

**MARITIME FANTASIES AND GENDER SPACE
IN THREE SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDIES**

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Abstract: Laden with sea images, Shakespeare's plays dramatise the maritime fantasies of his time. This paper discusses the representation of maritime elements in *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice* by relating them to gender and space issues. It focuses on Shakespeare's creation of maritime space as space of liberty for his female characters.

Keywords: Shakespeare, maritime space, gender, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice*

As a crucial constituent of the planet Earth, the sea has always had some influence on socio-cultural aspects of human life, especially for islanders surrounded by water. Great works of world literature, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, manifest human beings' deep involvement with the vast expanse of water around their lands. Not unlike the Greeks, the English, as islanders, have a long history of involvement with the sea. The English Renaissance was a period during which real and imaginary ambitions beyond seas boomed, stimulating rich literary productions reflecting this cultural-historical reality.

The huge fantasies of the English regarding sea adventures during the Renaissance were triggered by excitement arising from the discovery of new lands and trade routes and the legends of successful pirates. "Chronicles of New World explorers," such as updated Jamestown narratives, "appeared regularly in London bookshops" and were read by "an eager public" (Woodward 2009:5-9). Water formed a part of the life of

Londoners, as they constantly witnessed the arrival of ships loaded with foreign goods in the River Thames. The theatres were very closely involved with water, since crossing the river was needed for city-dwellers to attend the theatres, most of which were located in the Liberties on then other side of the Thames. As an English Renaissance playwright, William Shakespeare's fascination with the sea is apparent in many of his plays, such as *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice*, which employ sea adventures as pivotal plot elements.

Renaissance maritime culture traditionally conceptualised the sea and sea-crossing vessels as male domains. Sea crossing for conquest and trade was often regarded as exclusively men's business. "The world of the seafarer," as Anne Chambers, Dian H. Murray and Julie Wheelwright write, "is both a world unfit for ladies and one where women's presence leads to disaster" (1995:11). Marcus Rediker, a student of eighteenth-century Anglo-American maritime culture, points out that "seafaring was an occupation sharply segregated by sex" and that "women" did not ordinarily go to sea (1987:155). Margaret Lincoln also writes in her study of naval wives and mistresses in eighteenth-century England that "seafaring is a predominantly male profession" (2007:16). If this was so even in the eighteenth century, women must surely have been excluded from seafaring in Renaissance England. During the Elizabethan era, the traditional concept of the sea as a male domain was reinforced by laws and sermons that contributed to a general culture of women's domestication.

Nevertheless, a certain degree of liberty or licentiousness could still exist for women within certain domains, such as theatrical space. There is a well-known funny story in H. Pecham's *The Art of Living in London* about a woman who went to the theatre after being warned about pickpockets by her husband but still lost her purse. When her husband inquired where she had put her purse, she told him that she had put it "under her petticoat, between that and her smocke." Then her husband asked whether she had felt anybody's hand under her dress. "Yes, quoth shee, I felt ones hand there; but I did not thinke hee had come for that" (1642:6). The story shows the licentiousness and liberty that existed in the Renaissance theatrical space and what a female theatregoer would expect from her trip. Yet "women from every section of society," as Andrew Gurr writes, "went to plays" (1987:67).

In a certain sense, the world of the seafarer is rather similar to that of the theatre, as the seafarers have their adventures via the ship's "wooden world," (as Isaac Land calls it, 2009:16), while the players offer their audience imaginative adventures in their "wooden O." It is generally assumed that "players," as R. E. Pritchard writes, "needed to be beyond the reach of the City authorities" (2010:190). The outskirts of London, called the Liberties, which housed the theatres, were an "ambiguous realm," a "borderland", which was "'free' or 'at liberty' from manorial rule or obligation to the Crown, and only nominally under the jurisdiction of the lord mayor" (Mullaney 1988:21). It was a site where the city authorities could seem to be far away. There were calls for the brothels there to be closed, for instance, but the moves against these immoral institutions "always fell short" (Greenblatt 2004:176). Hence, just like the sailors' "wooden world," which could seem to be far from the jurisdiction of countries, the licentious Liberties of the players' "wooden O" could seem to be beyond the jurisdiction of the city fathers.

For female audiences who were in reality excluded from the seafaring business, plays about the thrilling dangers of sea adventures, and especially about female characters' involvement with sea –crossings, could be extremely appealing. Hence, the imagination of the sea as an open space full of opportunities not just for men but for women as well, as presented on stage, resembles the liberties for both men and women offered by the London theatrical space. In this licentious "wooden O," imagination could suspend the social reality that women were excluded from seafaring ventures. In the vicinity of brothels, dance halls, bear-baiting pits and scaffolds, playgoing could be an exciting and licentious event. And there was always a sense of adventure and danger involved, real or imaginary, as the cutpurse's hand under the female playgoer's dress suggests, that thrilled theatre goers.

The Tempest, which begins with "a tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning," as the stage direction indicates, vividly presents the imminent dangers of seafaring. Shakespeare has a ship-master, a boatswain and mariners trying to control their ship in a storm. Lines related to how to handle the ship, such as "Take in the topsail" and "Down with the topmast! Yare! Lower, lower! Bring her to try with main-course" (*Tempest* 1.1.6; 1.1.34-35), simulate the scenario of ship-steering. The sailors are so occupied that they do not answer Alonso's question, even though he is the King of Naples. The

boatswain simply asks the king to “keep below”, and when Antonio again asks the boatswain where the master is, the boatswain replies, “You mar our labour: keep/ your cabins: you do assist the storm” (*Tempest* 1.1.11; 13-14). The boatswain even says, “What care these roarers/for the name of King? To cabin: silence! Trouble/us not” (*Tempest* 1.1.16-18). This initial scene shows not only the threatening power of the sea but also the professional dignity of sailors. The ship becomes a space where the usual power relationship between a king and his subject is subverted.

The sea as shown in the opening scene is undoubtedly an enemy to the men onboard. In a later scene, Francisco describes what happened to Ferdinand: “I saw him beat the surges under him,/And ride upon their backs; he trod the water,/Whose enmity he flung aside...” (*Tempest* 2.1.110-13). The word “enmity” highlights the relationship between the sea and those fighting for their lives against it. When Alonzo, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo and others finally land on an island, Gonzalo encourages the others to be merry:

...our escape
Is much beyond our loss. Our hint of woe
Is common; every day, some sailor’s wife,
The masters of some merchant, and the merchant,
Have just our theme of woe; but for the miracle,
I mean our preservation, few in millions
Can speak like us... (*Tempest* 2.1.1-7)

These words accentuate how common it is for the sea to take people’s lives. Moreover, it also suggests that the sea is a male domain, as sailors’ wives have their theme of woe, which implies that sailors are men. Sebastian also says after the shipwreck that “Milan and Naples have/mo widows in them of this business’ making/Than we bring men to comfort them” (*Tempest* 2.1.128-30). By referring to the making of more widows in their thwarted sea-crossing business, Sebastian’s words echo Gonzalo’s in conceiving of the sea as a male domain. Moreover, the person who commands the tempest that sinks the ship is Prospero, a patriarchal figure.

At the beginning of the play, when Prospero summons the tempest, Miranda expresses her disapproval. Sympathetic towards the sufferers on the ship, Miranda says to her father: “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” (*Tempest* 1.2.10-13). Nevertheless, she possesses none of her father’s power to command the sea. And though she says she desires to sink the sea within the earth, she is fascinated by what the sea brings forth to the island. She comments that the ship is “a brave vessel” (*Tempest* 1.2.6), and Ferdinand who lands on the island after the shipwreck, is “a thing divine; for nothing natural/I ever saw so noble” (*Tempest* 1.2.421-22). For Miranda, the malignant force of the sea in the form of the tempest may be dreadful but the benevolent force of the sea in bringing to her attractive elements from outside her small island is welcome. These conflicting features of the sea from Miranda’s perspective can be considered as being a reflection of ordinary English people’s ideas about the sea during the Renaissance. At a time when trade with foreign countries was becoming more and more frequent and the discovery of new lands and new trade routes was stimulating the development of more seafaring businesses, fear of sea-crossing dangers and fascination with new horizons inevitably coexisted.

Ariel’s song for Ferdinand’s ears, which begins “Full fadom five thy father lies” (*Tempest* 1.2. 399-404), echoes this kind of fear and fascination with the sea. Though the beautiful depiction of a sea death for Ferdinand’s father is a hoax, the song reinforces the image of the sea as dangerous. “In symbolic terms” as Steve Mentz puts it, “the song represents the transforming powers of oceanic magic” (2009:7), a theme that is reinforced by Gonzola’s comment about their garments which “hold, notwithstanding, their freshness/and glosses, being rather new-dyed than stained/with salt water” (*Tempest* 2.1.60-62).

The employment of a shipwreck as its basic plot frame renders *Twelfth Night* rather similar to *The Tempest*. Even though the play does not dramatise a shipwreck at the very beginning of the play, with mariners shouting instructions on how to handle the ship, in Act 1 Scene 2 it does dramatise the aftermath of a shipwreck, and it puts into the mouth of a sea captain a vivid description of how Sebastian struggled for his life after the ship split: “I saw your brother/Most provident in peril, bind himself/... To a strong mast that liv’d upon the sea” (*Twelfth* 1.2.11-14). In a later scene, Antonio, another sea

captain, says he had rescued Sebastian “from the rude sea’s enrag’d and foamy mouth” (*Twelfth* 5.1.76), thus personifying the sea and highlighting how dangerous it is. When Sebastian describes the shipwreck which he thinks has taken his sister’s life, he also personifies the sea. He says his sister “the blind waves and surges have devour’d” (*Twelfth* 5.1.227). By poetically linking the salt water of the sea with his tears: “She is drown’d already, sir, with/salt water, though I seem to drown her remembrance/again with more” (*Twelfth* 2.1.29-31), Sebastian presents not only the dangers of the sea but also the interconnection between human misery and the sea in the form of salt water.

Not unlike *The Tempest*, which endows the mariners with professional dignity, *Twelfth Night* depicts mariners in a favourable light. The captain who speaks with Viola after the shipwreck is a friendly character. His soothing words comfort Viola and the information he supplies about Illyria starts her on her bold venture. Viola compliments him: “There is a fair behaviour in thee, captain” and she adds that “I will believe thou hast a mind that suits/With this thy fair and outward character” (*Twelfth* 1.2.47; 50-51). When Viola asks him to conceal her identity and present her to the duke of Illyria as a eunuch, the captain readily promises to do so, in a heroic tone: “Be you his eunuch, and your mute I’ll be:/When my tongue blabs, then let mine eyes not see” (*Twelfth* 1.2.62-63).

Likewise, Antonio befriends Sebastian and even lends him his purse with all his money. He is probably a wanted pirate, as he tells Sebastian that it is not without danger that he walks in town because he once served in a “sea-fight ‘gainst the Count his galleys” (*Twelfth* 3.3.26). Moreover, when Orsino meets Antonio, he addresses him as “Notable pirate, thou salt-water thief” (*Twelfth* 5.1.67). But Antonio replies, “Be pleas’d that I shake off these names you give me:/Antonio never yet was thief, or pirate” (*Twelfth* 5.1.71-72). Interestingly, there is no further discussion about what exactly Antonio is, and this blank may be understood within Renaissance maritime history. It is generally known that to empower the English in their conflict with Spanish sea power and expansion in the New World, Queen Elizabeth “let slip her sea dogs” (Konstam 2008:37). According to Augus Konstam, “one country’s privateer is another country’s pirate” (2008:37). This humorous description sheds light on why Antonio can defend himself boldly against Orsino’s accusation.

Pirate or not, Antonio shows his valour when he comes immediately to the rescue of Viola, who he has mistaken for Sebastian, when Viola is being attacked by Sir Andrew. He readily draws his sword and declares to Sir Andrew: “If this young gentleman/Have done offence, I take the fault on me;/If you offend him, I for him defy you” (*Twelfth* 3.4.319-321). In Antonio’s own words, he has given Sebastian “[his] love, without retention or restraint,/All his in dedication” (*Twelfth* 5.1.79-80). Not unlike the favourable image of the mariners in the opening scene of *The Tempest*, Antonio’s friendship and valour command respect. In making a captain, who is allegedly a pirate, command respect, Shakespeare probably has the topical issue of the Queen’s sea dogs at the back of his mind.

A common denominator of *The Tempest* and *Twelfth Night* is the shipwreck that makes possible the coming-together of the main protagonists. Yet *Twelfth Night* swaps most of the gender roles of *The Tempest*. Instead of a hero who lands on the island after the tempest, *Twelfth Night* focuses on a heroine who survives a shipwreck. Viola becomes a counterpart of Ferdinand in their roles as new arrivals on the island, while Orsino becomes the counterpart of Miranda, as both are safe in their home but are powerless in their desires. In addition, the character who holds power on the island turns from Prospero, a patriarchal figure, to Olivia, a countess whose immediate male relatives have all died and who is hence left to command her own household. Though Orsino is the Duke of Illyria, he is not a patriarch like Prospero. The play begins by presenting Orsino’s love-sickness.

This weakening of male power is strongly contrasted with the empowering of female characters. Olivia chooses to reject a suit from a most suitable candidate and instead follows her heart’s desire in loving a man supposedly below her social rank; Viola chooses to disguise herself as a man to serve a duke whose story fascinates her. These wilful female characters seem to be rather different from the subservient female image one would usually expect of Renaissance women. Yet a close scrutiny of Miranda’s part in *The Tempest* reveals her wilfulness as not greatly different from that of Olivia or Viola. After Ferdinand showers compliments on her, Miranda asks him straightforwardly: “Do you love me?” (*Tempest* 3.1.68). And she proposes to him: “I am your wife if you will marry me;/If not, I’ll die your maid” (*Tempest* 3.1.83-84). This kind

of forwardness is not greatly different from that of Olivia, who after she has mistaken Sebastian for Cesario and found him less resistant than before, summons a priest and arranges an immediate marriage. She tells Sebastian, who she thinks is Cesario: “If you mean well,/Now go with me, and with this holy man,/Into the chantry by” (*Twelfth* 4.3.22-24). In a rather similar fashion, Viola follows her own desires. When she is commissioned by Orsino to woo Olivia, she says to Orsino: “I’ll do my best/To woo your lady” (*Twelfth* 1.4.39-40) but then she says in an aside, “yet, a barful strife!/Whoe’er I woo, myself would be his wife” (*Twelfth* 1.4.41-42).

Compared to the wilful female characters, the male characters in *Twelfth Night* are relatively powerless and innocent. Orsino never discovers that the young man close to him is in fact a cross-dressed woman, and Sebastian simply agrees to marry Olivia when she proposes, though he finds his good luck rather incredible. When Olivia says, “would thou’dst be rul’d by me,” Sebastian replies, “Madame, I will” (*Twelfth* 4.2.63-64). These lines signify the reversal of gender roles from traditional male dominance to women on top. Even in the subplot that dramatises what is going on in Olivia’s household, Maria, Olivia’s waiting gentlewoman, is full of wit and tricks Malvolio, Olivia’s steward, into believing that Olivia loves him. The prank provokes a good laugh at the expense of Malvolio, whose image resonates with the other powerless and innocent male images in the play.

Even though there is a real Illyria on earth, in the play this setting seems a dreamland. When Viola first arrives on the island and learns the name of the place from the captain, she says, “And what should I do in Illyria? My brother he is in Elysium” (*Twelfth* 2.1.3-4). Illyria’s link (through alliteration) with Elysium gives the island a surrealistic touch. Moreover, with reversed gender roles on the island, Illyria resembles the island on which Prospero rules—a fictive land in a faraway place across the seas where the usual order and the usual relationships are reconfigured. What makes the protagonists’ adventures possible is sea travel, and *The Tempest* and *Twelfth Night* share a shipwreck as their common denominator. The sea that causes the disastrous shipwreck at the beginning is eventually proven to be benevolent. As soon as Viola hears Sebastian’s name on Antonio’s lips, she begins to suspect that he is still alive and says: “O if it prove,/Tempests are kind, and salt waves fresh in love” (*Twelfth* 3.4.393-394).

The dangers of seafaring are also crucial to the development of the plot in *The Merchant of Venice*. Even though there is no actual staging of shipwrecks, Shylock offers a picture of how vulnerable ships can be on the sea:

But ships are
but boards, sailors but men, there be land-rats, and
water-rats, water-thieves, and land-thieves, (I mean
pirates), and then there is the peril of waters, winds,
and rocks. (*Merchant* 1.3.19)

What eventually happens in the play proves that Shylock is quite correct. The failure of Antonio's ships to return creates a violation of the bond that makes Shylock demand a pound of Antonio's flesh, as stated in their agreement. It is noteworthy that when Shylock proposes the uncivil terms of having Antonio agree to pay a pound of flesh as eventual penalty, Antonio readily agrees, though Bassanio tries to stop him. Antonio says "Why fear not man, I will not forfeit it" (*Merchant* 1.3.152). Antonio's complacency is eventually proved to have been foolish.

The Merchant of Venice opens with a discussion of the mental burdens of seafaring for merchants. Antonio is sad but says he does not know why he is so sad, to which Salerio replies: "Your mind is tossing on the ocean" where your "argosies" are sailing (*Merchant* 1.1.7-8). Solanio says,

Believe me sir, had I such venture forth,
The better part of my affections would
Be with my hopes aboard. I should be still
Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind,
Piring in maps for ports, and piers and roads:
And every object that might make me fear
Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt
Would make me sad. (*Merchant* 1.1.15-22)

Salerio adds: "My wind cooling my broth,/Would blow me to an ague when I thought/What harm a wind too great might do at sea" (*Merchant* 1.1.22-24). He

elaborates further on how an hour-glass would prompt him to imagine that his ship was docked in sand, and how the stones of a church would make him relate to the “dangerous rocks” in the sea. This vivid description of the mental burdens of a merchant with ships at sea illustrates the risks involved in seafaring. But Antonio denies having such worries and says, “My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,/Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate/Upon the fortune of this present year” (*Merchant* 1.1.42-44). But what he says at this point is not the whole truth, because when Bassanio approaches him to borrow money, Antonio says, “Thou know’st that all my fortunes are at sea” (*Merchant* 1.2.177). These words contradict his earlier comment that his whole estate does not depend upon the fortune of that year. And then what happens next is Antonio staking his own life on the risky ventures of his ships. He says to the worried Bassanio, after he has agreed to go to the notary’s with Shylock to seal the bond, “Come on, in this there can be no dismay,/My ships come home a month before the day” (*Merchant* 1.3.176-77).

When compared to Solanio and Salerio’s description of their excessive worries about their ships, Antonio’s confidence about the return of his ones is naive. The perils of seafaring in the Renaissance, in the absence of modern nautical equipment, far exceeded those of our own era. Reports of misfortunes at sea were common in Shakespeare’s time. William Strachey’s *A True Reportory of the Wreck and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight, upon and from the Islands of the Bermudas: His Coming to Virginia and the Estate of that Colony Then and After, under the Government of the Lord La Warr, July 15, 1610* is a good example. “[Strachey’s] account of a shipwreck on an enchanted isle,” according to Hobson Woodward, was the inspiration for *The Tempest* (2009:182). Since it is generally believed that Strachey’s work inspired Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, it is reasonable to think that reports of this kind also contextualised *The Merchant of Venice*. Therefore, even though Antonio may think that the penalty Shylock is proposing is “overwhelmingly likely to remain uncollected” (to borrow Spencer’s words 1988:102), Bassanio’s concerns are more realistic than imaginative, and Shakespeare has already created the atmosphere for such a worry early in the play by including Solanio and Salerio’s description of merchants’ mental burdens for their ships. Moreover, by choosing Salerio as Antonio’s messenger to Portia’s home, the play reminds us of what Salerio had said at the beginning of the action about the dangers of seafaring.

Nevertheless, the sad news from Salerio is later proven to be incorrect. Near the end of the play, Portia gives Antonio a letter and tells him the good news contained within it: “There you should find three of your argosies/are richly come to harbour suddenly” (*Merchant* 5.1.276). This late information of the recovery of three of Antonio’s ships reminds one of how unpredictable and unmanageable the seafaring business is. How Portia has acquired the information and the letter remains unknown, as she states that “You shall not know by what strange accident/I chanced on this letter” (*Merchant* 5.1.279-30). John Russel Brown’s annotation comments that “this beautiful example of Shakespeare’s dramatic impudence has been severely criticized by some pundits” (1964:138). Yet the fact that it is Portia who has this information adds a magical touch to her role. Earlier in the play, when she cross-dresses to help Antonio out, she has already manifested her good logic. The joke she plays with Bassanio’s ring is rather similar to the tricks Prospero plays via Ariel to those shipwrecked. In a sense, Portia’s knowledge and wit make her almost a female counterpart of Prospero. Even though she does not have any power to command a tempest, she has information about ships which even their owners have lost track of. Yet she differs from Prospero in her heartfelt forgiveness for her husband after he has given away the ring she had given to him as a love token. According to Auden, Prospero “has the coldness of someone who has come to the conclusion that human nature is not worth much” (2003:57), but in Portia no such coldness exists. While Prospero’s magic to command the tempest may signify man’s wish to dominate the sea, Portia’s unexplained information about Antonio’s ships symbolises a mysterious relationship between woman and the sea.

The quintessential plot element in *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* is the danger of seafaring. In *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*, the female characters cross-dress for reasons related to a shipwreck. Even in *The Tempest*, where a patriarchal figure like Prospero holds royal power, Miranda benefits from what the sea brings to her. One of the most interesting things about women’s relationship with the sea in *The Tempest* is that the journey which takes the king’s company onboard a ship is for the king’s daughter, Claribel. This absentee from the play, who marries the king of Tunis, is the cause of the sea-crossing from Italy which gives an opportunity for Prospero to sink the ship. After the shipwreck, the king laments,

Would I had never
Married my daughter there! For, coming thence
My son is lost, and, in my rate, she too,
Who is so far from Italy removed
I ne'er again shall see her. (*Tempest* 2.1.103-107)

The king's words reveal that distance across seas creates great obstacles to the meeting of people who live far away from each other. In *The Tempest*, when Antonio is encouraging Sebastian to usurp his brother's crown, he says that the next heir of Naples after Ferdinand is Claribel, Queen of Tunis, but she is not to be feared because: "she that dwells/Ten leagues beyond man's life; she that from Naples/Can have no note" (*Tempest* 2.1.241-43). Again, this shows the barriers the sea can create between the rightful queen and her inheritance. Though the reason why Claribel marries the ruler of a faraway country across the seas is not mentioned in the play, the marriage stimulates imagination about her adventure. Moreover, it is this absentee who initiates the trip that is crucial to the plot. So after all, Claribel's marriage overseas in *The Tempest* signifies a new possibility for women.

To conclude, even though in the Renaissance the sea was a male domain, Shakespeare would not allow the enormous fantasies of the English during his time regarding sea adventures to exclude women in his theatrical space. Within the imaginative space of Shakespeare's "wooden O," maritime space is dramatised as a space of liberty and opportunity for women. This aspect may have appealed powerfully to his female audience because whereas in reality they found themselves excluded from an extremely fascinating element of their own culture, they could find their comfort from the wild imagination of theatrical space. This wild imagination also harps on a "supreme irony" of the time, which, to borrow Carol Hansen's words, is that "a woman, Elizabeth I, was running the whole show, or to be more precise, the whole country" (1993:4). She was the one who commanded the navy and the privateers, her sea dogs. Not unlike Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, who knows about the fate of Antonio's ships, Queen Elizabeth commanded information about ships at sea. Not unlike Claribel, who was the

reason for the king's sea-crossing in *The Tempest*, Queen Elizabeth commanded many activities on the sea, including her most famous triumph, that over the Spanish Armada.

It is notable that Queen Elizabeth's great triumph over the Spanish Armada was the result of "a great tempest" (Kay 1992:104). Shakespeare's career as a dramatist began, "in the years immediately following the defeat of the Spanish Armada" (Kay 1992:104). It is hence reasonable to believe that Shakespeare would remember the significance of the tempest in his Queen's glorious triumph over the Spanish. Though in *The Tempest* Shakespeare creates a *male* character who commands the tempest, it is rather interesting to link the positive outcome of the tempest for Miranda with what the tempest meant to Queen Elizabeth in the war against the Spanish Armada. The imaginative world of Shakespeare's theatrical space reflects the historical reality of his time - the tempest has impacts not just on men on board ships, but on women too. Yet there is a great difference between Shakespeare's imaginative world and historical reality when it comes to the marriage issue. In the three comedies related to seafaring, the female characters end up with good men to marry, while Queen Elizabeth did not.

It is well known that Queen Elizabeth carried on many marriage negotiations but never married. Many reports of Elizabeth's actions, as Ilona Bell comments, "disturbed conceptions of sex and gender and challenged the patriarchal assumptions underlying politics and marriage" (2010:xii). The attack of the Spanish Armada could even be considered the result of Queen Elizabeth's failed marriage negotiations with King Philip of Spain, as he was her first 'husband candidate' when she became queen but she refused his marriage proposal. According to William Camden, when the Spanish Armada withdrew from the English seas in 1588, "the Queen with a masculine Spirit came and took a View of her Army and Camp at Tilbury," and she rode about "sometimes with a martial Pace, another while gently like a Woman" (1970: 326). The description pinpoints the Queen's embodiment of both masculine and feminine traits. It is perhaps presumptuous to argue that Shakespeare has the self-styled virgin Queen in mind when he wrote these comedies about women crossing the seas and cross-dressing for love and for marriage, but it is undoubtedly interesting to forge the imaginative link.

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