

Women as Men in Shakespeare: the Outer Dress and the Inner Mind

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Abstract—This paper explores Shakespeare's use of female cross-dressing in *Cymbeline*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, focusing on how women adopt male identities to negotiate vulnerability, exercise agency, and control adverse circumstances. Imogen, disguised as Fidele in *Cymbeline*, represents the most ambiguous form of agency, as her disguise is suggested by Pisanio and her feminine behaviour repeatedly emerges beneath her masculine appearance. Viola, as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, deliberately assumes an androgynous identity, but becomes entangled in an unexpected triangle involving Orsino and Olivia. Rosalind, as Ganymede in *As You Like It*, exercises greater psychological control by testing Orlando's love, influencing Phoebe and Silvius, and ultimately orchestrating multiple marriages. Portia, as Balthasar, and Nerissa, as his clerk, demonstrate the greatest effectiveness, but their disguise also enables Portia to participate in the unjust treatment of Shylock. The paper thus examines the complex relationship between outer dress, inner identity, agency, and moral consequence.

Index Terms—Cross-dressing, Disguise and Identity, Female Agency, Gender-Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper seeks to explore the psychological games that ensue when circumstances make women characters in four plays of Shakespeare dress as men. There will be an attempt to trace the increase in agency of the women concerned.

II. DISCUSSION

In the late Romance *Cymbeline*, Imogen is advised to cross-dress by Pisanio. Her encounter with the attributes of a man occurs through another man's eyes. Pisanio tells her to change her behaviour from

that of a princess accustomed to command to that of an obedient page:

You must forget to be a woman: change
Command into obedience; fear and niceness
into a waggish courage,
Ready in gibes, quick-answer'd, saucy, and,
As quarrelsome as the weasel: nay, you must
Forget that rarest treasure of your cheek,
Exposing it ...
to the greedy touch
Of common-kissing Titan: and forget
Your laboursome and dainty trims ...
(III iv 156-66)

The intention, of course, is to protect Imogen from being vulnerable as a lonely woman in an unfamiliar environment. The over-enthusiastic Imogen sees herself 'A man already' (III iv 169), but experience makes her realize:

I see a man's life is a tedious one,
I have tir'd myself: and for two nights together
Have made the ground my bed. I should be sick
... (III vi 1-3)

This is the only case of cross-dressing in the four plays to be discussed where both the idea and the initiative comes from a man. From Rosalind to Viola, and finally with Portia, it is the woman who will decide when and why to disguise herself as a man. Therefore, Imogen's disguise is perhaps more ambiguous than those of the earlier heroines. Upon first seeing her, Belarius exclaims, 'Here were a fairy' (III vi 44), a word we normally associate with the female sex. That she has succeeded in seeming at least androgynous in appearance is indicated by Belarius calling her next 'an angel! Behold divineness/No elder than a boy' (III vi 46-48). Despite her disguise, both Guiderius and Arviragus are attracted to 'Fidele' – Imogen's male name – as

men are to a woman. Imogen-Fidele's behaviour towards the three men shows none of the 'waggish courage' Pisanio had advised, rather the outpourings of her womanly fear:

Good masters, harm me not:
Before I enter'd here, I call'd and thought
To have begg'd or bought what I have took ...
Here's money for my meat,
I would have left it on the board, so soon
As I had made my meal; and parted
With pray'rs for the provider.

(III vii 18-24)

One needs only to contrast this with Orlando's desperate swagger in *As You Like It*, when he bursts in with a drawn sword upon Duke Senior and his lords in Arden demanding food for himself and Adam, to see the difference:

Forbear and eat no more ...
He dies that touches any of this fruit,
Till I and my affairs are answered. (II vii
39, 100-101)

Unwittingly, however, Imogen-Fidele plays a psychological game as the three men are at once taken in by her masculine exterior and simultaneously respond to her inner femininity. This is seen when Guiderius declares:

Were you a woman, youth,
I should woo hard, but be your groom in honesty:
I bid for you as I do buy.
(III vii 41-43).

At the end, when all is revealed, Imogen tells them:

You call'd me brother,
When I was but your sister: I you brothers,
When ye were so indeed. (V v 377-79)

Compared with Imogen, Viola in *Twelfth Night* does exercise more agency when she elects to take on a different gender-identity and tells the Captain:

I will serve this duke [Orsino]
Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him. (I ii 55-56)

Although after this scene, as Lothian and Craik put it, no further reference is made to this part of the plan, the word fixes the idea of Viola-Cesario's androgyny firmly in the mind of the audience. In the play this is doubly ironic. Viola, as a woman, falls in love with Duke Orsino while Olivia becomes enamoured of Viola's Cesario-persona. Cesario is thus seen as a rival, first by Sir Andrew Aguecheek and eventually

by Orsino as well. The Duke thunders at Olivia, whom he has fruitlessly courted for so long:

Live you the marble-breasted tyrant still,
But this is your minion whom I know you love,
And whom, by heaven I swear, I tender dearly,
Him will I tear out of that cruel eye
Where he sits crowned in his master's spite.

(V I 122-26)

Incidentally, Orsino's determination to 'sacrifice the lamb that I do love' also refers to the attraction he has felt so long for the androgynous Cesario. The lovesick Viola replies that she would willingly die a thousand deaths 'To do [Orsino] rest' (*ibid.* 131). Earlier, when told by Sir Toby that Sir Andrew, 'knight, dubbed with unhatched rapier ... is a devil in private brawl' (III iv 237-39), a terrified Viola exclaims that s/he will return to the house of Olivia to seek someone to safeguard him/her, because, 'I am no fighter.' (*ibid.* 245)

The psychological game in *Twelfth Night* is played by circumstances with Viola, Sebastian, Orsino, and Olivia, and, through them, with Antonio, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, all of whom are taken in by Viola's cross-dressing and the fact that she and Sebastian are lookalike twins. Barring the decision to put on man's apparel, there is very little agency as such on Viola's part. She merely reacts to the 'comedy of errors' that her disguise precipitates. Both Sebastian and she are as bewildered by the events that Viola pretending to be Cesario generates, much like the two pairs of twins – masters and slaves – in Shakespeare's Plautus-inspired earlier Comedy.

Rosalind's agency in *As You Like It* is emphasized by her being overshadowed by Celia in the first two Acts when the two are at the court of the usurper Duke Frederick. Once the 'humorous' (I ii 256) Frederick banishes Rosalind, the latter, however, gradually assumes control. Celia insists on accompanying her cousin to the Forest of Arden, but being 'more than common tall' (I iii 111) it is Rosalind who assumes the identity of Zeus' androgynous lover Ganymede (corresponding to Latin *Catamitus*, a word which gives us 'catamite'). In her male guise, she initiates the 'cure' of Orlando's lovesickness which has manifested itself in two rather inferior pieces of verse. On the face of it, when 'Ganymede' dismisses the concept of love, 'he' sounds robustly satirical, perhaps even masculine:

The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love-cause. Troilus had his brains dashed out with a Grecian club, yet he did what he could to die before, and he is one of the patterns of love. Leander, he would have lived many a fair year though Hero had turned nun, if it had not been for a hot mid summer night; for, good youth, he went but forth to wash him in the Hellespont, and being taken with the cramp, was drowned, and the foolish chronicles of the age found it was Hero of Sestos ... men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love.

(IV i 90-103)

However, it is a psychological game Rosalind is playing with both Orlando and herself because she herself had fallen in love at first sight with Orlando when he came to wrestle Charles at court, much to Celia's amusement – 'Cupid have mercy, not a word?' (I iii 1-2) – which Rosalind had confirmed by saying that much of her agony was 'for my child's father.' (*ibid.* 9-10). When Celia/Aliena confirms that it is Orlando who, like them, is in Arden, Rosalind's reaction is hardly a picture of masculine, or indeed rational, restraint:

Dost thou think though I am caparisoned like a man I have a doublet and hose in my disposition? ... What did he do when thou saw'st him? What said he? How looked he? Wherein went he? What makes he here? Did he ask for me? Where remains he? How parted he with thee? And when shalt thou see him again? Answer me in one word. (III ii 191-92, 216-20)

Nevertheless, Rosalind soon assumes control and indulges in an elaborate psychological manipulation with Orlando. In her Ganymede persona, she persuades him to call her 'Rosalind' and woo her in an apparent exercise to 'cure' the young man of his infatuation. Her real intention is, of course, to enjoy his company and also to test the sincerity of his love for her. The obvious resemblance of 'Ganymede' to his Rosalind combined with his/her witty debunking of conventional romantic love attract Orlando even more to her. After persuading Celia/Aliena to perform a mock-marriage of 'Ganymede' and Orlando, Rosalind tells him:

men are April when they woo, December when they wed. Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives. I will be more jealous of thee than a Barbary cock-pigeon over his hen,

more clamorous than a parrot against rain, more new-fangled than an ape, more giddy in my desires than a monkey. I will weep for nothing, like Diana in the fountain, and will do that when you are disposed to be merry. I will laugh like a hyen, and that when thou art inclined to sleep. (IV i 139-48)

There is one other instance where Rosalind's womanly self breaks through her male disguise. This is when the now-reformed Oliver reports to her how Orlando has been wounded by a lioness while trying to rescue Oliver. In the fight with the lioness he lost so much blood that, in his agony, he took the name of Rosalind before fainting. Upon recovering, he has sent via Oliver 'this napkin, /Dy'd in his blood, unto the shepherd youth/That he in sport doth call his Rosalind.' (IV iii 154-56) Rosalind, at the sight of blood, faints. When she recovers, Oliver says, 'You a man! You lack a man's heart.' (*ibid.* 164-65) Upon a hugely-embarrassed Rosalind claiming it was 'counterfeited', Oliver counters, 'This was not counterfeit, there is too great testimony in your complexion that it was a passion of earnest.' (*ibid.* 167, 169-71) What is more ironic is, on Rosalind insisting it was counterfeit, Oliver asks her to 'counterfeit to be a man.' (*ibid.* 173-74)

Such elaborate game-play and near-exposure were lacking in both *Cymbeline* and *Twelfth Night*. *As You Like It* incorporates even the Viola-Cesario motif. Rosalind's androgynous disguise appeals to Phoebe despite Silvius' attempts to woo her. In fact, Phoebe falls in love with Ganymede at first sight, just as Rosalind had with Orlando:

Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might,
'Who ever lov'd that lov'd not at first sight?'
(III v 81-82)

Finally, unlike in *Twelfth Night*, it is no accidental arrival of a twin brother – an external device – that brings about the revelations and resolutions at the end. It is Rosalind who orchestrates the four marriages at the end, not only of herself to Orlando, of Celia to Oliver, of Audrey to Touchstone, but of the entitled and capricious Phoebe to Silvius, making Phoebe realize how sincerely Silvius loves her in spite of her lack of good looks, and trying, in vain, to make Silvius realize how Phoebe is exploiting him.

Our final example, which many consider the one showing maximum agency and effectiveness, is that of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Dressing herself as the young male lawyer Balthazar from Padua, she

proceeds to entrap Shylock in his insistence on the 'letter' of the bond Antonio signed with him. What is more, and where her 'success' is perhaps less morally questionable, is her persuading Bassanio to part with the ring she, as Portia, had given him and which he had promised to wear until death as a mark of his faithfulness. Inspired by her, her maid Nerissa, disguised as the male clerk of 'Balthazar' does the same with Bassanio's friend Gratiano, Nerissa's husband. Back at Belmont, both women allege that their husbands have committed adultery while in Venice and that the rings have gone not to a male lawyer and his clerk but to two women of pleasure. When the two men insist that they had indeed given the rings to two men, Portia and Nerissa retort that just as their husbands were unable to deny the men their rings, they too will be as generous to those men should they approach them, wives of Bassanio and Gratiano. Finally, the rings are produced, Portia claiming she got it off Balthazar in return for her favours, Nerissa claiming the same for the clerk. This is where the outspoken Gratiano makes the women's trickery run away with them by exclaiming:

Why this is like the mending of highways
In summer where the ways are fair enough!
What, are we cuckolds ere we have deserv'd it?
(V I 263-65)

The scandalized Portia can only remonstrate, 'Speak not so grossly'. (*ibid.* 266)

In the Trial Scene, Portia acts with the awareness that Antonio had signed the bond willingly, and sees that Shylock, despite being offered three times the principal amount, was not asking for the money back but was sticking to the letter of the written argument. She says:

there is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established:
'Twill be recorded for a precedent,
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the state ... (IV i 214-18)

The celebrated speech on mercy, and the appeal which follows to Shylock to arrange for a surgeon to prevent Antonio from bleeding to death, both are intended by Portia to establish in front of the Duke and all others present that Shylock is being ruthlessly literal in sticking to the bond and refusing to accommodate anything not mentioned in it. She then proceeds to use his literal adherence to the bond in conjunction with the Venetian law that protects the

life of a Christian citizen against Shylock, a Jew, perceived as an alien and the ultimate Other:

The bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
But in the cutting of it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are (by the laws of Venice) confiscate
Unto the state of Venice. (IV i 302-08)

Subsequently, at the charge of having, as 'an alien' (345) having sought 'the life of any citizen' (347), she proceeds to deprive Shylock of his property, half going to Antonio and half to the state. Additionally, Shylock stands at the mercy of the Duke if he is not to be executed. As a broken Shylock says:

Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that, -
You take my house, when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house: you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.
(IV i 370-73)

In response to Portia's query as to what 'mercy' (374) Antonio can render unto him, the man who had treated Shylock with brazen anti-Semitic arrogance and brutality in public from the very beginning, makes a show of kindness by asking the State to forego its share of Shylock's property, with Antonio holding the other half in trust for Lorenzo who had eloped with Shylock's daughter Jessica. And then, in return for this 'mercy', he demands that Shylock must give up his religious identity and become a Christian. The Duke proceeds to enforce these demands with the surprising assertion that, should Shylock demur, the Duke will recant the pardon he had pronounced shortly earlier. Portia as Balthazar participates in the Duke's misuse of power with, 'Art thou contented Jew?' to which a devastated Shylock can only say, 'I am content' (*ibid.* 388-89). As Niemeyer puts it, the criminal case against Shylock, which Portia introduces once Shylock gives up his claim on Antonio's flesh, is ended with an agreement the government has forced upon the accused. '[T]he whole course of this criminal proceeding is, according to any standard, illegal, unjust and immoral.'¹ And in conducting such a proceeding,

¹Th. Niemeyer, 'The Judgment against Shylock in the Merchant of Venice', *Michigan Law Review*, Nov. 1915, Vol. 14 No. (1) 20-36, <https://jstor.org/stable/1276185> 16 February 2022. The quotation is from p. 27.

Balthazar/Portia becomes morally a far more dubious figure than Fidele/Imogen, Cesario/Viola, or Ganymede/Rosalind, in spite of having shown far more courage and initiative against life-threatening circumstances – admittedly, not hers but Antonio's.

III. CONCLUSION

Our examples have ranged from passive acquiescence to the suggestion to cross-dress (Imogen) to deliberate disguising of one's female self as male for safety and sustenance (Viola and Rosalind) to using that disguise to test oneself and one's lover (Rosalind-Orlando), force an entitled woman to recognize the virtue of her spurned lover (Rosalind-Phoebe-Silvius) to using male disguise not only to trick one's husband (Portia-Bassanio, Nerissa-Gratiano) but also to participate in and augment state-authorized marginalization and identity-robbery (Portia-Antonio-Shylock). Using the fact that there were no women actors in his time, Shakespeare has ranged widely in his creative use of cross-dressing in three of his Comedies and one of the Last Romances.

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