

**Revisiting William Shakespeare: A Profeminist Reading
of *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*
Revisiter William Shakespeare: une lecture profémiste
de *Comme il vous plaira* et *Beaucoup de bruit pour rien***

Rawiya Kouachi*

Mohamed Lamine Debaghine University, Setif 2, Algeria.
kouachirawiya@hotmail.com

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Abstract:

This article questions William Shakespeare's feminist ideas in his comedies *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Albeit many scholars argue that Shakespeare is an anti-feminist writer, this article seeks to vindicate that he transcended the stereotypes of women in the Elizabethan society which regarded women as weak and meek to describe them as independent feminist characters. He violated the norms of his society in terms of women's position to portray extraordinary feminist females: Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* through their strong personalities and eloquent speeches. Compared to Shakespeare's Elizabethan world, Rosalind and Beatrice repudiate their social conventions about women to stand as outstanding female characters. Yet, the analysis unravels Rosalind's and Beatrice's wishes to be men to enjoy their privileges and rights. Thus, Shakespeare portrayed strong women by mixing feminine and masculine qualities as a reflection of his admiration for Queen Elisabeth. Hence, from a feminist standpoint, the analysis unravels that

Shakespeare is a forerunner of feminist thought in the Elizabethan time. He expressed feminist ideas in his chauvinist patriarchal society. Consequently, Shakespeare transcended his age to present feminist ideas in his works.

Keywords:

As You Like It, Elizabethan time, *Much Ado About Nothing*, protofeminist, Shakespeare.

Résumé:

Cet article s'interroge sur les idées féministes de William Shakespeare dans ses comédies *Comme il vous plaira* et *Beaucoup de bruit pour rien*. Bien que de nombreux intellectuels prétendent que Shakespeare est un écrivain antiféministe. Cet article cherche à prouver qu'il a dépassé les stéréotypes féminins de la société élisabéthaine qui considérait les femmes comme faibles et obéissantes pour les décrire comme des personnages féministes indépendants. Il a brisé les normes de sa société en termes de position des femmes pour représenter des femmes féministes exceptionnelles: Rosalind dans *Comme il vous plaira* et Beatrice dans *Beaucoup de bruit pour rien* grâce à leurs fortes personnalités et leurs discours éloquents. Par rapport au monde Elisabéthain de Shakespeare, Rosalind et Beatrice rejettent les conventions sociales concernant les femmes pour devenir des personnages féminins exceptionnels. Pourtant, l'analyse dévoile les souhaits de Rosalind et de Beatrice d'être des hommes pour profiter de leurs privilèges et de leurs droits. Ainsi, Shakespeare a décrit des femmes fortes en mélangeant des qualités féminines et masculines, ce qui reflète son admiration pour la reine Elisabeth. Par conséquent, d'un point de vue féministe, l'analyse montre que Shakespeare est un précurseur de la pensée féministe à l'époque Elisabéthaine. Il a exprimé des idées féministes dans sa société patriarcale chauvine. Par conséquent, Shakespeare a transcendé son âge pour présenter des idées féministes dans ses œuvres.

Mots-clés: *Comme il vous plaira*, époque Elisabéthaine, *Beaucoup de bruit pour rien*, protoféministe, Shakespeare.

* Corresponding Author:

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading William Shakespeare in the 21st century seems olde-worlde, but it still bears prominence in contemporary studies inasmuch as many postmodern literary works revive the classical ones which are open to a myriad of interpretations. Ben Jonson said: "I therefore will begin. Soul of the age!" (2016, 17), "To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe/He was not of an age but for all time!" (2016, 42-43). Hence, Shakespeare's ideas excel his time to stand as an outstanding author in English literature. In his time, England was a patriarchal society which included polarized gender roles. Supporting the Renaissance stereotypes of gender by treating men as superior to women, many of Shakespeare's plays portray Elizabethan women as weak and submissive by exposing their difficulties, limitations and oppressions. It is generally acknowledged that Shakespeare portrays human nature and behaviour in a faithful way and he is described as a poet of nature by Samuel Johnson who said: "Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (2008, p. 2). Yet, Shakespeare also questions women's position and rises above the stereotypical views of his society by portraying a whole range of strong female characters that deviate the social standards, especially in his comedies *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Thus, this article attempts to show that Shakespeare is a protofeminist since he shows women's sufferings and difficulties in the patriarchal society and transcends the stereotypes of his time by empowering women in his plays.

2. Women in Shakespeare's World

Despite the fact that England was ruled by a female monarch, Queen Elizabeth, women in Shakespeare's world were regarded as inferior to men. The Elizabethan society was a patriarchal one par excellence. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford stated that women "could be good, proceeding from virginity to marriage and maternity, and after a virtuously spent widowhood. Or they could be wicked: scolds, whores, or witches. What they could not be, in theory, was independent, autonomous, and female-focused" (1998, p.17). The two main dominant stereotypes of Elizabethan women were angels or wicked evil women. Angels were generally submissive and naïve women following the norms of their society in general and men in particular; however, women who transgressed the first stereotype were regarded as fallen evil women. In the Elizabethan time, women were not only viewed as inferior to men, but they were also considered as men's possession and property. Single women were first the property of their fathers who had absolute authority in the choice of their husbands, then they were possessed by their husbands. Not only had women no say in the matter of their marriage, their way of life was also determined by others; for instance, the colour, fabric and the material of their clothes were dictated by Sumptuary Laws. Elizabethan women were not allowed to wear whatever they wanted. So, women's lives were strictly controlled either by their fathers, husbands or monarchy. They had to marry, be obedient, submissive, voiceless, faithful, passive and weak in contrast to men who were strong, domineering and well-educated. Sara Ekici said: "Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy and patience...men were breadwinners and women had to be obedient housewives and mothers" (2009, p.3). In this regard, Elizabethan

women were inferior to men.

Women's weakness was also supported by religion that is an important issue and force affecting and controlling people's lives and minds. The Bible was twisted to fit the repression of women. First, Eve was created after Adam and she was created from his rib. Hence, she was inferior. Second, Eve was weak because she obeyed Satan and ate from the tree of knowledge. Therefore, Christian women suffered from this perspective and were regarded as weak and sinful. They were raised to believe that they are inferior to men. Before the Elizabethan period, the church had an influence on people's life in general and education in particular. By quoting from the Bible, John Knox, a protestant leader, said: "Woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man, not to rule and command him. As St Paul doth reason in these words: Man is not of the woman but the woman of the man. And man was not created for the cause of the woman but the woman for the cause of man" (1994, p.12). Hence, the church played a great role in the internalization of women's weakness and inferiority. Elizabethan women "[had] become like worms that live in the dull earth of ignorance and are kept like caged birds that hop up and down in their houses" (Cavendish as cited in Prior, 1985, p. 171). Therefore, they were oppressed and suppressed in their private sphere.

In fact, to defend women and empower their position, many feminist voices appeared hither and thither in different parts of the world prior to the launching age of feminist thought. The term feminism was coined by the French philosopher Charles Fourier in 1837. However, there are several early protofeminist works that advocate women's rights. That is to say, works that support feminist ideas before the appearance of feminism fall under the category of protofeminism. For instance,

in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her protofeminist book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* attacking patriarchal practices in her society. Not only were women the vanguard of feminism, men also contributed through different media to express feminist ideas. In 1869, John Stuart Mill published “The Subjection of Women” to shed light on women’s shackles in a patriarchal society. Consequently, both women and men contribute to the feminist thought and it is not merely women’s mission. Women cannot achieve gender equality without the help of men to defy patriarchy. They need the collaboration of men as well. Men ought to engage with feminism because if all women are feminists and men stick to patriarchy, women’s efforts ooze away without men’s help to eliminate patriarchy (Hook, 2000, p. 115). Thus, feminism is for everybody and this is reflected in literary works that mirror feminist or protofeminist ideas in both females’ as well as males’ oeuvres. Among the male writers advocating feminism is William Shakespeare who highlighted the plight of women in his plays.

3. Women in Shakespeare’s Works: *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*

In Shakespeare’s works, there are many female characters that epitomize the Elizabethan women; for example, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Octavia in *Antony and Cleopatra* and Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. They are all weak, submissive, inferior and dependent. They are considered as a property of their husbands. In other words, Petruccio’s saying about Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* indicates the position of a woman as a property. She is “[his] goods, [his] chattels; she is [his] house, / [His] household stuff, [his] field, [his] barn, / [His] horse, [his] ox, [his] ass, [his] anything” (1999, III.2.203-205). However, Shakespeare portrayed extraordinary protofeminist heroines by giving them a voice in a

patriarchal society where women were supposed to be obedient and voiceless; for instance, Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Shakespeare “has been the man to lift them from a state of vassalage and degradation, where in they were the mere toys, when not the she-serfs, of a sensual tyranny; and he has asserted their prerogative, as intellectual creatures, to be the companions...the advisors, the friends, the equals of men” (Clarke as cited in Hankey, 1994, p. 427). Shakespeare has a fascinating way of presenting strong and independent female characters. Both Rosalind and Beatrice violate the established Elizabethan assumptions about gender roles.

Rosalind, in *As You Like It*, is an outstanding female character in all Shakespeare’s works because she tore away the barriers of the patriarchal society. She is one of the heroines that has more lines than any of Shakespeare’s female characters. In addition, she performed the epilogue which is “not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue” (1992, V.4.191). In *As You Like It* or *As Rosalind Likes It*, she is the centre of the play because she controls all the events of the play by choosing her own husband and arranging four marriages at the end as well. Theo Tebbe said:

The audience again sees Rosalind’s importance in the world *As You Like It*. As a young woman, she fascinates Orlando, her cousin Celia, and her uncle, Duke Frederick, who is afraid that Rosalind’s reputation exceeds his daughter’s status. Moreover, disguised as the youth Ganymede she transforms to a powerful love healer, whose practices are used by Silvius and Orlando and who is attracted by the shepherdess Phoebe. (2008, p.10)

In this case, Rosalind repudiates her society’s stereotypes about women by being strong and autonomous.

Rosalind is an unconventional character. She is beautiful, intelligent, quick

witted, strong, active and independent woman. Orlando describes Rosalind as having features of goddesses and strong women of Roman and Greek mythology.

Celia reading Orlando's paper says:

Nature presently distilled
Helen's cheek, but not her heart,
Cleopatra's majesty.
Atalanta's better part,
Sad Lucretia's modesty.
Thus Rosalind of many parts
By heavenly synod was devised,
Of many faces, eyes, and hearts. (1992, III.2.140-147)

Rosalind gathers all strong features of powerful historical women and stands as a powerful woman.

Rosalind is uniquely strong compared to Elizabethan women who were supposed to be silent and obedient to men. When Orlando was preparing to wrestle with Charles, she says: "The little strength that I have, I would it were with you" (1992, I.1.172). In addition, her strength overwhelmed Celia. Many people admired Rosalind for her uniqueness and individuality and for that reason her uncle Duke Frederick banished her. He states:

She is too subtle for thee, and her smoothness,
Her very silence and her patience
Speak to the people, and they pity her.
Thou art a fool – she robs thee of thy name,
And thou wilt show more bright and seem more virtuous
When she is gone: then open not thy lips. (1992, I.3.74-79)

She poses a threat to Celia and overpasses all women's capacities and

characteristics which obliged her uncle to send her away.

Although Rosalind shows early protofeminist ideas, Shakespeare attributes some masculine qualities to her character. First, she is tall like a man: "Because that [she] is more than common tall / That [she] did suit [her] all points like a man" (1992, I.3.113-114). Second, she is extremely interested in watching wrestling like men and for that reason Touchstone was astonished because he did not expect ladies to like such a kind of sport. TOUCH. "Thus men may grow wiser every day. It is the first time / That ever I heard breaking of ribs was sport for ladies" (1992, I.2.121-122). Thus, Rosalind shows masculine characteristics which make her different from Elizabethan women.

Disguising as a man, Rosalind makes many sarcastic comments about women. She disguised as a man to hide the weaknesses of women because, for her, women are powerless and inferior sex. Most importantly, she strongly wants to transcend women's stereotypes of her time by commenting on women's position. Rosalind says: "A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh, / A boar-spear in my hand, and in my heart / Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will," (1992, I.3.115-117). Then she adds: "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...ought to show itself courageous to petticoat: therefore courage" (1992, II.4.3-5). She highlights the negative aspects of women. In addition, Rosalind is happy as being disguised as a man: "I thank God I am not a woman, to be touched with so many giddy offences as he hath generally taxed their whole sex withal." (1992, III.2. 327-329). Disguised as a man, she enjoys men's privileges which women were deprived of in their chauvinist society. She outcries the difficulties of her fellow women to expose their plights by wishing to be a man to enjoy his position.

Rosalind or the name of her disguised personality Ganymede thought that women are less creative than men. S/he does not believe that Phobe can write a creative letter. Rosalind says: "She has a huswife's hand –but that's no matter: / I say she never did invent this letter. / This is a man's invention, and his hand" (1992, IV.2. 27-29). In fact, women were excluded from education in the Elizabethan society. Accordingly, she anticipated that the writer of the letter is a man. Furthermore, Rosalind ridicules females by saying that they are very talkative and cannot hold their tongue. They are less rational than men because they talk without acting. This is ironical because for women to overcome their limitations in a patriarchal society, they need to act instead of talking. Rosalind says: "Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak" (1992, III.2.238). Later, she adds: "Certainly a woman's thought runs before her actions" (1992, IV.1.124). In this regard, Rosalind represents her gender. She dares to speak about women's miserable situation by commenting on their deeds and actions from a male's perspective through spotlighting their position in comparison to men. Actually, disguise helps Rosalind to speak her mind freely about women. Celia says: "You have simply misused our sex in your love-prate: we must have your doublet and hose plucked over your head, and show the world what the bird hath done to her own nest" (1992, IV.1. 181-184). Unlike Elizabethan women, Rosalind transgresses the existing stereotypes to stand as a protofeminist character defending women's rights. Consequently, she is not only a daring and active female, but she is also intelligent and witty. She is a spokeswoman on behalf of other Elizabethan women. Yet, she is not the only protofeminist character in Shakespeare's works, Beatrice, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, also advocates women's rights.

Beatrice, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, is one of Shakespeare's great heroines. She is not only beautiful and shrewd. She is also very strong and self-reliant. She

repudiates the moulds of Elizabethan women who were passive and submissive to stand as a protofeminist character in a male chauvinist society. In the play, Don Pedro, the prince of Aragon, describes her as “a pleasant-spirited lady” and Benedick called her “Lady Disdain”. Shakespeare depicts Beatrice as Benedick’s equal in intelligence through her witty actions and shrewish ways. She is able to handle any situation with her sharp tongue and wit and in that she is as equal as men. Beatrice’ wit “values itself so highly that to her / All matter else seems weak” (2003, III.1.53-54). Beatrice is a special woman in the Elizabethan society.

Beatrice does not fit to the notion of submissive woman because she violates the established Elizabethan social norms. She is no longer a voiceless female because she believes that she “was born to speak all mirth and no matter” (II.1.290). She does not only speak her mind, she also makes her own decisions. From the beginning of the play, Beatrice strikes the audience as a sharp and smart lady with an eloquent speech. From the first act, she seems active and strong because she interrupts males’ conversation to ask about the return of Signior Benedick. After her meeting with Benedick, he comments on her sharp tongue. He “would [his] horse had the speed of [her] tongue” (2003, I.1.121) and he “cannot endure [his] lady tongue” (2003, II.1.240). Her uncle Leonato is also worried about Beatrice’ situation. He is afraid that Beatrice would not find a husband that can bear her tongue. He says: “Thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (2003, II.1.16). In fact, Leonato does not interfere with Beatrice’ decision of marriage, but he controls his daughter Hero because she is weak, meek and voiceless. Indeed, Beatrice proves to be a distinguished female character since she marries not as her uncle pleases, but as she pleases. She proves to be a protofeminist character in a patriarchal society by asserting her voice and

rights.

Although Beatrice is described as an independent female character, she wishes to get men's privileges to defend the honour of Hero. She says: "O that I were a man!... O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market- place" (2003, IV.1.299-303). Then, she adds: "O that I were a man for his sake! Or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake!...I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving"(2003, IV.1.312-313-317). Actually, Beatrice recognizes the limitations of her gender and wishes to get the power of men. In a society where women were marginalized and neglected, women, in general, and Beatrice, in particular, wish to be like men to enjoy their privileges.

Both Rosalind and Beatrice have similarities and differences which make them unique and strong heroines of Shakespeare's plays. They are not only beautiful and gracious, but they are also witty and intelligent. They share feminist wit and both of them are unmarried. In addition, they defy the social norms in their society and their linguistic ability and eloquent speech are as high as men's. Albeit both heroines are strong, they are bounded to men to be strong. Rosalind, disguised as a man, makes daring remarks about women to defend their cause and Beatrice acknowledges her wish to be a man to get his privileges in a male-centered society. Concerning the differences between Rosalind and Beatrice, Rosalind uses disguise to express her ideas freely about women's position in her society; while, Beatrice does not use a male disguise to speak her mind and to allow herself the freedom of speech. However, both of them stand as strong and independent characters in a patriarchal society. Therefore, Shakespeare introduces feminist ideas in a protofeminist age.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Rosalind and Beatrice displays a more favourable idea about women which is different from that of Elizabethan society. It is clear

that Shakespeare views women to be equal to men by portraying his female characters in the centre of his comedies, but he bounds females to males. Shakespeare's women "seem to exist only in their attachment to others" (Hazlitt as cited in Hankey, 1994, p. 428). Both Rosalind and Beatrice adopt masculine qualities and wish to be like men to overcome the social restrictions and to escape women's limitations. Rosalind takes a man's attire to achieve her strength and to put herself at the same social level as men. She uses disguise to speak about women's plight in the Elizabethan society. In fact, Rosalind, the independent woman, does not exist because the actor is a male acting her role. Michael Shapiro said: "A boy can present a girl; a boy can present a girl presenting a boy; a boy can present a girl presenting a boy presenting a girl" (1998, p. 122). In other words, a boy performs Rosalind's roles as a girl and a boy. Furthermore, before knowing that Rosalind is an actor and not an actress, her strong and independent personality is performed in relation to men and in the Forest of Arden. In this case, her strength and independence are not in a realistic context and a real society. Rather, they are in an outcast place. This can be interpreted as borrowing feminist ideas from outside the Elizabethan society to ameliorate women's position. Concerning Beatrice, she does not use a male disguise to be free and independent, but she wishes to be a man to enjoy men's world and privileges and to get rid of her weak position as a woman.

By attributing masculine qualities to strong female characters, Shakespeare expressed his blurred and ambivalent attitude to the position of women as strong human being. In addition, it may have been that Shakespeare admired Queen Elizabeth, so that he was fond of portraying independent women by mixing masculine and feminine qualities that were apparent in the female monarch.

Queen Elizabeth said: "I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king" (as cited in Mendelson and Crawford, 1998, p. 354). Moreover, she stated: "though I be a woman, I have as good a courage answerable to my place as ever my father had...I thank God I am endued with such qualities that were I turned out of the realm in my petticoat" (as cited in Lenz et al., 1998, p. 103). Queen Elizabeth is known as a monarch of feminine and masculine qualities. In addition, Shakespeare's attribution of masculine characteristics to both Rosalind and Beatrice and their wishes to be men can be explained as a violation and repudiation of Elizabethan stereotypes of women to defend their position. Moreover, Shakespeare, through his portrayal of his two female characters, transcends Elizabethan moulds to create protofeminist characters. Thus, he is not only a poet of nature, but he goes beyond nature and his time to be a forerunner of feminist thought.

4. Conclusion

Consequently, Shakespeare's attitude towards women is modern because he violates the established social standards of women's position in his Elizabethan society by placing them in a central position of his plots. His plays *As you Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing* are forerunners of feminism by presenting powerful female characters overcoming gender limitations. Shakespeare's female characters Rosalind and Beatrice show strong personalities as a reflection of his admiration for Queen Elizabeth. Therefore, Shakespeare is a protofeminist author par excellence by portraying independent women who stand against patriarchal social conventions. Yet, this is only one interpretation of his works which are open to further future research.

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