

## THE ROLE OF THE MAID IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTH NIGHT & OTHELLO*

**Rasha Abdul Monim Aziz**

English Department  
College of Languages  
Baghdad University

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the role of two minor characters , the maids , in two of Shakespeare's works : *Twelfth Night* and *Othello* . It shows how they influence the whole action of both plays .

The paper is divided into an introduction, two sections, and a conclusion. The introduction provides a brief explanation of the effective role of the maids in these plays and how the minor character can be sometimes equally important to the sequence of events as the major one .

The first section deals with *Twelfth Night* . The role of the maid is represented in this play by Maria , the servant of the countess Olivia . Maria creates a second plot to the play through her plan of the forged letter .

The character of the maid in the second section is represented by Emilia , the servant of Desdemona in *Othello* .

She steals the handkerchief of her lady to satisfy her husband . This handkerchief becomes the tangible proof that leads to the murder of her lady Desdemona and the tragic end of the play .

The conclusion summarizes the outcomes of the research .

## **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout history the role of women has been heavily debated . There are many avenues that one could take to see and understand the role of women throughout history . This research concentrates on William Shakespeare's women , how he interprets the character of women specifically the minor characters or " the servants " .

The character of the servant plays an influential role in two plays of Shakespeare . One of them is a comedy *Twelfth Night* and the other is a tragedy *Othello* . The servants Maria and Emilia , respectively, play an important role that affects the events of the plays . They create the action of the plays through a folly or a misunderstanding .

Any reader usually concentrates on the major characters because their actions or reactions change or lead the movement of the play . He comprehends the role of minor characters as secondary and it has not any dramatic importance . Shakespeare reveals in these two plays with their different genres ( a comedy

and a tragedy ) that the reader must pay attention also to the minor characters in drama , as some of them could be as essential as the major ones in spite of being minor . By their action , they can control the behaviour of the main characters . They can make those main characters act differently or sometimes in the way they want . They make use of being near the hero or the heroin ( like the servant ) and they plan or act freely in the way that like , in the way that serves them .

Both minor characters held here are women . During Shakespeare's time women have been seen as unimportant or secondary to men . They are shown by Shakespeare to be as basic as men , how they contribute to the main problem or crisis of the plays , how they participate or influence the raising action of the plays .

Both of them act in a way that satisfies herself or solves her problem . They try to prove something that positively serves themselves , till the whole matter is disclosed at the end of the play showing how they have been thought by others to be undoubtedly out of any bad action or any sort of conspiring but the fact is revealed to indicate the opposite .

### **List of Abbreviations**

<b>Malvolio</b>	<b>Malv</b>
<b>Desdemona</b>	<b>Desd</b>
<b>Handkerchief</b>	<b>hank</b>

### **Twelfth Night**

This is a play about love in which three couples are brought together happily . Like many of William Shakespeare's comedies , this one centers on mistaken identity . Much of the play is taken up with the comic subplot in which several characters conspire to make Olivia's ( a rich countess ) pompous head steward Malvolio believe that his lady Olivia wishes to marry him. He is too self – important to enjoy the jokes of the clown ( Feste ) or the parties prepared by others , among whom is Maria .

Maria is the maid of Olivia .The influence or the work of the maid Maria begins at act 2 scene 3. Her plan is suggested by her speech:

**Maria: Sweet Sir Toby, be patient for tonight ; since the youth of the Count's was today with my lady , she is much out of quiet. For Monsieur Malvolio, let me alone with him; if I do not gull him into a nayword , and make him a common recreation , do not think I have wit enough to lie straight in my bed. I know I can do it.**

( . 3. 131- 137 )<sup>1</sup>

Her motive is hazy. She calls it a "revenge" ( .3.152 ) but it is unmotivated revenge just because Malv is proud of himself or a "puritan" <sup>2</sup> ( .3.140 ) as she describes him . She puts and fulfils her plan of the letter only to make him appear as a fool . What helps Maria is her position or job as a maid to Olivia :

" Maria: ... . I can write very like my lady . ... we can hardly make distinction of our hands " ( . 3 . 159-160) .

Notably , *Twelfth Night* features a great variety of messages sent from one character to another . Such messages or letters are used both for purposes of communication and miscommunication – sometimes deliberate and sometimes accidental . Maria's letter to Malv , which purports to be from Olivia, is a deliberate ( and a successful) attempt to trick the steward .

Maria's role or influence doesn't stop at sending the forged letter to Malv , and then leaves things or events happen subsequently. She has other effective roles . She persuades him to wear and act in a way that will annoy Olivia

( to wear yellow stockings cross – gartered , to be rude to the servants , and to smile in all circumstances ) . Then , she persuades her mistress that Malv is mad " Maria : He's coming, madam ; but in very strange manner . He is , sure possessed ,

madam . " ( . 4. 8-9) . She even asks the countess to take care and to have guards while meeting him .

She is , also , responsible for the idea of Feste's disguise as Sir Topas , the priest . The plan is to go to Malv in his prison ( believing Malv is insane , they lock him up in a dark cellar) and act as the priest . Malv is in a desperate state , and he is left alone in darkness for four hours . Sir Topas , or Feste , adds to his madness . He twists everything that Malv says until it sounds like madness .

Another joke has been played on him and Maria is again the planner . She says addressing Feste after finishing his role above : " Maria : Thou might'st have done this without thy beard and gown ; he sees thee not " ( IV . 2 . 66-67).

She suggests to Feste to visit Malv again as Feste the fool , i.e. as his real identity . He visits Malv and taunts him further .

Malv contributes , through the plan of Maria , to another theme of the play : the theme of madness<sup>3</sup> . No one is truly insane in the play , yet a number of characters are accused of being mad , and a current of insanity or zaniness runs through the action of the play . After duping him into believing that Olivia loves him , Malv behaves so bizarrely that he is sane , and he accuses everyone around him of being mad .

The folly of ambition is one of the problems treated in the play, and the social ambition or class anarchy are connected with the title of the play as the feast of Twelfth Night is a time when social hierarchies are turned upside

down. These work themselves out largely through the character of Malv and show themselves when Maria plays on these ambitions when she forges the letter and Malv thinks that Olivia is in love with him and she will marry him. He isn't of a noble blood and he is full of tremendous ambitions to rise out of his social class.

In the class system of Shakespeare's time, a noblewoman would generally not sully her reputation by marrying a man of lower social status<sup>4</sup>. Maria's plan doesn't only create a funny joke that agitates laughter and doesn't only create many dramatic ironies<sup>5</sup>, but it also discloses or adds to many themes and problems that the play tackles. A final theme that her plan contributes to is the theme of indulgence.

The theme of indulgence occupies an important position in the play, but we should remember that it is secondary to the theme of love that is employed in support of it. Malv's role; has to do with both love and the theme of indulgence. He is central to the action of the comedy in his double role of being both a lover, or would-be lover, and an exponent of a particular attitude toward indulgence<sup>6</sup>.

Thus Malva, involved in both themes, must be seen as a central character, and the dramatist's conception of him is clearly dictated by thematic considerations. He evolves in great part out of Shakespeare's choice to dramatize the analogy between romantic love and self-indulgence<sup>7</sup>. Actually Olivia, Sir Toby, Orsino, and Sir Andrew besides Malva are presented in postures of over indulgence of one sort or another.

Maria's plan or letter sheds light on Malva's relationship or contribution to both themes. Malva is first and last is one of Olivia's suitors, through Maria's letter he shows his attitude to love or self-indulgence by his love for Olivia or what he takes to be love. It is his peculiar response to love and his rigid objection to all indulgence which exclude him for a time from the happy and harmonious conclusion of the play<sup>8</sup>. In Peter Phialas' opinion Malva has clearly evolved out of Shakespeare's preoccupation, in his romantic comedies, with different and often conflicting conceptions of man's ideal relationship to woman<sup>9</sup>.

In a word, Maria's role as the planner of the whole trick played on Malva's makes him appear prominent in the following themes or problems, or a contributor to them:

- A. Theme of madness.
- B. Class anarchy or the problem of social ambition.
- C. Theme of love and indulgence.



The main concern of this paper is servant- master relation, or the theme of servant and master. This theme is shared with Shakespeare 's tragedy *Othello*.

### **Othello**

Basically , jealousy is one of the themes of the play ; and it is the main subject matter that leads to Desdemona's death at the hands of her husband and lover Othello . Emilia , Desd's maid , is an agent in the plot of this death . It has been done through Desd's handkerchief which is an essential proof used by Iago to plant jealousy in Othello's heart . Who brings Iago this precious token is Emilia , his wife .

In her first appearance in the play , Emilia is loved and defended by her lady Desd . Iago shows in their first appearance together ( act 2 ) his disapproval or dissatisfaction with his wife , Emilia . At the end of act 2 , Iago declares in his soliloquy his intention to use his wife in his trick against the Moor :

**Iago : My wife must move for Cassio to her mistress ; I'll  
set her on ; myself awhile to draw the Moor apart  
and bring him jump when he may Cassio find  
soliciting his wife . Ay , that's the way ! Dull not  
device by coldness and delay .**

**( II . 3 . 383-388) <sup>10</sup>**

He intends to use Emilia to guide or control Desd in the way he wants and that serves to develop his plan . Emilia is her maid and he knows that she has an influence over her mistress or at least she can play a significant role as a close figure to Desd , otherwise clever Iago will not think of using Emilia .

Besides her role in the episode of the hank , Emilia arranges Cassio and Desd's first meeting ( Cassio is another step in Iago's trick ) . Cassio wants to meet Desd to help him to regain Othello's trust . Iago's plan is to use them to poison Othello's mind by jealousy thoughts . Emilia encourages her mistress to help Cassio . She says that this grieves her husband , Iago , as it is his problem.

The major event happens in act 3 scene 3 when Emilia takes Desd's napkin after it falls without Desd or Othello's attention. In her soliloquy , Emilia discloses that she has no motive or aim more than pleasing Iago and gaining his satisfaction especially that he dislikes her . This is an attempt to show her love and faithfulness to her dissatisfied husband :

**Emilia : I am glad I have found this napkin ; this was her first remembrance from the Moor . My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it ; but she so loves the token ( for he conjured her she should ever keep it ) that she reserves it evermore about her to kiss and talk to . I'll have the work ta'en out and give't**

**Iago .**

**What he'll do with it , heaven know , not I ; I  
nothing but to please his fantasy .**

**( III . 3 . 289 – 299 )**

In Shakespeare's time , women are treated as if they are lower than men . These women take part in anything that pleases them . In no way they let men tell them what to do . In that days , women are only seen as objects . It is believed that if Shakespeare were alive today , he would be very surprised to see how far women have come . They are no longer just objects used to fulfil the pleasure of men , but women have become much more . <sup>11</sup>

Emilia has to fight to get her husband's attention . He rarely complements her . Halfway through act 3 scene 3 , Emilia and Iago have their first moments alone together . Iago doesn't use any romantic setting for his wife . Throughout their conversation , Iago's attitude towards Emilia has no respect . He doesn't talk to her like a husband but more like an employer . <sup>12</sup>

Many times has Emilia been asked by Iago to steal Desd's hank . She knows how deeply Desd treasures it , but she recalls that Iago has asked her many times for it . When the opportunity comes, Emilia steals it for her husband. When Desd questions her about the hank , Emilia answers with a lie

" I know not, madam " ( III.4.24 ) . Even after Desd explains the importance of the hank, she still sticks to her lie. Even during Othello's questioning , she remains silent.

Emilia doesn't even know what her husband will do with it. She merely thinks of the prize: Iago's satisfaction. She doesn't show, after that, her sorry or regret for her deed, she doesn't even link what is happening with her stealing of the hank. She sees how her lady suffers and how Othello is changed behaving cruelly with her. She doesn't try to help Desd by bringing the hank or telling about it.

The hank plays a great role in Iago's plan and advances it finally to the death of Desd and the destruction of Othello , fulfilling by that the goal of the plan. It is the tangible proof that rises Othello's anger and suspicion of his wife's fidelity to their peak and finally he resolves to murder her.

There is no sign that Emilia suspects the true nature of her husband . Iago presents an appearance not very different to his wife ( the honest Iago ) . She knows in addition that her husband isn't quiet so honest as he seems , but her nature isn't very delicate or scrupulous about trifles .<sup>13</sup> She thinks that her husband is odd and wayward and he looks on reason to doubt the sincerity of her belief that he is heartily sorry for Cassio's disgrace .

She nowhere shows any sign of having a bad heart . Emilia fails to perceive that Othello's jealousy is intimately connected with the loss of the hank ;for otherwise , when Othello 's anger shows itself violently and she is really distressed for her mistress , she couldn't have failed to think of the hank , and would undoubtedly have told the truth about it . In fact , she never thinks of it , although she guesses that Othello is being deceived by some scoundrel . She can't see that this person is her husband nor relate his ambiguous continuous request for the hank with what is going on :

**Emilia : I will be hanged if some eternal villain , some busy and insinuating rogue , some cogging , cozening slave , to get some office , have not devised this slander . I will be hanged else .**

**( IV . 2. 129-133 )**

Even after Desd's death and after knowing that Iago has brought it about,

she still doesn't remember the hank ; and when Othello at last mentions , as a proof of his wife's guilt , that he has seen the hank in Cassio's hand , the truth falls on Emilia like a thunder – bolt . Her stupidity in this matter is gross , but it is stupidity and nothing worse .<sup>14</sup>

The reader may feel after all this that Emilia is a foolish woman and her deed is merely a foolish one without any real or evil motive . One can't say that she is unfaithful to Dead or she hates her , nor can say that she is innocent . She is a desperate wife who tries to satisfy her husband ignorantly . The reader can't forget her defense for her lady in act 4 scene 2 when Othello asks her about Dead's meeting with Cassio . She assures him that they do nothing and say nothing sinful . She even tells him that if anybody poisons his ears with anything else he is just like the serpent (devil) that tempts Eve in the garden , of Eden ( IV . 2. 16 ) .

Emilia's contribution to the play isn't only seen through the stealing of the hank , but also as the one who discloses the reality to Othello and others after Desd's death . The feelings evoked by her are seen as one of the causes which mitigates the excess of tragic pain at the conclusion . <sup>15</sup> The reader can notice how she is changed in her speech and behaviour with Iago. He threatens her and orders her to go home and he even stabs her at the end nevertheless she says the truth and recommends her lady's real love and faithfulness to the last moment before her death . She loves her lady and she is loyal to her, but her loyalty appears after knowing her husband's reality . She as if opens her eyes and now she wants to admit her fault:

**Emilia : 'Twill out,'twill out ! I peace? No,  
I will speak as liberal as the north.  
Let heaven and men and devils,  
let them all, all, cry shame against  
me, yet I'll speak.**

**( V.2.217-220 )**

The importance of Emilia in the play isn't only her influence over the action of the play, but also through her Shakespeare presents a character of a woman with complicated feelings and views. In a time that man or the husband is a lord, Emilia sees that men treat women as food that they leave when satisfying their hunger. She speaks about jealousy of men, how they show it not because they have a cause but because it is something inside themselves like a monster.

Emilia has certain illusions about men, love or marriage vows. Her understanding of these vows can be seen through these lines where she speaks to Desd about husbands and wives:

**Emilia: yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know  
their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell, and  
have their palates  
both for sweet and sour , as husbands have .**

**What is it that they do when they change  
us for others ? Is it sport ? I think it is .  
And doth affection breed it ? I think it doth .  
Is't frailty that thus errs? It is so too .  
And have not we affections ? desires  
for sport ? and frailty ? as men have ?  
( IV . 3 . 98 – 105 )**

Through these lines one can tell the kind of character Shakespeare intends for Emilia to be<sup>16</sup> . She explains that there are many unfaithful wives and she blames it on the husbands . She insists that wives should have the right to do whatever men do especially that she lives in a society where women can't do the thing men do . She feels that a wife should not be judged nor treated with less respect than a man . Emilia speaks strongly on this issue because of her years living as Iago's wife . In other words , she has experienced more in her lifetime .

At the end of the play , the character of Emilia witnesses a shift or awakening .<sup>17</sup> Despite the dominance that Iago has over her , she manages to undermine his position and bring about his eventual downfall . In the last scene, the reader can see Emilia's strength as a woman . She ignores her husband's command to be quiet and go home . Her strength and determination to punish Iago leads to her death . she gets a final realization that her ultimate loyalty isn't to a man but to the facts as



she faces them .<sup>18</sup> Although she may be seen here as a victim , in the final analysis Shakespeare hasn't only given us a woman who comes of an age right in front of us but whose awakening neatly helps pose another issue : whether submission or self – assertion is the proper role for women . Emilia will speak out and confront men and society around her although she dies a violent death at the hand of a man .<sup>19</sup>

### **Conclusion**

If one makes a final look on the role of the maid in Shakespeare's comedy and tragedy handled here , he will see that her influence over the plays has different outcomes following the type of the play itself . The influence of the maid in the tragedy is more serious and important . Her role leads to the death of the heroine . Her influence ,on the other hand , in the comedy merely heightens the comic tone and creates a number of dramatic ironies . Their positions as maids help them i.e. they are close to their ladies; and the mistress is usually affected by her maid .

Both Maria and Emilia have no real motive nor evil intention ; even their aims are simple . Maria , " the little villain " as Sir Toby calls her ( II . 5. 12 ) , has unconvincing revenge upon Malv , she wants to create a fool out of him and to laugh at him . Emilia's aim is to satisfy and please her husband who treats her coldly . Nevertheless , Shakespeare presents two characters who are influential and at the same time secondary .

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> For this and all the subsequent references to the text see William Shakespeare , *Twelfth Night* ( London : Longman , 1992 ) .

<sup>2</sup> A puritan : an extremist in the Christian faith of the time . The Puritan movement disapproved of dancing , singing , theatres and most forms of merry- making .

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/twelfthnight/themes.html,n.p.](http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/twelfthnight/themes.html,n.p)

<sup>4</sup> loc.cit.

<sup>5</sup> For example : " Malv : ... , my fortunes having cast me on your niece ... " ( II . 5 . 69 – 70 ) .

Peter G. Phialas , *Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies* ( Chapel Hill : The University of North Carolina press, 1966 ) , p. 267 .

<sup>6</sup> Ibid . , p. 261 .

<sup>7</sup> Loc . cit .

<sup>8</sup> Loc . cit .

<sup>10</sup> For this and all the subsequent references to the text see William Shakespeare , *Othello* ( London : Longman , 1992 ) .

<sup>11</sup> " Role of Women in *Othello* "

<http://www.123helpme.com/assets/6290.html>, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> " Women as Victims in *Othello* "  
[http://www.123.helpme.com/assets/3657.html,n.p.](http://www.123.helpme.com/assets/3657.html,n.p)

<sup>13</sup> A. C. Bradley , *Shakespearean Tragedy* ( New York : The Macmillan press LTD , 1981 ) , p . 215 .

<sup>14</sup> Ibid . , p . 239 .

<sup>15</sup> loc . cit .

<sup>16</sup> " Role of Women in *Othello* " , p. 2 .

<sup>17</sup> Bill Long,"Emilia's Awakening II "  
[http://www.williamette.edu/~blong/shakeO/EmiliasawakeningII](http://www.williamette.edu/~blong/shakeO/EmiliasawakeningII.html)  
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