Was Shakespeare a Feminist?: Language, Deception, and Identity Between the Bounds of Feminine Liberation and Patriarchal Subjugation

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'In the Comedies, Shakespeare seems, if not a feminist, then at least a man who takes the woman's part' (Bamber 2).

The women of Shakespeare's comedies have long since functioned as important focal points of critical discourse, especially since the late twentieth century's advancement of feminist literary theory took the realm of Shakespearean scholarship by storm (Chedgzoy 5-6). Not only did this signify a deeper shift in critical attention and a more heightened emphasis upon the playwright's presentation of gender politics, womanhood, and conventional notions of femininity; but it also prompted key questions and debates regarding Shakespeare's controversial status as a feminist (Chedgzoy 5-6). *The Taming of the Shrew*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* are some of the most influential comedies in regards to Shakespeare's treatment of women on the Elizabethan stage and his supposed role as a feminist. All three texts feature a series of complex female characters central to the development of plot, thematic framework, and the structural composition of each respective play. Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Rosalind in *As You Like It*, and Viola in *Twelfth Night* can all be seen embodying the complexities and contradictions that characterise Shakespeare's portrayal of women, evident through the variety of ways in which they are consistently constrained by and/or liberated from their womanhood—sometimes even both simultaneously. This essay will focus particularly upon the writer's development of female identity in these three plays, and how its relationship to language, the body, deception and disguise, submission and control, and gendered systems of power provide us with poignant insights into the question of Shakespeare's alleged feminism.

To begin with, the treatment of Kate's character in *The Taming of the Shrew* is perhaps the most clearly defined deviation from Linda Bamber's claim that Shakespeare is a feminist who takes the woman's part. A significant portion of my essay is therefore dedicated to this play in particular; drawing on the presumption that it targets Bamber's endorsement of Shakespearean feminism more directly than many of his other works. As indicated by its title, the entire premise

of the play's action revolves primarily around the male desire to initiate a subjugation or '*Taming*' of Kate's outspoken and boisterous nature in order to produce an obedient, 'virtuous', and subservient wife instead (2.1, 136). This central thematic strand of masculine domination over feminine submission is then also compounded by male characters' pervasive use of language that either objectifies or dehumanises women in the play. In Act 2 Scene 1, for instance, we witness Kate's father, Baptista, referring to his daughters as 'prize[s]' for their suitors to 'win', and to himself as 'play[ing] a merchant's part / and ventur[ing] madly on a desperate mart' (152-3). In the same scene, Tranio (disguised as Lucentio), refers to them as 'commodit[ies]' likened to goods for trade 'on the seas', elucidating the impression of marriage in the world of the play as a financial transaction operating under the sole authority of fathers and future husbands (152). ~~The commercialised nature of the diction employed here thus highlights the lack of agency women in the play have access to, whilst also shedding light upon the masculine tendency to weaponise this absence of agency and perceive women as little more than objects for exchange, thereby challenging Bamber's assertion of a seemingly feminist Shakespeare~~. The commercialised diction here highlights women's lack of agency in the play, whilst also shedding light upon characters' masculine tendency to weaponise this absence of female agency. The subsequent treatment and perception of women as little more than objects for exchange therefore challenges Bamber's assertion of a seemingly feminist Shakespeare.

These ideas regarding male characters' use of language as a tool to reinforce patriarchal conceptions of women as objects and animals is then extended further throughout the rest of the play, most visibly exemplified in Petruchio's speeches in the third and fourth acts. After having finally married Kate, we see him describe himself as the 'master of what is mine own', before going on to refer to his newly wedded wife as 'my goods, my chattels, … my house, / My

household stuff, my field, my barn, / My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing' (3.2, 175). The markedly distinct repetition of possessive personal pronouns ('mine' and 'my') in Petruchio's lines thus illuminates Shakespeare's depiction of marriage and gendered relationships as being almost inherently skewed towards a dynamic of ownership and control. Furthermore, the opening scene of the fourth act also ends with Petruchio conceptualising his relationship with Kate as that of an untamed 'falcon['s]' relationship with 'her keeper' (4.1, 186). Shakespeare's continuous depiction of men dominating the women around them—women who are consistently dehumanised and stripped bare of their fundamental right to personhood and autonomy—in *The Taming of the Shrew* can therefore be seen as a powerful critique of Bamber's argument that Shakespeare takes the part of his female characters.

On the other hand, an alternative interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew* might instead argue that, by deliberately choosing to represent the unequal planes of hierarchical male-female relationships and the ruthless imposition of rigid social expectations idealising female passivity and absolute obedience, Shakespeare is in fact drawing attention to the patriarchal systems of social order that feminists are primarily concerned with critiquing. As Coppélia Kahn argues, Shakespeare 'never fails to question the moral grounds and practical effect' of the particular social order that his plays seem to endorse, if not directly, then indirectly by pushing his audience to do so themselves (88). He does this in a manner typical to much of Shakespearean comedy—by imbuing the overtly comic elements of the plot and the play's action with an underlying sense of excess and moral ambiguity, stretched to a point of subtle discomfort on the part of the audience. The blatant cruelty that Kate is subjected to by Petruchio, whilst often still being comedic, nevertheless carries with it a sense of injustice that seeks to evoke the audience's sympathy for her predicament. A similar phenomenon can also be seen occurring in *Twelfth*

Night, for instance, with respect to the trickery and deception that Malvolio is subjected to in the second and third acts of the play. Shakespeare seems to therefore have a penchant for pushing the comic dramatic form to its most extremes by confronting the audience with situations that question the boundaries by which they distinguish that which is comedic from that which is cruel. A feminist reading of the *The Taming of the Shrew* would then highlight the 'psychological and moral validity' that Shakespeare allows Kate's 'shrewishness' to possess, and how this destabilising combination of laughter and pity from the audience ultimately contains within itself the capacity to expose the 'irrational', absurd, and 'illusory' nature of patriarchal systems of power within the play (Kahn 88-89).

In addition, a feminist approach to deconstructing *The Taming of the Shrew*'s seemingly anti-feminist concerns would then also further emphasise the significance of form and genre in delineating Shakespeare's status as a feminist. The play is particularly unique in terms of how it slightly deviates from the conventional plot structure of the comedic dramatic form. This is evident in how it does not end with a series of marriages that take place in the final scenes, as is the case with *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and many other Shakespearean comedies. Instead, only Bianca and Lucentio are wedded in the fifth act; whereas the primary romantic pairing that is most crucial to the play's progression of plot and dramatic action—that of Kate and Petruchio—is married off at the end of the third act. By situating the play's principle romantic union at the climactic half-way point of the text rather than at its conclusion, Shakespeare turns love and marriage (and by extension, men's use of marriage to oppress women) into a source of conflict as opposed to its traditional structural use as a resolution of conflict; therefore supporting Bamber's argument in favour of Shakespearean feminism.

Moreover, the play’s induction scenes also stand out as another distinguishing factor that push the text farther away from the conventions of Shakespearean comedy, whilst also establishing the farcical tone of its overarching structural framework. The induction follows Christopher Sly, a drunken tinker who is deceived into thinking he is part of the aristocracy, and thereby reinforcing the idea of Shakespeare asking his audience to acknowledge the absurdity of the power structures governing English society. He does so by highlighting the ease with which these systems can be so completely overturned, mocked, and even laughed at. What is even more striking about the induction scenes, however, is how they set up the primary plotlines of the text as a play-within-a-play that Christopher Sly is meant to be entertained by. Although meta-theatrical dramatic devices are considered a hallmark of Shakespearean comedies, their deployment here is especially significant because they establish an additional layer of distance between the audience and the main characters, and relegate the substance matter of the shrew-plot to the domain of farce. As H. J. Oliver argues, the improbability and exaggeration inherent to the farcical mode of comedy makes it difficult to ‘“believe”’ in the characters of the shrew-plot when even Sly himself struggles to take them seriously as entertainment (40). Oliver’s rhetorical question of whether we are going to ‘let *that* play “preach morality” to us or look in it for “social and intellectual substance”’ then essentially sums up the feminist undertones of *The Taming of the Shrew* as manifesting in Shakespeare’s implicit treatment of the play’s overt misogyny as ridiculous, farcical, and absurd (40)**.**

It has therefore been demonstrated how *The Taming of the Shrew*, in spite of its vividly anti-feminist language and plot structure, can still be interpreted from a feminist standpoint to articulate the subtle yet acutely penetrative ways in which Shakespeare still seems to take the part of his female characters. The question of Shakespeare’s feminism is then evidently an

intricate and complex one, full of compelling arguments and evidence both in support of and in contradiction to its claims. The critical endeavour to reconcile these opposing viewpoints is then perhaps most remarkably epitomised through the nuanced relationship that the playwright constructs between language and how women in the comedies make use of it.

This can be connected back to the earlier discussion of how men in *The Taming of the Shrew* use objectifying language and dehumanising diction to perpetuate patriarchal power dynamics and assert dominance over women. However, the same idea can then also be reversed to accentuate how Kate actively resists male domination and subjugation through language. In fact, the primary basis of Kate's status as a shrew is grounded in 'her scolding tongue' and her uninhibited manner of speech (1.2, 124). She is the only woman in the play whose use of language subverts rather than reinforces the systems of male control that strip women of their agency. This is evident throughout the text in terms of male characters' responses to her outspokenness—she is called a 'wench', 'stark mad', 'a fiend of hell', 'rough', 'curst', and 'shrewd' all within the span of the very first scene (1.1, 109, 110, 115). Kate's reclamation of individual agency through language can also be observed in lines such as 'My tongue will tell the anger of my heart, / Or else my heart concealing it will break' and 'I will be free / Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words' (4.3, 198). Shakespeare thus sheds light upon the duality of language as a tool capable of both subverting and perpetuating the silencing and subjugation of women in the play, allowing him to simultaneously take the part in favour of and in opposition to the play's women—and hence further problematising the notion of him as a feminist.

Moreover, Kate's relationship with language is particularly striking when considered in contrast to her sister, Bianca's, who is continually associated with silence, 'virtuous[ness]', and 'beauteous modesty' throughout the course of the play (2.1, 138. 1.2, 132). In presenting Bianca

as the direct antithesis to Kate's lack of linguistic restraint, Shakespeare subsequently sets up a turbulent relationship between the two sisters that could be said to represent the internal struggle of silence-as-obedience versus outspokenness-as-resistance that is deemed crucial to each character's navigation of female identity. This can be observed in the opening scene of the second act, when Kate ties her sister up and calls her a 'minion', both physically and verbally alluding to the lack of freedom that Bianca's virtuous silence restricts her with (2.1, 134). Kate's following impassioned declaration that her sister's 'silence flouts her, and [that she will] be revenged' then also reaffirms the hostility and dramatic tension that Shakespeare sets up between women who do and do not use language as a means of challenging male authority (2.1, 135). Once again, this further complicates Shakespeare's status as a feminist because he presents a double burden that women in the play must confront: the first being the men who try to control them, and the second being other women who respond to this domination in ways that challenge their own individual responses to it. Shakespeare could be said to be taking the part of the women by choosing to dramatise the multidimensional nature of these struggles, but he could alternatively also be said to be doing the opposite by pitting women against one another whilst they are already suffering at the hands of male oppression.

Furthermore, the inextricable connection established between Shakespeare's central female characters and their use of language as a tool to explore their own womanhood is a prominent aspect of both *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*'s approach to Shakespearean feminism. Both Rosalind and Viola are women who take on disguises and deceive the majority of other characters around them into believing they are men, whilst also managing to maintain a mastery over language, wit, and wordplay that places them at a level above others in the play. This is evident, for instance, in the multiple occasions where Viola (disguised as Cesario)

directly alludes to her true identity and emotions before Orsino and Olivia, neither of whom ever manage to see through the layers of her physical or linguistic disguises. In Act 2 Scene 5 she tells Orsino that her 'father had a daughter [who] loved a man / As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman / I should your lordship', and then that she is 'all the daughters of [her] father's house, / And all the brothers too' (2.5, 140-41). In the very next scene, she also explicitly says 'I am not what I am' to Olivia—and yet neither one is able to unmask her witty manipulation of words, or of her own body (3.1, 161). Viola speaks in verse during both these encounters, and her elevated use of poetic language and duplicitous diction therefore highlights Shakespeare's deliberate decision to take the part of the woman by establishing her as the character with the highest level of knowledge and linguistic prowess in the play.

Similarly, Rosalind also demonstrates a remarkable level of awareness and lyrical eloquence throughout the course of *As You Like It*. This can be seen through her successful deception of all the characters in the Forest of Arden, including her own father, who are unable to see through her disguise as Ganymede. Her mastery over language and superior emotional intelligence can be most potently observed in the love-game she engages in with Orlando from the third act onwards, and how she convinces him to 'call [her] Rosalind' whilst still being disguised as Ganymede (3.3, 173)**.** This particular play on words is significant because of the comic effect it induces by referencing the multiple layers of differently disguised identities that Rosalind's character embodies. Since female roles were typically played by boys during the Elizabethan era, there would have been a young male actor pretending to be a woman (Rosalind), who was then pretending to be a man (Ganymede), who was then tricking her male beloved into referring to her as a woman again. Rosalind's linguistic and intellectual prowess can also be seen through her manipulation of the text's various romantic plotlines towards the end of Act 5. In

fact, it is her own delicately worded vows that facilitate Phoebe's union with Silvius and her own with Orlando. This is significant because it is almost as if Shakespeare elevates Rosalind to a level equal to his own role as playwright; giving her the agency to directly shape and influence the play's formal structures of plot and dramatic action through her clever use of language and disguise.

What complicates these two seemingly clear-cut examples of Shakespeare taking the side of women in his comedies, then, is precisely the fact that they are disguised at all. It is only by shedding their physical and bodily identities as women that Viola and Rosalind are able to maintain levels of awareness that supersede those of other characters, and it is primarily because of their male disguises that they are given the opportunities to exhibit their command over language and wittily allude to their multiplicitous identities. In fact, both characters initially acknowledge these limitations that the female body presents to the development of their individual plotlines and character arcs—Rosalind highlights the 'danger' of 'travel[ling] so far' as 'maids' (*As You Like It* 1.2, 91), and Viola wishes she could 'serve' a 'lady' instead of disguising herself to serve Orsino (*Twelfth Night* 1.3, 122). Nevertheless, their disguises are what provide them the agency that their female bodies would otherwise never have allowed them access to, whilst also being the means through which they mediate their encounters with love, womanhood, and identity. Once again, Shakespeare's decision to allow Viola and Rosalind to simultaneously navigate the world as men, women, and the liminality that lies between the two can be seen as both a supportive feminist act of widening the scope of what female characters were able to be, feel, and experience; or alternatively as an exclusionary assertion that women would only be able to live through these experiences if they were no longer entirely women.

To conclude, it can therefore be stated that Linda Bamber's claim regarding Shakespearean feminism taking the woman's part in comedies is both partially true and partially not so. The nuanced complexities of Kate, Viola, and Rosalind's characters are all testament to the sense of ambiguous duality that presents them all as liberated to a certain degree, but also concurrently as constrained and suppressed by their femininity in other respects. Shakespeare gives us stories that simultaneously free and subjugate these women, stories that simultaneously deconstruct and reconnect them to their womanhood, stories that offer them more possibilities than the real world would ever allow. He arms them with the power of language, wit, and a variety of selves and identities— allowing their lack of womanliness (via male disguises or shrewishness) to set them free, but still inevitably returning them back to the restrictions of womanhood that they seem unable to escape. Indeed, it is this very act of allowing these women's characters to experience and embody both these freedoms and these limitations all at once that makes it impossible to definitively confirm or deny Bamber's claim. Just like the women in his comedies, then, Shakespeare's feminism lies somewhere in between the liminal spaces of these definitive absolutes.

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