



IRAQI
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية
المجلات الاكاديمية العلمية

ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <http://www.iasj.net/iasj/journal/356/about>



SHAKESPEARE'S VIEW OF WOMEN: A STUDY OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS

In His Comedy "*As You Like It*"

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Received: 12 / 1/ 2023 , Accepted: 26 / 2 /2023 , Online Published : 1 / 4/ 2023

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Abstract

The present paper aims at studying Shakespeare's view of women through the study of female characters in some of his comedies. The selection of the comedy is decided according to the nature and role these female characters play and according to the various stages of the playwright's works. The female figures in Shakespeare's comedies are believed to be prominent, vital and progressive following the writer's mental and spiritual changes.

This paper studies the middle or sunny comedies from which one play is selected: *As You Like It*. In this play, the female characters appear to have some impressive characteristics. They are portrayed as being impressive, beautiful, gentle, tender,

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passionate and of leading characters. They also show themselves to be loving, optimistic, courageous and the main plotters of the action.

Keywords: Shakespeare, woman, comedy, play.

نظرة شكسبير عن النساء: دراسة صفات الانثى
في مسرحيته الكوميدية " كما تحبها "

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المستخلص

تهدف الدراسة إلى دراسة وجهة نظر شكسبير عن المرأة من خلال دراسة الشخصيات النسائية في بعض أعماله الكوميدية. يتم تحديد اختيار الكوميديا وفقاً لطبيعة ودور هذه الشخصيات النسائية ووفقاً للمراحل المختلفة لأعمال الكاتبة المسرحية. يُعتقد أن الشخصيات النسائية في أعمال شكسبير. الكوميدية بارزة وحيوية وتقدمية بعد التغيرات العقلية والروحية للكاتب. تدرس الدراسة الكوميديا الوسطى أو المشمسة التي تم اختيار مسرحية واحدة منها: كما تحبها. في هذه المسرحية، يبدو أن الشخصيات الأنثوية تتمتع ببعض الخصائص المثيرة للإعجاب. يتم تصويرهم على أنهم مثيرون للإعجاب، وجميلون، ولطيفون، وعاطفيون. يظهر أنهم أيضاً أنهم محبوبون ومتفائلون وشجاعون والمخططون الرئيسيون للعمل.

الكلمات الدالة: شكسبير، المرأة، الكوميديا، مسرحية.

1- INTRODUCTION

When thinking of the background against which Shakespeare wrote his comedies and hence the special nature of his characters and female characters in particular, many points require consideration. Among these points are the historical factors of having the great British Empire ruled by a strong female figure, namely Queen Elizabeth; the Elizabethan view of women as part of their view of the world order and the nature of the dramatic heritage of the Age and its treatment of the female figures.

The inclinations and tendencies to replace the medieval spirit by the Renaissance culture brought with them a spirit of hopefulness and optimism in the early sixteenth century. The

English people began to feel that a new age had dawned, bringing with it tidings of peace, with the end of The Wars of the Roses* and with the flourishing of learning embodied in the great interest in the writings of the writers of Greece and Rome such as Virgil, Homer and Horace.

This age also showed a tendency towards the introduction of classical learning within the boundaries of Christian teachings and this is the essence of Erasmian humanism which replaces the contemplative life of the Middle Ages by an active life associated with active involvement of man in public life, and in moral, political action for the service of the state.¹ These tendencies were expressed by Desiderius Erasmus, the most prominent advocate of the sixteenth century humanism.

Erasmian humanism was heavily based on the pious wisdom and learning of the ancient world.

*The Wars of the Roses, a series of struggles over the English crown, were fought from 1455 to 1485 between the house of Lancaster, with the red rose as its symbol, and the house of York with the white rose as its symbol. See "The Wars of the Roses." <http://www.allshakespeare.com/1680>.

It turned to the classical world for its inspiration through the rediscovery or rebirth of classical literature, history and moral philosophy.

Consequently, attempts were made by the men of letters to explore the wonders of ancient times and to widen their knowledge of classical literature, history, music and other parts. Those men were supported by King Henry the Eighth and later by his daughter Queen Elizabeth the First. The English men of letters succeeded in building the new Renaissance England relying on the educated gentry who possessed a Renaissance spirit, a reflected tendency towards the classics, education, as well as good lineage, descending from ancient English families.

2-1 As You Like It

This play was possibly written in 1600.⁷ The opening scene of *As You Like It* presents an image of a tyrant versus oppressed figures. The entire image is one of tyranny and injustice. Orlando, the young son of Sir Rowland de Boys, appears angry complaining of being deprived of his legitimate rights as a son of de Boys. It was Sir Rowland's will that his elder son Oliver, the tyrant oppressive brother, would take care of raising Orlando in a proper gentleman-like manner. Oliver, however, rejects his brother's demand and treats him in a harsh way depriving him of all his lawful rights. This was an attitude which Orlando can never accept:

My father charged you in his will to give me good education. You have trained me like a peasant, obscuring and hiding from me all gentleman-like qualities.

(I. i. 68-70)

This challenging spirit which grows in Orlando, as he says, from his father's spirit shall lead him to meet Rosalind when he decides to prove his manhood and strength at a wrestling match with the beast-like court wrestler, Charles; thus he affirms:

The spirit of my father grows strong in me, and I will no longer endure it. Therefore allow me such exercise as may become a gentleman, or give me the poor allotry my father left me.

(I. i. 71-74)

The defying spirit of Orlando is important in respect to his first acquaintance with Rosalind, the banished Duke's daughter. It is at the court of the usurping Duke that they first meet and their first buds of love flourish. Orlando's insistence on wrestling with Charles wins the admiration of both the Duke and Rosalind. He was pushed to accept this challenge by his greedy brother Oliver who was happy to get rid of him as well as by his feeling of loneliness and disappointment. As Rosalind comes to ask him to give up this dangerous "sport", Orlando declares a number of reasons for his being careless about his life:

If killed, but one dead that is willing to be so. I shall do my friends no wrong, for I have none to lament me; the world no injury for in it I have nothing.

(I. ii. 199-202)

The importance of this scene lies in that it introduces to us the major female characters Rosalind and Celia who also suffer from inner conflicts just like their male counterparts.

Rosalind and Celia are well-born ladies, of the same noble status. They are shown to be mature, endowed with wit, intelligence, sympathy as well as emotions over which they have full control. The manner with which they speak to Orlando in the wrestling scene, i.e., asking him not to take part in the wrestling, shows them to be strong and more rational than the male characters; a fact that will be elaborated further in their challenging journey to the forest of Arden.

Each of these ladies suffers from personal causes of sadness. Rosalind is down-hearted because she is forced to live with the usurper of her and her father's rights and because she was separated from her father; hence she identifies herself with the lonely young Orlando, since both suffer from injustice and deprivation:

We see her a dependent, almost a captive in the house of her usurping uncle, her genial spirits are subdued by her situation, and her remembrance of her banished father, her playfulness, is under a temporary eclipse.⁸

On the other hand, Celia, the usurping Duke's daughter, was also discontented because of her father's tyranny, wrongdoings and injustices.⁹

As usual, Shakespeare manipulates minor incidents to weave the main actions of his plays. Hence, when Orlando beats the court champion, Rosalind congratulates him and offers him her necklace instead of his denied reward. This shows the first signs of attraction

and affection between the two. Orlando in turn gets charmed by Rosalind's beauty and kindness which give him hope and some sort of comfort. Her gentle attention to Orlando comes just at the right time since he was at the top of despair feeling quite deprived of love and just treatment by his brother. Through this incident, Orlando regains his self-confidence because Rosalind's love enlivens his heart.

In most of his comedies, Shakespeare presents his females in couples, thus Rosalind and Celia are presented as a close couple of almost equal personality, mentality, thinking as well as equal social rank. Shakespeare does this for the purpose of comparing and contrasting their main traits, in order to emphasize the characteristics of the leading typical heroine Rosalind. This method of presenting the females in couples is also apparent in the early group comedies, but these couples are not shown to be of equal qualities. For example, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, though Bianca and Katharine are sisters, they are of quite different personalities, mood, intentions, behaviour and reactions. Hermia and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are also different even in their physical appearances.

Rosalind is witty, assertive, and gay and enjoys a strong personality. She is also a leading figure who shoulders the responsibility of giving herself and other characters the chance of self-recognition and reconciliation while all meet in the forest of Arden.¹⁰ Despite the bitter and agonizing circumstances in which she lives, being the daughter of a banished abducted Duke forced to live with the usurper of her father's wealth and rights, Rosalind shows a gay and a cheerful spirit. This spirit is composed of an evident manifestation of her great self-confidence and self-control, as when she confidently speaks with her tyrant uncle controlling her nerves:

I do beseech your Grace,
Let me the knowledge of my fault bear with me.
If with myself I hold intelligence,
Or have acquaintance with mine own desires;
If that I do not dream, or be not frantic—
As I do trust I am not—then dear uncle,
Never so much as in a thought unborn
Did I offend your Highness.
(I. iii. 47-54)

Rosalind remains lively and courageous throughout the difficulties she encounters. She also enjoys both physical and spiritual attention as:

Everything about Rosalind breathes of youth and youth's sweet prime. She is as fresh as the morning, and as sweet as the dew awakened blossoms, and light as the breeze that play among them.¹¹

It is the significant match of moral and physical beauty in Rosalind that was the source of Orlando's attraction to her. It makes him describe her as perfect as Helena:

Nature presently distill'd
Helena's cheek but not her heart
Cleopatra's majesty

Atlanta's better part,
Sad Lucretia's modesty.
Thus Rosalind of many parts
By heavenly Synod was devised;
Of many faces, eyes and hearts.

(III. ii. 136-144)

Moreover Rosalind shows herself to be a woman believing in love from the very beginning of the play. Her tenderness, womanhood and passion are revealed when Celia asks her to be happy. Her immediate answer to Celia's request is that she would be happy and would devise a love sport, which reflects her tender emotional loving spirit:

From henceforth, I will coz, and devise sports.

Let me see, what think you of falling in love?

(I. ii. 21-22)

These words reflect Rosalind's subconscious readiness to fall in love as soon as she meets the gentle young Orlando at the wrestling sport. Just like Orlando, Rosalind has a psychological need and readiness for love because of the effect of her uncle's attitude.

Another characteristic of Rosalind is her defying and challenging spirit. When Duke Fredrick, who proves to be of a tyrannical nature, suddenly asks her to leave the court within a given time or she would face death, Rosalind's reaction to this shows her strong, defying spirit, which stands against the unjustifiable decision of her uncle who accuses her of being a traitor like her father:

Treason is not inherited, my lord,

Or if we did derive it from our friends,

What's that to me, my father was no traitor.

Then good my liege mistake me not so much

To think my poverty is treacherous.

(I. iii. 64-68)

Here, Rosalind's real challenge begins. It seems that Shakespeare, by not giving a clear reason behind Duke Frederick's decision of dismissing Rosalind, wants to throw his female characters in the middle of real challenge. This functions as a touchstone to her character. Through this, he intends to subject both females to difficulties and see how they react to these hardships, in addition to revealing their own traits and characters. By accepting to face the realities of life, they show that life is full of trials and errors and disguises.¹² Hence, Rosalind now has to decide where to go after being promised to be accompanied by her cousin Celia, who rejects her father's harsh injustice, into exile:

Shall we be sundered? Shall we part sweet girl?

No, let my father seek another heir.

(I. iii. 99-100)

Rosalind was delighted at Celia's suggestion to go in disguise to seek the banished Duke Senior in the forest, for she was eager to meet with her father. Nevertheless, she thought it dangerous for two young gentlewomen to travel all alone to such an exotic unknown place. So Rosalind suggested to disguise herself as a man and Celia as a woman to hide their true identities.

Disguise is one of the commonly employed devices by Shakespeare in his comedies. However, disguise is an essential element in Elizabethan theatre. Technically speaking, actresses were not allowed to appear on stage. So males used to play female parts. Moreover, disguise a thematic requirement since the Shakespearean female characters in this group, like Rosalind and Viola, have a strong, challenging characters that make them extreme opposites to the traditional view of woman in the Elizabethan age, mainly her being subordinate to men and incapable of carrying out independent actions.

Rosalind's disguise, however, implies some thematic connotations as well. In addition to protecting herself in the forest, her disguise would mislead her uncle and his men if they try to find her. It also becomes a means of simultaneously revealing and controlling her emotions and giving them further maturity especially in her planned approach to Orlando's love. Moreover, it is through disguise that Rosalind's role as a leading character is deepened. While in the court, Rosalind and Celia were almost of parallel dramatic value but Shakespeare starts gradually to deepen the character of Rosalind. Thus, being the taller and braver of the two,¹³ Rosalind disguises as a man and becomes the leading dominant figure of the two since:

It is she who deals with the outside world, who can meet and converse with me, speak and act assertively, even authoritatively. She is thus able to develop and demonstrate areas of her personality that could not, according to the stage conventions Shakespeare adhered to, be gracefully revealed if she were in female apparel.¹⁴

Accordingly, it is because of her dressing up as a man that Rosalind takes the lead since her personality is more protected as a man than Celia who, not having apparent masculine qualities, takes Rosalind's advice to disguise as a woman, to play the role of Ganymede's sister, Aliena. The purpose behind Celia's disguise is to protect herself while in the forest, and to hide her true identity as Duke Frederick's daughter and to suit Rosalind's plan of disguise and to be more convincing disguised brother and sister shepherds. This disguise serves Rosalind as a means to achieve "self-discovery and personal redemption."¹⁵ Being in the forest, Rosalind and Celia come across some love verses which Rosalind first used to laugh at. But when Celia tells her that she saw Orlando, who has escaped from the court to the forest because of his brother's threats. Rosalind's view of the verses immediately changes. She gets excited and attempts to "control the pleasure of her heart."¹⁶ Later, when Rosalind meets Orlando, she keeps her true identity hidden because the two girls want to retain their safety until they unite with the banished Duke Senior. Though she gets excited at meeting Orlando, she uses her wit to hide her love.

Moreover, even after meeting Orlando and hearing his love confession, Rosalind proves wittier than Orlando and overshadows him through the pretended courtship she manipulates against him. Rosalind, who was already disguised as a young man wittily pretends, for Orlando's benefit, to be a young woman, Rosalind herself.¹⁷ Thus, she makes him imagine that Ganymede is his "heavenly Rosalind" through her cross dressing plan:

It is Rosalind who turns male as Ganymede and convinces her lover Orlando (who think[s] he is Ganymede) to pretend she is Rosalind and court her.¹⁸

Shakespeare uses this cross-dressing technique for the major purposes. First, it is used as a means to reveal Rosalind's wit, intelligence and wisdom. Second it is also a means to enable Rosalind to test Orlando's true love.

Besides, Rosalind's new disguise reveals her feminine passionate aspects, but being unable to unveil her true identity, she fails to declare her love to him in response to his love confession. When they meet however, at the courtship game, Rosalind disguised as Ganymede, finds an outlet to outspoke her own love to him by pretending to be his beloved Rosalind:

Come, woo me, woo me, for now I am in a

Holiday humor and like enough to consent.

(IV. i. 67-68)

In the meantime Rosalind's role as a plotter of the action moves on, she is not only one of the lovers in the play but also, like Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well*, she acts as the curing character at whose hands others recover. When the play of pretended courtship fails because Orlando is after the true Rosalind and not an imagined one, Ganymede offers another suggestion. She offers herself as a magician who can bring the real Rosalind for Orlando to marry:

... Say I am a magician. Therefore put you in your best array, bid your friends. For if you will be married to-morrow, you shall; and to Rosalind if you will.

(V. ii. 77-80)

Her speech to him here reflects that she assumes the role of a man but with a loving woman's heart:

The coquetry with which she plays with her lover in the double character which she has to support is managed with the nicest address. How full of valuable, laughing grace is all her conversation with Orlando. How full of real fondness and pretended cruelty is her answer to him when he promises to love her "for ever and a day."¹⁹

An advocate of love and lovers is another aspect of Rosalind's dynamic role. When she and Celia meet the two shepherds Corin and Silvius in the forest, she sympathizes with Silvius while exhibiting his love for Phebe. She immediately criticizes Phebe for being unmerciful to Silvius and for being too proud of her beauty. Accordingly, she asks Phebe to accept Silvius, being an honest and true lover. She also attempts to bring both lovers

together. She handles the challenging situation of Phebe's love for her as a male cleverly without allowing it to cause any complications and without revealing her identity or breaking Phebe's heart. Her positive answer to Phebe's love letter is conditioned to Phebe's acceptance of Silvius' love:

You are there followed by a faithful shepherd;

Look upon him, love him. He worships you.

(V. ii. 87-88)

At the same time, she attempts to comfort Silvius and to ease his agony, though not quite successfully, by telling him that Phebe has attacked her in her letter. Moreover, Rosalind decides that "she will remedy the situation and help Silvius get Phebe by eventually revealing that Ganymede is a she."²⁰ Here, Rosalind shows evident seriousness in dealing with love. She never ridicules love because she herself hides behind her strong personality a strong passion for Orlando which gets more and more intense and apparent when he does not show up at his appointment with her. She starts feeling worried, sad and melancholic but like other Shakespearean females, Rosalind owns the equipoise necessary for keeping her feelings and her melancholy under control.²¹

The character of Celia comes next to Rosalind in thematic importance and dramatic effect. Celia is of a very gentle and loving nature but her yielding to Rosalind, out of love and devotion, shows her selflessness and loyalty as well rather than weakness or stupidity. Hence, Celia's reply to her father's accusations of Rosalind is reflective enough of her natural love and intimacy with her cousin Rosalind:

... If she be a traitor,

Why, so am I, we still have slept together,

Rose at an instant, lern'd, play'd, eat together'

And where so we went, like Juno's swans,

Still we went coupled and inseparable.

(I. iii. 68-72)

This situation reveals some traits of Celia as Rosalind's foil. Here she appears to be courageous and defying like Rosalind, when she "determines to join Rosalind in exile" and "her act of defiance is motivated more by loyalty to her cousin than by any desire of her own."²²

Moreover, her decision shows her rightful spirit for she stands against her father's injustice and tyranny and shows self-sacrifice and self-denial when she accepts to leave behind her all the court pleasure. Besides, Celia heartily accepts to adopt herself to whatever role or mode she is requested to. She also welcomes Rosalind's correction of her own idea of disguise as Ganymede's sister to fulfil Rosalind's plan. Celia is as witty as

Rosalind and her wit is inspired with a spirit of kindness. She wittily, but kindly, humours Rosalind when she feels melancholic because of Orlando's delay.

Never thinking of love herself till she meets Oliver, Celia takes it as her responsibility to comfort and keep Rosalind's spirit up, it is not to say that she has no passions or feelings, but it is her duty, as she takes it, to lessen Rosalind's suffering at the same time of acting as a reflecting mirror which shows the depth and earnestness of Rosalind's passion. Here, she plays a role similar to that of Rosalind when she attempts to ease Silvius' sufferings caused by his love to Phebe. Moreover, love for Celia is a holy thing and should not be dealt with in a careless manner. Thus, her reply to Rosalind's love-game suggestion is that she is committed to treat love seriously:

Marry, I prithee, do, to make sport withal; but love no man in good earnest, nor no further in sport neither than with safety of a pure blush thou mayst in honour come off again.

(I. ii. 25-28)

Despite her view of love as a serious and sacred thing, Celia falls in love with Oliver at first sight. After the confessions Oliver makes to Celia about his old evil manners of living, Celia's heart is overwhelmed with his love and, later, they decide to marry, as she in turn helps Oliver get purified by accepting his love. Thus, she, like Rosalind, has a sort of healing effect on others, though on a narrower scale.

Here, Celia's role is of no less importance than that of Rosalind. Unlike Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who are passive and almost type characters, Celia is a secondary character who comes next to Rosalind in fully participating in and plotting the action of the play. Celia's position here shows a development in Shakespeare's approach of presenting his female characters. In his early group comedies, most of the secondary female characters are passive and they fall under the control of almost one chief heroine, while in the middle comedies, we come across two or more important female characters such as Rosalind and Celia or Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*.

Before the first wedding scene, Shakespeare attempts to untangle the knot of the plot. The denouement of the play is properly weaved to suit the title, in that the events end as the audience like. Hence, all characters manage to get rid of their conflicts, aided by the forest, and come to know themselves well:

As You Like It is a play of young love wherein the characters discover happiness by recognizing and accepting the briars with the roses, the sour with the sweet.²³

Consequently, Orlando "discovers happiness" and was given justice when his brother Oliver, who came after him to kill him, attains self-recognition after being saved by Orlando. Duke Frederick discovers his wrong doings to his brother through a conversation with the hermit he meets in the forest, who convinces him of the benefits of religious life. This leads to the end of Rosalind's and Celia's problems by seeing justice done to Duke Senior and also through finding their true lovers. Even the minor characters such as

Touchstone, an agreeable, witty humorous clown who sacrifices court pleasures by his own will to accompany Rosalind as a company and comfort, manages to unite with Audrey, an uneducated type character standing for an innocent shepherdess though their love is basically that of physical attraction. Also Silvius manages to unite with Phebe, aided by Rosalind and the healthy, redeeming forest atmosphere.

In the final wedding ceremony, there is joy everywhere, joy for the newly-wed lovers, joy for Orlando and Oliver who became at last true loving brothers, and joy for the Duke and his daughter Rosalind who were reunited after a long of separation; for all these characters “love has been a call to adventure, a voyage of discovery, and a pilgrimage to the Rose of married Chastitie.”²⁴

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare shows development in his portraiture of his female characters. Hence, Rosalind, the heroine is a developed female character who enjoys certain characteristics that cannot be found in the female characters of the early comedies. These are beauty, wit, wisdom, courage, gaiety and humour. Besides, she enjoys an independent honest character whose love and loyalty to Orlando’s love reflect her femininity. Moreover, she plays a leading role embodied in her physical as well as spiritual ability to plot and lead the action while in the forest motivated by her flight from the court to search for her father and also by her sincere, true love to Orlando.

Celia is also of a prominent role in the movement of the action. Her wit, charm, gaiety and loyalty to Rosalind poses her as a secondary heroine of the play. Her major motivation in the play, is her loyalty to her cousin Rosalind. All these characteristics, most of which are not found in the heroines of the early comedies, make the heroines of *As You Like It* active, developed and leading characters, hence, managing to achieve their ultimate goals.

Conclusions

As far as the females of the middle sunny comedies are concerned, they are presented to be of more mature and fully developed natures. Shakespeare endows Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night* with the attributes of being independent individuals who are passionate and loving. Besides, through their wit, eloquence and courage they manage to plot the action to some extent according to their wills. Hence, Rosalind employs male disguise both as a self-protection and as a means through which she can escape men’s influence to achieve independence.

In sneaking from the court and becoming a man herself she rids herself from the social chains. Moreover, disguise permits Rosalind to say things a woman would not normally say and to gain the rights and freedom that she could not receive if she were to remain a woman. Hence, Viola appears to be an independent individual through her eloquence and wit through which she plans to fulfil her dream of marrying the Duke. Both Rosalind and Viola choose their own men, proving to show their strong belief in love-based marriage and their rejection of institutional marriages. Their challenging spirit, however, is coloured by fun and merriment that are apparent in the comic scenes of the play, particularly in Rosalind’s treatment of Orlando when she is disguised as Ganymede in the wood.

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