these qualities. Shakespeare excelled in all of them all the time, or at least majority of times, as he teased

and tormented his readers with his exquisite wit on one scale and sublimated them with his deep insight into human psyche on another. Plays like those of Shakespeare are written in blood; not run cold but running warm and lively through the author's veins and spills like molten lava on every word that he writes. Shakespeare, as all know, wrote in an age outstanding in literary history and its vitality of language. No doubt, Shakespearean plays depict the yearning for scientific learning and human philosophy in its myriad and intense form. It is his unquestioned genius that made him so appealing to the era of flux in which he wrote and makes him relevant even today after so much scientific advancement.

It is widely accepted that Shakespeare's Supreme gift is his universality. He was not of an age but for all times, because his characters are true to the external aspects of human life and not limited to any contemporary society. A man torn by the problems of evil, the injustice of the universal laws, the betrayal of innocence, the triumphs of the wicked, may write burning verse, the lyrics of a Shelley, the epic satire of a Byron, but the Shakespearean tragedies could not be written by a suffering or saddened spirit. They are too royally designed, too masterly controlled, guided rounded and finished, to even remotely label their author as sad or melancholic. Shakespeare saw and understood too much, could pierce the heart with too many passions, could realise the actual play of life, without falling in bondage to any power. Ben Johnson is right in calling "Shakespeare not of an age but of all ages.

Truly speaking, the study of Shakespeare is a boon to any student of literature, for he lies immortal in the annals of English literature. No dramatist is held in such high esteem as Shakespeare and no one stands on par with him. Though he deals with such various themes as love, valour, music, patriotism, disloyalty, humanism, villainy, faithfulness, transformation to goodness, love of beauty, destruction of harmony, malignant superiority, intellectual eminence, righteous act, shallow vision life, frustration and depression, ramification of evil, friendship, romantic love, tragic vision, fact and fantasy, homosexuality, reconciliation, rivalry, establishment of the female identity reigns supreme in all respects. Shakespeare is said to have been a great feminist even when the term 'Feminism' was alien to the world. He was a staunch supporter of women and this gets revealed in his delineation of women characters. As Ruskin puts it, "Shakespeare has no heroes, he has only heroines".

Shakespeare's women are more remarkable than his men. Even Marlowe, who paved the way for Shakespeare, had no natural conception of womanhood. His women are mostly distorted visions of youthful fancy, and are therefore in the form of exaggerated virtues, that have no prototype in reality. The Elizabethan mind was particularly imbued with every weakness for woman, the court-life of England had the weakness of idolizing woman in every form – women's form and beauty, for speech and action, her thought and manners, her virtues and even her vices were pitched too high in the eyes of the new renaissance priests and therefore, every woman was painted a demi-god. Nobody considered that woman, also like man, is a creature with frailties, freaks and fancies, with individuality and a personal stamp of her own. Just as men cannot simply be either gods or devils but form various types so woman also must form a variety with every point of difference and similarity. It was Shakespeare who did discover the real mystery of woman's nature, caught her in very flesh and blood, and viewed her total personality in the light of earthly perfection and worldly limitation.

Every woman in Shakespeare is so natural that she forms a single character, a distinct individual, unique by herself, and though she resembles other woman only in the elements of general human character, yet she has got her own heart, her own tongue, her own soul, and even her own limbs. Pope justly remarked, "Every single character in Shakespeare is as much an individual as those in life itself; it is as impossible to find any two alike:

Ruskin in *Sesame Lilies* argues thus:

"Perfection cannot be sought in the heroes of Shakespeare. The same idea is taken up for discussion by H.B. Charlton in his analysis of the women characters in Shakespearean comedy. The main idea in both is that the tragedy is brought about by lack of stability on the part of the tragic hero and the essence of surrender to fate provides equanimity to the heroines in the lighter plays"

(Narayan, 57)

In Shakespeare's women, "there is no conflict of impulses, no mixture of motives, which lead to complexity of character and therefore they are mostly either good or bad. In *King Lear*, the characters of Goneril and Regan are very simple. They are wicked to the backbone from the very beginning and with all their evil designs, they are out-spirited by their own jealousy, malice and hypocrisy. Cordelia is also equally simple; she is foolish, innocent and loving. There are many women in the world like her who never think before unlocking their hearts, who can never imagine that truth does not always prevail, who know only to confess, suffer and weep all their life. T.K.Dutt observes:

"Women by nature are instinctive, and Shakespeare has presented them as such. He has shown how their wit and humour, their courage and love, hatred, nobleness, malice, jealousy and even their smiles and tears are the fruits of instinct" (P 26).

Women are presented in their varied emotions in Shakespeare's plays with one excelling the other and valour is an outburst of these diverse emotions and situations. The women characters in general such as Miranda, "the Eve of an enchanting Paradise" who had the strength to speak of her love openly to Ferdinand, Rosalind, who in the forest of Arden won her lover with great aplomb, Viola who in the frame of triangle love helped her lover with patience and Portia, who became a Daniel in order to save Antonio. Even the women in tragedies display great valour as is evident from the characters of Portia and Cordelia get delineated in his plays. Though Ophelia has little to speak of valour, in her obedience to her father lays her strength.

Shakespeare's men as class may not be compared with his women for practical genius. Compton Rickett admires Shakespeare's knowledge of the female psychology and the modernity of Shakespeare's women and comments. "Shakespeare's women have the primal qualities of womanhood common to every age, and therefore can never be outdated". It is so amazing how a man could portray women with all their virtues and vices, their wit, sensibility and sentimentality. Shakespeare's heroines are virtuous, witty and ethereal representing all human emotions. Shakespeare is so gentle a being that he finds god even in bad. His portrayal of Emilia and Bianca in *Othello* and Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet* testifies this. He depicts them as loose in morals and finally makes the readers astonished at their sense of sacrifice and loyalty. The literary off-spring of Shakespeare is so vast an ocean that it is difficult to examine all women characters but a precise study of some women characters becomes necessary in this respect to show how wonderfully Shakespeare moulded women in diverse forms and show how his women fulfill Compton Rickett's comment:

"Women in Shakespeare's comedies outwit their male counterparts as they are endowed with rare genius, power and magic. They are never aggressive but are always sweet tempered and when occasion demands, they prove more valiant than their men and yet remain submissive, loving and honouring them".

Miranda is the heroine of *The Tempest*, one of the last plays of Shakespeare. She occupies a unique place among the heroines of Shakespeare and to put it in the words of Mrs. Jameson, she is "the Eve of An Enchanted Paradise". She is worthy of her name which means "a person to be admired". Miranda has a fascinating personality. But it is not her ethereal beauty that captivates Ferdinand who feels that she is a perfection of womanhood. He admires her beauty and praises:

"Admired Miranda!  
Indeed, the top of administration! Worth  
What's dearest to the world! Full many a lady  
I have eyed with best regard; and may a time.  
The harmony of their tongues had into bondage  
Brought my too diligent ear; for several virtues  
Have I liked several women; never any  
With so full soul, but some defect in her  
Did quarrel with the noblest grace she owed  
And put it to the foil" (Act III, Sc -I, Lines 39-49)

He hails her as perfect, peerless and the best of every creature. It is wrong if we mistake it for infatuation as Ferdinand's father Alonso wonders whether she is Goddess. Caliban, in all his malignity admires the beauty of Miranda:

“... I never saw a woman  
But only Sycocrax my dam and she!  
But she as for surpasseth sycrorax  
As great’st does least” (Act III, Scene II, Lines 97-100)

Miranda is an embodiment of virtue and innocence and a time maiden full of compassion. Prospero’s pathetic story leaves her in doldrums, but she feels sorry for the trouble she might have given her father as a three-year-old lass. But for Prospero, she has been a “little cherub”. She grows up in the lap of nature and the only man she knows besides her father is Ferdinand and she falls in love with him and never feels ashamed to express her innermost feelings. Her artless simplicity is brought out in the words:

“I am your wife, if you will marry me;  
If not, I’ll die my maid” (Act-III, Sc-I, Lines 83-84)

Such is the candour and vaour of Miranda. She possesses all womanliness and impression with her charm, her sympathy, her innocence and her cheerful nature. She renders incredible charm to the play *The Tempest*.

Viola is an epitome of all feminine qualities such as tenderness, modesty and shrinking delicacy of feeling, she is graceful and imaginative, and even in complex situations which she had landed into, she plays her part creditably and never forgets that she is playing a part. She dominates the whole action of the play *Twelfth Night* and as Hazlitt rightly points out, “she is both the hero and heroine of the play. She is filled with a sweet consciousness of her feminine nature”. (39). There are only a few references to her beauty in her disguise as Cesario and Shakespeare does not stress her physical charm much since the qualities of her head and heart are even more attractive. She is loyal and true, and she loves Orsino and wants to be his wife. She, in the disguise of Cesario tells Orsino.

“Yes, a bartful strike  
Whoe’ver I woo, myself would be his wife”  
(Act-III, Sc-iv, Lines 41-42)

But Orsino, who still believes her to be Cesario employs her to plead his love for Olivia. This would come as a thunderbolt to any woman fixed in the frame of triangle love but fulfills her duty very sincerely and earnestly. Shakespeare proves his hand at the depiction of this beautiful lady. He portrays her as a symbol of patience and self-sacrifice. He characterization stands as a testimony to Shakespeare’s reverence for women. Viola upholds Olivia in high esteem and appreciates certain graces of Olivia. She is no mediocre of the society to mar Olivia’s reputation. How much inner strength does she possess in doing so! This is what makes Viola valiant. She gives to Orsino – beautiful account of her sister’s love.

“But let concealment like a worm I’ the bud  
Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,

And with a green and yellow melancholy  
She sat, like patience on a monument,  
Smiling at grief” (Act-III, Sc-iv, Lines 110-115).

This speaks of her own love for Orsino which is unchanging self-effacing and quiet. Her glamour, her forbearance, her wit and romance spellbound the readers. She, with her versatility remains a perfection of womanhood. Rosalind is the heroine of the play *As You Like it*, she has captivating looks and Orlando adores her as a wonderful combination of Helen’s beauty, Cleopatra’s majesty, Atlanta’s exquisite symmetry and Lucretia’s modesty:

“Nature presently distill’d  
Helen’s cheek, but not her heart,  
Cleopatra’s majesty,  
Atlanta’s better part,  
Sad Lucretia’s modesty” (Act-III, Sc-ii, Lines 127-131)

Rosalind is Shakespeare’s ideal woman. She has beauty and wit interwoven together making her the cynosure of the play *As You Like it*, As Mrs. Jameson points out, “everyone in *As You Like it*, must have loved Rosalind the cruel Duke himself did; and generations of readers and playgoers have been in love with her and so it will always be”. The character of *Portia* in *The Merchant of Venice* is dealt with utmost care and attention by Shakespeare. She, a wonderful creation of Shakespeare, shares the excellent qualities of his other women. She is gracious, vivacious, agile and candid in her speech. An amiable, intelligent and accomplished women, she is a synonym of perfect womanhood. Bassanio’s words to Antonio reveal how virtuous and peerless Lady Portia is

“And she is fair and fairer than that word,  
of wondrous virtues; sometimes from her eyes  
I did receive fair speechless messages:  
Her name is Portia; nothing undervalued  
To Cato’s daughter, Brutus’ Portia.”  
(Act-III, Sc-I, Lines 162-166)

She is no less than ‘Brutus’ Portia in intelligence and steadfast loyalty. A woman with all feminine sensibility, she indicates Bessanio of her love by her looks though she never voices it out to him. But she is a true daughter abiding by the will of her father. In the serenity, balance and equipoise of her nature, she appears like any one of those Shakespeare’s normal woman. Her womanliness appears at its best in the casket scene. While her womanliness, grace and sensitivity are more appealing, her masculine strength compels our admiration. She is the only heiress of Belmont and her father’s early death catered to her sense of discretion and enabled her to manage things effectively. The news of Antonio’s impending disaster sharpens her mental faculty and she is deep insight into human nature. As K.R. Srinivas Iyengar points out,

“Love and gratitude grow wings in her,

quicken the agility of her intelligence and she neatly turns the scales in the trial scene. This sort of thing cannot happen, we say: that is true and the more is the pity. But then, there are no such people as Portia. The bond story has served to throw a luminous light on Bassanio and Portia: Bassanio is the sort of man who could inspire such love in Antonio and Portia's love and gratitude are of the kind that can defeat the diabolic mores of even such a man as Shylock" (P 344)

In the words of Mrs. Jameson, "A prominent feature in Portia's character is that confiding, buoyant spirit, which mingles with all her thoughts and affections" (P 182). Ophelia is innocent, tender, docile, affectionate and obedient. She grows up in desolation having lost her mother early in her life. Thus, she is deprived of her mother's love and her world centres round three men, her father who is her guardian and who little believes in love, her brother who only puts obstacles in the path of her lover who feels and baffles her to the point of driving mad thus making her life tragic. A.C. Bradley observes:

"Her affection for her brother is shown in two or three delicate strokes. Her love for her father is deep, though mingled with fear. For Hamlet, she has, some say, no deep love – and perhaps she is so near childhood that old affections have still the strongest hold; but certainly she has given to Hamlet, all the love which her nature is as yet Capable. Beyond these, three beloved ones, She seems to have eyes and ears for no one" (P 161)

Mrs. Jameson is all pity for Ophelia and comments:

"She is too soft, too good and too fair to be cast among the briars of this working day world, and fall and bleed upon the thorns of life" (108)

Though the feminine interest in *Julius Caesar* is slight, the character of Portia is drawn with a surer torch. She is one of the loveliest creations of Shakespeare. She is a woman blessed with a strange valour to assert her right as a wife. She is with her husband through his thick and thin, always eager to share not only his pleasure but also pain that she is in every sense of the world a true and honorable wife. Portia is the counterpart of Brutus. She is his softened reflection. She is ever

conscious of being the wife of Lord Brutus and the daughter of Cato. She strives to live up to their reputation. Her words to Brutus reveal how much she values her husband and father:

“I grant I am a woman; but withal  
A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife.  
I grant I am a woman; but withal  
A woman well-reputed, Cato’s daughter.  
Think you I am so stronger than any sex,  
Being so fathered and so husbanded?”

(Act-III, Sc-1, Lines 292-297)

Brutus is greatly moved by her entreaties that he speaks of his love and the importance he attaches to her. He says,

“You are my true and honourable wife,  
As dear to me as are the ruddy drops  
That visit my sad heart,” (Act-III, Sc-ii, Lines 287-290)

The relation between Portia and Brutus is based on understanding and mutual respect. Portia is essentially feminine with all her endurance. Shakespeare has portrayed Portia as a dynamic woman, strong and conscious of her rights as well as her duties. Cordelia is another superb creation of William Shakespeare who portrays Cordelia as pure and perspicacious in expression. She is a synonym of Candour and lacks the wiles and guiles of her sisters Goneril and Regan. She resembles her father in psychology but is more blessed as there are no traces of his haughtiness in high irascibility in her and this makes her worthy of valour and spirit, for she embodies the unmingled tenderness and love which are the essential of her nature. Hers is the power of loving which the Laxmikant Mohan holds:

“Cordelia is a real woman of the Renaissance;  
nobody can lord it over her pure soul.  
She is a stoic, of course; all honest souls  
are. She cannot cling to her father and  
chant sweet lies in his ears. She has not  
uttered the words by any contretemps;  
so, there is no question of retracing her  
steps (P 149).

Everything about Cordelia shows that she has what one calls strength of character and capacity. And this quiet strength is penetrated with an infinite tenderness, “too sacred for words, and almost too deep for tears”.

“Thou art a soul in bliss” (Act-IV, Sc-vii, Line 46).



To conclude, Shakespeare has presented woman in her varied forms. Women in his plays represent different emotions. He attaches much importance to filial affection as he does to love between man and woman. Valour, as is observed from the general study of the women characters depicted excepting Ophelia, arises out of complexities and subtleties. It arises out of love as a Miranda who bares her heart before Ferdinand, Viola who fixed in the love triangle carries her mission boldly, and Rosalind, who with her sense of wit and courage braves the odds, Portia, who with her shrewdness and boldness saves Antonio from the imminent Peril and Cordelia who is candid and bold enough even to lose the fortunes of her father. All these characters display valour of a rarer kind and any reader can find these emotions perennial in their freshness.

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