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Shakespeare

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Shakespeare and Identity

The theatre has long been a place where people can forget themselves and take on a different identity. In the case of actors, the self can change in an instant, with nothing more than a costume change. The playwright is able to create new worlds and characters, and the audience is able to lose themselves and become involved with these creations. One of the most (arguably the most) famous and prolific figures to participate in this theatre cannon is William Shakespeare. For a long time, not much was known about Shakespeare himself. He was notoriously private about his personal life, but through years of study and searches through public records, certain information has become available that allows a portrait of his personality to emerge. Through this study (as well as a close examination of his theatrical works), the question can be asked: why did this man choose to dedicate his life to the theatre? The answer lies in the very nature of the atmosphere. Shakespeare was involved in theatre because it allowed him the space and freedom to choose his identity.

From what could be gleaned of Shakespeare's life from early records, he was one of eight children (four daughters and four sons) born to John and Mary Shakespeare. John was a fairly esteemed "glover, landowner, money lender, and dealer in wool and other agricultural goods" (45) who "held a series of important posts in local government" (45). He even went as far as to apply for a family crest but came on to sudden financial hardship (for which reasons are unknown), and was unable to finish the process. Later, William paid for this title, effectively

promoting himself and his father to the status of gentlemen. This seems like one of the important ways that playwriting allowed William to control his identity: the financial assets that he gained through his profession allowed him to elevate his social status. In addition to going through a financial ruin, John was very probably a Catholic, something that would be considered highly controversial in Protestant dominated nation. William would have likely been raised with these beliefs but due to the restricted political climate would have been required to refrain from expressing them. Because religion can be such a highly personal and important aspect in someone's life, it is not a reach to say that if the above were true, Shakespeare would have felt like he was suppressing a major part of his identity. In fact, in *The Merchant of Venice* in particular, the conflict centers on a religious conflict between Jewish people and Christians. It is a fair observation that this conflict could very well have been an allegory for the same struggles between Catholics and Protestants, with an element changed so as not to attract censorship and possible consequences from higher powers in government. Shakespeare seemed to be particularly talented at this: masking social commentary by placing the setting in a distant country between separate but similar groups. When making these commentaries, Shakespeare tended to err on the side of compromise and acceptance being the right path- anything that would allow people to embrace their true identities- even if a surface level reading doesn't reveal that. In his adult life, Shakespeare married a woman named Anne Hathaway, who was seven years his senior. Together, they had two daughters. Despite this, for much of his early career he spent a majority of the year in London with his theatre company, away from his family. The theatre scene was one that was controversial: it was entirely comprised of men, many of them younger. It was a community associated with homosexuality, and to some extent, carousing. In essence, an atmosphere that would have been very different from being at home with a wife and children. It

could be argued that there was a very real conflict present in Shakespeare- it would seem reasonably likely that he would have taken a younger lover, with a relationship not unlike Antonio and Bassanio shared. While he clearly seemed to care for his wife and, especially, daughters, this was yet another aspect of his identity that he explored in an environment where it was conducive to do so.

Another one of the places that that the search for identity becomes apparent is in Shakespeare's characters, and "virtually all of Shakespeare's major characters, men and women, convey the sense of both a self division and an inward expansion" (62). As the Norton Shakespeare explains, "identity in Shakespeare repeatedly slips away from the characters themselves...[but] the slippage does not mean that they retreat into silence; rather, they embark on an experimental and difficult fashioning of themselves and the world, most often through role playing" (63). For Shakespeare, identity was a fickle and malleable thing- and more often than not, the source of his plotlines. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, the two young lovers grapple with the sense of personal sense of self against the family rules and values that they were raised with. The end up making the ultimate sacrifice to stay true to the values that they have decided are important. Looking at *Much Ado About Nothing*, almost every problem in the play deals with identity of some sort. Don John was villainous because of his status and the identity of "bastard" that had been assigned to him at birth. Hero's honor was placed at stake because of an intentional deception involving her identity. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio must decide between his identity as Antonio's young lover and his role as Portia's husband. Portia herself hides her identity in order to affect the outcome of Antonio's trial. Shylock's identity ends up compromised as he is forced to convert, and his daughter Jessica chooses a new identity when she runs away with Lorenzo. Again and again, the devices used to advance the plot and develop

the characters revolve around the way that those characters choose to portray themselves, and yet “the shattering of the glass serves to remind us not only of the fragility of identity in Shakespeare, but of its characteristic appearance in fragmentary mirror images” (63). There is also the plot device of the masque: it is similar to the theatre in the way that characters can disguise themselves (to an extent) and behave as they would like to, and it was also an event that made it into most of Shakespeare’s early plays as a notable turning point for the story. Again, Norton Shakespeare says it best:

“This is a world in which outward appearances are everything and nothing, in which individuation is sharply etched and continually blurred, and which the victims of fate are haunted by the ghosts of the possible, in which everything is simultaneously as it must be and as it need not have been” (64).

By writing characters with complex and rich inner lives, Shakespeare was expressing his own feelings and experiences: both with having to hide certain aspects of his identity and how to express others.

It seems unlikely that Shakespeare was motivated to pursue theatre solely by financial reasons. There are, of course, many different careers that he could have engaged in that would have provided a suitable and adequate income. It also would not seem that he was motivated by a desire for recognition and fame. As was stated before, he was intensely private, and in fact, “though by 1597 seven of Shakespeare’s plays had been printed, the title pages did not identify him as an author” (44). It is clear that he chose to be a man of the stage because he loved it, but to look at exactly what he loved about it is important. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia says, “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (Act IV, Scene 2). While the character may be referring to what negative acts people are capable of doing, perhaps this expressed something

deeper from Shakespeare as playwright. While it is easy for any given person to see what position they are in at any given time, there is almost limitless potential for who they could become in the future. He echoes this (while talking specifically about drama) in *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage, and the men and women are players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being in seven ages” (Act II, Scene 7). William Shakespeare, like every person on the planet, was a complex man who spent his life attempting to discover who he was. What set him apart was his unique ability to express this feeling and his bravery and determination to do whatever he could to follow his journey of self-discovery. By pursuing a life in the theatre, Shakespeare found an avenue in which he could not only live whatever lives he wished, but also help audience members aspire to do the same.

Works Cited

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