



## Liminality and Gender Fluidity in Shakespearian Dramaturgy: A Postmodern Perspective

Sarah Syed Kazmi\*  
Esha tir Raaziah\*\*

### Abstract

*The article seeks to compare and contrast the critical canon based on transvestism with deliberations upon androgyny. The postmodern approach explores the liminal spaces in Shakespearian dramaturgy where rigid, hide-bound compartmentalization of dichotomies in gender fuse with a fluid, liminal space of hybrid interface. The earlier readings of misogyny and chauvinism into Shakespearian heroines' assumption of the male identity open vistas in the liminal space where these characters are conferred a privilege to navigate spaces beyond conventional fixities. By subjecting gender binaries to artistic rendition and critical canon, Shakespearian dramas offer insight into the socio-political debate around gender roles and responsibilities. By breaking free with the status quo, Shakespeare's female protagonists emerge more empowered and emancipated in their deft handling of crisis where cross-dressing only serves as an expedient measure to earn them the requisite mobility to the echelons of power. On the other hand, it is on account of their intellectual acumen that poised on a critical juncture they are able to trigger a denouement of the dramatic complication.*

**Keywords:** Liminality, Fluidity, Postmodernism, Transvestism

### Introduction

Recent enactments of Shakespeare's plays offer a liminal space where the rigid bifurcations between gender and other socially institutionalized dichotomies become ephemeral. The coteremporary readings of Shakespeare's plays point to a space where gender conformity is substituted

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\* Dr. Sarah Syed Kazmi is Head of the English Program at the DHA Suffa University, Karachi. Email: sarah.kazmi@dsu.edu.pk.

\*\* Ms. Esha tir Raaziah is M.Phil Clinical Psychology at the Bahria University, Karachi. Email: eesharaaziah@gmail.com.

by hybridity and a pronounced ambivalence by way of which the audience makes meaning of the public roles and responsibilities attributed to each gender. It is interesting to note that behind the literary finesse of Shakespeare his free-flowing dramatic verse and iambic pentameters the dramatic interludes are laden with pithy philosophies and universal truism embodied by characters choosing to grow out of preconceived notions. However, gender roles assume a fluidity, pitted against the conventional fixities of Elizabethan times where women were barred from taking part in stage enactments.

This brings us to a crucial juncture in Shakespearian dramaturgy where male actors played the role of female characters. While in the midst of climactic moments in drama, these very female characters played by 'men' had to impersonate the 'male' role as directed by the plot. This double pretension interferes with the psychic radar of the male actors donning the female role and, paradoxically, in the midst of a self-reflexive, dramatic illusion, go back to 'feign' a male character despite being conferred a socially accepted male gender role.

Men playing women on public arenas dates as far back as the Greek theatre and is not merely common to the Elizabethan Age. The temporal epoch goes on to highlighting how theatre becomes a chronicle of the ethos of the age. Women were denied suffrage and even performance in theatres. Thus, the female impersonation of the masculine role within the folds of the text coincides with the male actors' impersonation of female identity onstage. This double-entendre draws parallels between the aesthetic and political means of 'representation' in Shakespearian dramaturgy. It has been argued that Shakespeare's actors were predominantly fair skinned out of historical necessity and is evocative of colonial anxieties prevalent in the society.

Thus, the conspicuous absence of women (since they were played by men), people of colour, and people of Irish or African descent also assumes colonial ascendancy.<sup>1</sup> In Marxist terms, the phenomenon of 'visibility' or 'absence' onstage, for that matter, can be further translated into a resolute power motive driven by economic dominance to the latent absence of such power in the case of the 'absent' presence of female personages or marginalized communities. Thus, female visibility is undermined by men playing them,

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<sup>1</sup> Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, (London: Routledge, 2000), i.

which also raises the question of 'misrepresentation' of the female persona by men. Virginia Woolf however shifts her attention from the 'image' to the 'axis' of vision, critically decoding the role of 'male gaze' as a pivot of vision. In *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, Shakespeare contrives a quipping dialogical exchange between Julia and Lucetta, her attendant:

Lucetta: What fashion, madam shall I make your breeches?

Julia: That fits as well as 'Tell me, good my lord,  
What compass will you wear your farthingale?'

Why even what fashion thou best likest, Lucetta.

Lucetta: You must needs have them with a codpiece,  
madam.

Julia: Out, out, Lucetta! that would be ill-favour'd.

Lucetta: A round hose, madam, now's not worth a pin,  
Unless you have a codpiece to stick pins on.

Julia: Lucetta, as thou lovest me, let me have

What thou thinkest meet and is most mannerly.

But tell me, wench, how will the world repute me

For undertaking so unstaide a journey?

I fear me, it will make me scandalized.<sup>2</sup>

Julia's maid Lucetta suggests that Julia should don the 'codpiece' conditioned with masculinity and virility to pursue Proteus. Julia however is apprehensive thinking of a woman bearing semblance with male anatomy and authority as being both against the norms of propriety and downright shameful. Lucetta despite being a maid emerges as a more powerful woman than Julia, dismissing her qualms on the breach of social strictures on feminine code of conduct and dressing: "Then never dream on infamy, but go."<sup>3</sup> Lucetta considers cross-dressing as a strategy of power acquisition, while Julia is shown as rooted in conventional wisdom, voicing concerns regarding the risk of growing out of traditional gender roles.

The dramaturgy of Shakespearian plays has also undergone a volte-face. Male transvestism was commonplace in the Elizabethan age as female characters were already played by male actors, and, in this case, even Lucetta and Julia were enacted by an all-male actors' team at the famous

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<sup>2</sup> *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, available at [http://shakespeare.mit.edu/two\\_gentlemen/full.html](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/two_gentlemen/full.html).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Act 2. 7. 64.

Globe Theatre. Yet, women's cross-gender performance has always been a subject of stringent criticism.

In 2003, Phyllida Lloyd directed *The Taming of the Shrew* and added a 'prologue' to the play to critique the negative stereotyping of gender roles:

The first time this house hosted Shakespeare's *Shrew*  
All the parts were played by men, Weird, yes, but true  
And still today you'll find our acting brothers  
Portraying sisters, daughters, and their mothers.  
Vice-versa's very rare. But in this odd piece  
The girls do get the chance to wear the codpiece  
Our new production, crammed with female talents,  
May help in some way to redress the balance.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly the locus of the plays is the Elizabethan age. The female monarch's reign was reinforced by her decision to remain unmarried. Yet, cross-dressing in Shakespeare's female characters, such as Rosalind, Viola, and Portia has been carefully studied by critics. For females impersonating as male counterparts offers the characters the necessary leeway to cross rigid, hide-bound gender demarcations. It acts as a corridor to their repressed longings. In contradistinction to this, some critics consider feigning a 'male' appearance as a tool to reinstate gender stereotypes while some consider it a remarkably free-flowing, liminal tendency on the part of the characters. Thus, even in Hamlet's inability to avenge his father's murder, the critics read an oedipal complex bringing out an uncanny awareness of the unexpressed, hitherto, repressed longings of the unconscious mind.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes the plot is propelled further as a result of a character's decision to assume masculine identity. Viola's act of impersonating male identity to obtain a position with the Duke of Orsino following the shipwreck galvanizes the plot in the direction of extending her 'identity'. Textual evidence does not substantiate 'fear' as the driving force behind her assumption of male identity, for she is young and an eligible bachelor in an alien land. On the other hand, her wilful assumption of the masculine role in the shape of

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Klett, *Cross-gender Shakespeare and English Identity: Wearing the Codpiece* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn E. Brown, *Shakespeare and Psychoanalytic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 4.

'Cesario' is not challenged by the 'fear' of being 'unmasked' either. She plays the role with a staunch conviction. The distance between 'being' and 'becoming' is traversed in an affirmative space of self-actualization within the plot of the drama to the extent that Olivia falls in love with the masculine persona donned by Viola.

The drama unravels the complexities of human schemata in which Viola is delineated as being locked in an unsavoury position. Viola develops a strong penchant for Orsino while playing Cesario, proclaiming; "Though that nature with a beauteous wall / Doth oft close in pollution",<sup>6</sup> whereas Cesario has been asked by Orsino to woo Olivia on his behalf. Strangely enough, Olivia falls for Cesario, who has feigned a manly appearance. The juxtaposition of Viola and Orsino is ironic as Orsino, on learning that Cesario is a 'woman', states: "Give me your hand," followed by, "and let me see thee in thy women's weeds"<sup>7</sup>. This shows that the revelation that it is 'Viola' disguised as 'Cesario' does not seem to create large ripples, and Shakespeare keeps it open-ended and unresolved allowing the readers to reread the subtextual implications.

In the age of Renaissance cross-dressing was deemed as 'mimicry' of a 'high' social order. For example, imitating the social high-ups by donning their apparel was considered a breach of the social order.<sup>8</sup> Thus, there were two kinds of prevalent transvestism; one that violated gender bifurcation and the other executed a breach of social hierarchy. The performative nature of gender roles is thus bracketed with machinations of power and representation. Viola's masquerade transcends above gender stereotypes where her role emanates an androgynous appeal, permeating gender boundaries. In the same vein, Malvolio, Sir Toby, Orsino, and Olivia, challenge the social order. Olivia spurns the advances of her social counterpart, Orsino, while Sir Toby, an aristocrat, dances attention on Olivia's maid, Maria, instead of wooing a woman from amongst the nobility. Malvolio, Olivia's steward, likewise fancies marrying her. He is further inveigled into believing that Olivia also requites his feelings by way of the 'forged' letter. In fact, the comedy of errors generated by the forged letter,

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<sup>6</sup> Act 1. Scene 2,50. *The Twelfth Night*, visit at [http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth\\_night/full.html](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/full.html).

<sup>7</sup> Act 5, Scene 1, 285. Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Dymna Callaghan, *Shakespeare without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 32.

and Malvolio, following it in letter and spirit, supplies the ensuing humour and comic effect. The dramaturgy highlights class transvestism and gender impersonation. Although gender impersonation is entrenched as a means of maintaining decorum and decree of gender stereotypes of the age, the class transvestism is considered with a pinch of salt and Malvolio who harbours the fantasies of marrying Olivia and becoming 'Count Malvolio'<sup>9</sup> is ridiculed. Thus, Malvolio is not merely a minor character introduced to further the subplot. He morphs into a character challenging the accepted social order.

The dynamics of exclusion of the female body from the *Twelfth Night* can be contrasted against impersonation of a female voice in the enactments of Shakespearian plays. The missing female voice is just as much troubling as the enactment of roles by white men. The racial impersonation in *Othello* also opens new avenues of inquiry as to why 'white' men played roles in the Elizabethan Age. For a naïve spectator, *Othello*, delineated as a black man by a white man, brings out the racial and gender differentiation, for the spectator is convinced that Desdemona, a white woman, is being killed by a black moor.<sup>10</sup>

From the vantage point of the audience-spectators, knowledge about the actors' gender disguised in their respective roles would further make it difficult to suspend disbelief and furnish rapt attention to the storyline. This conscious awareness about the gender of the actors would interfere with the receptivity of the role being watched. This can be treated in contradistinction to the cross-gender female performances of Shakespearian plays during the onset of the new millennia.

The 2003 performances by an all-female cast in Shakespeare's dramas opened a host of possibilities where cross-dressing was not a mere extension of sartorial imagination but afforded an autonomy to the actor-cum-character; an ordinary man playing the king, a male playing the woman, and within the folds of the plot, the woman playing the man. This intricate pattern of cross-dressing demonstrates that it is the actor's imagination about the character that helps him immerse into the role without being restricted by established gender roles. Since Shakespearian characters have assumed the stature of 'classics', male characters being played by female actresses challenged the audiences conditioning with male characters by

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<sup>9</sup> II.V.30

<sup>10</sup> Dymna Callaghan, *Shakespeare without Women: Representing Gender*, 12.

defamiliarizing them with the perception of kings being enacted by men.<sup>11</sup> The role of imagination in supplanting the stereotypes with their aesthetic counterparts is further precipitated when the audience's schemata is decentered from the patriarchal axis of vision. Therefore, as Prospero lays down in his famous speech, the distinctions melt and, in a bout of meta-fictional admission, Prospero proclaims how actors are 'spirits' which are more 'elemental' and defy rigid gendered bifurcations:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision...<sup>12</sup>

If we draw a chronological order, we come across four female protagonists i.e., Rosalind, Viola, Julia, and Portia as young women brimming with energy and verve; mobile and decision makers of their marital choices. These protagonists assume the male identity with aesthetic finesse. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594), Julia disguises herself as a lad to pursue her amorous ventures. Since Proteus has been sent to Milan by his father on academic excursion, Julia disguises herself as Sebastian, 'servant' of Proteus. On finding Proteus wooing Sylvia, the Duke of Milan's daughter, Julia disguised as Sebastian reveals that Proteus' beloved awaits his return home. On a climactic moment, Sylvia backs out and Proteus marries Julia, enamoured by her charm.

Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) feigns the masculine identity to allow herself the mobility to travel to Venice and enter the courtroom. Portia communes her deep-seated emotions to Nerissa as to why she resorts to disguise.<sup>13</sup>

Portia: They shall, Nerissa; but in such a habit,  
That they shall think we are accomplished  
With that we lack. I'll hold thee any wager,  
When we are both accoutred like young men,  
I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Klett, *Cross-gender Shakespeare and English Identity*, 140.

<sup>12</sup> From *The Tempest*, Act IV Scene i.

<sup>13</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, available at [https://shakespeare.folger.edu/downloads/pdf/the-merchant-of-venice\\_PDF\\_FolgerShakespeare.pdf](https://shakespeare.folger.edu/downloads/pdf/the-merchant-of-venice_PDF_FolgerShakespeare.pdf).

And wear my dagger with the braver grace,  
And speak between the change of man and boy  
With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps  
Into a manly stride...<sup>14</sup>

Portia is a dynamic woman who assumes the male identity with ease; whereas, on the other hand, her allegiance to the 'ring' given to her by Bassanio is symbolic of her acceptance of moral precepts prevalent in Elizabethan age. Marriage was a conventional affirmation during the Elizabethan age which entrenched women's subservience. Women were denied legal rights, which reduced them to the level of sub-humans. Portia, however, transcends this stereotypical notion by gifting a ring to Bassanio. Her gift-giving is an act of winning over authority, especially because the gift is too precious to be reciprocated in kind. Thus, Portia's role generates an ambivalence, delineating power acquisition through disguise and gift-giving at one level, and also highlighting the limitations on that power circumscribed by gender roles.

Portia, by virtue of her sheer ingenuity and wit, is able to salvage Antonio from losing a pound of flesh and lands Shylock in misery. Shylock incurs a defeat by losing his wealth to the state as well as Antonio. Hence cross-dressing is merely a means of entering the top echelons of the court; whereas it is by virtue of her genius that she is able to rescue Antonio and defeat Shylock. In implementing her skills in ratiocination, she utilizes the legal register, indicating her immediate conformity to the conventions of patriarchal values. Her knowledge is, therefore, at once 'borrowed' from the patriarchal domain.

A parallel can be drawn between Shakespeare's Portia and the young dame, daughter of Midas, on the economic front. The financial exchange between fathers and daughters in *The Merchant of Venice* suggests that women have been commodified and their destinies tied up by 'inanimate metal' showcasing their innate 'mettle'.

Viola in the *Twelfth Night* (1600) impersonates an identity traversing above gender bifurcations, donning a 'eunuch's garb' to win over Duke Orsino's love. In *As You Like It* (1600), Rosalind takes on the garb of a 'shepherd' to

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<sup>14</sup> Act 3, Scene 4, *Ibid.*



escape from the clutches of her uncle, Duke Frederick, who has banished her father, Duke Senior. Her latent motive is also to acquire Orlando's love. The actor-character equation does not emerge as a dichotomous, mutually exclusive relation, hence cross-dressing is supplanted as a natural order. Rosalind is exceptionally tall and in a self-reflexive empathy, adduces it as a plausible reason to feign male appearance, further reinstated by equipping herself with a 'curtle-axe', 'boar-spear', and a 'martial'...:<sup>15</sup>

Rosalind: 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,  
We'll have a swashing and a martial outside—  
As many other mannish cowards have  
That do outface it with their semblances.<sup>16</sup>

Her feminine gentleness is evident when Oliver shows her the blood-stained handkerchief of Orlando and she almost loses her equipoise. Oliver bolsters her courage making a passing remark about her gender in the interrogative: "Be of good cheer, youth. You a man? You lack a heart"<sup>17</sup> to which Rosalind's answer is "I should have been a woman by right"<sup>18</sup>. This can be contrasted to Rosalind's virtues of head and heart: "her smoothness, her very silence and her patience"<sup>19</sup>, adduced as the pretext behind her very banishment on the part of her uncle, Duke Frederick. He eyes her daughter Celia to occupy the coveted position that Rosalind holds and emerge 'more bright' and 'more virtuous'. Thus, Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines are not merely hankering after the privileges and prerogatives that come with assuming the male identity. They are women of exceptional genius, enjoy credible reputation, and conduct their roles as 'males' with the same characteristic sagacity which defines their intellect as females.

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<sup>15</sup> [https://shakespeare.folger.edu/downloads/pdf/as-you-like-it\\_PDF\\_FolgerShakespeare.pdf](https://shakespeare.folger.edu/downloads/pdf/as-you-like-it_PDF_FolgerShakespeare.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Act I, Scene iii, *As You Like It*, Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Act IV, Scene iii. 166.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Act IV, Scene iii. 178.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Act I, Scene iii, 80.

In a later romantic comedy *Cymbeline* (1611), Imogen assumes the male identity in order to search for Posthumus Leonatus. Disguise becomes a complex thematic concern where both recognition and Anagnorisis recur and assume the proportions of a motif. Although *Anagnorisis*, an Aristotelian term, also implies recognition, there is a distinction as to what level of 'recognition' results. Aristotle, however, used this term to signify three facets of recognition vis-à-vis disguised identities resulting from cross-dressing. At one level, recognition in terms of attaining the necessary 'knowledge' to further action. Secondly, as a result of this knowledge or first level recognition, the relationship between characters undergoes change. The hitherto disguised becomes 'recognised' and the one discovering the inherent identity becomes the 'recogniser'. The relationship might experience an increase in love or even animosity due to the changed equation. Thirdly, the fate of the characters also changes with change in the status of recognition and leads to 'peripeteia' or the dramatic reversal in the play. For example, in *Cymbeline* the king eventually recognises his daughter by hearing her voice<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, Portia's disguise as Balthazar, Viola as Cesario, Rosalind as Ganymede, and Julia as Sebastian complicate the mode of recognition until the play reaches a denouement. As a lawyer Portia conducts the legal proceedings adroitly, detached from her social standing as a descendant of an affluent father, a woman, and a wife. As soon as Bassanio says:

Antonio, I am married to a wife  
Which is as dear to me as life itself;  
But life itself, my wife, and all the world  
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.  
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all  
Here to this devil, to deliver you.<sup>21</sup>

This dramatic interlude is only followed by Portia's panache assertion: "Your wife would give you little thanks for that, / If she were by, to hear you make the offer".<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Portia does not appear to be a prototype of a conventional spouse. She sets the notion aright as soon as she gets a chance.

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<sup>20</sup> Available at [https://shakespeare.folger.edu/downloads/pdf/cymbeline\\_PDF\\_Folger\\_Shakespeare.pdf](https://shakespeare.folger.edu/downloads/pdf/cymbeline_PDF_Folger_Shakespeare.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV. Scene I, 280-85.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Act IV. Scene i.286-87.

This contrivance generating from the plot itself emboldens the fact that women disguise themselves not as an expression of weakness but social expediency which gives them an opportunity to showcase their innate qualities of head and heart par excellence.