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Viola and Kate: Different Yet Similar

William Shakespeare has come under extensive scrutiny recently regarding his treatment of women in several of his plays. Some feminist critics suggest that Shakespeare, despite the fact that he does include women in important roles, he still represents women as dependent individuals who must live under the submission of their husbands. This motif is well illustrated in two of Shakespeare's more popular plays: *Twelfth Night* and *Taming of the Shrew*. Despite the many differences between these two plays, there are three common elements regarding Shakespeare's presentation of women, represented by Kate in *Taming of the Shrew* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*: their desire to be independent women, their transformation into submissive women and their fulfillment as individuals in a marriage. As both of these women progress through their respective experiences, it becomes apparent that Shakespeare presents a traditional view of women that suggests the natural order in society purports the idea, that in a marriage the woman is to be submissive to males and to her husband.

At first, it would seem that Viola, in *Twelfth Night*, and Kate from *The Taming of the Shrew* are completely different. After all, *The Taming of the Shrew*, one of Shakespeare's early comedies, presents the main female character, Kate, as a bold, aggressive and stubborn woman seemingly determined to remain unmarried and uncontrolled by any man. Conversely in *Twelfth Night*, one of Shakespeare's later

comedies, Viola is almost the exact opposite of Kate. Viola, at the onset of the play, finds herself helpless in a strange land, and must quickly find refuge in the disguise of a man. She then enters the service of Orsino so he might protect her from the unknown evils of the land of Illyria. Ironically it is these differences that, in fact, make Kate and Viola very similar.

The audience first meets Kate in Act II of the play; however, Kate's character is developed well before she actually takes to the stage. In Act I, Kate is described in many negative ways. For example, Hortensio states that she has a "scolding tongue" (I.ii. 100). Later in the scene, after Hortensio has explained Petruchio's goal to woo and then marry Kate, Grumio asks Hortensio if he has been honest and forthright with Petruchio regarding Kate's many faults (I.ii.186). Learning that Petruchio is well aware of Kate's aggressive tendencies, Grumio encourages Petruchio's marital endeavors; however, he does so with a sense of warning. Grumio says "O sir, such a life, with such a wife, were strange! But if you have a stomach, to'ta God's name: You shall have me assisting you in all (I.ii. 194-196) Obviously, Kate's reputation as an aggressive woman has spread throughout the country. Tranio confirms this common perception later in the scene when he describes Kate to Hortensio as being a woman with a scolding tongue (I.ii.201).

Kate's aggressive nature is fully developed in Act II of the play. The Act opens with Bianca talking to Kate about her desire to get married and the hindrance Kate presents to this desire. Because Kate is the older daughter, social values dictate she must be married first; only then can Bianca marry. The conversation quickly develops into a full-fledged fight with Kate eventually overwhelming Bianca and tying her up. Kate's

actions through the next three Acts only reinforce her reputation as an almost uncontrollable, independent woman.

Conversely, Viola, in *Twelfth Night* is quite different in her behaviour. Unlike Kate, Viola has lost all male influence in her life. She believes her brother has died and she is shipwrecked on an unknown island. Unsure about what to do, and worried that she may be taken advantage of, she immediately seeks help from the Sea Captain. Together they plot a way for Viola to hide her identity as a woman and seek employment in the house of Orsino, the Duke of Illyria. Viola recognizes her vulnerable state and thanks the Sea Captain for his help in these matters. While Kate rejects men's assistance, Viola seeks the help of a man and even takes on the disguise of a male eunuch in order to protect her state as a woman.

It is also interesting to note that when Viola's twin brother, Sebastian, lands on the island; he does not follow the same plan as Viola. Sebastian does not attempt to disguise himself from the people of Illyria. Instead he boldly enters the town and hopes to visit with Count Orsino (II.i.318). Sebastian, the male twin, does not fear he will be taken advantage of. Furthermore, he discourages the help of Antonio who offers his services to him. Unlike Viola, Sebastian is aware that he is capable of looking after himself.

The difference in behaviour of these two female protagonists, in completely different circumstances, has one very important similarity. Irene Dash points out that while Viola and Olivia seem to be opposites "...Economic independence and the absence of male authority figures in their families seem to promise self-sovereignty "(Dash 212). Both women have a unique opportunity as women, to live without the influence or domination of a man. Viola capitulates faster than Kate. She quickly resorts to the

protection of a man, the Sea Captain, and then takes on the disguise of a man, in order to seek employment and protection from any other man. Ironically, this act of adopting a male disguise is really an act of rebellion. Dymrna Callaghan points out that, “in the Renaissance, the mimicking of social superiors by wearing their clothes was as much a violation of the natural order as the assumption of a sexual identity other than that dictated by one’s anatomical destiny (Callaghan 32). Viola is rebelling against the norms of the Renaissance through this simple action. She is asserting herself as an independent woman.

Viola’s actions would have been very troubling for the Elizabethan audience. The audience would not be at all sympathetic to a woman who performed such an outrageous action because, “the masculine woman and the woman in disguise are both disruptive socially because they go behind the scenes and find that manhood describes not the man inside, but the world’s reaction to his breaches” (Dusinberre 244).

In contrast Kate maintains her independence for most of the play. She steadfastly tries to rebuff Petruchio’s advances. Her actions indicate her desire to maintain independence and her own individuality; she will not marry and a man will not dominate her. It was considered acceptable behaviour for young women to succumb to the power of men and gradually relinquish their independence to a man (Dash 212). Kate’s behaviour illustrates a fight against the typical stereotype regarding women.

It is also interesting that Shakespeare never allows Kate to express her thoughts regarding her desire not to marry. Throughout *Taming of the Shrew* Kate never overtly states her feelings regarding marriage. The audience simply knows that she will not marry. Furthermore, Kate exhibits all of the negative stereotypes of a shrewish woman:

violent, coarse language, disrespect for authority to itemize a few of her attributes (Pitt 95).

Thus, Shakespeare presents two different types of women, and yet carefully ties these two individuals together under one banner: independence. Angela Pitt believes Shakespeare's treatment of women is very important. He presents different types of women together subtly under the desire to be independent (Pitt 76-77). The suggestion made by Shakespeare is that the basic desire of all women is to be independent. This desire to be independent becomes a negative attribute through the unruly and obnoxious actions of Kate. Ironically, Petruchio is allowed to act this way without any criticism, suggesting that men may act this way but women may not.

Viola's independence as a man gradually erodes during the course of the *Twelfth Night*. She must deal with many different circumstances as a man but do so having the internal perspective of a woman. This situation provides a great deal of humor for the audience but she must suppress her growing love for Orsino, reject the romantic advances of Olivia and even face the prospect of a duel with Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Her hidden identity, in each one of these circumstances, presents a female perspective in a male role. Despite her humorous behaviour, her female identity remains hidden even at the cost of death, albeit a weak duel with Sir Andrew.

Likewise, Kate also goes through a transformation in *Taming of the Shrew*. At the start of Act II, Kate seems an unlikely candidate for a wedding. She remains steadfast in her hope to remain single, even after her father promises her in marriage to Petruchio. Then, in Act III, she must endure Petruchio's further attempts to humiliate her. He arrives for the wedding late and in very inappropriate attire; he then refuses to attend the

wedding feast, preferring to take Kate off to his home in the country. Petruchio's harsh treatment of Kate continues in Act IV. He denies Kate food or sleep in order that he can eventually "tame" Kate to be obedient to him. Eventually Kate succumbs to her new husband's demands and Petruchio rewards her with basic necessities.

In both cases, Kate and Viola must learn to repress their identity as an independent woman and, in turn, become more and more dependent on men. Viola must set aside her identity as a woman in order to protect herself. Kate, too, must set aside her individual and independent and become submissive to her new husband, Petruchio. Shakespeare's message of submission is illustrated through two different women, but with the same result. In order to find fulfillment, a woman must become submissive to a man.

Another common element concerning both women is their role in each respective play. Viola is a slave of Orsino. She must heed his every wish without any hesitation, even if Orsino is acting in an unreasonable manner. For example Viola, as Cesario, tries to point out Orsino's hopeless plan to woo Olivia. Orsino ignores this advice, and insists that Cesario continue his task to woo Olivia on his behalf. Reluctantly, she continues with her instructions. Orsino seems to be blind to the ill-fated nature of his relationship with Olivia; yet, Shakespeare allows him to continue with this goal until the very final act of the play. Men, it would seem, are allowed to act in any manner even if it is not reasonable.

Kate experiences a somewhat similar situation in *Taming of the Shrew*. Petruchio is allowed to make all sorts of strange requests regarding the manner in which Kate is treated. No one ever challenges his harsh and at times cruel treatment of Kate. Even more

important is the fact that other characters in the play, most notably Bapista, Kate's father, allow Petruchio to act in this manner all in the hope of subduing her nature.

Unfortunately, as a reward for this less than admirable behaviour of the significant males in her life, Kate succumbs to Petruchio's plan, and becomes a submissive woman (Pitt 95).

One of Shakespeare's greatest supporters, Queen Elizabeth, commented on this theme according to Mihoko Suzuki. Suzuki writes:

Elizabeth is said to have regarded the marriages that concluded Shakespeare's comedies to be a reproval to her unmarried state... Comedies, with their recognizably Elizabethan settings... their focus on establishing social harmony- as emphasized by the marriages that conclude them – would have been especially suitable vehicles through which the audience's concerns with the social order would be dramatized and worked out. (Suzuki 121)

Suzuki poignantly summarizes the important fact that each one of Shakespeare's concludes with a marriage. This is a significant part of Shakespeare's understanding of life: the restoration of order. Angela Pitt states; "The hallmark of Shakespeare's comedies is consequently the move towards reconciliation and restoration of order by the correct understanding of the original problem" (Pitt 76). The "correct understanding" of a woman's role is without a doubt, the most crucial aspect in both the *Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night*.

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola's identity is finally revealed in the last Act of the play. Through a series of events, Viola is forced to reveal her identity to all of the people with

whom she has become associated as a man. However, this is not possible without her own reconciliation with her brother, Sebastian. Unexpectedly, he arrives on the scene and she is able to let her masculine guard down and openly admit that she is his sister. During this scene, Viola admits, to everyone's surprise, that she is a woman. Once Sebastian confirms this, then Viola assumes her rightful place as a woman. Then, once this has occurred, Orsino proposes to her, knowing now that his love has finally found its true focus, Viola and not Olivia.

It is interesting that Shakespeare deals quickly with the issue of Viola's inappropriate clothing soon after her confession. The very first thing that Orsino says to Viola, once she becomes the object of his love, is his desire to see her in appropriate clothing. "Give me thy hand; And let me see thee in thy woman's weeds" (V. i. 279-280). This is a very important step, not only regarding the reconciliation of their relationship, but also regarding establishment of their status in this public forum. Orsino is now in control as a man, and Viola is now submissive to his desires. Proper order has been reestablished. This order is reinforced by Orsino's last pronouncement in the play regarding Malvolio. Despite the fact that Malvolio is not his servant and that he really does not have any power to set the parameters regarding his desire to seek justice, Orsino states

Pursue him, and entreat him to a peace: /He hath not told us of the captain
 Yet: /When that is known and golden time convents, /A solemn
 combination shall be made /Of our dear souls. Meantime, sweet sister,
 /We will not part hence. Cesario, come; /For so you shall be, while you are

a man; /But when in other habits you are seen /Orsino's mistress and his
fancy's queen. (V. i. 389- 396)

Orsino has taken control of the situation. He proclaims how the injustice of Malvolio will be dealt with and then turns his thoughts to marriage. Olivia, the one who is really responsible for Malvolio, merely looks on and complies with Orsino's wishes. With these words, the main characters leave the stage and one can only conclude that they live happily ever after. Orsino will now marry Viola and Sebastian will marry Olivia; there is a rightful order; the couples will live as man and wife.

However, there is a far more important message in the conclusion of both plays. As one Shakespearean critic notes, this pattern is common throughout Shakespeare's comedies. All of the women in Shakespeare's plays, who go against the prevailing social values of the day, are all redeemed by the end of the play (Pitt 75). The marriages of both Kate and Viola suggest that each woman has now found her rightful place as a married woman.

The marriages symbolize the fact that the transformation of both Kate and Viola is complete. For Viola, her transformation leads her back into the role of a woman who is controlled by a man. She sheds her masculine clothing and adopts her rightful place as a married dependent woman. The Puritans, who are responsible for the censorship of plays, would be pleased with the outcome of both marriages at the end. While the Puritans believe in the equal status of spouses in a marriage, they also believe that one spouse, the woman, would be required to be the submissive partner if a marriage is to be successful. In return for this, the women receive love from her husband (Dusinberre 83). Thus, both plays would be approved from the prevailing religious group of Shakespeare's day.

There is one little small twist regarding the status of a married woman in *Taming of the Shrew*. In the last scene, Petruchio boldly wages with the other newly married men that he can prove Kate is, by far, the most obedient wife. Well tamed, Kate does indeed help her husband win the wager to everyone's surprise. But even more important is what the other women suggest to the audience. Bianca and the Widow begin to act in an independent manner in this scene. It seems that a role reversal has occurred amongst the women; Kate is now submissive, whereas Bianca and the Widow are acting like shrews. Perhaps Shakespeare is suggesting that all women secretly desire to act like the former Kate (Pitt 98). Yet Kate, in the play demonstrates that the best role for a woman is to be submissive.

Clearly, the two plays have a common thread. The central female characters, Kate and Viola, despite their apparent differences, act in a similar fashion. Both characters rebel against the traditional roles of a woman, Kate directly through her actions as a shrewish woman, Viola when she dresses up as a man. Then, both women undergo a transformation; Kate learns to succumb to Petruchio and submit to his authority; Viola eventually sheds her male image and returns to her role as a traditional woman under the control of a man. Finally, order is reestablished in both plays when the lead female characters marry their respective male lovers. Thus, Shakespeare is presenting a very powerful message to his audience: women should not be independent but rather dependent and submissive under the direction of their husbands. To act otherwise is to break the order within traditional Elizabethan society.

Works Cited

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