



Radiant Femininity in Shakespeare's Early Comedies: Insights from *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

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Abstract

Before the Renaissance, Europe was in the Middle Ages and the Christian Church practiced asceticism. There was a highly unequal status of women and men. Not only was economic treatment unfair, but also women's political rights were extremely low. With the movement of the Renaissance, the status of the bourgeoisie was elevated and it was happening anti-feudalism and anti-churchism again. Women's individuality emancipation, human dignity, and value were emphasized. This paper explores how Shakespeare's early comedies exemplify the humanist values of the Renaissance by depicting intelligent and independent female characters who challenge societal norms. Women's dignity and intelligence are demonstrated in comedies. The male character was used to set off the female character's intelligence as well. This paper aims to analyze the portrayal of women and to understand the spirit of humanism better from *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Keywords

Radiant femininity; *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

1. Introduction

Before the Renaissance, Europe experienced a dark and long period—the Middle Ages. During the feudal period, the Christian Church practiced harsh asceticism, destroying human nature and viewing women as symbols of lust and sin. Women's political rights were low. Throughout the ruling class of England just at that moment, although Queen Elizabeth had supreme power, women in the royal family had no recourse in political decision-making.

Judging by the social custom of that period, sons had more inheritance rights than daughters and even some laws did not recognize the inheritance rights of daughters at all. Not only did women have no political rights, but also they had to follow the wishes of men, such as their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Economically, during the Middle Ages, women were often portrayed as symbols of sin, with limited political or economic rights. The Renaissance, however, sparked a renewed emphasis on individual dignity and humanism, enabling Shakespeare to create complex female characters who challenge these archaic views (Kim, 2016). Compared with males, females got lower status. It is obvious if we take authorship as an example. The respective fortunes of the burial sites of these two “dead, white, male poets” are to a significant degree indicative of how a distinct canon of English literature has emerged over the centuries (Andrew Sanders, 1904). It shows that female writers of other races were not recognized by the public and were rejected to enter the poet's corner.

With the rise of the Renaissance movement, the emerging bourgeoisie gradually gained status politically and economically. There were waves of anti-feudalism, anti-church, and especially anti-asceticism in various European

countries. In the meanwhile, the liberation of women's individuality, dignity, and value of the human personality was universally emphasized by the whole society. *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as Shakespeare's early works, were written in 1598 and 1600 respectively. When the central sovereignty of Elizabeth I was still consolidated, the temporary alliance between the royal family and the industrialists and businessmen as well as the new aristocracy was still under development. After defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588, the power of England was greatly enhanced.

The history plays and comedies written during this period show a bright and optimistic style. As an important representative of the Renaissance, Shakespeare vigorously manifested and carried forward the spirit of humanism in his plays, praising human nature, opposing feudalism and the church, and opposing asceticism (Zhang, 2001). In his plays, he gave voice to women by portraying glorious female figures. These women shine with the noble light of pursuing individual liberation and love, opposing feudalism, and defending human dignity.

2. Life-loving Females in *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*

Twelfth Night mirrors *The Comedy of Errors* in its comedic depiction of Viola and Sebastian, twins separated by a shipwreck and rescued by different captains. Viola as a choirboy serves Orsino who is the Duke of Illyria and helps him pursue the rich countess Olivia's love. Brother Sebastian is rescued by a sea captain Antonio who is a friend to captain Sebastian. After many twists and turns, the siblings meet and recognize each other. The two lovers are finally united.

In the play, the author has made great efforts to portray Viola and Miss Olivia as two humanistic women, who are persistent in pursuing love. Both of them are kind, rational, and clear about truth or falsehood. Olivia rejects the repeated pursuits of Orsino, the noble Duke of Illyria. She explains to Viola, who is dressed as a manservant, "Your lord does know my mind; I cannot love him: Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble of a great estate, of fresh and stainless youth; In voices well divulg'd, free, learn'd, and valiant; And, in dimension and the shape of nature, a gracious person; but yet I cannot love him; He might have taken his answer long ago" (Shakespeare, 2018, p. 203).

While Viola is conveying her love for her master, Olivia unconsciously falls in love with the duke's manservant who boldly gives Viola a ring to express her love. When meeting with Viola, she issues a confession bluntly and frankly to Viola "By maidhood, honour, truth, and everything, I love thee so, that, maugre all thy pride, Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide." (p. 200) After being rejected by a servant, the noble and wealthy countess does not get angry or rude but exclaims "The clock upbraids me with the waste of time. Be not afraid, good youth, I will not have you." (p. 198) At the moment, she praises Viola, "And yet, when wit and youth is come to harvest, your wife is like to reap a proper man. There lies you way, due west." (p. 199) After meeting Sebastian, who has the same face as Viola, Olivia breaks the bounds of propriety to express her love for him and proclaims her betrothal to him again.

Viola, who dresses as a man, is an eloquent and quick-witted woman appreciated by both Duke Orsino and Miss Olivia. Her male disguise not only allows her to navigate a patriarchal society but also subverts traditional gender roles, revealing the performative nature of her identity and empowering her to influence others without being constrained by societal expectations. What she dressed as a man's in-depth role-playing was a kind of rebellion against society. She stepped outside the boundaries between men and women in a way, switching between two genders freely.

She is so elegant that the honorable Miss Olivia appreciates her style of conversation when she is courting for the Duke. She has the courage to pursue her love, suggesting to the Duke that she is a daughter. She expresses her love to imply her identity, My father had a daughter lov'd a man, As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman ...I am all the daughters of my father's house, And all the brothers too; and yet I know not. Sir, shall I to this lady? (p. 180). And she always believes that "if I were to woo for him, it would be I who would be his wife."

The play uses the image of the male characters to set off the intelligence and human dignity of the female protagonists. For instance, although the young Duke Orsino is honorable and powerful, he is coy and self-pitying in the face of love and immerses in the bitterness of love without finding any solution. On the one hand, he celebrates his love for Olivia.

There is no woman's side can bide the beating of so strong a passion as love doth give my heart; no woman's heart so big to hold so much; they lack retention. "Alas, their love may be call'd appetite, —No motion of the liver, but the palate, —That suffer surfeit, cloyment, and revolt; But mine is all as hungry as the sea, And can digest as much: make no compare between that love a woman can bear me. And that I owe Olivia." (p. 79)

Orsino plays up himself by taunting women's capability of pursuing love. Compared with words spoken by Olivia and Viola, his words are dishonor. On the other hand, he only indulges in fantasies and lacks the vigor of action,

entrusting Viola to run errands for him instead of wooing Olivia in person. Someone else is needed to deliver his adoration and bitter love by platitude.

Shakespeare used comedy to satirize this pretentious courtship of the medieval feudal ruling class. The other males also lose out to the females. Andrew is a stupid puppet at the mercy of others and Marvolio is a laughing stock for being clueless and self-righteous. Toby is the epithet of rudeness and burial. By contrast, women dare to break through the boundaries of feudal asceticism and hierarchy. And they obtain real love ultimately.

3. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Dames of Windsor are as good as they look. Dames love to fool around but they are still innocent. The play portrays three new bourgeois women, Mistress Ford, Mistress Page, and Miss Anne Page. The first two receive a letter of confession from Falstaff, a naive and greedy old Sir at almost the same time. Two letters have the same content except for the recipient. It is obvious that Falstaff is foolish and disrespects women. The two ladies decide to fool the fat Sir Falstaff, who has an exaggerated opinion of his abilities. Therefore, they arrange to inform Falstaff to rendezvous twice, during which her husband happened to catch him in the act of adultery. In desperation, they put him in a basket filled with dirty clothes and throw him into the gutter near the Thames for the first time. The second time, Falstaff is dressed up as the aunt of the Burren and is severely beaten. The last time, they ask children who are made up as elves and humiliate them in the forest. With these witty and ingenious methods, they severely punish the lecher and defend their own personality and rights.

While punishing Falstaff, the two ladies also ridicule and satirize their husbands' distrust of them. Sir Ford pretends to be a Sir to ensnare Falstaff and Page believes that her wife is unfaithful as well. While teasing Falstaff, the two matrons also tease their husbands by being caught in the act of adultery, as Mistress Page says, "I was then frugal of my mirth. Heaven forgive me! Why, I'll exhibit a bill in the parliament for the putting down of men." (p. 18) However, after the third time of teasing Falstaff, Mistress Ford persuades her husband that Falstaff has already received his retribution, it's better to settle a score than to tie it up. Let us not push him too far. She knows where she stands exactly. It shows the independent and extraordinary dignity of the personality of Mistress Page and Mistress Ford. Their ideological character of pursuing autonomy appears vividly as well. These two women, representing the emerging bourgeoisie, finally won the victory, which not only dealt a blow to the feudal aristocrats with bad habits represented by Falstaff but also mocked the consciousness of the small citizens who distrust women.

In contrast to the two beauties and their flawless personalities, the image of the three Sirs seems silly. The exaggerated flaws of Falstaff, Ford, and Page serve to amplify the intelligence and moral integrity of Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. Their ability to outwit these men underscores the progressive portrayal of women as agents of justice and reason. Falstaff, a fat, lustful, and money-grubbing Sir, wants to dredge for money by courting the two wealthy wives in Windsor. Consequently, he is caught and teased several times. Undoubtedly, he underestimates women and even does not plot a conspiracy to seduce them. Sir Ford and Page suspect their wives of infidelity. Instead of believing or questioning them, they pose as Master Brook to arbitrate information from Falstaff. The play ends with Ford's line "For he, to-night, shall lie with Mistress Ford". (p. 78) The two squires eventually repent and choose to believe their wives and the repentance expresses the mockery of the consciousness of the small citizens better. The image of the three Sirs greatly sets off the shining image of the two damsels and celebrates their wonderful qualities.

In addition to the two damsels, the pretty Miss Anne Page exudes a humanist glow. Though Miss Anne appears infrequently, she serves to skewer the other main thread. She skillfully evades her parents' control over her marriage when playing a trick on Falstaff and quietly marries the love of her life, the young gentleman Fenton.

Apart from Miss Anne's own intelligence, her image is complemented by two suitors, Slender and Caius. Slender, the fallen aristocrat chosen by Miss Anne's father, stands out in the play as being comical and unassertive. Firstly, Charlotte, Slender's uncle, proposes his marriage to Miss Anne in order to gain the seven hundred pounds and gold, silver, or jewelry that Miss Anne's grandfather left her when he died. Once she is seventeen and then gets married, she can get the wealth. In the play, Slender does not react and think about whether he loves Miss Anne or not, but repeats, "I will marry her, sir, at your request; but if there be no great love in the beginning, yet heaven may decrease it upon better acquaintance, when we are married and have more occasion to know one another...But if you say 'marry her,' I will marry her, that I am freely dissolved, and dissolutely." (p. 8)

This is in stark contrast to Miss Anne's pursuit of her ideal love and her obsession with the one she loves. He has so casual attitude that he seems a marionette. Besides, Miss Anne invites him into the hall for dinner in the name of her father, he excuses himself for the reason that he is not hungry right away. Then he says a lot of irrelevant things,

such as his mother, competition of swords and knives, bears in the city. Finally, he enters the dining room at the insistence of Miss Anne. In their short conversation, it is easy to see the comical and face-saving traits of Slender.

Miss Anne's other suitor is the rich and influential French Dr. Caius, who is chosen for her to marry by Mistress Page. This doctor is impolite, short-tempered, vulgar, and harsh in his treatment of his inferiors. After knowing that Reverend Hugh has helped Slender's court, Miss Anne, he orders Slender's servant to deliver a provocative letter to Slender. In the letter, he says, "Mock-vater! Scurvy jack-dog priest! By gar, me vill cut his ears. Clapper-de-claw! By gar, me do look he shall clapper-de-claw me; for, by gar, me vill have it." (p. 31)

In contrast to these two suitors, Miss Anne is highly gentle and kind to others, daring to pursue her love, and manages to escape the entanglements of both Slender and Caius. She successfully marries her sweetheart Fenton by falsely agreeing to her parents' arrangement at the forest masquerade. But in fact, she wears neither white nor green. In her own performance and set off by other characters, Miss Anne's disregard for feudal rites, rituals, and the orders of her parents. She is frank and stubborn and rejects to be repressed. She struggles steadily for her own right to love, even eloping and marrying her lover Slender regardless of reputation. Her behavior highlights the brave and fearless personality of the new bourgeois women.

4. Achilles' Heel of the Shining Heroines

In *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, Miss Olivia makes up her mind that within seven years, she will turn her life into a sea of tears in the name of mourning for her dead brother and not allow love to take root in the heart. This is clearly an old-fashioned and outdated ethic. As Viola criticizes her, "Lady, you are the cruell'st she alive, if you will lead these graces to the grave, And you leave the world so copy", urging Olivia not to waste her youth. This is also the author's way of promoting the spirit of humanism and freedom from asceticism and feudalism through Viola. In the play, Olivia's behavior also confirms this. When she first met Viola dressed as a servant, the bud of love in her heart burrowed out of the soil and flourished. This feeling cannot and must not be suppressed.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, although Mistress Page is a positive female figure portrayed by the author, teasing and punishing old Sir Falstaff and deriding her own husband successfully, she tries to arrange her daughter Miss Anne's marriage and wants her daughter to marry Dr. Caius who is a grumpy but rich and influential man in good company with the princes and noblemen. "That Slender, though well landed, is an idiot; And he my husband best of all affects. The Doctor is well money'd, and his friends Potent at court; he, none but he, shall have her, though twenty thousand worthier come to crave her." (p. 62) That shows her greedy side as a bourgeoisie.

5. Conclusion

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Mistress Ford, and Mistress Page use their wits to defend their dignity. They tease old Sir Falstaff and earn their husbands' respect. Miss Anne Page escapes her parents' control over her marriage skillfully and succeeds in marrying Sir Fenton.

In *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, although the twin siblings go through a series of twists and turns, two pairs of young people, Viola and Orsino, and Sebastian and Olivia, also end up in love. The heroines in the play use their wisdom to break through the shackles of feudal and hierarchical concepts. They reap the benefits of love, dignity, and personality sovereignty, which is an example of the glorious female image in the early comedies of Shakespeare, and also a representative of Shakespeare as the main force of the Renaissance the flag of humanism.

Shakespeare's early comedies highlight the transformative ideals of the Renaissance, by portraying women as intelligent, independent, and morally superior to their male counterparts. Nowadays, these works continue to inspire discussions on gender equality and the enduring relevance of humanist principles in literature.

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