

THE 'FEMALE PAGE' IN SHAKESPEARE'S SELECTED PLAYS AND ELIZABETHAN THEATRE ROLES

Dr. Anshu Pandey
Assistant Professor
Department of English,
C.M.P College University of Allahabad,
Allahabad.

ABSTRACT

My aim through this article is to propagate that Shakespeare is the best known voice for Theatre equality. Drama affects the human spirit; it illuminates our conditions in a way that changes our views of ourselves, our neighbors and the world around us. From the point of view of the history of manners, the prohibition of woman from the stage is also certainly connected to the way the acting profession was normally regarded: as menacing figure, not only because he is able to play an infinite number of roles, but also because, according to the typecast. In this paper the female role has been studied within the context of the merry culture which prevails throughout sixteenth century England. Understanding the female role in its original cheerful context entailed examining the joyful society in Elizabethan England through these plays.

Keywords: Elizabethan stage, female role, Self-Identity, Identity Crisis.

William Shakespeare was an English dramatist and poet who lived in the late 1500's and early 1600's (around 400 years ago). His plays are now performed all over the world in hundreds of languages. His work is so admired because Shakespeare wrote about human nature and how people perform. Although his words can be tough to understand, his thoughts are a pertinent now as they were four centuries ago. William Shakespeare's work has been observed as a great achievement due to his idiosyncratic dramatic style and his conscientious attention to exploration of human predicament in his plays. Shakespeare's plays sail very close to the wind in highlighting the exigencies of theatrical performance. Theatre in Elizabethan London was an amusement for everyone, like the cinema today. The cheapest tickets cost one penny, which most ordinary people could pay for.

The most costly tickets were sixpence and were bought by rich merchants and upper class. Foreign traders and tourists often made a trip to the theatre as part of their vacation to

London. Theaters were not only used to show plays. There was gambling and in some there was even bear baiting. With so many people crowded together, the theaters were also popular with thieves and pickpockets. Audiences were not as well-behaved as they are today. People mocked at the actors and screamed out impolite remarks. Some audiences even climbed onto the stage and joined in with swordfights. People also brought food with them to eat during the presentation, or to throw at awful actors. The reputation of actors was remained disreputable, a legacy from the rogues and vagabonds who had previously roamed the country putting on plays and their classification as “vagabonds and sturdy beggars,” in a 1572 act of Parliament. Particular effects and surroundings did not play a huge part in Elizabethan theatre. Musicians provided sound effects with drums and trumpets, and the actors often wore profligate, show dress in the plays. But in spite of that audiences were likely to use their imaginations for different locations and backgrounds in the theatre. Shakespeare is thought to have joined the theatre as an artist, and become a writer later. It was usual for actors to help write plays, or to change them a lot during preparation. Shakespeare probably started slowly writing more and acting less. Actors often specialized in one type of part. Famous actors like Richard Burbage and William Sly got the big parts, such as leading roles in tragedies. Comic actors or clowns, such as Will Kempe played a fool or a comic character in the plays in theatre. There were no actresses that time so women’s roles were played by boys. Women did not act on stage until the Restoration, after the English Civil War. In Shakespeare's time London was the greatest rising city in the world. It was a bustling, noisy, dirty, dangerous, exciting place to be. For entertainment, the theatre struggled with bear- and bull-baiting, taverns, brothels, gambling and cockfighting.

People from all social classes attended the public theatres. The lower classes stood in the 'pit' near the stage while the middle classes sat in the galleries. There were special boxes for the titled and wealthy. Salesperson moved through the audience selling wine, cocktail, fruit, tobacco and playbooks. Performances could be three hours long so audiences were often loud. Actors needed power, presence and strong voices to hold their own in such a setting. The atmosphere of the indoor theatres was more dignified.

Although in western culture women are both mythically and ritually connected with Earth and, like the Earth, participate in the mystery of Nature. My aim through this article is to propagate that Shakespeare is the best known voice for Theatre equality. Drama affects the human spirit; it illuminates our conditions in a way that changes our views of ourselves, our neighbors and the world around us.

From the point of view of the history of manners, the prohibition of woman from the stage is also certainly connected to the way the acting profession was normally regarded: as menacing figure, not only because he is able to play an infinite number of roles, but also because, according to the typecast. The coming of women onto the scene indicate, once and for all, the division between the categories of male and female, relegated to different sexual characters. Actors and actresses had lost their femininity, but then, art is genderless. It would appear to be two main reasons for the historical abolition of women from the stage. In the first place, the theatre is conventionally a public space and, as we know, for centuries women were not considered to be socio-historical subjects in their own right.

So it is that Shakespearean womanly characters -from Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, to Rosalind in play *As You Like It* and Viola in the play *Twelfth Night*- study themselves, as in a reflect, while they play their double roles in the plays. Each of these roles

presenting a variety of characteristics which are continuously contrasted, in opposition: on the one hand, the clever humor of the gentleman and, on the other, the delicate feeling of the woman. In both *Twelfth Night* and in *As You Like It*, the mask functions on three different levels. Viola in *Twelfth Night* is a girl who dresses up as a boy, Cesario, who at the play's conclusion takes on the appearance of a boy dressed up as a girl. And the same roles are played by Rosalind/Ganymede in the play *As You Like It*. The theatrical technique of costume working together with the reunion of the boy-actor becomes in Shakespeare tremendously refined device for the weaving -through a characteristic record stuffed with puns, absurdity and homosexual mentions- of the subtlest, most highly complicated misunderstandings.

Shakespeare's female characters have often attracted the attention of the critics over the time. The controversial aspects of the female role in Shakespeare's comedies were mainly suggested by twentieth century critics. Although these female characters have been strongly studied and examined, but after that some arguments and differences over the interpretation of the female role were often left unanswered. The main questions are that are these female characters unconventional or subjugated? How could these women clear such authority on the Elizabethan stage on which the simple presence of actresses was prohibited? Answers to these questions seem to depend largely on the exact artistic viewpoint of different historical periods. In the history of theatrical performance it is clear that from the earliest days of women's acting of heroines who disguised themselves as boys, there was no real attempt to suggest a male gender identity. This paper studies the female role in two selected plays of Shakespeare's comedies, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, exploring its relation to the Elizabethan theatre, and the way through which the female role has been understand throughout different historical periods of time. Studying the female role in the Elizabethan context does not promise that the comic effect of the cheerful meanings will be recaptured. In its context, the female role belongs to Elizabethan England and its public stage.

As entertainment in Elizabethan England was becoming slowly marginalized therefore, the test of the female role in the broad artistic setting – Waller says:

Social, economic, political and ideological which collaborated to produce and reproduce the female role in the comedies sheds the light on "the marginal but insistent forces that challenge and may eventually breakdown a monolithic construction of power" (Waller 20).¹

In this state, this paper attempts to exemplify that *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, reflect cultural attitudes, both Viola, Rosalind, present characteristic female characters who are active, creative and in control of their dramatic situations. The comedies of Shakespeare do rotate around these females who guide the action right from the start. However, the happy endings with which the comedies close function just like a fair which infringes the beat of everyday life only to bring ordinary life back into panorama. The second quotation is taken from the Prologue to the 1660 performance of *Othello* in which, for the first time ever in England, a female came upon the stage to play the part of Desdemona:

The woman plays today: mistake me not, No man in gown, or page in petticoat,... in this reforming age We have intents to civilize our stage²

It is far from easy to pin-point the socio-historical reasons for the exclusion of women from the theatre In *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, cheerful liberty and disobedience finds its best expression in the mask of Viola and Rosalind. Pretense, a popular cheerful custom in sixteenth century England, provides these female characters Viola and Rosalind with physical

liberty surrendering both heroines entrée into their male-dominated worlds. Disguise, as a form of joyful cross-dressing, becomes quite fascinating due to its unique place on the Elizabethan stage given the reality that Viola and Rosalind were played by Elizabethan boy actors. The eroticism arising from watching a boy actor playing a female role and then disguised as a male was a part of the Elizabethan time. Condemnation of disguise as a theatrical technique cannot humiliate the multi-dimensional theatricality of disguise on the Elizabethan platform. Cross-dressing and the female role on the Elizabethan stage have had their unique signifying system. The different sign of celebration greatly influence the vocabulary of the heroines in the comedies. Viola, Rosalind, always vary between the cheerful and non-cheerful modes of appearance depending on the time in the action. By difference, the anti-festive conversation restricts and limits the linguistic properties of the female characters. The clear active, disobedient, and liberal attitudes of Viola and Rosalind are reflected in their language. The Elizabethan stage has been assimilated to the public places in which celebrations have been held.

The nature and purpose of theatre was the subject of vigorous debate in Elizabethan England, and the relationship of theatre to the cultural life of the community as a whole was hotly disputed. But one way in which theatre sometimes functioned was to provide a space in which the energies of carnival could exist: an alternative place of opposition to official culture ... (Mangan 35) 3

The Elizabethan theatre has come to dwell in a reputable position in the in general cultural development of Elizabethan England. The fact that in Elizabethan England no woman was allowed a permit to rise the theatrical platform does not darkness the presence of distinguished female roles on the specialized stage. In Shakespeare's plays one cannot fail to take listen to of disobedient, bold and imaginative female characters that put into practice their wits and efforts in whatever time given to make the best of their circumstances. The undoubtedly bold actions and in fact creative thoughts these female characters enjoy have always been prearranged under disguises, games, as well as other practices typically classified. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola shows to have the determination and approach similar to that of the festival spirit. Existing a shipwreck and arriving at Illyria, Viola now only needs to plan and put her design into sensible action. She decides to mask herself as a page willing to provide lady Olivia: "*O that I serv'd that lady*" (*Twelfth Night*. I. ii. 42).⁴

Viola's disguise, the singing, and the other amusements she volunteers to accommodate Orsino with are all indicative of the festive atmosphere *Twelfth Night* successfully conveys. Viola, particularly at the start, seems to enjoy the kind of liberty which in Elizabethan England can be kindly offered only by celebration. Viola falls in love with Orsino and is able to be around him the majority of the time now that she has roughly immediately earned his faith and become his pet servant: "*I [Orsino] have unclasp'd / To thee the book even of my secret soul*" (I. iv. 13-14). (*Twelfth Night*)⁵ Viola also gets to deliver her master's love messages to Olivia with such lighthearted festive liberty: "*I'll do my best/ To woo your lady*" (I. iv. 40-41). (*Twelfth Night*)⁶

Viola here can be regarded as the messenger of love, which might have shaped an similarity between the two on the Elizabethan stage .Viola is improved knowledgeable than any other character on the stage, having more clues to the confusions taking place; Viola is in fact decided a dominance of insight over other characters:

VIOLA: Methinks his words do from such passion fly That he believes himself; so do not I: Prove true, imagination, O prove true, That I, dear brother, be now ta'en for you! (III. iv. 382-85) 7

At all costs, in *Twelfth Night* Viola and Olivia seem to be also the basis or the object of the fantasies and accordingly the obvious madness that is surely to follow. This dreamy world of illusions troubles almost every character in the play. The unbreakable chains between the Elizabethan stage, comedy, and public life are strongly brought back to surface. *As You Like It* manages to emphasize differences within the Elizabethan life in the course of providing diverse comic patterns of court, country, and also a court set up in the country. Ladies come first; it is rude to let them pursue gentlemen; but as ladies do not come first in the theatre because the preface is always spoken by a man, there is nothing ill-mannered in having a lady come last. This inversion of polite behavior is part of the gender inversion in which Rosalind herself takes part.

ROSALIND: Come; woo me; for now I am in a holiday humour and like enough to consent. What would you say to me now, and I were your very very Rosalind? (IV. i. 65-68). *As You Like It* 8

In *As You Like It* Rosalind and Celia are reported to have run away with Orlando to the woods. This report has the most disturbing effect upon Duke Frederick. Here again the full heaviness of the Country/ Court resistance is laid down with its various implications between conducts of these two extreme worlds mainly in relation to female characters as spoken by the character of the Second Lord:

Hisperia, the princess' gentlewoman, Confesses that she secretly o'erheard your daughter and her cousin much commend The parts and graces of the wrestler That did but lately foil the sinewy Charles, And she believes wherever they are gone That youth is surely in their company. (*As You Like It*. II. ii. 10-16) 9

Feminist critics in particular have dedicated sincere efforts to the study of this complex theatrical technique, especially to its sexual implications. The fact that on the Elizabethan stage female characters have been played by male actors further obscures costume. A disguised female character is originally a male actor dressed as female and then disguised as a man. The absence of actresses on the stage has without a doubt assigned the Elizabethan male actors to become part of the comic schemes in which female characters are involved. As a result, Elizabethan boy actors satisfying in female roles cannot be dismissed from the site where female roles are performed.

The comedy of female disguising was, of course, operating with incompletely different signs on the Elizabethan stage. . . . Likewise, it is often conveniently forgotten that much of the humour in the situations of women disguised as men derived from the fact that those women were already young, sexually attractive men in female disguise. (126-127) (*The Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy* 88). 10

Mask is a profound technique. It builds up meanings with the development of the action right until it is finally willing off on the stage. Nevertheless, the maleness underneath female figures cannot stand in the way of perceiving bold, defiant, and active female heroines who are remarkably present in Shakespearean comedy. As Jardine tells us:

We now know a considerable amount about this historical period, in particular about the position of woman and about views concerning

women: enough to know that Shakespeare's plays neither mirror the social scene, nor articulate explicitly any of the contemporary views on "the woman question" ... I try to suggest alternative (corrective possibilities for reading the relationship between the real social condition and literary representation.¹¹

Entrenched in cheerful pastimes, disguise seems to lend female characters with characteristic bodily and spoken liberties. Not only are these female characters, such as Rosalind, Portia, and Viola, leading, but also they are the middle centre of the plays. As Rosalind tells us:

I could find in my heart to disgrace my man's apparel and to cry like a woman; but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat; therefore, courage, good Aliena.

*(As You Like It (II,ii, 4-8)*¹²

Twelfth Night had been a popular festive comedy in Elizabethan times. Viola's character, however, was more Elizabethan in representation than modern. According to Gay, the role Played by actress Dorothy Tutin with enthusiasm and warmness successfully presenting the young and boyish element in Viola's role.

As a whole, Hall's "moderate changes to tradition" which offer "just a hint of modern irony and gender-disruption in the Viola-Olivia scenes, seems to have satisfied – or sated- the market" (Gay 26).¹³

As You Like It has never stopped to be a well-liked play in which audiences have delighted from the sixteenth century on. Rosalind's joyful role and slight wit has made the play one of the most loved Shakespearean plays. It is rather an investigation of how far has understanding traveled from festivity and its associations with the female role, and the way this move has exaggerated the performance of the female characters in *As You Like It*. The fact that Rosalind's role is the longest female role Shakespeare had ever composed attracted actresses to play this outstanding heroine from the eighteenth century on. Comedian actress Dorothy Jordan pleased audiences playing Rosalind between 1778 and 1814. Tragic actress Sarah Siddons, on the other side, failed to deliver Rosalind's character on stage. On the Elizabethan stage, Rosalind's character was supposed to put forward the qualities of both a romantic and a liberal woman. It was the contrast between the court and the forest which made the distinctions clear to the Elizabethan audience. Rosalind's power and supremacy were the symptoms of the festive climate manifested in Arden.

In this paper the female role has been studied within the context of the merry culture which prevails throughout sixteenth century England. Understanding the female role in its original cheerful context entailed examining the joyful society in Elizabethan England through these plays. *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, are among Shakespeare's cheerful comedies, which were built around popular celebrations in Elizabethan England. Viola and Rosalind are the heroines of the jolly atmosphere. These leading female characters are at the centre of the action around which threads of the plot revolve. Viola and Rosalind represent the joyful traditions in its various manifestations of liberty, transgression and power, both physical and verbal.

REFERENCES

1. Waller, Gary, ed. *Shakespeare's Comedies*. London: Longman, 1991.
2. G. Boas, *Shakespeare and the Young Actor*, London, Barrie and Rockcliff, p. 6.
3. Mangan, Michael. *A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies: 1594-1603*. London: Longman, 1996.
4. Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik. London: Methuen, 1975
5. Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik. London: Methuen, 1975
6. Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik. London: Methuen, 1975
7. Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik. London: Methuen, 1975
8. Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Ed. Agnes Latham. London: Routledge, 1996.
9. Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Ed. Agnes Latham. London: Routledge, 1996.
10. Bradbrook, M.C. *The Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1961.
11. L. Jardine, *Still Harping on daughters, Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1983, pp. 6-7.
12. Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Ed. Agnes Latham. London: Routledge, 1996.
13. Gay, Penny. *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*. New York: Rutledge, 1994.

Is Elizabethan theatre an historical period, just Shakespeare's plays, a theatre style, or all of the above? Sometimes, performance styles are associated with periods in history (and hence, theatre history) and Elizabethan theatre (or Elizabethan drama) is one of these examples. Historically, Elizabethan theatre refers to plays performed in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). Students of theatre often forget Shakespeare was not the only playwright during this time (somewhat understandable when they hear the term "Shakespearean drama" so regularly). Shakespeare's contemporaries