

Shakespeare's Women under Mask: A Feminist Study

S. Blessie

V.O.C. College of Education
Tuticorin- 628008

The use of disguise is an old technique used in literature even from the time of Homer. It has been prominently used by Elizabethans during Renaissance. One among such Elizabethans, who has skilfully handled this technique in his plays, is William Shakespeare. Of his thirty-seven surviving plays, about one fourth involves cross-dressing. Shakespeare makes the disguises of his characters for several reasons. All the disguises, Shakespeare used, do not have the aim of hiding gender identity. Many of his male characters guise themselves as some other male characters. For example, The Duke comes in the guise of a Friar in *Measure for Measure*. Only two of his male characters like clown Falstaff come in women robes only to entertain the audience. But the method of disguise becomes more reasonable and vital when his heroines like Rosalind, Portia, Viola, Imogen and other women characters hide their gender identity by disguising. This paper is to view their disguises with feminist spectacles and to question the necessity of their male masks.

Shakespeare's heroines in his comedies are strong, witty, self-confident, self-reliant personalities equal to men and sometimes more powerful than men. Hidden behind the guise, women had more rights and freedom. Julia is a young noblewoman from Verona in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In the play, she disguises herself as a boy and follows her boyfriend, Proteus, to Milan, where she catches him trying to hook up with another

woman. In order to travel safely, she disguises herself as a boy, "Sebastian". In *Cymbeline*, posthumous plots to kill his wife Imogen, but the designated killer reveals the plot to Imogen and advises her to hide; she escapes to the woods dressed as a man. This shows that women ought to be in male mask just to protect themselves from any kinds of dangers.

There is a multiple disguise in the comedy *The Merchant of Venice*. Three women disguise themselves as men. However, not all three disguises are the same. In the story the first woman in disguise is Jessica. She is a daughter of Shylock, a Jew, and she wants to escape from home as she falls in love with a Christian man. She guises herself as a torchbearer or a page, however, in essence, she could escape in her common dress since her father is away from home

Moreover, in contrast with another person in disguise, Portia, Jessica is not such a strong personality. Her aim is only to escape and be with her lover. When she flees from home, she feels ashamed of wearing male clothes and tells it to her beloved man. She does not like the guise at all.

Here, catch this casket: it is
worth the pains,

I am glad't is night, you do
not look on me,

For I am much asham'd of
my exchange;

Love is blind, and lovers
cannot see

The pretty follies that
themselves commit;
For if they could, Cupid
himself would blush
To see me thus transformed
to a boy. (II.vi.198. 33-9)

Portia's disguise is much more important for the plot than that of Jessica's. Portia decides to disguise herself as a wise lawyer Balthasar and her maid as a servant to be allowed to enter the court of justice and save her husband's fellow's life. "Portia is also the only one of the Shakespeare's heroines to adopt and relinquish male disguise not under the pressure of events from outside... but by her own choice of time and circumstances." (Shapiro 100)

The reason why Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves in male clothes is more pragmatic. Judging from the absence of any women in the trial scene it appears that they were not even let into the courtroom, let alone to be allowed to embody such a crucial role. As opposed to Jessica, however, these two ladies seem genuinely enthusiastic about their transformation. In her speech, Portia joyfully enumerates a couple of the "thousand raw tricks of [all those] bragging Jacks" (*The Merchant of Venice* III, iv, 77) whose behaviour she is to imitate. Portia, after all, does not have any reason to be ashamed of her disguise. As a wealthy lady, she has to be accustomed to masques and celebrations and as a strong, secured female character she does not need to feel the necessity to be ashamed in any form she takes on. It appears, however, that Portia enjoys the power her disguise provides her with a bit too much. She toys with Shylock in the trial scene, pushes him ever further, and prevents him from killing Antonio only at the very last moment, not caring for how cruel she is towards Bassanio and Antonio himself.

She wins the "battle" and Shylock loses. Portia and Nerissa in their disguises are given rings as an expression of

gratitude by their husbands. In the last scene, after coming home, they confess to their disguise during the ring episode which is again full of wit and audacity in which Portia surpasses the men in the story. "Portia invents a role that will give her authority over the men in the play." (Shapiro 100)

In *As You Like It* the reason of disguise is bit different than in *The Merchant of Venice*. In the previous comedy Portia disguises herself on her own will to help her beloved husband's friend. Here, in *As You Like It*, the heroine Rosalind disguises herself as a man to save her own life and to escape unrecognized from the dominion of Duke Frederick. The Duke took her under his protection and gave her home after he had exiled her father from his home. Although Frederick likes her as much as his daughter, as the time passes, he starts to be suspicious and accuses her of betrayal. She has to escape and Frederick's daughter Celia joins her since they are like sisters. To be successful in their plan, they decide to disguise themselves. Rosalind disguises herself as a young man Ganymede, because her body constitution is tall and reminds of that of man's while Celia dresses herself as a poor girl called Aliena. However, the decision to flee in disguise was the idea of Celia, not Rosalind.

No? Hath not? Rosalind
lacks then the love

Which teacheth thee that
thou and I am one.

Shall we be sunder'd? Shall
we part, sweet girl?

No: let my father seek
another heir.

Therefore, devise with me
how we may fly,

Whither to go, and what to
bear with us:

And do not seek to take
your change upon you,

To bear your griefs yourself,
and leave me out;

For, by this heaven, now at
sorrows pale,
Say what thou canst, I'll go
along with thee. (I.iii. 219. 93-101)

The reaction of Rosalind shows that she is no such a strong woman, although as Hyland comments, “. . . as Ganymede, Rosalind does dominate the play.” (*Shakespeare's Heroines* 33)

Why, whither shall we go?
Alas, what danger will it be
to us?
Maids as we are, to travel
forth so far!

Beauty provoketh thieves
sooner than gold. (I. iii. 219, 103-6)
Celia then promptly offers the way how they can manage their disguises and hide their women's beauty.

I'll put myself in poor and
mean attire,
and with a kind of umber
smirch my face.
The like do you: so shall we
pass along,
And never stir assailants. (I.
iii. 219. 108-11)

What confirms Hyland's theory is the fact that after Rosalind hears about the possibility to disguise herself, she chooses an appearance of a young boy and begins to be stronger and more active than Celia. (33) As in the most of Shakespeare's comedies where women disguised themselves as men, it is apparent in this story how challenging it was for female heroines to dress as men. What a kind of change in their characters was caused by that simple disguise! Being strong, free and self-confident, not under the strict rules of the society and without repressing their feminine intelligence, they are able to behave bravely and at the same level as men. Rosalind's increasing self-confidence and dominance within her sudden vision of her cross-gender change is well seen in her

reaction and in the rest of the story from that moment.

Were it not better,
Because that I am more than
common tall,
That I did suit me all points
like a man?
A gallant curtle-axe upon
my thigh,
A boar-spear in my hand;
and in my heart
Lie there what hidden
woman's fear there will. . . (I. iii.
219. 102-7)

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare also finds in disguise a solution for his heroine. Disguise appears after Viola's survival of the shipwreck. She finds herself in a strange land called Illyria which is ruled by Orsino. She does not know anything about her twin, Sebastian. She consults her captain about a way to hide her personality so as to move freely. He agrees to help her by disguising her as a page in Orsino's court. After a short time of her disguise, she turns to be the best attendant to Orsino, who reveals all his heart secrets especially his rejected love to a beautiful lady, Olivia. Viola, unlike Rosalind of *As You Like It* and Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*, fails to hide her feminine features completely. Thus, Orsino notices her hidden beauty, but she tries to behave according to her disguised role. Her disguise is so different because her guise is external only. So in her asides, she returns to her actual womanhood to declare her love to her master. She is like all the disguised heroines in finding love through the disguise. The disguise of Viola hints that many people in life wear permanent or ephemeral masks due to circumstantial difficulties identical to Viola's. Shakespeare creates every circumstance to make Viola Cesario's guise convincing, this is supported by his “unique force”.

The first ensuing aftermath of this disguise, perhaps resembles that of real

life, is her dear love to her master who chooses her to be the love messenger to Olivia. This is the cruel side of hiding her true character and she cannot tell anyone about her love, then she should carry the love letter of her lover to another woman. She should shoulder this difficult job to explain the suffering and the painful sting of Orison's love. Viola-Cesario asks Olivia to be merciful on her master. In spite of her deep love, she conveys the message faithfully. She benefits a lot from her guise when she gains a golden opportunity to know closely the romantic personality of Orisno. This allows her to gain true love. The important part of disguise is that it grants her with a chance to speak on behalf of women, perhaps she alludes to the social chains that force women to select and find true love only in disguise. She defends female sincerity by inventing a story about her sister who dies for her love. She states that: "Too well what love women to men own. In faith, they are as true of heart as we. My father had a daughter loved a man. As it might be perhaps, we're I a woman, I should your lordship" (p.57)

In feminist eyes, Viola is also a heroine. She represents strong women, and how women also can survive while maintaining a sweet and gentle nature, the kind of nature that should be instilled in all people. Shakespeare gave Viola an ability to adapt to situations quickly without missing a step. She is witty, sweet and clever. From a feminist stand point, her will to explore the unexplored is one of the

strongest in all of Shakespeare's characters.

Women do women's work and men do men's work, for example. This was necessary for primitive society to survive but stigmas of these role requirements linger still today. Women are still socially required to look pretty, wear make-up, smell nice, be virtuous, motherly, sisterly, feminine show little to no masculine traits, and the all-important nurturer. Shakespeare used Portia and Viola's characters to liberate women from one certain set of characteristic traits by broadening their human characteristic traits through their male disguises. In a sense then, Rosalind, Portia and Viola are liberated from the confines of the appropriate. Rosalind, Portia and Viola are aware of the social posturing of men. Each is very careful to hide her true self.

Shakespeare created strong female characters to show female stigmas of his time. Shakespeare should be considered one of the founders of feminist views. He believed in equality among the sexes. His liberation of women through disguises gives much insight to the atmosphere of the times regarding gender and women's roles in society. Women are still fighting these same society imposed characteristics and the only solution is to get as close to androgyny as a society without giving up our own identities. We must eliminate gender bias and focus as one whole unit what Shakespeare wanted.

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