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Lavinia, Kate and Portia: The Progression of Identity

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The works of William Shakespeare often touch upon and make comments about women. One example that has been illustrated is the concept of a self-aware identity. What is meant by a self-aware identity is a woman with her own opinions and beliefs, one who possess a strong voice and is a powerful force. As presented, for the purpose of my argument, a woman’s identity is defined by her valued voice and her own power. The treatment and outcome of women with their own identity in Shakespeare’s plays serve to present different views on this concept. Three of his works that create suggestions on how to deal with self-aware women are: Titus Andronicus, The Taming of the Shrew, both written in 1594, and The Merchant of Venice, written years later in 1599. In Titus Andronicus, the character of Lavinia is raped, ravished and killed because of her individual identity. This vilification of identity is somewhat subdued in The Taming of the Shrew where the self-aware Katherine fares well, but only because she is tamed. The Merchant of Venice presents an appreciated sort of woman, where the character of Portia is allowed the force and voice of identity, but only when disguised as a man. A study of these plays demonstrates a progression, over time, of an individualized feminine identity from that which must be destroyed by man, to that which must be tamed by man and finally developed into that which can be valued in the form of a man. What this progression shows is the formation of the concept that the only proper way that a woman can carry a voice and power in society is when (she is likened to a man). This idea further makes the suggestion that if women want to be respected and valued, they must learn to act less like a woman, and more like a man.

The tragedy of Titus Andronicus is a bloody and brutal tale that illustrates the self-aware identity of Lavinia as the marker of her downfall and demise. She is first introduced into the play by her brother as “her to whom my thoughts are humbled all, gracious Lavinia, Rome’s rich ornament” (1. 1. 51-52). This shows how, at the beginning of the play, Lavinia has no real individuality and exists simply as an adornment to add beauty to the city. This concept is furthered by the fact that she has very few lines, which represents a lack of voice and power. She forms no opinions and displays no authority over any other characters, even when her father gives Saturninus permission to marry her when she is already betrothed to Bassianus. When Titus asks if she is displeased with this arrangement, Lavinia’s only response is “not I, my lord; sith true nobility warrants these words in princely courtesy” (1. 1. 271-272). Her refusal to protest a marriage that she doesn’t want further exemplifies her complete lack of voice and power that form a true identity. In fact, the only reason that she is not forced to wed Saturninus is because of Bassianus, who seizes Lavinia and announces “this maid is mine” (1. 1. 276). Others recognition of Lavinia being without individuality is expressed with the declaration of Demetrius that “She is a woman, therefore may be woo’d; She is a woman, therefore may be won” (2.1. 82-83). What he is saying is that Lavinia is an example of a woman without identity; she has no power over or opinion on her domination by men.

One can mark a change in Lavinia to a woman with a self-aware identity upon her entrance into the forest. She and Bassianus come across Tamora, the Goth queen, engaging in sexual acts with a Moor that is not her husband. Surprisingly enough, the quiet disposition of Lavinia seems to disappear suddenly when she speaks the majority of her lines in a short dialogue where she exchanges lewd and crass insults with Tamora. Lavinia goes as far as crediting Tamora with “a goodly gift in horning” (2. 3. 67) and makes reference as to Tamora’s husband being “mightily abus’d” (2. 3. 87). The fact that Lavinia
uses her voice to overpower Tamora by accusing her of being sexually loose and shaming her husband
shows the expression of Lavinia’s opinions and demonstrates the construction of her self-aware identity.

The creation of Lavinia’s own identity is quickly followed by Tamora’s plea to her sons to
“Revenge it” (2. 3. 114). What happens is that Lavinia’s self-expression causes her own destruction in
which Chiron and Demetrius cut out her tongue, cut off her hands, rape her and then mock her.
Demetrius cries, “So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak, Who ‘twas that cut thy tongue and ravish’d
thee” (2. 4. 1-2). Chiron then goes to add, “Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so; An if thy
stumps will let thee play the scribe” (2. 4. 3-4). The loss of her tongue makes it so that she is unable to
speak and the loss of her hands leaves her as powerless and as devoid of an identity as she was in the
beginning of the play. Her father, Titus, later declares “Die, die, Lavinia, and they shame with thee”
when he murders her in order to protect her from her shame (5. 3. 46). In response to the accusation of
himself as Lavinia’s murderer, he responds, “Not I; ‘twas Chiron and Demetrius; They ravish’d her, and
cut away her tongue: And they, ‘twas they, that did her all this wrong” (5. 3. 56-58). What is being
exemplified is the concept that it was the self-aware identity of Lavinia that caused her suffering and
death. This is because it was the development of her identity that called for the need for the loss of her
identity; which was done through the rape and ravishment that then led to her death. In this manner, it
can be seen how Titus Andronicus presents the concept that a woman’s identity is something that must be
taken away by men. In Shakespeare’s next play, The Taming of the Shrew, the effects of a woman having
individuality are softened.

The Taming of the Shrew is a comedy that deals with the idea of a woman’s identity and makes
the suggestion that women with self-aware identities, in this case Katherine, can be tamed into a new
humor that is more desirable to men. In the beginning of the play, Katherine is described as “curst and
Shrewd” (1. 1. 193). This is because she uses her voice freely and loudly and lets others know of her
opinions. When her father commanded her to stay, she declared “What, shall I be appointed hours as
though, belike, I knew not what to take and what to leave? Ha!” (1.1. 105-106). This shows that
Katherine is forceful and makes her own decisions. With all of this, what is clearly defined is that
Katherine is a woman with a self-aware identity. Because of this, men are not attracted to her; yet,
because of her rich dowry, a man named Petruchio decides to tame her in order to “wive it wealthily” (1.
2. 76).

Petruchio’s first act of taming is to compromise Katherine’s identity by calling her Kate. When
she corrects him, he responds “you lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate” (2. 1. 193). This is
important because Petruchio is telling Katherine who she is and thereby taking away her sense of identity
with his use of power and voice. Basically, he is subduing her voice and power by establishing his own
as more important. Petruchio later fully discloses his intent when he tells Katherine that “I am he am born
to tame you, Kate, and bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate conformable to other household Kates” (2. 1.
291-292). With this, it becomes clear that Katherine’s identity is not acceptable and she will therefore be
changed in order to make her acceptable in the eyes of men. The taming process can be further shown in
Petruchio’s statement to Katherine “and kiss me, Kate. We will be married o’ Sunday” (2. 1. 343). This
is important because he rejects her voice when he does not ask her opinion and basically informs her that
they are engaged. Petruchio’s denial of Katherine’s identity obtains the desired effect because instead of
refuting the engagement, Kate silences her voice and allows her father to start planning the wedding. The
remainder of the taming goes on after the wedding at Petruchio’s home where he doesn’t allow his Kate
to sleep or eat and speaks in opposition to whatever it is that she says. In this manner, he takes away her
power to the point where she can not even get anyone to serve her food and takes away her voice by
making her so frustrated with him that she gives up her own view and simply agrees with whatever he
says.

A great shift in Katherine’s manner appears when, after a fight in which Petruchio states the sun
to be the moon. She finally declares “and be it moon, or sun, or what you please. And if you please to
call it a rush candle, henceforth I vow it shall be so for me” (4. 5. 15-17). This is very significant because
it marks the moment when Katherine realizes that she must adhere to whatever it is that her husband says
and abandon her own individuality. This realization is further marked in her long speech at the end of the
play. Petruchio commands Katherine to explain a woman’s duty to her husband and she submits and continues to declare that “thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper” (5. 2. 162) and that “my hand is ready, may it do him ease” (5. 2. 195). One can see from this persuasive and lengthy speech that she obtains her original voice and power, yet not her self-aware identity. What this means is that Katherine’s identity had been tamed to the point where her voice and power still remain, but they do so only at her husband’s will. It has been shown how The Taming of the Shrew takes the belief from Titus Andronicus that a self-aware woman is no good; but, through the taming of identity, presents a milder way to rid society of such women. This concept of identity is further shaped into an acceptable form in The Merchant of Venice.

Another comedy by Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice expands the already developed concept of a woman’s individuality into an identity that can be valued by society. In this play, the character of Portia develops her own sense of identity that is respected and profitable to others by adapting the identity of a man. At Portia’s introduction into the play, it becomes known that she is “aweary of this great world” because she must adhere to a lottery courtship, involving three chests, that was formulated on her father’s deathbed (1. 2. 1-2). She laments that “so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father” (1. 2. 24-25) and “I cannot choose one, nor refuse none” (1. 2. 26). What she is saying is that she has no voice or power in her courtship and must marry the man who picks the correct chest, no matter how she feels about him. She later says to one of her suitors that her father “scented me and hedged me by his wit to yield myself” (2.1. 16-17). With her regrets on being so restricted and bound, it becomes clear that Portia longs for the identity that she lacks because of her father. Fortunately, the suitor that chooses the correct chest is Bassanio, who was favored by Portia.

Upon his winning guess, Portia states that “myself, and what is mine, to you and yours is now converted” (3. 2. 170-171). This illustrates the fact that now free from her father’s hold, Portia is capable of creating her own identity. Yet, because it is a marriage that releases her, the only kind of identity that she can create is one that is dependent and somehow mixed with that of her husband. This concept is further explained with the misfortune of Bassanio’s good friend Antonio. Immediately after the wedding, Bassanio must depart for Venice because Antonio must appear in court and could be killed. Upon her husband’s departure, Portia and her handmaid Nerissa decide to acquire “such a habit that they shall think we are accomplished with what we lack” (3. 4. 63-65). What she means is that both women will disguise themselves as two men, a doctor and a clerk, in order to travel to Venice and save Antonio. Because a woman’s voice is not valued like a man’s and a man has more power, especially in the courtroom, they will have to “turn two mincing steps into a manly stride” in order to help (3. 4. 70-71). What is shown is that Portia is forced to take her identity that is already dependent on a man and push it one step further to construct an identity as a man.

In court, the costumed Portia uses her voice and power of her masculine identity in order to save Antonio from death. Bassanio expresses to Portia that “Most worthy gentleman, I and my friend have by your wisdom been this day acquitted” (4. 1. 426-427). Portia and Nerissa are celebrated and quickly return home in order to arrive before the men. At Bassanio and Antonio’s arrival, Portia admits that she “was the doctor, Nerissa there, her clerk” (5. 1. 288-289). Upon this discovery, Antonio says to Portia “sweet lady, you have given me life” (5. 1. 306). This shows the significant good that Portia was responsible for because if it were not for her, Antonio would have most likely died. This is very important because it is an instance of a woman’s voice and power of identity being not only acceptable, but highly valued. The important thing to remember is that Portia would have never been able to express herself in court and save Antonio if she had not been dressed as a man. What this shows is the complete progression from a woman’s self-aware identity as something that must be destroyed or tamed by man, to a woman’s identity as something that can be appreciated, but only as long as it is expressed like that of a man. What is being suggested is that if a woman wants her identity to valued, she needs to make it more like a man’s. While the fact that Portia had to pretend to be a man in order to have her identity valued may seem like a catastrophe, one must keep in mind that the distortion of one’s self to liken that of a man is a great step beyond Kate having her identity tamed into subservience or Lavinia’s identity being destroyed with rape and ravishment.
Through the Shakespearean works of *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of The Shrew*, and *The Merchant of Venice* there has been demonstrated a progression of identity. Each play features characters that have their own sense of individual identity through their voice and their power. The fate of each character is unique: Lavinia, of *Titus Andronicus*, is raped and murdered; Kate, of *The Taming of the Shrew*, is tamed; and Portia, of *The Merchant of Venice*, saves the day disguised as a man. This concept of the self-aware identity of a woman is treated differently in each play in order to illustrate the movement to the idea that the only way for a woman’s opinion to be valued in society, is if she presents herself less like a woman and more like a man.

Works Cited