

Patterns of Crossdressing in Shakespeare's Comedies

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If we judge the position of women in the English Renaissance society by the examples Shakespeare offers us in some of his comedies, we may believe that women were emancipated and admired for their wit, self-confidence and self-reliance. However, some historians and some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents suggest that although there were streams of thought more friendly towards women in the Renaissance and although there were exceptions from the rule, the ideal to which a woman was to aspire was an obedient, modest, chaste, silent and passive creature never forgetting her subordination to men, especially her father and husband. Yet in Shakespeare's comedies we find different heroines and the audience applauded them, even though they were nearly everything a woman should not be—dynamic, active both physically and verbally, assertive, independent.

The characters of Renaissance plays were not intended to offer a realistic picture of the society. A comedy was not a documentary but served as entertainment. Yet even comedies could not go completely against the values ruling the society—it would threaten the generally accepted order and this would disturb the audience as well as the authorities. If there was a serious deviation from the accepted norms, it had to be neutralized or punished. The playwrights were primarily businessmen and wanted to please their audience, not to annoy it. However, the Renaissance was a period of transformation: the authority of the old system was undercut, a new system was not fully established yet, the society was trying to cope with an amalgam of contradictory ideas. Attitudes towards women were also in transition: the traditional hierarchical model in which women lived in submission to a male authority was being challenged by the idea of partnership. It enabled playwrights to choose heroines who were, according to some conduct books and sermons, totally unacceptable. However, the audience seemed to have accepted them with delight, although the majority of men in the audience would probably not have enjoyed having anything similar at home.

Unlike the heroines of Shakespeare's tragedies, the comedy heroines do not bring about destruction or self-destruction by their activity, they act as forces of renewal and harmony. Their motivation for active behaviour differs—some are active for the fun of it, some have no other choice but to defend their life or their rights in the hostile world, some assert their right to be treated like partners or to choose their future husband themselves. The motives are often combined within one character. The strategies of active behaviour are basically four—verbal activity (being a shrew), clever manipulation (may be disguised as sweetness and obedience), open defiance (including elopements) and disguise (especially a specific type of disguise, crossdressing). Once again, more than one of these strategies can be employed by one character.

From the social point of view, crossdressing in the Renaissance had an important aspect: as women were considered inferior to men and had fewer rights, crossdressing presented an important change of status. Both male and female crossdressing was a pretence,

a potential threat to the order of the society. Yet if a woman pretended to be a man, she was, in fact, assuming more rights than she was entitled to, thus threatening the order more dangerously. Apart from several exceptions in the real life, it was only in fiction and carnivalesque festivities that crossdressing was allowed as a temporal escape from everyday reality. Note that in the comedies if a woman is crossdressed, she usually becomes a boy of a lower status (Rosalind, the heiress to the throne, becomes a humble owner of a herd of sheep; the rich heiress Portia becomes a junior, though wise, lawyer; the noblewoman Viola becomes a pageboy). Although generally a crossdressed man was more acceptable than a crossdressed woman, in Shakespeare's comedies we seldom encounter men in women's clothes.

We must not forget that crossdressing was an everyday practice in the Elizabethan theatre even if it was not a part of the plot, as all the female roles were played by boys. In England the public theatre was a domain of men. Some modern critics, e.g. Lisa Jardine (1983), find this aspect very important; Jardine in her analysis recalls the arguments of those who attacked theatre for immorality: not only the Bible forbade men to wear women's clothes (as well as any other pretence), moreover, men in women's clothes and imitating female behaviour could and sometimes did awake a sinful homoerotic passion in the male part of audience. Jardine also stresses the dramatic irony of a boy playing a girl and argues that the playwrights were fully aware of the irony and from time to time drew the audience's attention to it. However, it is clear to us that such reminders of the actor's real sex could not have been very frequent and obvious. Renaissance audience came to watch a story, a boy-actor playing a woman was a stage convention, something to forget. The playwrights could not afford to disturb the story with too many hints at its unreality. They could now and then suggest that there is a real world besides the imaginary one, but such hints had to be carefully measured and placed.

In *As You Like It*, for example, the crossdressing scheme is very complex, as we encounter a boy actor who plays a girl, who pretends to be a boy, who performs in the role of a woman. Moreover, there is a direct reference to the real sex of the actor playing Rosalind towards the end of the epilogue. Rosalind steps out of her role, the male actor has just finished playing a part of a woman and addresses the audience in his own voice announcing what he would do if he were a woman. Nevertheless, it takes place just in the end, the epilogue is a transition between the fictional world and the real one, to which the spectators are about to return. The extra-theatrical reality may be fully realized by the audience before and after the play; during the play the spectators are supposed to cooperate as much as possible with the playwright and the performers by using their imagination, believing the story and feeling with the characters.

In Shakespeare's comedies, there are several female characters who use crossdressing as a strategy to achieve their goals. Besides safety and greater freedom of movement, the masculine attire also offers greater freedom of expression; as Dreher (1986) points out, what may sound aggressive from a proper woman like Katherine or Beatrice seems perfectly natural from someone dressed as a man. Crossdressing appears in one of Shakespeare's first comedies, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* as well as in one of his last plays, *Cymbeline*. However, the focus of this article rests on the plays chronologically placed between these two: *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.

The strategy is clear—the heroines are using crossdressing. Is their motivation and performance similar as well? Rosalind obviously enjoys her freedom and uses it for her own purposes: she escapes from the court, tests her lover's feelings and arranges the final marriage scene. But why did she come to the forest? She was forced to do it, her uncle gave her only two possibilities—to leave the court immediately, or to die. In fact, for a moment Rosalind is so overcome by the news and shocked by her uncle's sudden hostility that it is her cousin

Celia, who has to start planning their escape. Rosalind is only able to join in after a while and plan some practical details, including the idea to dress herself as a boy for greater safety. Once dressed as a boy she starts taking advantage of the physical and verbal freedom the role gives her. When a girl falls in love with her as Ganymede, she is not as unhappy as Viola but seems to enjoy the joke and easily manipulates the girl into a marriage with someone else. Only when her goals are achieved and when *she* decides that the game is over, she becomes Rosalind again. Although she does not manage to solve all the problems of the play (she is not responsible for Oliver's repentance and her uncle's conversion is caused by her actions only indirectly as he meets the holy man when he strives to find her and Celia) she contributes to the healing and playful atmosphere of the forest of Ardenne. She does not actually need Hymen in the end to help her—he is there at her service, rather a best man at the wedding than a *deus ex machina*, to bless the marriages *she* arranged. Yet her relation to the male public sphere is realized primarily through her father and his status, otherwise she remains more or less in the private sphere, the one traditionally thought more suitable for women; she is concerned with love and relationships and does not go far beyond this border.

The Merchant of Venice quantitatively displays more instances of crossdressing than *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. Besides Portia, there is her accomplice Nerissa and, for a moment, Jessica. However, Jessica's crossdressing is only formal, she uses it to defy her father and safely elope with Lorenzo. Everyone knows she is a woman, she does not have to assume male identity as well as clothes. Nerissa's disguise, then, is just imitative she only follows and supports Portia. From the three it is only Portia who can be matched with Rosalind and Viola. Her crossdressing is briefer than theirs, but she perhaps gets further. After her dutiful but rather reluctant compliance with the wishes of her dead father, she is in charge till the end of the play. Her submission to Bassanio is beautifully worded, but seems to be purely formal, because *she* conducts the betrothal and decides when the marriage is to take place, *she* sends Bassanio to Venice, *she* remains the mistress of the house. As for the crossdressing, she plans the strategy and performs her part without hesitation or doubt. Back in her female clothes she carries out the rest of her plan. She leaves the domestic sphere assigned to women and not only enters the public scene, but stands in its centre and triumphs. It is *her* choice to go to Venice, the circumstances do not press her to do it. What is quite obvious is her self-assurance and her fully justified belief that she can solve the problem better than any man in Venice.

Viola is the least active of the three heroines. It is true that she is very optimistic and resourceful, but to a great extent she is steered by the circumstances—her motive for crossdressing is survival or at least safety, she is left alone in a foreign country. Moreover, her brother probably dead, she must support herself and the only possible household where she could find a safe employment is closed for her. She therefore assumes the role of a pageboy to be able to take care of herself in the potentially dangerous house belonging to the unmarried duke while avoiding the dangers the world has in store for a young unprotected woman. She is successful, and yet unhappy in her role. She uses her wit in the service of her master and reluctantly woos Olivia for him. She does not move far from the domestic sphere—she just moves between the two Illyrian households uneasily as she moves between her masculine and feminine identity. The double identity is more a burden than a key to freedom. Moreover, unlike Portia and Rosalind, she has no female friend to share her uneasiness with—only herself and the audience.

Dreher (1986) explores how crossdressing is connected with the concept of androgyny popular in the Renaissance. This concept appeared in alchemy as well as in writing and visual art. One of the key terms of alchemy was *balance*, and androgyny is an expression of a balance between the masculine and the feminine principles. On the physical level it can be perceived in the figures who carry both masculine and feminine features; beautiful boys with

feminine grace and boyishly slender women. The spiritual level of androgyny was even more important than the physical one. The concept of androgyny provides us with an interesting field of analysis in Shakespeare's plays. Crossdressing just further stresses the idea of androgyny by giving it a physical dimension, but most of Shakespeare's comedy heroines are active, dynamic and resourceful, which are the qualities associated rather with masculinity than femininity. At the same time, the masculine features must be and are balanced by the constant reminders of the heroine's femininity. With the crossdressed heroines these reminders are perhaps even more important than with the others, as their masculinity is being continuously confirmed by their clothes.

Portia may be a mistress of a great household, she can undertake a daring journey and solve a difficult legal case, teaching all men and her husband in particular a lesson, but in some respects she remains feminine. She obeys her dead father's wish and lets the casket trial select a husband for her, although she feels frustrated by her inability to choose for herself. She gives, at least formally, herself, her fortune and the rule over Belmont to Bassanio. Then she plans to play a masculine part in a bold and entertaining way—but we never see her do it, she settles down in a calmer mode and instead of a boastful boy we encounter a serious young lawyer. Later she needs a male authority behind her to introduce her as Balthasar at the court in Venice. We are also not quite sure whether Antonio's defence is purely her own work or whether her male cousin Bellario devised the strategy. When Portia solves the case, she leaves the punishment to the male authority again. In the end she returns to her feminine attire—but she remains the mistress of the house and of the situation. However, the last replica of the play is given not to her but to Graziano, although he only confirms and develops what she has just said.

From all the crossdressed Shakespeare's heroines Rosalind enjoys the man's part best. She remains in the centre at the end of the play, she is given the epilogue (an uncommon practice in the Elizabethan drama to have a woman speaking the epilogue) and in its first lines draws attention to her femininity. Like Portia, she may stay in charge till the end partly because her femininity is stressed visually by her return to a feminine dress. Throughout the play she is active and resourceful, but in the moments of crisis she proves her feminine sensitivity—it takes her some time to recover her wits and join Celia in planning their flight, she faints when she sees blood on Orlando's scarf. The name Ganymede refers back to someone who is perhaps not feminine, but definitely less than masculine. To test and at the same time enjoy Orlando's love, Rosalind-Ganymede decides to play a woman's part, but Ganymede's Rosalind points back more to Ganymede's masculinity and masculine prejudices about women than to Rosalind's femininity. Talking to Orlando, she moves between the parts of Ganymede, Ganymede pretending to be Rosalind and the real Rosalind. Left alone with Celia, all masculinity and self-assurance are gone and we see and hear just a young girl in love. When she decides that she had enough fun playing a boy, that the danger is no longer urgent and that it is time to get married, she resumes her female garments and after a brief reunion with her father she gives herself to Orlando. To make sure everything runs smoothly, she relies on a male (and divine) authority to bless the marriages.

Viola seems to be the most feminine of the three. She crossdresses purely for safety and does not enjoy the part at all, she sees herself as a deformity. In her scruples and her femininity apparent even in the male disguise she is different from Portia and Rosalind. She needs a male authority of the sea-captain to be able to start her role. Moreover, her first plan is not to pretend to be a man but a eunuch, someone less masculine than a man. She obediently woos another woman for her beloved. She is alone with her secret, there is no female character with whom she could be Viola and not Cesario. Unlike Rosalind, she does not find amusing the fact that Olivia has fallen in love with her; she is troubled, because it further complicates her already difficult relationship with Orsino. Moreover, she genuinely pities

Olivia, because she knows too well what an unrequited love feels like, she has the feminine quality of empathy. Her femininity is further confirmed by her reluctance to fight in a duel. The final blow to her masculine role is her reunion with Sebastian—the twins represent the concept of androgyny in between themselves, as soon as Sebastian is back and will balance her femininity with his masculinity, Viola can become fully feminine again. Because her masculine attire throughout the play confirms rather than undermines her femininity, she can stay in it in the end of the play. The absence of her woman's garments has also an important function in the play: it postpones the happy ending and the play is concluded in a darker atmosphere of Malvolio's threat and the melancholy mood of Feste's final song.

The ending of comedies usually brings the fictitious world back to balance, Shakespeare's heroines often leave their active days behind and gladly accept the authority of the present men. Today's audience is often left to wonder whether the husbands the comedy heroines get serve as a reward or as a punishment for their activity. Bassanio can easily be read as a fortune-hunter who irresponsibly spends vast amounts of borrowed money and is primarily interested in Portia because she is so rich. Orsino is presented as a self-absorbed egoist who cannot take "no" as an answer. Orlando seems to lack negative qualities, he is a virtuous youth who can wrestle well, but otherwise he is nothing to write home about and we cannot help feeling that the lively and intelligent Rosalind perhaps deserves something better than that. Nevertheless, all the three heroines get what they wanted and there has not been a better alternative for them. And at least Portia and Rosalind are not silenced towards the end as many other comedy heroines are, to conform to the Renaissance ideal of a silent and obedient wife.

Works Cited

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