

## Crossdressing in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*

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*As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* dissolve the usual gender conventions through their emphasis on crossdressing. This paper attempts to reveal that crossdressing enables the two heroines Rosalind and Viola to exhibit their intelligence and achieve subjective freedom without abandoning their feminine quality, and thus blends the Elizabethan gender roles prescribed for women and for men. In this sense, these two plays make it possible to believe that there is no such thing as a fixed masculinity or femininity.

*Keywords:* crossdressing, gender, Shakespearean comedy

### Introduction

The term crossdressing denotes an action or a behavior of wearing clothes commonly associated with the opposite sex within a particular society. Crossdressing has been used for various purposes throughout history. It is a prevailing custom in theatrical practice, especially in Shakespearean plays. The two comedies of *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, written for a stage on which boys play the parts of girls, involve crossdressing on two levels: A boy dresses up as girl who disguises herself as boy. Banished by her uncle, the heroine Rosalind in *As You Like It* assumes a male identity and leaves the court for the Forest of Arden. Similarly, after surviving a shipwreck, Viola in *Twelfth Night* goes into service with the Duke Orsino of Illyria, disguised as a young page Cesario. As a readymade farcical element, crossdressing in these two plays not only promotes the development of the plot, but also conveys a deeper meaning. These two plays, coming midway in the career of Shakespeare, were born in Elizabethan England, an extremely patriarchal society, in which economic and political and marital power was controlled by men. Women were viewed as inherently inferior, weak, and were expected “to be the silently beautiful beloved and not the balladeer” (Kemp, 2010, p. 29). They were not expected to engage their intellect, and the whole society was obsessed with the prescription of female subjection, a convention of “gendering the universal human subject as male imprisons women in the position of object and excludes them from full subjectivity” (qtd. in Kemp, 2010, p. 141).

Many scholars have studied the phenomenon of crossdressing in these two plays through the ages. Some critics examine the two plays’ crossdressing within the socio-historical and cultural context. Edward Berry, for example, insists upon the plays’ intention of reconstruction of social norms violated in the course of the action. In his view, the two plays’ ending, implying the heroines’ role as a wife, represents the resumption of the conventional patriarchal hierarchy (2004, p. 137). On the other hand, some critics see the two plays in a contrary view. Catherine Belsey claims that the cross-dressed heroines show the possibility of a disruption of sexual difference, which radically challenge patriarchal values. Similarly, Leigh Bullion believes that both these two plays consist of cross-dressed women engaged in homoerotic relationships with men and women,

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which challenge the notion of the heteronormative social standard (1985, p. 4). Carol Thomas Neely sees the concluding marriage in another way. He considers it less a prescriptive imposition of a hierarchical patriarchy than an accommodation to subjects both male and female who negotiate within culture and ideology to attain their desires (2016, p. 295).

In addition, the gender study continues to receive significant critical attention. Barbara Hodgdon considers that the effect that boy actors playing women cross-dressing as men offers up a possibility of flexible sex-gender identities, confounding the body's truth (2004, p. 179). Phyllis Rackin (2003) examines gender in relation to plot in these plays. He suggests that dramatic representations of cross-dressed characters reproduce the instable sex-gender system in Shakespeare's time, putting the gender of the characters in flux to complicate the dramatic action. Carol Thomas Neely suggests that with cross-dressed heroines, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* play out different relationships of eroticism and gender (2016, p. 294).

This paper associates crossdressing with gender stereotypes, and examines how it helps put into circulation the notions of masculinity and femininity within the two plays, thereby blending the culturally assigned gender roles through the disguised heroines.

### **From Passive Resignation to Subjective Freedom**

Both Rosalind and Viola are typical sufferers before they put on men's clothes. *As You Like It* begins with Rosalind dejectedly remembering her banished father and her consequent loss of preeminent social place. She suffers as companion to her uncle the usurper's daughter Celia. Despite being held in deep affection by her sister Celia, Rosalind is still like half a prisoner in the palace, where she maintains "her smoothness,/Her very silence, and her patience" (I.iii.80-82). She is a melancholy sufferer at court who has to resign herself to be "object in submission and adoration" (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 291), while Celia tends to be her protector because of greater resources. After banished by her uncle, Rosalind decides to dress up as a man named Ganymede in doublet and hose. Viola in *Twelfth Night* has survived the shipwreck in which her brother is believed to have perished. Landing on the coast of Illyria, she is alone and without protection in a foreign country. Her hope to enter into the service of the Countess Olivia is dashed because Olivia "hath abjured the company/And sight of men" (I.ii.40-41). Therefore, Viola disguises herself as Cesario and takes service as page with the Duke of Illyria.

The initial reason they dress up as men is for self-defense. Before setting for the Forest of Arden, Rosalind considers "what danger will it be to us,/Maids as we are, to travel forth so far?/Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold" (I.iii.114-116). Then she decides to suit herself like a man, a precaution against sexual assault. Similarly, as a woman in an unknown country, Viola knows that she is put in a precarious situation, and she is more likely to find employment as a male. Since power is in the hands of men in both of these plays, there is more opportunity and more safety for a woman even if she is only pretending to be a man.

Whether the heroines don male disguise for self-protection or plot advancement, crossdressing facilitates their shifts in roles and allows them to give play to their subjectivity. In answer to Valentine's words about the duke's favor to her, Viola returns: "You either fear his humor or my negligence, that/you call in question the continuance of his love. Is/he inconstant, sir, in his favors?" (I.iv.5-7) Viola uses such brilliant turn of phrase to learn more about Orsino whom she herself is in love with by eliciting Valentine's opinions. Three days only gain Viola/Cesario Orsino's trust and disclosure of "secret soul" (I.v.15), and she is sent to woo Olivia on behalf of the duke. She is resourceful because she succeeds in what fails Valentine. It is the disguised Viola that

gets closer to Orsino and invokes Olivia who forswears mourning the death of her brother in solitude for seven years, and thus transforms the situation. Refusing to tell Olivia where she comes from, Viola/Cesario claims: "I can say little more than I have studied, and/that question's out of my part" (I.v.176-177). When Olivia accuses her of rudeness, she sharply retorts: "The rudeness that hath appeared in me have I/learned from my entertainment" (I.v.214-215). When Olivia unveils her face, Viola sincerely extols: "Excellently done, if God did all" (I.v.235). When Olivia asks for Viola's opinion about her, she replies: "That you do think you are not what you are" (III.i.146). Then Olivia says: "If I think so, I think the same of you" (III.i.147), and Viola replies with a repartee that makes the truth sound figurative: "Then think you right. I am not what I am" (III.i.148). As Malvolio generalizes, "he speaks very shrewishly" (I.v.159). Her quick-witted answer and constant shifting of tone show that she is intelligent, practical, and resourceful.

As "a rare courtier" (III.i.88), Viola in her disguise delivers the most convincing courtship speech in the play. Asked by Olivia what he would do if he was her lover, Cesario replies that he would set up a cabin at her gate and fix the world's attention on her by repeatedly calling her name. Such a determined wooing scene shows Viola's courage to take the initiative in pursuing love, which is in sharp contrast with Orsino's wooing behavior and the stereotypical norms that command self-restraint on women. In masculine attire, Viola is utterly free from the restrictions imposed by society on women and achieves subjective freedom.

Rosalind possesses almost all the qualities with which we have been familiar in Viola, except that she undergoes a more radical change of role. In the trip to the Forest of Arden, Rosalind, disguising as Ganymede, takes the lead and displays as Celia's protector, while Celia is increasingly subordinated. She is reduced to watching Rosalind's outstanding wit and sportive activity. The doublet and hose also enable Rosalind to act at her own will. She amuses herself, from behind her page's disguise, by making herself Orlando's confidant, and bids him woo her every day in order to test his love by pretending to be his Rosalind. In this scene of disguised wooing, Rosalind is literally radiant with wit and youth, whose conversation with Orlando is full of voluble, laughing grace. Though deeply in love with Orlando, her male guise gives her licence and opportunity to mock the amatory conventions, as she tells Orlando:

Love is merely a madness, and, I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do; and the reason why they are not so punished and cured is that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love too. (III.ii.407-411)

And her such lively intelligence permeates the whole scene. Besides, the cross-dressed Rosalind severely chastises Phebe for mistreating her lover, gaily manipulates Phebe's love for her to throw off her disguise, and arranges the final marriage scene. She is obviously going through a transition from passive resignation to assertive wit.

Crossdressing permits these two heroines not only to subvert their gender identity in appearance, but also to perform their intelligence, creativity and courage, qualities that are conventionally fixed on male. What's more, they are permitted not only to be appreciated for their capability, but also to do things with it. As Simon de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex*, if women are given the opportunity to assert their subjective freedom, they "could display the same lively exuberance, the same curiosity, the same initiative, the same hardihood, as a boy" (1956, p. 285). Such credit endowed to the heroines is worth considering, given the conventional prescriptions in Elizabethan authoritative texts that "women should be silent, chaste, and obedient, that silence is the best eloquence for women, that the woman should learn in silence with all subjection" (qtd. in Magnusson, 2004, p. 169). In this sense, Shakespeare adopts crossdressing in these two plays to disrupt the

settled notions that dictate verbal and behavioral submissiveness of women.

### Fluidity of Gender

Although crossdressing reveals some qualities that deviate from normative gender roles, these features attached to the male clothes do not conceal the heroines' femininity. Repeatedly, Rosalind and Viola play on insides and outsides, insisting that "sexual disguise conceals a female body beneath a male façade" (Hodgdon, 2004, p. 183).

Rosalind has as much tenderness as mirth, her gaiety never diminishes her sensibility. When Rosalind, as Ganymede, enters reading snatches of the verses Orlando has been hanging or carving on the trees, Touchstone proceeds to parody in such lines as: "Sweetest nut hath sourest rind/Such a nut is Rosalind" (III.ii.106-107), a reference to Rosalind's disguise as Ganymede: a sweet inside and a sour rind. Rosalind urges Celia to reveal the identity of the writer of the love-verses, says: "Good my complexion, dost thou think/though I am caparisoned like a man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition" (III.ii.198-200), an assertion that her clothes do not change her nature as a woman. When Orlando has to leave her to attend the Duke at dinner, she becomes lovesick and tells her sister that "I'll tell thee, Aliena, I cannot be out of the sight of Orlando. I'll go find a shadow and sigh till he come" (IV.i.228-230). She even faints when heard about Orlando's wound and saw the blood-stained napkin, and yet has sufficient self-mastery to return to her playfulness, "I pray you tell your brother how well I counterfeited" (IV.iii.177-178). As Anna Jameson suggests, Rosalind "assumes the airs of a saucy page, without throwing off her feminine sweetness" (2008a, p. 52), which undoes conventions and calls into question the possibility of fixed gender roles.

In addition, Rosalind constantly puts into circulation the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Her brag of manhood shows Elizabethan gender roles: "I could find in my heart to disgrace my/man'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.4-7). Doublet and hose, the standard costume for an Elizabethan courtier, are used here to identify manhood, just as petticoat identifies femininity. The whole society has internalized this logic that courage as an attribute is specific to male, while female is weaker. "Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak" (III.ii.253-254), she says to Celia, a mocking use of a stock satirical jibe about women's garrulity, used by Rosalind to justify feminine importunacy, and also comically reminding the audience of the boy who plays her. When Rosalind generalizes about women, "You shall never take her without her answer unless you take her without her tongue (IV.iii.182-183), she gives voice to different stereotypical viewpoints. In her assertion that Phebe could not have written the letter that Silvius delivers to her, "I say she never did invent this letter./This is a man's invention, and his hand" (IV.iii.31-32), Rosalind brings out another stereotype of feminine versus masculine styles, associating a particular script with femininity: "Women's gentle brain/Could not drop forth such giant-rude invention" (IV.iii.36-37). In describing how she once cured a lunatic lover by pretending to be a woman that is "effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles" (III.iii.417-420), Rosalind mocks the stereotypical views of femininity. In Epilogue, Rosalind says what she would do to the audience if she were a woman, completely breaking down the illusion of the female Rosalind and reminding the audience of the multiple possibilities for masculinity and femininity.

Viola is described as "distinctly feminine in her disguise, more so than Rosalind" (Barber, 2008, p. 172). She wears her masculine attire but never at the sacrifice of her dominant feminine nature. Viola is employed as

a messenger from the man she loves to Olivia, who in turn falls in love with the cross-dressed deputy wooer. Viola gets stuck in misery when she realizes in what entanglements she has been involved: “My master loves her dearly,/And I, poor monster, fond as much on him,/And she, mistaken, seems to dote on me” (II.ii.33-35). The amorous triangle burdens her delicate heart and she is full of tender compassion for the lady whom her disguise has led astray as well as herself. Viola reflects on this and calls her disguise a wickedness. She laments on women’s frailty: “How easy is it for the proper false/In women’s waxen hearts to set their forms!/Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we,/For such as we are made of, such we be” (II.ii.29-32). She could do nothing about this problem and only hopes that time could resolve it. In response to Orsino’s generalized opinion of women’s inability to love, the disguised Viola invents the story of a wordless woman, hinting at the nature of her own love for Orsino:

Viola. A blank, my lord. She never told her love, But let concealment, like a worm i’ th’ bud, Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought, And with a green and yellow melancholy She sat like Patience on a monument, Smiling at grief. (II.v.122-127)

Crossdressing enables Viola to give utterance to her love, albeit in a carefully disguised way. However, the love-struck woman in her story follows the contemporary prescriptions of female conduct, which manifests Viola’s modesty in the relationship. Her “playfulness is assumed as part of her disguise as a court page, and is guarded by the strictest delicacy” (Jameson, 2008b, p. 54). When forced into dueling, Viola exclaims in an aside: “Pray God defend me! A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man” (III.iv.314-316). Her inability to duel with Sir Andrew proves her feminine interiority. As Jameson suggests, “a sweet consciousness of her feminine nature is forever breaking through her masquerade” (2008b, p. 55), as Viola replies to Olivia: “And yet by the very/fangs of malice I swear I am not that I play” (I.v.181-182).

The fluidity of gender is also manifested in others’ comments on the fusion of gender attributes in Cesario. Orsino first comments on it: “Diana’s lip/Is not more smooth and rubious, thy small pipe/Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,/And all is semblative a woman’s part” (I.v.34-37). Viola’s “small pipe” identifies her as both boy and woman. Malvolio also notices it, and his description of Viola “in standing water, between boy and man” (I.v.158) suggests the fluctuant status of the adolescent male who was neither one nor the other, reminding the audience of the female character and male disguise, as well as the boy actor, thus illustrating the thematic concern. Moreover, the fluidity of gender is reemphasized at the conclusion of the play when Cesario is revealed as Viola. The twins Viola and Sebastian share “one face, one voice, one habit” (V.i.226). Their similarities make their nominally different genders of no importance. Orsino effortlessly enlarge his favour on Cesario to Viola as he says: “Cesario, come/For so you shall be while you are a man./But when in other habits you are seen,/Orsino’s mistress, and his fancy’s queen” (V.i.408-411). Like the Duke, Olivia easily moves Sebastian into the place formerly held by Cesario since they have the same quality. At the same time, Orsino continues to call Viola Cesario, and she remains in “masculine usurped attire” (V.i.262) and the retrieval of her “maiden weeds” (V.i.267) is deferred, as is her return to the normative gender role.

### Conclusion

Crossdressing in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* is assigned a significant role in characterization and theme. Rosalind and Viola’s moving back and forth from delicate woman to quick-witted boy is to convey that they have qualities of both. Their wit and womanliness are in equal proportions. Crossdressing helps put

gender-typed behaviors and expectations into play and distorts them, and thus invalidates any idea of a fixed masculinity or femininity, which shows, at least, an indifference to the Elizabethan gender conventions, if not breaking them.

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