

GENDER SUBVERSION IN SHAKESPEARE'S ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL, TWELFTH NIGHT AND ANTHONY AND CLEOPATRA

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Abstract

Helena thus rebels against Calvinist determinism and social hierarchy, invoking nature and merit. Though she are Bertram and socially distant Helena argues they are suited in nature: nature will join them as they resemble each other in nature rather than stature. Merit thus challenges social hierarchy as those of lower ranks can rise to earn what they deserve through merit. Helena is thus an active advocate of creating your own fate rather than resigning to God. She thus believes in overcoming her low status in society and winning Bertram's heart though her own intelligence and efforts, defying gender norms. In Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, gender is depicted as incidental and indeed accidental to the occasion of love. This is seen in the way Olivia falls for Viola as Cesario and is ready to transfer her affections to Sebastian once it is revealed that Cesario is actually a woman, Viola and Orsino's ready affection for Viola upon the revelation that she is female rather than the male eunuch Cesario .Hence Cleopatra is depicted as a voluptuous, feminine Other who unmans and undoes Anthony and proves to be his fall. And yet, one is brought to admire their peerless love, which indeed, somewhat immortal between the great Anthony and his grand seductress Cleopatra.

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Helena, the orphan daughter of a famous physician, is the ward of the Countess of Rousillon, and madly in love with her son, Count Bertram, who has been sent to the court of the King of France. Despite her beauty and worth, Helena has no hope of attracting Bertram, since she is of low birth and he is a nobleman. However, when word comes that the King is ill, she goes to Paris and, using her father's arts, cures the illness. In return, she is given the hand of any man in the realm; she chooses Bertram. Her new husband is appalled at the match, however, and shortly after their marriage flees France, accompanied only by a scoundrel named Parolles, to fight in the army of the Duke of Florence.

At the end of the first scene, Helena reveals her love for Bertram and he has left Rousillon for the king's court

Hel: Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie
Which we ascribe to heaven the fated sky
Gives us free scope only doth backward pull

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What power is it which mounts my love so high
That makes me see and cannot feed mine eye?
The mightiest space in fortune nature brings
To join like likes and kiss like native things
Impossible be strange attempts to those
That weigh their pains in sense and do suppose
What hath cannot be. Who ever strove
To show her merit that did miss her love?
The king's disease- my project may deceive me

But my intents are fix'd, and will not leave me (All's Well that ends well, 1.i, 212-250)
This scene emphasizes Helena's low rank in society. Her love for Bertram thus remains unrequited because of their class disparity.

Later on in the scene Helena thinks her love mounts 'so high' that she can 'see' her prey on the ground beneath like a falcon. Thus in her situation she 'mounts...high' in her falcon resembling hunting of Bertram. The idea remains throughout where she remains more visionary and long sighted than Bertram who only heeds the immediate situation. Helena's love 'mounts...high' in the social sense that she is aspiring to a higher class. The falcon image also references the individual and fate. The falcon flies high only by its master's permission. Logically thus it is fate itself that removes the hood and allows her love to 'mount' and 'see'. Drawing this to its conclusion Helena reasons God is on her side as a hunter would not launch his falcon unless he wanted the falcon to catch its prey.

Helena's second image is of nature bringing distant things together 'to kiss like native things' The image fits her purpose, but 'kiss' connotes sensuality and complements the falcon image which is to capture and kill. We thus see her as very human. When she claims Bertram in Act 2 scene iii, her words enlarge on the coarse context that the King sets out by urging her to make 'frank election' and 'make choice' and by his emphasis that is her reward. Helena tones down this idea when claiming Bertram saying 'I dare not say I take you but I give/ Me and my service (2, iii, 102-3) and she renounces her right to claim him when he objects: 'That you are well restor'd my Lord I'm glad/Let the rest go (2, iii 147-8) So the imagery of Helena's speech subverts gender conventions of male pursuit and ardor as she is the aggressor and initiator in this courtship.

Later Helena says "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie" challenges the oppressive power of society and gender norms. The line is also significant in religious controversies during Shakespeare's time between free will and predestination. The puritan doctrine of predestination held that fate is determined by God. We may have free will to act righteously or sin but this has no effect on the ultimate destiny God has determined before we are born. This is Calvinist determinism. Helena is defiant of determinism believing fate can be taken into your own hands. She believes in creating her own fate and doing what she can to earn her reward' Who ever strove/ To show her merit that miss her love?' Helena thus rebels against Calvinist determinism and social hierarchy, invoking nature and merit. Though she are Bertram and socially distant Helena argues they are suited in nature: nature will join them as they resemble each other in nature rather than stature. Merit thus challenges social hierarchy as those of lower ranks can rise to earn what they deserve through merit. Helena is thus an active advocate of creating your own

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fate rather than resigning to God. She thus believes in overcoming her low status in society and winning Bertram's heart though her own intelligence and efforts, defying gender norms.

In Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, gender is depicted as incidental and indeed accidental to the occasion of love. This is seen in the way Olivia falls for Viola as Cesario and is ready to transfer her affections to Sebastian once it is revealed that Cesario is actually a woman, Viola and Orsino's ready affection for Viola upon the revelation that she is female rather than the male eunuch Cesario she had disguised herself as. Love thus exceeds gender and it is revealed to be invested rather in one's persona as Olivia falls for Viola as Cesario and Orsino likewise falls for Viola once it is revealed that she is female rather than the male eunuch he had taken her for.

If music be the food of love, play on
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die
That strain again, it had a dying fall.
O, It came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets
Stealing and giving odour. Enough, no more
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before. (1.1, 1-9)

In the above quote Orsino is seen to be thoroughly love sick and filled with longing for Olivia, and he is indeed sick as his love for her is unrequited, thus breathing upon a bank of violets, stealing and giving odour and not was sweet as it was before because his pursuit of Olivia is in vain given that she is in mourning and refuses his advances in wooing her.

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid
For such disguise as haply shall become
The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke,
Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him.(1.2,50-54)

Viola disguises herself as a male in order to get close to Orsino, whom she in fact, is in love with as she has heard of his noble heritage. This occasion however leads to much complication and a love triangle when upon being sent by Orsino to woo Olivia Olivia falls for Cesario whom she is convinced is a beautiful male who is more enticing than Orsino.

Make me a willow cabin at your gate
And call upon my soul within the house,
Write loyal cantons of contemned love
And sing them loud even in the dead of night
Halloo your name to the reverberate hills,
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out 'Olivia!' O, you should not rest
Between the elements of air and earth
But you should pity me.(1.5,257-265)

In the above quote Viola as Cesario renders an intensely moving speech pleading for Olivia to return love to Orsino but the passage of communication as a meditation on Olivia's riveting beauty that confounds nature moves Olivia to fall for the messenger Cesario instead as she is moved by the poetical ode to her beauty and believes it originates from Cesario rather than Orsino. This is the occasion of much complication for Viola as she cannot and does not love

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Olivia as she in in fact a woman herself and is rather, in love with Orsino, thus creating a love triangle.

Oh Time, thou must untangle this, not I.
It is to hard a know for me t' untie(2.2 40-41)

Viola is caught in a deep dilemma and love triangle as Olivia has fallen for her as Orsino's messenger after her moving speech on Olivia's beauty with the result that Viola does not know how to escape the situation as she indeed is not in love with Olivia but rather her rival in love as she loves Orsino too while Orsino pines for Olivia.

She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' th' bud,
Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like Patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?
We men may say more, swear more, but indeed,
Our shows are more than will; for still we prove
Much in our vows, but little in our love."(2.4 110-118)

Olivia is here disclosing her plight to Orsino who does not realize she is talking about herself as she has disguised herself as Cesario to get close to Orsino and she discloses that she pines for Orsino as much as he pines for Olivia. She discloses that she has been waiting patiently for Orsino to see beyond the concealment but he has proven to be ignorant of her love and pining for him.

O, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful
In the contempt and anger of his lip!
A murderous guilt shows not itself more soon
Than love that would seem hid. Love's night is
noon.-
Cesario, by the roses of the spring
By maidenhood, honor, truth, and everything,
I love thee so, that, maugre all thy pride,
Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide.
Do not extort thy reasons from this clause,
For that I woo, though therefor hast no cause;
But rather reason thus with reason fetter:
Love sought is good, but given unsought is better.(3.1, 143-153)

The moment of complication for Viola has come when Olivia declares her love for her as Cesario and tries to convince her that love given unsought is better than love that is sought, like Orsino's love for her that remains unrequited. Viola of course is confounded by this as she loves of course Orsino rather than Olivia as she is a woman.

What relish is this? How runs the stream?
Or am I mad, or else this is a dream.
Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep;
If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep! (4.1,58-61)

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Sebastian in the above quote is confused by Olivia's interest in him but at the same time elated by his new found love. Olivia has of course mistaken Sebastian for Cesario or Viola, and it will indeed be requited love this time as Sebastian is attracted to Olivia while Viola as a female is not as her maleness is a mere disguise.

But when in other habits you are seen,
Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen(5.1, 376-379)

Orsino thus realizes that he loves Viola as a female rather than Olivia as he had been subliminally attracted to his effeminate eunuch in the play throughout and now that it is disclosed that she is indeed the beautiful Viola it is Viola in her female dress that she loves instead. *Twelfth Night* thus discloses, with the ready falling in love of Olivia with Sebastian and Orsino with Viola at the end of the play that gender is incidental to love as it is the person and character of Viola that Orsino has come to love and that indeed Olivia had fallen in love with Viola as Cesario.

The fall of Anthony is the fall of a great man and his line of duty to the whims and manipulations of the seductress Cleopatra, it is the sacrifice of worldly honour for love, Anthony's tragedy is that he is led to sacrifice his military prestige and honour as well as the line of duty "as bellows to a fan to cool a gypsy's lust".(Anthony and Cleopatra 1:1) Anthony attempts to straddle the worlds of duty and love but is unmanned and feminized by the wiles of Cleopatra, who is depicted unflatteringly as a whore with ravenous sexual appetite and barely any consideration of Anthony and his obligations to Rome and empire.

Indeed Cleopatra is depicted as Anthony's ruin, unmanning him and feminizing him while leading him to neglect the call of empire and duty. As she is described in Act 2:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women cloy
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies, for the vilest things
Become themselves in her, that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish (II ii 240-5)

Cleopatra is thus depicted as a great seductress, who lures into her trap men whose sexual appetite for her prove interminable, she is also depicted as wanton, coy, fickle, coquettish, a seductress of infinite variety whose nature is to beguile men like Anthony from their line of duty. Indeed, Cleopatra devices ways and means to keep Anthony away from Rome which she views as the greatest threat to their romance. Unlike her charms, mutability, changeability, frivolity and fickleness, Rome is the formal and cold world of rules, formality, regulations that threaten to lure Anthony away from their great romance. As she puts it in Act 1:

But sir, forgive me
Since my becoming kill me when they do not
Eye well to you. Your honour calls you hence
Therefore be deaf to my unpitied folly
And the gods go with you! (I iii 95-9)

Indeed Cleopatra proves to be Anthony's ruin again by betraying him on three counts. Firstly when she leaves the sea battle, second when she entertains Thidas with courtesy, and thirly when her fleet surrenders to Caesar. Cleopatra was cowardly to abandon Anthony at the first battle. It is her great mutability and frivolity as well as inconstancy to Anthony that proves to be

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Anthony's undoing and defeat. Having exhausted him as a lover, she proves to be no military ally and her frivolity frequently leads her to desert him on all counts. As such Anthony is unhinged and unmanned by her behavior:

Here I am Anthony
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave
I made these wars for Egypt, and the Queen
Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine
Which, whilst it was mine, had annexed unto 't
A million more, now lost- she Eros, has
Paced cards with Caesar, and false played my glory
Unto an enemy's triumph (IV xiv 13-20)

Anthony is divided by the masculine world of Roman duty and Egypt's feminine love, and it is the mutability, inconstancy and frivolity of Cleopatra that proves to be his undoing. Anthony's tragedy is that he cannot balance the worlds of honour, duty and pleasure and love and is indeed undone by the mutability, inconstancy and frivolity of Cleopatra.

We see the conflict between honour and pleasure in the opening scene:

CLEO You must not stay here longer. Your dismissal
Is come from Caesar. Therefore hear it Antony.
Where's Fulvia's process? Caesar's I would say! Both!
Call in the messengers. As I am Egypt's Queen
Thou blushest, Anthony, and that blood of thine
Is Caesar's homage; else so thy cheeks pay shame
When shrill tongued Fulvia scolds. The messengers!

ANT. Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arcg
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space
Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as as man. The nobleness of life
Is to do thus- when such a mutual pair
And such a twain can do't, in which I bind,
On pain of punishment, the world to weet
We stand up peerless (I I 26-40)

In the above passage we see Cleopatra challenging Anthony's dominion by accusing Anthony of being under obligations to Fulvia and Caesar, thus challenging him to rearrange his priorities by placing their love above his call of formal duty. Anthony is indeed provoked by the challenge to declare that Rome and empire as well as the formal call of duty are insignificant compared to their grand, eternal, peerless love which is his first call. As such Anthony shifts his priorities from being a great military commander to being the lover of Cleopatra and is as such as many critics point out, unmanned by Cleopatra and beguiled by her wiles to place love before duty, which will ultimately prove to be his fall.

Anthony's portrayal of Cleopatra as being 'cunning past man's thought'(I. 2. 144)Indeed Anthony may be seen to place excessive blame of his own faults on Cleopatra but he is undeniably bitter about her frivolity and unmanning of him, calling her his "Serpent of Old Nile (I. 5. 25)but for fear that " You'll heat my blood. No more!, he refuses his request to "play one scene/ Of excellent dissembling and let it look/ Like perfect honour(I. 3. 80 78-80). Indeed

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Anthony calls Cleopatra other names. Coming upon Thidias kissing her hand, he calls her ‘kite’ (3.13.89) which implies that she is a sexual predator and whore. Shortly after he accuses her of having ‘‘been a boggler ever’’ (3.13.113) Indeed Anthony confesses to feeling manipulated and beguiled by Cleopatra. He advances a theory that ‘‘The wise gods seel our eyes’’ (3.13.113), that is blind and beguile him, so that he can ‘‘make us/Adore our errors, laugh at’s while we strut/ To our confusion. (3.13.114-16)

Hence Cleopatra is depicted as a voluptuous, feminine Other who unmans and undoes Anthony and proves to be his fall. And yet, one is brought to admire their peerless love, which indeed, somewhat immortal between the great Anthony and his grand seductress Cleopatra, their endings in death may imply ruin and failure but may also be read as an attempt to conquer fate, that is rather than suffer physical defeat, their suicides are their triumph over physical defeat, conquest and imprisonment. The grand and peerless nature of their love is thus celebrated even as Cleopatra proves to be the ruin of Anthony.

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