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Disguise: Shakespeare's Weapon against Male Domination

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Abstract

The display of women in male disguise is a theme that William Shakespeare had a great liking for and that has perplexed the critics most. Scholars have endeavoured to find out the nub of Shakespeare's interest in presenting a woman in a man's robes. Was it the requirement of the plot of the plays or did he use the device of disguise only for "the compounding of comic confusion".¹ What did Shakespeare think in regard of women when he presented them in male disguise? What pressing situations did he face in which his heroines impersonated men? Was a male disguise compulsion for them or did they disguise themselves only for entertainment? This paper aims (i) to examine from the feminist viewpoint the situations that induce Shakespeare's female characters to adopt to the male disguise, (ii) to assess Shakespeare's contention in displaying only his female characters impersonating men and not vice-versa, (iii) to explore the patriarchal set-up of the society that compel women to

hide their identity for survival. The paper attempts to demonstrate disguise as a weapon that Shakespeare's female characters generally adopted against the male domination. It chiefly deals with three plays of Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.

Keywords

Disguise, Feminism, Shakespeare's Comedies and his comic heroines, patriarchy and androcentric double standards in society, Elizabethan society.



Disguise: Shakespeare's Weapon against Male Domination by Dr Vipin K Singh

William Shakespeare frequently portrays women disguised as men. Julia, in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, is Shakespeare's first comic heroine to become a man. Rosalind, in *As You Like It*, and Viola, in *Twelfth Night*, also adopt the male disguise. In *The Merchant of Venice*, all the three female characters (Portia, Nerissa and Jessica) impersonate men. Similarly, in *Cymbeline*, Imogen appears as the page, Fidle. In each play, Shakespeare tends to underline the problems of women. In many of Shakespeare's plays disguise has generally been used "as part of the mechanism of the plot"², but in

Shakespeare's handling the disguised characters "gain the theatrical force and importance that take their disguise well beyond its simple plot function."³ Shakespeare appears to have presented his female characters in male disguise for the sake of their safety. Because the society that Shakespeare seems to have portrayed in his plays is phallogocentric—his heroines disguise themselves as men to hide their female identity. In a male dominated society, one of the several ways to control women "is the use of rape and sexual violence as the tools of domination."⁴ Shakespeare's heroines such as Julia, Rosalind and Viola impersonate men to protect themselves from "the fear generated by the threat of rape that keeps women subordinated".⁵ In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia, for example, expresses her fear when she decides to set out for Milan in pursuit of Proteus:

Lucetta: But in what habit will you go along?

Julia: Not like a woman for I would prevent

That loose encounters of lascivious men.

(II. vii. 39-41)

The threat of sexual harassment is one among several male biased practices across the world. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare does not use the device of disguise only as a means of protection. He seems to have more purposes behind making Rosalind disguised as a man than mere safety. Rosalind disguises herself as a male because she realizes that "Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold". (I.III. 106.) But, on meeting Orlando in the Forest of Arden, Rosalind should have disclosed her identity to him and acquired his protection. As Rosalind does not do so, Shakespeare might be said to have more things in his mind to convey to his audiences. Kate Clarke maintains that the function of disguise in *As You Like It*, seems to be "closely related to the exploration of gender expectations in respect of love."⁶ F. H. Mares also tends to make love the ground of his study of the device of disguise in Shakespeare.⁷ In *As You Like It*, the use of theatrical metaphors as a

way of 'meta-theatre' (a term coined by Leonel Aberl in 1963 "to indicate all modes of theatrical self-consciousness in the drama")... which lead(s) us to question our understanding of 'reality', social or natural, and of gender roles within society".⁸

A conspicuous fact about Rosalind is that as Ganymede, her confidence and self-possession is enhanced. In the court of Duke Frederick, when Rosalind is not in male disguise, Celia seems to be the dominant character. But Rosalind's "male disguise immediately endows her with a desire not only to look masculine but to adopt masculine attributes."⁹ She shows a willingness to represent the male stereotype responses because a man, in an androcentric society, is generally thought to be "bold, strong, assertive, independent, aspiring, rational (and) logical".¹⁰ Rosalind asserts: "I would find in my heart to disagree my men's apparel and to cry like a woman. But I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat." (II.IV. 3-6)



Shakespeare, in the play *As You Like It*, appears to display the notion of gender as a cultural construct rather than a natural one: "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. . . it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature. . . which is described as feminine."²¹ Shakespeare shows the notion of masculinity and femininity "to be entirely external and superficial, simply a question of 'doublet and hose' or 'petticoat'".¹² Rosalind's impersonation of

man endows her with liberty from the tyranny of Duke Fredrick and allows her to meet Olanado. It encourages her to search for her father in exile and explore almost a new world, the Forest of Arden, that is unbiased and does not make any gender discrimination. Rosalind explores a world, which does not believe in the formation of a society that entails the subordination of woman. Here, both the sexes can survive according to their wit and intelligence and enjoy freedom in equal measure. In this reference, Kate Clarke states that the freedom that the male disguise accords to Rosalind "is not in the adoption of the guise of masculinity but in the recognition of gender expectation and gendered responses it permits."¹³ However, this is not correct. Although, recognition of gender expectation is important, more important is the attempt that Rosalind makes to attain the potions and privileges of the superior sex. And that attempt is possible only through the device of disguise that Shakespeare's female characters adopt as a means for the betterment of their gender. Shakespeare leans to convey the idea that the gender discrimination is only a cultural construct and not a natural product. He seems to have formulated the idea that if a woman enjoys the same privilege as a man does without any gender discrimination, she would be as powerful and consolidated in the society. She will fail nowhere just as Rosalind does not fail. Therefore, Shakespeare's invention of disguise should be seen as a means to suggest a basic equality between the sexes.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare foregrounds other problems concerning women. The use of disguise in this play does not put forward the idea of sexual harassment that induces women to impersonate men. Exile and willingness to eschew a man's tyranny have not been made the basis for disguise as they have been done in *As You Like It*. Jessica disguises herself as a page only to hide her identity and has no other purpose. But through the impersonation of Portia as a male Lawyer and Nerissa as her clerk, Shakespeare seems to question certain male biased notions. To show a bias in the social system is to indicate the need to remedy it. In the case of

Jessica, it is interesting to notice that Shakespeare correlates the device of disguise to the idea of elopement. But Portia adopts a man's robes not for the reason Rosalind does. F. H. Mares finds the disguise of Portia and Nerissa as lawyers as "a special case, not the simple female-into-male transformation."¹⁴ Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer to solve a man's problem; she goes to the court to rescue Antonio from the bloody knife of Shylock. Here it may be noticed that Portia impersonates herself as a male lawyer and not a female lawyer, although she might have presented herself as a female lawyer. Here, Shakespeare doubts whether Portia as a female would be heard more seriously and accepted in the court than as a male lawyer. A woman in a male-dominated society is generally regarded to be too wise to participate in a man's affairs; too bold and witty to put forward her views publicly. Because in a patriarchal society, the male voice is more influential and is given more attention. Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer and Nerissa as her clerk. She also impersonates a man because in Shakespeare's time, females were seldom allowed to participate in public affairs. Portia represents herself as a man to hide her identity from Bassanio because she wants to spy on what her husband does in her absence. As a lawyer, Portia knows all the legal procedures and subtle applications of the law of which the Duke himself appears to be ignorant. Shakespeare appears to dismantle the male biased notions that consider women incapable of saying or doing anything that concerns men. By presenting Portia at home in law and legal procedures, Shakespeare intercedes on behalf of women and eradicates the idea that women do not have wisdom, so they should not interfere with men's business.

In patriarchal societies, women feel safer when they have male support with them. It may be fairly presumed that Shakespeare and his contemporaries felt a woman would protect her virginity and chastity on her own. If she was alone, she would either present herself in a man's robes as many of Shakespeare's heroines did or have some male chaperon along with her. In the absence of these

two alternatives she would be open to any sorts of risks, particularly rape and sexual violence. Claudio, for example, makes Juliet pregnant in *Measure for Measure*, and Lucio in the same play gets a prostitute with a child. Angelo abandons Mariana for dowry and compels Isabella to surrender, at least in his own knowledge, her virginity before him. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Lancelot gets a Negro lady with a child: “the moor is with child by you, Lancelot”. (III.V.32)



About Viola's practice of disguise in *Twelfth Night*, Harold Bloom maintains, “There is an air of improvisation throughout in *Twelfth Night*, and Viola's disguise is part of that atmosphere. . . .”¹⁵ Anne Barton comments that Viola's “boy's disguise operates not as liberation but merely as a way of going underground in a difficult situation.”¹⁶ It would be unfair to think that Shakespeare wrote any of his work without a motive and thought. Viola's disguise, in fact, does not seem to be a part of an extempore effort. Instead, Shakespeare probably views it in as a woman's approach to her problems from a different perspective. Viola disguises herself as a boy but she does not have a male support with her. She is the first of Shakespeare's comic heroines who thinks that disguise can be dangerous¹⁷: “Disguise, I see thou art wickedness/ Where in the pregnant enemy does much”. (II.ii.24-25) Voila is afraid of disguise because she has to live in the real world as opposed to the ideal

world for a long time. If Rosalind impersonates a man, she lives in an ideal world, the Forest of Arden, where both sexes are granted equal freedom without any gender discrimination. Rosalind does not present herself as Ganymede in the real world, represented by the court of Duke Frederick.¹⁸ If Portia and Nerissa adopt male disguise, this is only for a short time, i.e. the court scene; and Jessica also does not encounter the real world in her male disguise. Whereas, Viola has to face the real world. She also does not have a confidant with her, as Rosalind has Celia, and Julia has Lucetta. There are other differences between Viola's disguise and the disguise of Shakespeare's heroines in earlier plays that need to be taken into account. Viola does not take "masquerade for mockery. Her's is not a mocking nature."¹⁹ She is in a critical situation and her crises is created not because she is "a woman, but a woman of rare sensitivity, who carried her masquerade with uncertainty, in a sprightly manner but with rising alarm and forced bravado."²⁰ Shakespeare's earlier heroines, on the other hand, carried their masquerade with certain elation, but Viola adopts disguise "neither for the relief of boredom nor the enjoyment of acting, but merely for self preservation."²¹ Viola claims a stress over Shakespeare's earlier heroines because of the hostile situations that she encounters. She has no male support with her; both, her brother and her father are dead, at least in her knowledge. She impersonates a man to secure protection as well as to earn her livelihood. Describing the complexity of Viola's situation, Bertrand Evans maintains: "Hopelessly wooing Olivia for Orsino, hopelessly loving Orsino, hopelessly loved by Olivia, ignorant that Sebastian is alive to make all right at last, she is caught in what is to her a frightening dilemma. . . ."²² That Viola is perplexed in her disguise is not important. What is significant is the brilliance with which she reacts to that situation and secures her protection. The most challenging task before Viola is her survival; how she would survive in an unknown country and hostile situations, especially when she has lost both her land and family, and when she does not have any male support like Rosalind or any legal authority as Portia had. The uniqueness of Viola lies in

maintaining her disguise for such a span of time. Julia's practice of disguise in *The Two Gentlemen* affects only two scenes and the only person whose ignorance of it is exploited is Proteus. Rosalind's impersonation of Ganymede, in *As You Like It*, is longer than Julia's but it, too, happens only in two major scenes, and the persons whose ignorance of it greatly matters are Orlando and Phebe. Portia's disguise in *The Merchant* happens only during one Act, and "its consequences furnish the substance of another."²³ Helena's disguise in *All's Well that Ends Well* makes the central incidence of the plot, but its only victim is Bertram. Imogene's practice of disguise in *Cymbeline* is only one among the several intrigues in the play. But the force of Viola's disguise in *Twelfth Night* "prevails in all but the opening scenes and relates to every incident and person"²⁴. Though it seems to affect two persons mainly, Orsino and Olivia, Viola's practice of disguise seems to dominate the plot of the play as a whole. Bertrand Evans compares the effect of Viola's mail disguise on the world of Illyria to the Duke Vincentio's on the world of Vienna, and in tragedy to Iago's on the world of Venice and to Hamlet's antic disposition on the world of Denmark²⁵.



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Viola's practice of disguise is not an illusion as it is generally the case of Shakespeare's earlier heroines but it has its real objective in form of Sebastian. The disguised characters in the earlier comedies of Shakespeare are more illusionary than real because when the

disguises are put off, the disguised characters disappear altogether. Rosalind as Gantmede, Portia as a lawyer, Julia as a page disappear in the climax of the play. In this reference, these disguised characters appear to act as the ghosts of Hamlet in *Hamlet*, which exists, yet does not exist. However, in the play *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare has presented the real form of the disguised person. He presents Viola and Sebastian as identical twins, which is biologically not possible. In this support Penny Gay may be quoted as:

*“that she has an identical twin in male Sebastian is of course a biological impossibility: it is a fantasy of desire undifferentiated, uncontrolled by the constraints of gender: the play enables not only the fantasy that one may not choose between a homosexual and heterosexual bond but that one need not become either male or female, that one can be both Viola and Sebastian, both maid and man.”*²⁶

Disguised as Cesario, Viola finds reality in Sebastian. In other comedies, a single personality is extended but the extension is contemporary and finally withdrawn. This is the only case in which “the new figure created by disguise was also on objective reality, a life of its own.”²⁷

Shakespeare views men and women equal in the world that declares them unequal, and his concealment of female characters in man's clothes prepares the ground for women to claim for that equality. Hence, disguise in Shakespeare's plays grants women liberation to think, act and exploit the opportunities in the same measure as men enjoy. All the characters in *As You Like It* accept Rosalind for her superiority; and in *The Merchant of Venice*, everyone obeys Portia's authority as a lawyer and praises her respectfully for her wit and intelligence.

Shakespeare also seems inclined to explore by means of female camouflage, the plight of women and the double standard that they face in the gender biased society. It also works as a weapon that women adopt to overcome the crises and achieve success over the

patriarchal practices. Through the use of disguise, Shakespeare attempts to quell several male biased notions that suppress women and deprive them of freedom and opportunities in almost all domains of life that men enjoy. Shakespeare's use of disguise, therefore, may be said to act as a sort of theory that does not support women at an abstract level (i.e. mere in words) only but uplifts their hold on the concrete ground at par with men.

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