

# Miranda: A Pinnacle of Femininity and Object of Patriarchal Power

(A Study of Shakespeare's "The Tempest")

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**Abstract:** Shakespeare was not of an age but for all times because his characters are true to the eternal aspects of human life and not limited to contemporary society. Shakespeare was also the soul of his age. By its very nature drama is a mirror of its times. He wrote for Elizabethan audience and he conditioned his art to suit the tastes of the people and the limitations of the age. Shakespeare's greatness, one critic said lay in his comprehensive soul. That is the most poetic summation of a dramatic genius that has never been equaled. No dramatist can create live characters save by bequeathing the best of himself into his work of art, scattering among them a largess of his own qualities, his own wit, his comprehensive cogent philosophy, his own rhythm of action and the simplicity or complexity of his own nature. Shakespeare excelled in all of them all the time, or at least majority of times, as he teased and tormented his readers with his exquisite wit on one scale and sublimated them with his deep insight into human psyche on another. Shakespeare wrote in the age outstanding in literary history and its vitality of language.

During the time of Shakespeare, there was a social construct of gender and sexuality norms just as there are today. There was a hierarchy of sexes and each had their own role in society. Men were masculine; they were not ruled by emotion they were strong and hard working. Gender roles during the Elizabethan era were clearly defined with men reigning superior over women. Men really had such great influence over women. While a man went out to work, a woman at that time was only expected to keep the hearth - to stay at home and manage the household duties. From birth, Elizabethan era women were taught how to govern a household and perform domestic duties so that when they married, which was expected of them regardless of their class and ancestry, their husbands would be proud. The women of the Elizabethan era were given education only if they were members of the nobility. Otherwise, they had to stay home and learn to run the household. Speaking of marriage, Elizabethan era women were also expected to provide a dowry, which could be any amount of money, goods, or property that was to be their contribution to the marriage. Once married, a woman during the Elizabethan era was expected, perhaps even pressured, to have and raise children. During the time, the mortality rate among infants and children were high, so even though the women gave birth often, families were not always large in number.

All throughout their life, the women of the Elizabethan times were made to become dependent on a male relative - father, brother, uncle, husband, or other. Even religion dictated the fate of women, as obedience of a woman to a man was greatly emphasized. It is interesting to note that while the rest of the women citizenry of England during what people call the Golden Age were given to the decisions of the male members in their family and were only limited to household duties, it was a woman who sat on the throne as queen of the land.

The Paper explores the status of women in the Elizabethan age with reference to Miranda the female character of the play "The Tempest". It discusses Miranda as an epitome of Femininity and also as one who is an object of patriarchal power which are the traits of the Elizabethan age. The paper also marks the transition in the role of women in Shakespearean age with reference to the assertive nature of Miranda at times. **The Tempest** is a play by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written in 1610-11, and thought by many critics to be the last play that Shakespeare wrote alone. It is set on a remote island, where the sorcerer Prospero, rightful Duke of Milan, plots to restore his

daughter Miranda to her rightful place using illusion and skilful manipulation. He conjures up a storm, the eponymous tempest, to lure his usurping brother Antonio and the complicit King Alonso of Naples to the island. There, his machinations bring about the revelation of Antonio's lowly nature, the redemption of the King, and the marriage of Miranda to Alonso's son, Ferdinand.

The Tempest interprets Miranda, Prospero's daughter as a living representation of female virtue. She was 3 years old when she and her father were exiled. Now, some 12 years later, she is beginning to blossom into a beautiful young woman. She is an innocent, having never seen another woman and having no knowledge of any other human being, except for her father. She is unaware of her beauty because she does not know what feminine beauty is supposed to look like. Miranda's name literally means "that which must be admired" (from mirari—to admire). She looks on the world with a childlike wonder, which is more than naïveté and might actually just be the eyes of an artist, able to see the beauty in everything. Admiration is an important word for Miranda from the other side too, as she isn't the only one doing all the looking: she is much admired by those who look upon her. She is precisely admired by everyone; Prospero who considers her as Non Parallel, Ferdinand who address her as Admired Miranda! and Goddess and Alonso who also exclaims her as Goddess.

Miranda is a consistent, natural human being. Our impression of her nymph-like beauty, her peerless grace, and purity of soul, has a distinct and individual character. Not only is she exquisitely lovely, being what she is, but we are made to feel that she could not possibly be otherwise than as she is portrayed. She has never beheld one of her own sex; she has never caught from society one imitated or artificial grace. The impulses which have come to her, in her enchanted solitude, are of heaven and nature, not of the world and its vanities. She has sprung up into beauty beneath the eye of her father, the princely magician; her companions have been the rocks and woods, the many-shaped, many-tinted clouds, and the silent stars; her playmates the ocean billows that stooped their foamy crests, and ran rippling to kiss her feet. Ariel and his attendant sprites hovered over her head, ministered dutifully to her every wish, and presented before her pageants of beauty and grandeur. The very air, made vocal by her father's art, floated in music around her.

She retains her woman's heart, for that is unalterable and inalienable, as a part of her being; but her deportment, her looks, her language, her thoughts — all these, form the supernatural and poetical circumstances around her, assume a cast of the pure ideal; and to us, who are in the secret of her human and pitying nature, nothing can be more charming and consistent than the effect which she produces upon others, who never having beheld anything resembling her, approach her as "a wonder" as something celestial:—

"What is this maid? Is she the goddess who hath severed us. And brought us thus together?" (Alonso Vi.187-188)

Most Sure the goddess On whom these airs attend! ( Ferdinand I.ii 418 -419)

The beauty of his daughter ; he himself calls her a non pareil : I never saw a women( Caliban III ii 97-98)

Contrasted with the impression of her refined and dignified beauty, and its effect on all beholders, is Miranda's own soft simplicity, her virgin innocence, her total ignorance of the conventional forms and language of society. It is most natural that in a being thus constituted, the first tears should spring from compassion, when she sees the shipwreck and was touched she comments "suffering with those that she saw suffer"; . . . and that her first sigh should be offered to a love at once fearless and submissive, delicate and fond. When her father tells about their story of exile her sympathy is towards her father " heart bleeds to think o' she expresses the same sympathy when she hears of the charity of noble Gonzalo and when Ferdinand suffers under the harsh treatment meted out to him by her father she intercedes on his behalf "Why speaks my father so ungently? Pity move my father" (I,ii 441-444) Later Miranda surpasses as the epitome of tender sympathy in the courtship scene between the two.

Miranda sees only beautiful and is totally blind to what is ugly or harmful. As she sees the shipwreck she comments "How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is!" (V,i 181-183) When Prospero tells her that the two should visit Caliban she protests "Tis a villain, sir, I do not love to look on" (I, ii 310-311)

"Miranda has internalised the patriarchal assumption that a woman's main function is to provide a legitimate succession." (Ann Thomson) Miranda is also viewed as having completely internalized the patriarchal order of things, believing herself to be subordinate towards her father. She is loving, kind, and compassionate as well as obedient to her father. She is, furthermore, the only female character within a cast of strong male figures, and much of her interaction on stage is dominated by the male figures around her. Miranda's behavior is typically seen as completely dictated by Prospero, from her interactions with Caliban to her ultimate decision to marry Ferdinand. The traits that make the pinnacle of femininity are the same traits that disenfranchise her: her innocence and vulnerability are seen as the things that allow her to be readily manipulated first by her father and then Ferdinand. Her every code of conduct, from that of dress to that of morality, is that of Prospero. Her environment is either created by the benevolence of nature or the studious presence of her father. Throughout the course of the play, Miranda acts as a foil to Prospero's more violent instincts, and serves as a sounding board to move the play's plot further. She is also a central figure in her father's revenge, enabling Prospero to gain political prestige through her marriage to the Prince of Naples, Ferdinand. The Tempest's second scene begins with Miranda centre, begging her father to spare the lives of the men at sea She's fully aware of the powers Prospero possesses

and begs him to cease the storm.. Miranda is an obedient daughter, as proved by her dismay when she forgets herself and reveals her name to Ferdinand " O my father I have broken your order not to reveal my name".

Yet some times Miranda seems to be strong and bold enough; In an act of bravery she challenges her father's wisdom, arguing that: "Had I been any god of power, I would / Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere / It should the good ship so have swallow'd and / The fraughting souls within her."<sup>[2]</sup> As the scene progresses it is revealed to her that she is, in fact, the Princess of Milan. She immediately falls in love with the first new man she sees on the island, Ferdinand. She states, 'I might call him a thing divine for nothing so natural I ever saw so noble' (Act 1, Scene 2, line 21) She stands up to her father regarding her love for Ferdinand. She states, 'My affections are then most humble. I have no ambition to see a goodlier man' (Act 1, Scene 2, line 28) She also stands up to Ferdinand and tells him, 'I am your wife, if you will marry me If not, I'll die your maid' (Act 3, Scene 1, lines 83-84) She speaks to Ferdinand about her love for him despite her father's disapproval. When Caliban makes his attempted rape of her seem minor, Miranda speaks up for herself and lets him know that his behavior was unacceptable.

Women in Shakespeare's plays continue to captivate us, relevant and revealing even today, centuries after their creation. They also offer us a window into the realities of daily life for women across the social spectrum during Shakespeare's own time. Shakespeare reflects and supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of women and men and their various roles and responsibilities in society. Miranda is the only female character in the play that Shakespeare allows a voice and character development (the other women being Claribel and Sycorax, who we never meet). Her presentation as a weak, submissive, virginal young girl embodies how women were seen and treated during the Elizabethan age. The reader is not able to compare her beauty and virtue to any other female in the world of "The Tempest", and this serves both to show her value as a character and the fact that no other living women has the virtue of Miranda. While Miranda may not have many outstanding lines or soliloquies, she makes up for this in sheer presence alone. Miranda's character encompasses all the elements of perfectionism and goodness expected in the women of the Elizabethan age. Miranda also serves as the ultimate fantasy for any male who (like Ferdinand) is a bachelor. She is extremely beautiful, she is intelligent, and she has never been touched or even seen by another male. Shakespeare makes Miranda even more desirable by including the fact that she has never seen or even talked to another man with the obvious exception of Prospero. Miranda personifies the ultimate source of good in the play. Finding a woman this humble in the world of Shakespeare is almost impossible. One does not have to look farther than her last line in the play to realize her purpose in the plot. Miranda states "O wonder! / How many goodly creatures there are here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world / That has such people in't" (Tempest,5.1,185-7) Through this passage and many of her other dialogues Miranda shows a positive attitude which is almost uncanny when compared to the other characters. "I dare not offer what I desire to give": Shows Miranda's love and lust for Ferdinand, but in the 17th century it was not seen appropriate for women to show or even have sexual desire. Shakespeare disguises Miranda's passion carefully, but the very mention of it suggests that the play is covering new ground in women's relationships with men.