

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

ENGLISH B

EXTENDED ESSAY

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**Research Question:** Study of unconventional woman figures in William Shakespeare's comedies "Much Ado About Nothing", "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Twelfth Night" in regard to the conservative society of the period.

**Abstract**

William Shakespeare's plays tend to exhibit discernible woman figures that go beyond the accustomed passive women.

The investigation carried out in this essay will be according to the research question: **“Study of unconventional woman figures in William Shakespeare's comedies “Much Ado About Nothing”, “A Midsummer Night's Dream” and “Twelfth Night” in regard to the conservative society of the period.”**. The purpose of this extended essay is to analyze how the prominent woman figures in the comedies Much Ado About Nothing, A Midsummer Night's Dream and Twelfth Night reject the accustomed womanly attributions and display valiancy.

This essay is comprised of three sub-headings, each analyzing a particular play with respect to its most remarkable woman figures and their stance towards the society's shallow approach towards them. While analyzing the plays, the attitude towards women in the realm of the play is discussed and contrasted with the idealized heroines. In the conclusion of the study, the main elements of the comedies are juxtaposed and assembled with references to other works on Shakespeare's audacious woman figures.

Based on the analysis, the common characteristics came across in these plays are gallantry, wit and confidence. As a result, it is found to be obvious that all of the females studied propose an explicit transgression that leads the way towards the two sexes becoming more equal.

(218 words)

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history, women have been regarded as “the opposite sex” (Belsey 640) who is apparently fragile and who depends on men to go on with their life. As every aspect of life, this despondent condition of women is reflected in literary works, where patriarchal modes of behavior are illustrated. This approach draws a bold line between the genders, defining the feminine as that which is not masculine- not, that is to say, active, muscular, rational, authoritative...powerful (Belsey 640).

However, at the time when Shakespeare’s plays were written, there was an immense appeal for heroines, female fighters and women disguised as pages (Belsey 640). Therefore an interest towards witty women can be lucidly spotted in Shakespearean works, unfolding the females’ own frame of behavior, one which inhabits courage, intelligence and integrity as opposed to conventionally defined roles attributed to them.

Clearly, what brought about an interest in chivalrous women in the minds of the writers like Shakespeare was the social structure of the times when the plays were written. The Elizabethan age exhibits a woman figure of prominent claims towards their freedom and equality as a result of the presence of an unmarried woman on the throne of England. With a spouseless sovereign, however without organization they took place, vast numbers of women started to seek higher education, equal rights in the law and wear men’s clothes. The role model, in other words the inspiration, of this pursuit was the sovereign itself, Elizabeth the Virgin Queen, who persisted in not marrying a man to cede the control of the kingdom.

When the interest towards women gaining control on their own destiny was so popular, it was impossible for the likes of Shakespeare to stay out of the movement. Though the society kept its patriarchal composition, readers and the audience of plays inevitably came across women figures more frequently than the residents of the previous eras. These women figures exhibited

wit beyond the common maidenly attributions to their sex. They were smart, brave and witty, all of which were dispositions widely imputed to men. As Susan C. Shapiro puts it, “Shakespeare again and again created an idealized portrait of the youthful Elizabeth (now an elderly lady in her sixties) in the brilliant, witty, charming, and universally admired heroines of his comedies.”(Shapiro 711)

In order to demonstrate how this refinement is echoed in Shakespearean comedies, I intend to analyze three plays of his with a view to their women characters. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Twelfth Night* exist females that endorse gallantry as well as uncustomary intellect. Hence Beatrice, Hermia and Olivia along with Hero, Helena, Viola and Maria have been considered as the most noteworthy characters in the scope of this study.

With an aim to inquire the research question: **“Study of unconventional woman figures in William Shakespeare’s comedies “Much Ado About Nothing”, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and “Twelfth Night” in regard to the conservative society of the period.”**, this essay is divided into four subheadings, plays assessed individually, and a conclusion in which characters are juxtaposed, in order to assay the characters in the breadth of their particular contexts as well as lay out the concurrences of these female heroes.

## I. MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

The most prominent woman character in Much Ado About Nothing can be established as Beatrice. She is, for many, the clearest character of Shakespeare's invention that points out an audacious woman figure and coincides with the powerful female trend at the time of Elizabeth's reign. Though Beatrice can be considered as an epitome of the chivalrous characters the women started to possess in the Elizabethan Era, the comparison of her personality and actions with those of Hero would bring about a better understanding of the dissimilarity of these courageous new women with the traditional passive woman figure. Therefore, while asserting the motive of "chivalrous women" in Much Ado About Nothing by focusing on Beatrice, Hero could be the reference point, a solid example of the palatable women at the times when Shakespeare wrote his comedies.

Much Ado About Nothing bears an abundance of reference to the social structure of England by narrating wrong accusations of the women and the mistrust of the men towards them. In contrast to Beatrice, her cousin Hero displays a woman of passiveness and conformity.

The society's approach revealed in Much Ado About Nothing is one of a patriarchal structure. However prominent the changes for women may have been during Queen Elizabeth's reign, men's attitude towards them was lucidly exhibited as one of absolute authority and perpetual suspicion. Much Ado About Nothing particularly promotes men figures as flawless embodiments of authority that preserve the social order. This notion can be interpreted as a commonplace motive as men were considered as the absolute owners of power in a large portion of the history. An appropriate example to men's ascendancy over women confronts the reader near the end of the play when Leonato demands that Claudio marry his brother's daughter instead of his dead child Hero in order for him to be forgiven. The noteworthy fact

in this course is that neither Leonato nor Claudio deems it necessary to question the bride-to-be on this hasty marriage accord. Even Leonato's brother, who is the father of the so-called Hero's cousin, does not seem to prize his daughter's stance in this matrimonial issue. Another prominent example illuminating the patriarchal structuring of the society can be how Hero is falsely accused of unchastity. During the nuptial ceremony when Claudio proclaims his prospective wife's defeat of virginity, everyone including her father's credulousness on this allegation acts to prove the unimportance of a woman's utterances. Albeit Hero tries to defy the stain on her virtue, her father refuses to believe a woman's words, even if it is his daughter. Also, Claudio's urge to Leonato that he should instruct her daughter to cite the truth reveals a sound authority of fathers on daughters. "*And by that fatherly and kindly power/ That you have in her, bid her answer truly.*" (Much Ado About Nothing, 4.1.78-79) This outright course implies that Shakespeare has given Leonato the power to command her daughter.

Even though the society in which *Much Ado About Nothing* is set reveals a conspicuous men's reign, the most exceptional character in the play, Beatrice propitiously exhibits an exceptional woman figure of uncommon wit and withstands the acute nature of men's hegemony. The readers are exposed to the prodigious claims uttered by her in as early as Act 1, when the messenger heralding the news of Don Pedro's approach comments: "*I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.*" (Much Ado About Nothing, 1.1.76-77). A most outstanding example to her anomalous opinions, however, shows itself on the later stages of the play.

*LEONATO'S BROTHER [To HERO] Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father.*

*BEATRICE Yes, faith; it is my cousin's duty to make curtsy and say "Father, as it please you." But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say "Father, as it please me."* (Much Ado About Nothing, 2.1.50-56)

By claiming that Hero ought to say “Father, as it please me” instead of “Father, as it please you.” Beatrice brings forward her most curt presumptions on the male-dominated realm about her. She alone does not conform to what the society demands of her, contrary to what her cousin Hero does. Her deprecation of the males being highly assertive on every issue also shows itself on marriage concerns when at the beginning of Act 2, Leonato infers the importance of marriage and the society’s expectancy from women to find a convenient match. “*By my troth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband, if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue* (Much Ado About Nothing, 2.1.18-19). Beatrice hails this claim by her out-of-ordinary musings about marriage, “*Just, if he send me no husband; for the which blessing I am at him upon my knees every morning and evening.*”(Much Ado About Nothing, 2.1.27-29). These words can be said to convey the unique characteristics attributed to Beatrice, for she is remarkably and uncommonly unfettered. While it is the prevalent demeanor for women to seek marriage, she feverishly despises such an act. It is apparent throughout the play that her kin would rather she got married, as Leonato makes a matchmaking attempt that will later prove successful and all her acquaintances take part in the pursuit to getting her marry. However, during this course, Beatrice resists wedding and refuses to enslave herself to men. Her unconstrained will to be free is what separates her from her peers.

By the bold sentences and responses she utters, it can be perceived that Beatrice not only exhibits a figure of self esteem, but also never hesitates to express her deviant thoughts. Her unpretentious yet bright speech tends to reveal her intelligence which can be said to exceed that of her associates. So remarkable is her acumen that she is immediately spotted by Don Pedro. “*By my troth, a pleasant-spirited lady.*”(Much Ado About Nothing, 2.1.334). Unlike other women figures in Much Ado About Nothing, she challenges men during conversations and makes sarcastic remarks particularly in her speeches with Benedick. Though at the time

when the play was written the maidenly attributions to ladies were such passive roles, Beatrice embodies the women starting to gain power by the display of a remarkable wit. Her distinction is clearly perceivable from her words due to the fact that women's talking too much was an illegitimate exercise of power (Wayne 1985) -and it is without doubt that Beatrice takes the floor whenever a chance arises.

*“DON PEDRO An he should, it were an alms to hang him. She's an excellent sweet lady; and, out of all suspicion, she is virtuous.*

*CLAUDIO And she is exceeding wise.”(Much Ado About Nothing, 2.3.165-168)*

From the dialogue above one can conveniently be drawn to the fact that Beatrice demonstrates wit beyond the ordinary women figure in this particular play.

## II. A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Shakespeare's pattern of creating unconventional women is also apparent in his comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In this particular play, the most remarkable woman figure is Hermia. Her individualistic character and courage are what distinguishes her from the typical women around her. An appropriate comparison between her and Helena, especially, would reveal her distinctness from the accustomed behavior attributed to females.

Like *Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also reveals the society's values and the common demeanor to wives, daughters, ladies. The two plays inevitably bring to light a similar pattern of stance towards women, for they are written at a time when there is an accepted and almost universal point of view towards females. At the beginning of the play, men's reign over women is unfolded when Egeus declares his authority over her daughter Hermia. He is so confident in his rule over his daughter that even where a marriage is the course of concern, he bears the power to choose whom Hermia will marry. "*As she is mine, I may dispose of her:/Which shall be either to this gentleman/ Or to her death, according to our law/ Immediately provided in that case.*" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5) Egeus's words suggest that it is the duty of a daughter to marry whoever her father desires, or else the punishment is as severe as death.

What makes Hermia stand out among the play is her resoluteness in deprecating her father's authority. As opposed to what the people expect from her, Hermia finds in herself the courage to pursue her own way in order to marry the men she desires. Her boldness in her expression of the fact that she will not endure to ensue the choices of her father even though she is faced with severe punishments also reveals her gallant nature.

*"HERMIA I do entreat your grace to pardon me.*

*I know not by what power I am made bold,*

*Nor how it may concern my modesty,*

*In such a presence here to plead my thoughts;*

*But I beseech your grace that I may know*

*The worst that may befall me in this case,*

*If I refuse to wed Demetrius.”*(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 5)

By these words, Hermia defies her father so boldly even in The Duke of Athens’s authoritative company that she may have been considered “as brave as a man” in the eyes of the readers in the Shakespearean era. Her frank nature is also come across in Act 3 Scene 2, when she and Helena have a row that emerges from the confusion of their lovers. During this quarrel, Hermia chooses to defend herself with dauntless words whereas Helena cowers and hides behind right maidenship with her words,

*“ I pray you, though you mock me, gentlemen,*

*Let her not hurt me: I was never curst;*

*I have no gift at all in shrewishness;*

*I am a right maid for my cowardice”* (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 36)

Helena’s speech makes a concise overview of what the maidenly attributions to females are and how Hermia is exceptional and auspiciously inconsistent. Even a tiny spark of fierce and opposition that originates from women is sufficient in order for the people to consider them shrews. However, it may be argued that this rather infers that particular woman’s intelligence and gallantness. In this case, Hermia’s. Helena’s words’ cessation with a cry of help from the two gentlemen (Lysander and Demetrius) draws us further to the conclusion that Helena is as despondent a woman as Hermia is intrepid. The discrepancy between these two ladies is underlined even more with Helena’s words during her pursuit of Demetrius into the woods, “*We cannot fight for love, as men may do;/We should be wood and were not made to woo.”*

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 18). Even though Helena seeks to accentuate the

dissemblance between the two sexes with these lines, Hermia unfalteringly repels all the oppression and her father's expectancies to go after Lysander, thus fights for her love, *as men do*.

A cue that could easily be mistaken for a mere detail gives itself away in the play produced by the mechanicals. While rehearsing *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the six Athenians argue whether particular details in the play would scare the ladies off. Bottom's lines "*First, Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself; which the ladies cannot abide.*" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 23) and his suggestion that "*a lion among ladies, is a most dreadful thing; for there is not a more fearful wild-fowl than your lion living;*" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 24) lucidly exposes a rather shallow approach to females. Notwithstanding this concept, Hermia is a character of Shakespeare's devise that does not tend to conform to what the society expects of women. Her spending a night alone in the deserted depths of the woods constitutes as proof for her distinctness and prowess. Why would a lady who is afraid of merely an actor portraying a lion dwell in the forest all by herself?

## III. TWELFTH NIGHT

Twelfth Night is a devise of Shakespeare's mind which prominently exhibits women of independent and feverish character. The most obtrusive figures in this comedy are Olivia, a countess of Illyria, and Viola, who disguises herself as Cesario. Their unconventional behavior is what distinguishes them from the traditional womanly practice, parallel to those inquired in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, contrary to the other plays which were analyzed in this essay, *Twelfth Night* could be considered as lacking in prominently conventional women -does not prominently exhibit conventional women. It can be proposed that the women narrated in this particular piece all endorse acumen and gallantry. Though Maria can be considered as a supporting character, even she frames a remarkable character of shrewdness.

As early as the second scene, Olivia the countess's self-governing identity is revealed. As the captain familiarizes Viola with Illyria, where they have just set foot on, he makes important remarks about the countess: "*She hath abjured the company/ And sight of men.*" (Twelfth Night, 1.2.38-39). In this regard, it can be assumed that her despise of men's company has spread so much as to make itself known to a mere sailor. In an era where women are considered chaste so long as they surrender themselves to their husbands or fathers, Olivia seems in this cognizance to stand solid as an independent woman. She neither craves for a husband nor resigns her wealth and hegemony to a man. The witty character feverishly refuses to marry Orsino, the duke of Illyria, though he possesses substantial wealth and command. The Duke's proposal would undoubtedly be tempting for the vast majority, however what makes Olivia stand out in this position is her constancy in eschewing such a proposal.

Olivia not only acts against the system by claiming that she can do without men but also multiplies her transgressive nature by falling in love with a page. Had it been a secret passion dwelling inside her, she could have been regarded as a traditional figure, yet she makes her fondness known to Cesario (Viola) which can be interpreted as an act of boldness. It is also Olivia who proposes to Sebastian (whom she mistakes for Cesario), which controverts the customary codes of behavior attributed to women. By her words “*Nay, come, I prithee: would thou’dst be ruled by me!*” (Twelfth Night, 4.1.60) she can be said to delineate her inclination to be in authority, even in a romantic relationship as such. Albeit the prevalent scope of social pattern attributes puissance to men, Olivia ceases to conform and takes over the prerogative.

Olivia can be perceived as the most dominant figure in Twelfth Night, this is apparent both from her one-to-one relationship with Cesario and her rule over men, including her kinsmen Sir Toby Belch. When Sir Toby and his companion Sir Andrew Aguecheek display prodigal behavior, Olivia tends to reprimand them to keep the order of the house. Her authority is underlined by Malvolio, Olivia’s steward, in the following words: “*My lady bade me tell you, that though she harbours you as her kinsmen, she’s nothing allied to your disorders.*” (Twelfth Night, 2.2.88-90). Indeed, Sir Toby immediately obeys his kinswoman’s censure in this particular case in Scene 2 Act 2 and gets going, bidding Maria a farewell. However established may men’s reign in the 17<sup>th</sup> century be, Shakespeare narrates Olivia as an atypical character, reversing the accustomed roles alleged to men and women, creating a world in which the two sexes are drawn more equivalent.

Viola’s role in ushering an influential women’s reign in Twelfth Night is not one that can be underestimated. Viola, by possessing unwavering wit and valiancy, contradicts customary perceptions about females. Contrary to the lightheartedness attributed to women inferred in Duke Orsino’s words: “*There is no woman’s sides/ Can bide the beating of so strong a*

*passion*” (Twelfth Night, 2.4. 92-93) Viola stands solid in this play as a medium to contradict all that curtails women’s ingenuity. When it comes to love, as opposed to Orsino’s remark on the nature of women, she stays constant to her passion for Duke Orsino despite the perplexed situation resulting from her disguise. Her consistency in preserving her mock identity and skills to survive in a foreign land all by herself also aggrandize her idiosyncrasy. Indeed, as pointed out by Jean E. Howard, Viola, the apparent threat to the patriarchal system, is rewarded (qtd. in Arias Doblaz 263) at the end when Orsino declares that she shall be his mistress. Hence it can be attained that Shakespeare praises courageous women and cherishes their uniqueness.

However insignificant may some see her contributions to the context, Maria is also crucial in portraying a sharp minded lady. It is Maria who masterminds the plot against Malvolio in an attempt to taunt him. Indeed, even men are impressed by her incisive devise that Sir Toby praises her acumen in the following words: *“To the gates of Tartar, thou most excellent devil of wit!”* (Twelfth Night, 2.5.195). Her conceiving such a plan could also infer the cunning nature of women, who strive to abide with whatever chicanery until they get what they want.

In Twelfth Night, it is apparent that Shakespeare gives women the most witty and audacious of roles. Here, the three woman figures take up all the prominent guises in the play, making it in a way dominated by the fresh and compelling women’s reign.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

As made apparent by the various examples and quotations from the context of the plays, the late 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century was mostly influenced by men, giving way to a patriarchal mode of social structure. This common lineup brought about a perspective towards women which mainly consisted of fragility, cowardice and confirmation to men's hegemony. A fitting lady of the realm could be one that submitted to poltroonery and obeyed her father or husband's rule. As Helena from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* puts it, "*I have no gift at all in shrewishness; / I am a right maid for my cowardice*" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 36) the habitual attributions to "right maids" were cowardice and submissiveness. Beatrice, Hermia, Olivia all act to disprove these generalizations, them all being witty and tending to be unrestrained when it comes to issues concerning their own fates.

According to Stephen Orgel, "fantasies of freedom in Shakespeare tend to take the form of escapes from the tyranny of elders to a world where the children can make their own society, which usually means where they can arrange their own marriages."(671). This is exactly the case in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Hermia craves to marry the men she adores and therefore breaks free from her father's reign. Albeit there is no apparent case of unfettering from a man's govern, *Twelfth Night* also bears traces of a desire to pursue the loved one, longing to shape one's own fate as Viola feverishly fancies her master.

Another conspicuous notion is Beatrice and Olivia's reluctance to submit themselves to a man. This avidity to be self-governing is a legitimate example of the two figures being liberated. Beatrice and Olivia, by this aberrant attitude, tend to express power beyond the accustomed allegations to females as they infer by their actions that they do not need a men's initiative to survive.

In the anonymous 17<sup>th</sup> century book narrating the once contemporary trend of masculine women *Hic Mulier: or, The Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to Cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of our Time* (1620), the following extract vindicates the claims made through this essay:

*“...and will bee man-like not only from the head to the waste, but to the very foot, and in every condition: man in body by attyre, man in behavior by rude complement, man in nature by aptness to anger, man in action by pursuing revenge, man in wearing weapons man in using weapons.”*(Hic Mulier)

Referring to this extract, Viola clearly plays the part of “*man in body by attyre*”, Hermia the one who pursues revenge (as she fights with Helena for Demetrius) and Beatrice portrays a “*man in behavior*” by her banters. These characters are all preeminent women who strive to get what they want, as the men of the same realm have always done.

By this investigation and analysis of William Shakespeare’s three comedies, it is apparent that they comprise of the same concept when it comes to the role of females in the society. All of the females mentioned in this essay, mainly Beatrice, Hermia and Olivia, manifest a women’s revolution, a metamorphosis of females, inclined towards the two sexes becoming more equal, by displaying unfaltering wit. By crafting these invaluable women, W. Shakespeare can be said to have ameliorated social prejudices about females.

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