

Shakespeare's Heroines: Women of Valour with Perfect Womanhood and Magic Spell

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Abstract

This paper throws light on Shakespeare's heroines as women endowed with perfect womanhood and magic spell. Shakespeare was a man who was fully aware of the powers of life and human fellowship, some of them more evil-natured and conscious than the divine. In Shakespeare's work, he appears as a feminist in the treatment of women, who testifies for being an ardent supporter of women. Although Shakespeare is programmed like modern feminists, his heroines dominate the play's actions. Shakespeare's women characters show a rare kind of valour. They are all embodied in their refreshing perennial emotions.

Keywords: Shakespeare mystery, Womanhood, ambition, valour, emotions.

The study of Shakespeare is a boon to any student of literature, for Shakespeare lies immortal in the annals of English literature. Thinking about this immortal legend, all join together in crying with one voice, "Oh! What a dramatist!" because no dramatist is held in such high esteem and no one stands on par with him, what a glowing tribute Ben Jonson does pay to William Shakespeare, the legend? And as Ben Jonson himself says, Shakespeare's genius is unsurpassed and his greatness as a dramatist is ever lasting. No doubt, Shakespeare stands peerless in all English literature, nay, in the literature of the whole world. As Laxmikant Mohan puts it, "Things become old and worn out with age and usage, but with the passage of time and thought, Shakespeare is growing younger and even brighter-surely a paradoxical phenomenon worth studying" (P XIII).

Shakespeare was the man who cared more for life and humane fellowship fully conscious of the powers, some beneficent, some evil and conscious above all, of the Divinity that shapes our ends. Commenting on the mystery of Shakespeare's relation to his work, Allardyce Nicoll remarks thus:

".... just as God in relation to human beings
Is both immanent and transcendent, so the
poet is imminent and transcendent in
relation to the characters of his imagination.
We sense Shakespeare's presence beyond

The reach of reason and nevertheless potently appreciated; and at the same time, we feel his vitality and strength identified with and expressing itself through the individual characters” (P 63).

Thus, the vitality and strength of Shakespeare takes roots in his characters who are endowed with the power of valour, especially women characters. Then what is valour? The only answer is valour is nothing but exhibiting courage and enough strength in a battle. The term ‘valour’ cannot be restricted to men only, for it can be displayed in women too. Valour is nothing but an outcome of various emotions such as pity, passion, compassion, ambition, fear and even pain.

Shakespeare, in his treatment of women, appears to be a feminist for the works of Shakespeare testify him to be a staunch supporter of women. Shakespeare’s women leave a beguiling impression on everyone. Whether Shakespeare, like the modern Feminists projected women in such a way that they loomed big dominating the very action of the play. Though it is an established fact that Shakespearean tragedy centres around the hero and Shakespearean women in comedies with their wit and charm do excel their men, women are found to be all the more interesting in Shakespearean tragedies. It is really a marvelous thing to know how Shakespeare could delineate women in their varied emotions like love, passion, compassion, ambition and make them valiant through these emotions. No doubt, one can find many a number of Desdemona, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra often in the present day society. Women are presented in their varied emotions in his plays with one excelling the other and valour is an outburst of these diverse emotions and situations.

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 thus: “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. He is so gentle a being that he finds good even in bad. His portrayed of Emilia and Bianca in Othello and Queen Gertrude in Hamlet testifies this. The literary offspring 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 connection to show how wonderfully Shakespeare moulded women in diverse forms and 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 move valiant than their man and yet remain submissive and loving.

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, Miranda 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 which captivates Ferdinand who feels that she is a perfection of womanhood. He admires her beauty and praises thus:

“Admired Miranda!
Indeed the top of admiration! Worth
What’s dearest to the world! Full many a lady
I have ey’d with best regard, and many a time
The harmony of their tongues hath 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 ow’d
And put it to the foil” (Act III, Sc-1, Lines 39-46).

Ferdinand hails her as perfect, peerless and the best of every creature. Caliban in all his malignity admires the beauty of Miranda as:

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

Miranda is an embodiment of virtue and innocence and the true maiden full of compassion. Prospero’s pathetic story leaves her in doldrum, but she feels sorry for the trouble she might give her father as a three year old less. 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 following words:

“I am your wife, if you will marry one;
If not, I’ll die your maid” (Act-III, SC-1, Line 83-84)

Viola is an epitome of all such feminine qualities as tenderness, modesty and shrinking delicacy of feeling. She is graceful and imaginative; 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”. 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 she loves Orsino and
Wants to be his wife.
She, in the disguise of Cesario tells Orsino
Yes a bartful strife
Who’ever I woo, myself would be his wife”.

(Act-I, 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 she fulfils her duty very sincerely and earnestly. Shakespeare proves his hand at the depiction of this beautiful lady. He portrays her as a symbol of a patience and self-sacrifice. Her characterization stands a testimony to Shakespeare’s reverence for women. With her versatility, she 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 better part,
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. She is essentially feminine being filled with great concern for others. She is blessed with a rare intellect and she conceives a plan to disguise herself as a shepherd boy and Celia as his sister. Even in the disguise of Ganymede, she is so appealing that the proud Phebe at once falls in love. She takes delight in Orlando’s presence in the forest. She overwhelms Celia with her questions and comments. She weeps when Orlando is late at his tryst. When Celia blames him, she defends him. And when Celia praises him, she blames him. Her swooning at the sight of Orlando’s blood stained hand-kerchief is characteristic of any woman neck deep in love. It is really a marvelous thing to know how a man so masculine in his attribute and attitude could portray woman in her varied emotions and versatile forms. Mrs. James aptly remarks: “The impression left upon our hearts and minds by the character of Rosalind – by the mixture of playfulness sensitivity and naivete is like a strain of music.” (P 150).

The character of Portia is dealt with utmost care and attention by Shakespeare. As a wonderful creation of Shakes, she shares the excellent qualities of his other women. She is gracious, vivacious, agile and candid in her speech. An amiable, intelligent, and accomplished woman, 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-1, SC-1, Lines 162-66)

While her womanliness, grace and sensitivity are more appealing, her masculine strength compels our attention and admiration. She, with the valour and wit of her tongue prevents Antonio from the imminent peril. 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. 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 moves of even such a man as Shylock” (P 344). No doubt, Portia is a delightful creature, one of Shakespeare's most intelligent and captivating heroines.

Ophelia is innocent, tender, docile, affectionate and obedient. She grows up the desolation having lost her mother early in her life. Thus, she is deprived of her mother's love and her world centres around 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 fools and baffles her to the point of driving mad thus making her life tragic. As A. C. Bradley opines, “Her affection for her brother is shown in two or three delicate strokes. Her love for her father is deep 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 briers of this working
day world, and fall and bleed upon the
thorns of life”.

Cordelia embodies the unmingled tenderness and love which are the essentials of her nature. Hers is the power of loving with the strongest, purest devotion and of inspiring love. Her strength is revealed at the outset of the play. She is not a sycophant like Goneril or Regan who, with an evil design satisfy Lear's ego. She is a simpleton, candid in every sense of the word and possesses a rare divinity that makes her unique. Her straightforward answer

to King Lear which Lear feels ‘so in tendered’ enlightens the reader. Cordelia is a woman who given half of her love to her husband when married.

“.... Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my Plight shall carry
Half of my love with him, half my care and duty:
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all” (Act-I, SC-1, Lines 94-98)

Cordelia knows that she is her father’s heartbeat, but she cannot satiate his hunger which is to know how immeasurable and infinite her love is for him. Cordelia is a real woman who shares her love between her father and husband. Cordelia’s attitude lucidly displays the genius and perspicacity of Shakespeare. As Laxmikant Mohan puts it, “Cordelia is a real woman of the Renaissance” (P 149). All these characters, no doubt, display valour of a rarer kind and one can find all of them as embodiment of emotions perennial in their freshness.

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