

## SHAKESPEARE'S GIRLS

Shakespeare's girls have grown up too quickly. Juliet was only thirteen in 1595 when *Romeo and Juliet* was written. 'She hath not seen the change of fourteen years,' Capulet tells Paris. Juliet was sixteen in the story Shakespeare dramatised. He decided to knock three years off her age. She tends to be older now, but in those days, when the part was played by a boy, thirteen was probably about right.

Our understanding, not just of Juliet but of other female characters, has changed since we began to think of them as young women rather than girls. If we thought of Helena and Hermia as excitable adolescent girls, led astray by a couple of older youths, we might be closer to what Shakespeare intended. We might understand *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as not about love or mistaken identity or jealousy, but simply about growing up.

The first time we see the two sisters in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katharina has tied Bianca's hands together and is interrogating her about the men in her life.

*Of all thy suitors, here I charge thee, tell  
Whom thou lovest best: see thou dissemble not.*

The language and the actions, which include Katharina hitting Bianca, are those of adolescents. They behave like ordinary sisters. Kate is no man-hater, just the opposite. She is furiously jealous, as jealous of Bianca as Helena is of Hermia. When her father takes Bianca's side, she responds with an over-the-top display of adolescent hurt feelings.

*She is your treasure, she must have a husband;  
I must dance barefoot on her wedding-day,  
And, for your love to her, lead apes in hell.  
Talk not to me: I will go sit and weep,  
Till I can find occasion for revenge.*

The boy actor must have enjoyed flouncing off after that.

Kate wants her own way but has not yet learned how to get it. In her confusion about men and women and the difference between them, almost as a reaction against becoming a woman herself, she starts to act like a man instead. She tries to beat Petruchio at his own game and quickly loses.

In the final scene, she explains her mistake.

*My mind hath been as big as one of yours,  
My heart as great; my reason, haply, more,  
To bandy word for word and frown for frown:  
But now I see our lances are but straws;  
Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare, —  
That seeming to be most, which we indeed least are.*

Banding word for word and frown for frown is what Beatrice does in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Beatrice and Hero, like Katharina and Bianca, are variations on Helena and Hermia, girls growing up rather than young women already grown. Probably they were played by the same boy actors.

The difference between *Much Ado About Nothing* and the others is that the girls and the men are a match for each other. Nobody wins and there are no lessons to be learned. To that extent, it seems to anticipate Restoration comedy. Claudio takes the news of Hero's death like a man, agrees to marry someone else and is pleasantly surprised when it turns out to be Hero after all. Beatrice and Benedick bandy word for word right to the end until Benedick says, 'Peace! I will stop your mouth,' and kisses her. The only argument at the end is whether they should have music and dancing now or later. It was all just a lot of fuss about nothing.

The same characters appear in *As You Like It* with different names. There is no plot to speak of, but all the other things that audiences expected in Shakespeare's comedies are there, along with a

wrestler. Shakespeare gave them what they wanted and everyone, cast included, enjoyed it. Hence the name.

The last of Shakespeare's girls were in *Twelfth Night*. Viola and Olivia are the girls we met first in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but they are subtly different, more content to be themselves. Viola's disguise is purely a practical expedient for a girl who finds herself in a difficult situation, though it turns out to be one which causes more problems than it solves.

*Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness,  
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.  
How easy is it for the proper-false  
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!  
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we!  
For such as we are made of, such we be.*

Viola's self-knowledge is new. None of the other girls has had it. So is the depth of Olivia's love for the young man she takes Viola to be. She was only half wrong after all, mistaking Viola's impersonation of her brother for the real thing. When she sees Sebastian, she knows it was him she loved all along.

In *Twelfth Night* there are two kinds of deception, one that is well intentioned and another that is not, unless teaching Malvolio a lesson can be considered well intentioned. Plans go awry, as they do for Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck's mistakes are put right by Oberon, Viola just has to hope for the best.

*O Time, thou must untangle this, not I;  
It is too hard a knot for me t' untie!*

When Puck says, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' he means how childish they are, which is what Shakespeare is saying in all these comedies. Only now, at the end, he is beginning to see it as a cause more for tears than laughter.

If *Twelfth Night* is about growing up, it is about the end of growing up and the end of Shakespeare's comedies. Viola is a survivor of the shipwreck which she thinks killed her brother. Olivia has lost both her father and her brother, 'for whose dear loss,' we are told, 'she hath abjured the company and sight of men.' Everyone, it seems, is getting older and finding less to laugh at and we are reminded of what Christopher Sly says to the boy he thinks is his wife when they sit down to watch *The Taming of the Shrew*: 'Come, madam wife, sit by my side, and let the world slip: we shall ne'er be younger.'

The play is recommended to Christopher Sly as good for his health.

*For so your doctors hold it very meet,  
Seeing too much sadness hath congeal'd your blood,  
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy:  
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play,  
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,  
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.*

The boy actors were getting older, ready to play women instead of girls - Ophelia, Cressida, Isabella, Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Cleopatra. Not though Marina, Imogen, Perdita or Miranda. A new boy must have played them. They were different, spiritual, virginal. The two boy actors, one tall, one short, who first brought Shakespeare's girls to life would have had no fun at all playing them.