

“Damsel in Shining Armor” & “Knight in Distress” – Role Reversal of Mythical Gender Archetypes in Shakespearean Comedies

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“Damsel in Distress” and “Knight in Shining Armor” are two of the most recurrent mythical gender archetypes in literature, painting, classical and medieval myths, legends and romances, fairy tales, films and soap operas. Traditionally, a “Damsel in Distress” is a woman who is young, beautiful, naïve, vulnerable and sexually attractive, and is always in need of a man to save her life or chastity. On the other hand, “Knight in Shining Armor” is a man who is young, adventurous, brave and chivalrous, and is always ready to rescue the damsels who are in distress, and usually end up marrying the damsel that they save. These two notions regarding gender roles are constructed and popularized by the traditional classical and medieval patriarchal society and these notions are still continuing. Men and women are seen in terms of the binary opposition regarding their roles, where the woman is always the helpless creature and the man is always the Messiah of that helpless woman.

However, we see a reversal of such defined gender role in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*. In these plays, the two protagonists, Portia and Rosalind, come out of their socially defined role of “Damsels in Distress” and translocate themselves as “Damsels in Shining Armor”, who are capable of changing their own fortune and rescuing the suffering men from various kinds of distresses. In these plays, the patriarchal notion of “Damsel in Distress” is reconstructed and presented in a new light to uncover the misconstrued stereotyping of the genders regarding their roles. In these plays, the heroes are “Knights in Distress” who need the help of Portia and Rosalind to be saved from dangers threatening their lives as well as the well-being of the society. Therefore, this paper aims at examining how William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It* reverse the mythical gender role archetypes, by beginning with a discussion of the long-held popular notions of “Damsel in Distress” and “Knight in Shining Armor” and how patriarchal society constructed, represented and viewed these archetypes, moving onto a discussion of how Portia and Rosalind transgress the boundary of their defined roles in society and translocate themselves with a new identity, the “Damsels in Shining Armor”.

Mythical Gender Role Archetypes: “Damsel in Distress” and “Knight in Shining Armor”

The concept of “Damsel in Distress” stemmed from the patriarchal belief that a woman needs protection from her male counterpart as she is physically weak, sexually attractive and emotionally fragile. “The word “damsel” derives from the French *demoiselle*, meaning “young lady”, and the term “damsel in distress” in turn is a translation of the French *demoiselle en détresse*” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>). Etymologically, “Damsel in Distress” refers to a young lady who is very beautiful and weak and often her beauty is the reason for causing distress in her life. She is dominated by the patriarchal figure, either a dominating father, or a monster, or a villain, and on the verge of losing her life or virginity. She is unprotected against such forces and is entirely dependent upon a man, traditionally referred to as “Knight in Shining Armor”, for physical protection, social standing and emotional support.

On the other hand, “Knight in Shining Armor” is a figure who represents the strong chivalrous masculine power and who comes forward to save the damsels who are in distress or danger. The security and well-being of the damsel’s honour and life entirely depend upon the “Knight in Shining Armor”. The knight is very courageous, robust, gentle and gracious, and is always ready to save the damsel. He epitomizes valor, mercy, fairness; champions the good against the evil; protects the poor and the weak, specially, the ladies. He is always on a quest to save humanity and restores peace and justice in society.

From classical myths and legends to today’s popular culture, these two archetypal roles have a very strong presence and they emerge as a confirmation of the patriarchal “construct” that women cannot save themselves as they are weak and helpless. Man and women are seen in terms of the binary opposition regarding their roles in society. The portrayal of “damsel in distress” in literature, painting, art, films and other medias, conforms to the “masculine gaze”. Women are portrayed in a way the male wanted to see them. In terms of literature, the narratives contain stories where the woman cannot survive without the help of a man, and her life long quest is to find out a “macho man” for herself who can give her shelter, social status and emotional and financial support.

If we look at the paintings, the “damsel in distress” is often portrayed as locked or tied up, and as “nude” figures to show how much vulnerable they are. Even in films or drama today, we see that women are depicted as vulnerable creatures, especially in commercial films. These gender archetypes are still continuing and with large-scale audience approval. The heroine is always in danger and the hero comes to rescue her fighting with a band of armed villains alone. Again, in Disney movies, which are

adaptations of classic fairy tales and specially meant for children, the character of the princess is portrayed as a “damsel in distress” locked up by monsters or witches, and she survives that confinement only when her prince charming comes to rescue her with a “true love’s kiss”. Even in terms of video games, the “damsel in distress” and “knight in shining armor” themes are used to design games that are quite popular among game lovers. So, in all forms of representation, narrative or visual, these gender roles are portrayed as opposite to one another. Men represent the women as they desire to see her - a poor creature and an object of pleasure, dependent upon the mercy of a man, and such stereotyping and sexual objectification of women is still thriving today.

Patriarchy expects and loves to see a woman as a “damsel in distress” because a woman who is defenseless and always seeks help from a man reminds patriarchy of its superior status. The distressed damsel does threaten the image of a man, constructed and upheld by patriarchal society. With such stereotypical dependent damsels, patriarchy can continue with its narcissistic image of itself as a superior being. As a continuation of such superiority complex, patriarchal society brands “strong-willed” and independent women as witches or fallen women or goddesses that need to be either subjugated or appeased by sacrifice. Elizabethan witch hunting is reminiscent of such an attitude of patriarchal society.

Role Reversal in Shakespearean Comedies: Portia and Rosalind, the “Damsels in Shining Armor”

Now, I would like to put forward my argument that William Shakespeare, in his comedies *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*, portrays two very different “damsels in distress”, who break away from the traditional role of “damsel in distress” and acts as “damsels in shining armor” who move forward to change their own fortune and help the men around them by providing them emotional support, shelter, social standing and a new life and hope. The two women are Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

At the beginning of the plays, Portia and Rosalind are, both portrayed as “damsels in distress” locked up by patriarchal figures. Portia begins by saying, “By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is awearry of this great world” (1.2, 1). She is worried because she cannot marry the man she wishes and may end up marrying someone incompatible with her. Portia’s will is “curbed” by the “will of a dead father” as her father has devised a “lottery” to find a proper partner for his daughter. Portia’s condition is reminiscent of Hermia’s condition in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* where Hermia’s father wants to kill her when she refuses to marry Demetrius. Whether living or dead, patriarchy always tries to guide the woman as if she is incapable of making a proper

choice, and Portia's father's lottery is such an ordeal that he devises before his death to curb Portia's freewill, limiting her freedom of choice. On the other hand, Rosalind is locked up by another representative of patriarchy, her uncle, Duke Ferdinand. Rosalind also begins with a sad note, "Dear Celia, I show more mirth than I am mistress of, and would you yet I were merrier? Unless you could teach me to forget a banished father, you must not learn me how to remember any extraordinary pleasure." (1.2, 2-5). The Duke has not only banished Rosalind's father, but also drawn a circle pass not around her to control her willpower.

Though their free-will is barred by the authoritative patriarchy and their "limited feminine space" is made to grow more limited, Portia and Rosalind decide to come out of it. Instead of waiting for their "knight in shining armor", Portia and Rosalind take up the responsibility of saving themselves, asserting their willpower to make a place on this earth on their own account. Rosalind, though a young girl, denies the suffocating comfort of her uncle's palace, where she has to pass her days under the supervision of a tyrannical uncle, and comes out into the streets to find her own way. Like the adventurous "knights in shining armor", she moves onto a perilous journey to the "Forest of Arden" to rescue her father, find her lover and save mankind. By transgressing the safety and security of the palace, she not only disobeys her uncle's wish, but also dismantles the long-held patriarchal belief that home is the only "comfort zone" for women. Portia also leaves the home soon after her engagement when she finds her husband's friend's life is in danger. In both cases, Portia and Rosalind move forward to carry out the duty of establishing peace and restoring order and justice - a duty that is meant and decided only for men. But they cross that boundary and affirm their own willpower and come out of their house "to liberty, not to banishment".

On the other hand, the heroes, or the knights in these plays are in distress of some sort. Bassanio is in economic distress as he has spent all his money leaving him at the mercy of Antonio. Now he needs a strong financial shelter that will make his life certain. So, he aspires to win Portia, "a richly lady left" (1.1, 160) who will make him "fortunate" (1.1, 175) as he will inherit the money from her. Bassanio describes Portia in terms of business language, marking his wooing of Portia as a "thrif" (1.1, 174). Antonio, another "Knight in Distress", also begins with a sad note, "In sooth I know not why I am so sad" (1.1, 1) as he is worried about losing his venture abroad and suffering from the pain of losing a friend. Both of them need support of some kind - moral, physical, emotional or financial, and it is Portia who provides them with the support they need. In *As You Like it*, Orlando the knight or hero, is in distress due to his elder brother's betrayal of filial duty. Orlando is in a vulnerable condition because his elder brother has denied his rights and share of property. He is left penniless, treated like an animal and is socially disgraced by her brother. Rosalind, the "damsel

in shining armor”, rescues Orlando from his emotional distress caused by his unhappy upbringing and his recent infatuation for Rosalind, and trains him to become a man from a love-sick, narcissistic, obsessed lover.

Again, in terms of courtly love, we see a role reversal in these plays. Traditionally, a damsel should wait for either the father to choose a husband for her or for her “knight in shining armor” to come to rescue and woo her. According to the chivalric romances, the knight always woos the lady, not vice versa. But in Portia’s case, we see a reversal of this role because it is Portia who steps forward to woo Bassanio rather than Bassanio wooing her. She gives long speeches in the beginning of Act 3, scene 2, regarding her affection for Bassanio while Bassanio speaks little. Moreover, she does not have enough faith in Bassanio’s skill and so she wants to delay the process of choosing the casket for the time being: “I pray you tarry, pause a day or two/Before you hazard, for in choosing wrong/I lose your company; therefore forbear a while” (3.2, 1-3). When Bassanio insists that he wants to choose the casket as soon as possible, Portia gives him hints through a song and helps him to make a right choice. By wooing Bassanio and helping him to make the right choice, Portia not only subverts male and female roles in terms of professing love, but also breaks away from the lottery that her father devised and ends up disobeying patriarchy in her own way.

In *As You Like It*, Rosalind, in the guise of Ganymede, teaches Orlando how to woo a lady. Rosalind strips the façade of courtly love and shows the harsh reality that lurks behind it. She makes Orlando understand that more than courtly love, a relationship that is based on mutual understanding and love is more important. He must learn to communicate his feelings properly and Rosalind gradually teaches him the use of language. The first time Orlando meets Rosalind, he becomes “tongue-tied”. He is incapable of expressing himself and his love: “My better parts/Are all thrown down, and that which here stands up/Is but a quintain, a mere lifeless block What passion hangs these weights upon my tongue?/I cannot speak to her, yet she urg’d conference” (1.2, 249-51, 259-60). Even in the forest, the poems that are hung by Orlando in the trees are full of false deification of Rosalind: “*Thus Rosalind of many parts/By heavenly synod was devis’d,/Of many faces, eyes, and hearts,/To have the touches dearest priz’d./Heaven would that she these gifts should have,/And I to live and die her slave.*” (3.2, 149-54). Peter Erickson comments on the poems of Orlando:

The mechanical and impersonal nature of [Orlando’s] elevation of the women to divine status is demonstrated by the way Orlando’s poem invents her through an amalgamation of fantazsized “parts”. Worship of the woman that is supposed to pay homage creates an inhuman pastiche that demeans her and inhibits genuine contact. (43)

Again, Orlando's love poems suggest that he is a self-absorbed lover who is more in love with the idea of being in love rather than being in love with Rosalind. Erick Erickson's finds such a love an adolescent one that requires time to reach maturity. He observes, "[Such a love as] an attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified" (132). Rosalind reminds Orlando that "men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love." (4.1, 101-103)". The unusual use of the image of death and worm subverts the petrarchan image of love being divine and brings it into a mundane level. Again, Rosalind reminds Orlando that the deification of the beloved and self-abasement of the lover cannot sustain in the long run when Orlando tells her that he wants to possess Rosalind forever: "Say a day, without the ever. No, no, Orlando, men are April when they wed. Maids are May when they are maid, but the Sky changes when they are wives." (4.1, 138-140). Rosalind breaks the illusion of courtly romances to show Orlando the true nature of love.

Order and justice are dismantled in both the courts - the court of Venice and the court of Duke Ferdinand. According to the mythical notion of gender roles, the responsibility for the restoration of order lies with men. The knights used to go on perilous journeys to find out the solution to stop chaos and restore order in their respective empires. But in *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*, all the knights are suffering from some sort of distress or dilemma, leaving them unable to act like "knights in shining armor". In the court-room scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia plays the role Antonio's savior. She manipulates Shylock with cunning, closing all the escape routes for Shylock first, and gradually disclosing her proper intention. The loopholes that the guardians of patriarchy are unable to find, Portia finds out easily, and saves Antonio from Shylock's vengeance. She first guides Shylock through the teaching of Christian mercy, then she offers him ducats, three times more than the actual amount, and finally she moves onto her final weapon, her extraordinary wit and hits back at Shylock by showing the loopholes in the bond that he can take only a pound of flesh, not more not less, without any blood or bones in it. Through her powerful rhetoric Portia shakes the foundation of the patriarchal judiciary system and her one single phrase "no jot of blood" (4.1, 302) turns the whole tide of events in favor of Antonio and restoring peace and justice.

In *As You Like It*, Rosalind's steps to come outside her uncle's home, sets the play in motion and gradually moves towards the restoration of order in Duke Ferdinand's court. She acts as a guide for the exiles and natives of the Forest of Arden. She patches up the relationship between Phebe and Silvius. Phebe refuses to listen to the hyperbolic expressions of Silvius and Rosalind takes up that refusal as a weapon to turn on Phebe when she tries to woo Rosalind/Ganymede in the same hyperbolic terms. Thus Rosalind

brings out the narcissistic “Petrarchan mistress” out of Phebe to make her see Silvius’s love for her and “put Phebe in her place and brings Silvius upto his place”. (Erickson 43-44). Though Ferdinand and Oliver begin as blackguard villains, they also suffer from inner conflict and they do not know which of their selves they should listen to. It is Rosalind’s action that makes them discover their true selves and do penance for whatever sins they have committed, and then order is restored.

Again, Rosalind is careful about keeping Celia and Oliver away from a pre-marital sexual relationship. When she discovers that Oliver and Celia may lose control over themselves and end up having a physical relationship, she prepares for their wedding. Here she acts like Prospero in *The Tempest* who also teaches Miranda and Ferdinand to abstain from pre-marital sex. As a “damsel in shining armor”, Rosalind is capable of retaining her chastity as well as her cousin’s without the help of her knight. In terms of her relationship to her father and fiancé, Rosalind is witty enough to see the demarcation between her love for her father and her fiancé and she says both to her father and Orlando that “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4, 116-17). Though at the end it seems that Rosalind is giving herself up to male possession, it does not demean her will power as she does it willingly. She is clever in perceiving the rivalry between her father and her fiancé regarding her love, which Cordelia fails to see in *King Lear*, and Rosalind, is careful in gratifying both men by assuring them that they have all of her love, not half of it, saving the court from further chaos as it happens in *King Lear*.

One may ask, if Portia and Rosalind are so brave and courageous, why do they need to take on man’s disguise? Though both Portia and Rosalind need man’s apparel to win their way, but it is not their dress that gives them power, but it is their own wit, confidence in their own selves and their intellect that give them the power to overcome their problems. A knight wears his weapon and attire to facilitate him and save his body from harm. But an unskilled knight cannot survive with his weapon and armor only. It is his skill that helps him to outshine others and win the heart of his lady and restore order in society, fighting against the evil power. It is neither Portia and Rosalind’s beauty nor their “father given” property that facilitates them to rescue the men. But it is their freedom of mind and intellect that make it possible for them to write their own narrative of their existence and along with them, the narratives of other men around them, without conforming to the stereotypical notions of patriarchy. Though they are in distress, they act like heroes, providing emotional, mental and financial security and refuge to the other men around them. Clara Clairborne Park comments:

Male garments immensely broaden the sphere in which female energy can manifest itself. Dressed as a man, a nubile woman can go to places and do

things she couldn't do otherwise thus getting the play out of the court and the closet and into interesting places like forests or Welsh mountains. Once [Portia and] Rosalind [are] disguised as [men], [they] can be self-assertive as [they like]. (108)

So, in a society that does not allow women to raise their voices, the male garb gives these two damsels the opportunity to assert themselves and raise their voice against all follies and injustices of society to restore the status quo. It is also ironic that they dress as male to discard the assumed passivity of their sex, while the male in their attire are less confident and positive in their role compared to these two women.

Moreover, men's disguise makes them overthrow the long-held stereotypical notion that damsels manipulate or attract men or knights by their beauty. Feminine beauty and sexuality is the only power that women have over men. But Portia, disguised as a lawyer, in men's attire does not possess that womanly charm that can manipulate others. Rather, she uses her intellect and ends up finding out the loophole, overlooked by the representatives of patriarchy. Again, Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, manipulates Orlando and brings Orlando out of his love sickness to make him see reality and to turn him from an "unschooled youth" into a "man". Men's attire turns Portia and Rosalind into "non-sexualized" entities and they are able to dismantle the patriarchal notion that a woman can only work through her feminine charm or beauty rather than her wit or her own sense of self-awareness. So, men's apparel or the typical seductive beauty is not the thing that turns these two women into "damsels in shining armor", rather their intellect, wit, self-awareness, confidence and the power of their language have turned them into heroic figures, outshining the "superior" men folk. As the knight needs a shining armor to save himself from weapons and charms or spells cast by evil powers, these women need a man's disguise to save them. By crossing all the boundaries of patriarchy they reconstruct their identity as powerful entities capable of changing the world for the better.

In *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It* William Shakespeare creates scope for women to assert themselves. Rosalind and Portia strip the mask of narcissism from the face of patriarchy and show it how much it owes to woman power for its well-being. Patriarchy tries to hide the weaknesses in men and portray men as stronger and superior to women. Patriarchy also tries to subjugate the will power in women, marking them weak and dependent upon the mercy of men. But Portia and Rosalind prove such patriarchal beliefs about gender roles wrong because they are not only capable of working from their limited space, but also they have the will-power to change their own fate and the fate of others. By breaking all the barriers and transgressing their socially defined role as "Damsel in Distress", Portia and Rosalind translocate

themselves as the “Damsels in Shining Armor” capable of becoming the “savior” of men and mankind.

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