

Gender Categories Can Both Liberate and Limit

Visual Culture

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The British playwright, poet and actor William Shakespeare was a master at his craft. He defied traditional gender norms and has prompted us to question gender characteristics and the capacity of patriarchy. His work has stimulated years of study and has influenced many modern reproductions. While personally studying the works of Shakespeare, I found that a common theme arose. The independent female characters depict antagonists. They never reap the rewards for their forward-mindedness. They become limited due to their gender category. The docile, dependent and obedient female characters depict protagonists. They are adored and idolised for their happiness with traditionality. They become rewarded. They are comfortable with their limits due to their gender category. Nevertheless, they are more liberated than the strong females, especially in the eyes of the audience.

In this essay, I will explore how Shakespeare both liberated and limited female characters based on their gender categories. First, I shall examine the lives and roles of a woman in Shakespearean times. I will do this to see how they were limited or liberated due to their gender category, focusing on the reigning monarch, Elizabeth I. Next, I shall be discussing how gender categories both limit and liberate through the Shakespeare work King Lear. To conclude, I shall challenge my argument by exploring another of his works, Twelfth Night. Throughout my essay, I will back up my opinions with reliable sources and critically analyse his works to further my understanding.

Before diving into the world of Shakespeare and how he limited and liberated female characters based on their gender category, it is crucial to study how real-life women lived during his lifetime. In one way, the women he interacted with and observed were his

primary source of character inspiration. He would have learnt what characteristics a woman displays and interpreted them in his own way to include in his works.



Figure 1: *Lucas van Leyden, Young woman spinning, c. 1513, English Civil War Living History Resources.*

Women of the late 16th Century were very limited in what they could do because of their gender category, social class and economic background. The life a woman leads was determined by whom she married. Some husbands may have offered their wives some liberation to work outside the typical female gender norms. Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, carried out such tasks like the day-to-day running of the business. Women were not fit to be playing the gender roles of a man. "As women, they were expected to be the silently

beautiful beloved and not the balladeer” (Kemp, 2009). Women learnt the appropriate practical skills, passed down from generation to generation, for day-to-day housewifery, baking and knitting (*Figure 1*).



Figure 2: George Gower, *Elizabeth I*, c. 1588, *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

We may ask why women of the time were limited due to their gender category, especially considering that the reigning monarch was a very respected lady, Elizabeth I (*Figure 2*). It all seems contradictory, as Elizabeth I reigned for forty-five years and was considered a successful monarch. Her success might have been down to her sexism towards her gender. She further limited her gender, even resuming the legality for men to impose corporal

punishment on their disobedient wives. She did not find liberation in her female gender but that of a male gender - something she made abhorrently clear: "...she defended her right and authority to rule not on her personal merits or attributes of her female body, but rather on the masculinity of her politics" (Kemp, 2009). She truly believed that to gain the rights of a man, she must think and act like a man. By shunning the typical gender norms of a woman, she became liberated and respected. She did not further women's rights or associate herself with traditional female ideals of the time. She did not marry or produce any children, causing her to earn the title of the Virgin Queen. We may ask questions about the Queen based on how she viewed and tackled issues regarding her gender. It is clear to see that to liberate herself in her gender category, she had to take on a different gender category. Elizabeth I can directly relate with Goneril and Regan in King Lear, and also with the character of Viola in Twelfth Night - all of these characters I shall be exploring in later parts of this essay.

I shall first examine this argument through the lens of King Lear. This work was published first in 1608. It follows King Lear and his descent into madness brought on by his daughters, Goneril and Regan, after he disowns his third daughter, Cordelia. I shall focus on the leading female characters of Goneril, Regan and Cordelia (*Figure 3*) and how they are limited and liberated in their gender category. When the gender categories provide limitations, the characters are antagonists. When the gender categories provide liberation, the characters are protagonists.



Figure 3: *Gustav Pope, The Three Daughters of King Lear, (1875), Art Renewal Centre.*

King Lear automatically dives deep into gender categories and their limitations and liberations as soon as the play begins. Lear hopes to abdicate his throne due to his old age. He wishes to divide his land, not between his daughters but their husbands. He will do so based on which one of his three daughters "...doth love us most" (Shakespeare, n.d.a).

What follows next through the two eldest daughters shows their reward, or liberation, by conforming to their traditional gender categories. Goneril flatters Lear, "I do love you more than words can wield the matter" (Shakespeare, n.d.a) and is rewarded with a large section of land to call her own. Regan then upstages Goneril by proclaiming that her love is grander than her sisters. She then receives a section of land larger than her sisters. By exhibiting

obedience and love, they become rewarded and liberated to enjoy the land for which their husbands will govern.

However, the youngest of the three daughters sees right through his love test. Cordelia refuses to inflate Lear's ego for inheritance and replies, "Nothing, my lord" (Shakespeare, n.d.a). By going against the norms of the female gender category, she is limited to the highest degree. As a strong woman, refusing the chains of her femininity she is cast as an evil daughter and disowned, "Here I disclaim all my paternal care" (Shakespeare, n.d.a).

As the play progresses, we see how complex the characters of Goneril and Regan are. Although they come across as loving, faithful daughters in the Love Test, the truth of their characters comes to light. The sisters both see how limited they are in their gender category and strive to become liberated, "...acting as though they were men in a world that saw women as weak and vulnerable" (Kakimoto, 2019), something which is very similar to what Elizabeth I did to earn her place as an honoured monarch. However, instead of becoming respected, both sisters are demonstrated to be an embodiment of evil. Lear arrives at Goneril's, where he parties with his band of one hundred unruly knights. His poor behaviour results in his being ousted after Goneril tells her servants to "put on what weary negligence you please" (Shakespeare, n.d.az). Both she and Regan are regarded as hypocrites in the eyes of the audience due to their refusal to play the docile daughter. Undoubtedly, they are putting themselves and their servants of the house first by refusing to accommodate Lear and his boisterous knights. Rather than hypocrisy against their father, one may see compassion and appreciation for their servants and selves.

The apex of Goneril and Regan's limitations due to their non-traditional gender category reaches as they both fall in love with Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate and antagonistic son. Shakespeare writes about the seemingly malicious, yet gender category-defying, sisters' deserved end. "Women at power can only bring disgrace" (Kaiter, 2015). Even though the sisters have their husbands, they fall into a jealous rage with each other over their battle for the powerful apparent heir. They strive for independence and influence, which results in their deaths. Goneril, apparently overruled by lust and jealousy, poisons her sister Regan, who has become paranoid and equally jealous. Goneril's shameful end arrives with Edmund's death. She would rather lose everything she had worked so hard for than Edmund; so she takes her own life. The sisters strive to liberate their limitations due to their gender category but have failed. The only glimmer of liberation is that Goneril had just enough power in the end to control her life and choose how she wanted to die. Conclusively, the sisters' death restores patriarchal rule.

Goneril and Regan's true colours mean that Cordelia, the banished daughter, is recast as a typical Shakespearean woman, "absent, silent or dead" (Kaiter, E.). She conforms to her gender category by playing the role of the caring daughter and becomes liberated from her banishment. She returns to look after her mistreated and insane father when "holy water from her heavenly eyes" (Shakespeare, n.d.a) does shed. Cordelia represents all that is good and decent. Her liberation is her casting as the protagonistic daughter, arriving to save Lear from his spiralling madness. Her submission to her gender category is further demonstrated when she shows overwhelming compassion and no desire to plot revenge against her misjudging father.



Figure 4: Artist unknown, no date, Lear grieving over the death of his daughter Cordelia,

Historica Graphica Collection/Heritage Images/Getty Images

Cordelia's final downfall is her choice to break her gender category and fight for her father's corner. By choosing to take on a male gender category, she is fatally limited in her female gender category (*Figure 4*). She faces her fate bravely and is strangled in her jail cell. Her only tragic remark is that she wishes she was a better daughter than she already was "For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down" (Shakespeare, n.d.a).

I will sequentially challenge my argument through another Shakespeare work, *Twelfth Night*. This work was first published in 1602 and contains themes of mistaken identity, accidental queerness and non-conforming gender categories, which opposes *King Lear*.

The play begins with Viola shipwrecked in the land of Illyria. She laments the loss of her twin brother Sebastian, and learns very quickly how limited she is due to her gender category. She is considered a traditional gender-conforming female, similar to Cordelia's character. Contrary to King Lear, this does not mean Viola is liberated or rewarded. She figures out how gender categories and norms play crucial roles in the treatment of people. Viola cannot find proper work as a woman, which mirrors the lives of Elizabethan-era women of the time. She disguises herself as Cesario, "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." (Shakespeare, n.d.b). Viola is immediately liberated due to her newfound male gender category and finds work as a page for Duke Orsino.



Figure 5: William Powell Frith, 1874, *Olivia Unveiling*, Folger Shakespeare Library.

Duke Orsino is in love with Countess Olivia, who is distraught over her brother's death and will not receive visitors. He sends Cesario to court the Countess for him (*Figure 5*), but she falls in love with Cesario instead - something no other man in Illyria could do. Cesario's presentation as a male gender category when they are concealing their female gender category is our first glimpse at Viola's ultimate liberation. By taking the best parts of both gender categories, Viola can live her best life, entirely liberated. She discovers that gender categories can limit and liberate, so by breaking gender categories, she can become fully liberated.

Sebastian, Viola's twin, arrives, causing a flood of events caused by his mistaken identity with Cesario. Olivia finds Sebastian after a duel caused by this mistaken identity; also believing that he is Cesario, she invites him to the chantry to get married.



Figure 6: Joan Marcus, 2009, *Photo Flash: The Public Theatre's TWELFTH NIGHT at the Delacorte Theatre, Off-Broadway*

The twins are eventually reunited and are ecstatic that they are both still alive. Orsino comments that “One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not” (Shakespeare, n.d.b), suggesting that Viola and Sebastian are the same person (*Figure 6*), a feminine and a masculine side of one person; the most liberated character due to their ability to alter gender categories.

Finally, Orsino realises his attraction to Cesario and promises Viola that he will marry her, but only once she is dressed as a woman again. “Cesario come, For so you shall be while you are a man. But when in other habits you are seen, Orsino’s mistress, and his fancy’s queen” (Shakespeare, n.d.b) He interestingly calls her Cesario, even after her true identity is disclosed. This contradicts Viola’s feeling of uselessness we witness at the beginning of the play - she is now limited due to her male gender category when presented as Cesario. She must liberate herself by resuming a female gender category and acting so.

It becomes clear that Viola has now noticed how she can gain ultimate liberation by expelling gender categories. “...she evokes elements from both genders and fluidly switches between them in order to best handle whatever situation comes her way” (Luk, 2010). Viola conforms to the independent, physically liberated male category at the very beginning of the play when trying to find work. She then conforms to the elegant, morally liberated, female gender when she needs to, for example, when she gained Olivia’s attention and also when

comforting Orsino on his rejection, “We men may say more, swear more: but indeed / Our shows are much more than will; for still we prove / Much in our vows, but little in our love” (Shakespeare, n.d.b).

To conclude this essay, Shakespeare liberated and limited female characters, based on their gender categories. I have studied the lives and roles of a woman in Shakespearean times and how they were limited and liberated due to their gender category. I have forwarded how Shakespeare has liberated and limited female characters in *King Lear*. I have challenged my argument by studying liberation and limitation due to gender categories in *Twelfth Night*. I supported my opinions with reliable sources and critically analysed Shakespeare’s works to further my understanding.

The suggestion that Viola and Sebastian, the female and male gender categories, are the same is essential to this essay. It starkly contrasts with the real Elizabethan-era women and the female characters in *King Lear*. Elizabethan-era women had no freedom to break their gender category and stayed in their limited female gender category. Elizabeth I, similar to Viola, broke gender categories by playing both a male and a female gender category and achieved ultimate liberation. In *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan reject their typical, limited female category and take on a male gender category that they believe will liberate them. Cordelia sticks to her female gender category after limiting herself through her banishment for playing a non-traditional female gender category. *Twelfth Night* suggests that if all the female characters in *King Lear* played into a fluid gender category, they would have likewise achieved Viola’s ultimate liberation.

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