

Portia as a Cross-Dressed Heroine

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ABSTRACT

This paper mainly deals with 'Cross-dressing' giving emphasis on Shakespeare's Portia. Though it was prevailing during Shakespeare's time in theatre as dramatic technique fulfilling dramatist's purposes, he used this technique within the play in order to bring out the gender bias, sexuality and politics, role of women as well as her capabilities and strengths in the society which was dominated by men. In a very subtle way the playwright Shakespeare here criticizes man's ego and his hypocrisy. Putting the play in the context of the Renaissance Theatre and feminism and gender politics it has been studied here that the cross dressing is the relationship between gender roles and clothes. For Portia passes herself off easily enough as a man and, in the process, acquires a certain freedom to move around, give advice, and associate as an equal among other men. In this Shakespeare has proved in this play that the line drawn between men and women is fluidic. By introducing the technique cross-dressing, he has shed new light on the concepts like gender and sexuality. This paper focuses on how sociological, cultural, political aspects which influence individual's life.

KEYWORDS: Class, Cross-dressing, Deconstruction, Elizabethan-Period, Feminism Gender, Politics, Psychology, Renaissance, Romantic-comedy, Sex, Sexuality, Society, Theatre.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept Cross-Dressing is being used as a new critical tool in feminist and gender studies in the Postmodern arena ; but it was seen in mythologies of different cultures and nations as well. It was, during Renaissance Period in England, used as a dramatic technique as female roles were performed by the young male actors. Society where in writers like Shakespeare were writing plays was of patriarchal; women folks were strictly prohibited to be taking part in the theatre activities and roles like Juliet, Portia and Rosalind were done by the disguised young male actors. To study Elizabethan theatre, society and patriarchal domination the term 'Cross-dressing' has come to be a subject in the literary and cultural studies. Interestingly it could also be traced in history and mythologies as well.

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In Greek mythology...

In punishment for his murder of Iphitus, Heracles/Hercules was given to Omphale as a slave. Many variants of this story say that she not only compelled him to do women's work, but compelled him to dress as a woman while her slave.

Achilles was dressed in women's clothing by his mother Thetis at the court of Lycomedes to hide him from Odysseus who wanted him to join the Trojan War.

In the cult of Aphroditus, worshipers cross-dressed, men wore women's clothing and women dressed in men's clothing with false beards.

In Hindu mythology...

In one of the India's classical epics *Mahabharata* during Pandavas Ajnathavaas ("exile") period of one year imposed upon the Pandavas, in which they had to keep their identities secret to avoid detection. So each one of the Pandavas was seen in different identity. Arjuna the third pandava was himself crossdressed as Brihannala (transgender) and became a dance teacher.

Many writers in their works used cross-dressing for various purposes.

- In the myth of the Trojan War, Achilles' mother Thetis wanted to keep him from joining the Greek forces (and thus dying in battle as was prophesied), so she dresses him in women's clothes and hides him among a cloister of women. When the Greek envoy arrives to fetch him for battle, Odysseus is suspicious of Achilles' absence and concocts a scheme to reveal the deception: he offers gifts to all the women, including among them a sword and shield. Then he has an alarm sounded, and when Achilles instinctively grabs the weapons to defend himself, the ruse is revealed and he must join the Greek army and fight at Troy.
- In Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Bradamante, being a knight, wears full-plate armor; similarly, Britomart wears full-plate armor in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Intentionally or not, this disguises them as men, and they are taken as such by other characters. In *Orlando Furioso*, Fiordespinga falls in love with Bradamante; her brother Ricciardetto disguises himself as his sister, dressing as a woman, persuades Fiordespinga that he is Bradamante, magically changed into a man to make their love possible, and in his female attire is able to conduct a love affair with her.
- In *Arcadia*, Sir Philip Sidney has one of the heroes, Pyrocles, disguise himself as an Amazon called Zelmane in order to approach his beloved Philoclea.
- Lord Byron in his *Don Juan*, had Don Juan disguised as a woman in a harem.
- Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* disguises himself as a girl at one point in the novel, not very successfully.

So in light of the references shown above it can easily be understood what cross-dressing is. As The American Dictionary of English Language refers, cross dressing is to the act of wearing clothing and other accoutrements commonly associated with the opposite sex within a particular society. It has been used for purposes of disguise, comfort, and as a literary trope in modern times and throughout history.

Nearly every human society throughout history has expected distinctions to be made between males and females by the style, color, or type of clothing they are expected to wear, and likewise most societies have had a set of social norms, customs, mannerisms, views, guidelines, or even laws, defining what type of clothing is appropriate for each gender. It does not, however, necessarily indicate transgender identity since a person who cross-dresses does not always identify as being of a gender other than their chosen gender. The term "cross-dressing" denotes an action or a behavior without attributing or implying any specific causes for that manner and attitude.

After Derrida proposed his theory 'Deconstructionism', lot of changes have taken place in the way of reading and thinking. In literature very new perception, observation, understanding, analysis, interpretation evolved with different varieties of critical tools. So naturally Shakespeare's plays also have got new approach. If plays like '*The Tempest*' have been studied as a postcolonial text; *The Taming of the Shrew* has been studied

in the light of feminism. And further, his romantic comedies expect to be studied from the perspectives of feminism, gender and sexuality.

2. MAIN DISCUSSION

It is known that during Elizabethan era female role was performed by male. This evidently shows that the Elizabethan society was very clearly dominated by male. Female had very lesser significance. As a writer Shakespeare had observed gender differences and he had shown in his plays. In this way he seemed to be a critical insider of his society. Specifically in Romantic comedies like (of course they are called cross-dressing plays as well) *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night (What You Will)* he had made substantial use of cross-dressing for female characters who take on masculine clothing to carry out actions difficult for women.

Portia is a leading character in the play as she is the center of the play taking a very important role. She is the heroine of the play. She is the lady of Belmont. Of course she is rich as well since her father left property. She is cultured, refined, young and pretty. S.A Brooks calls her, 'queen of Beauty'. The fame of her beauty has spread far and wide, and a number of lovers are eager to marry her. As Bassanio puts it:

*For the four blow in from every coast,
Renowned suitors, and sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colcho's strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.*(1.1. 168-172)

Portia is said to be one of the intellectual heroines of Shakespeare. Her intellect is seen in her wit, which is an expression of her wisdom. When she is introduced in Act I, Scene II of the play, she comments on the various suitors that have already arrived and her comments in each case are witty and to the point. When Morocco has made his choice, and taken to leave, that she sums him up in the following words:

*A gentle riddance, - Draw the curtains, - go,
Let all of his complexion choose me so.*(2.7. 78-79)

In the court of Venice, Antonio has tried on the complaint of Shylock. It is a sensational case; the court is full to capacity and the sympathies of all are with Antonio. Portia (disguised as male lawyer) takes up the case to defend Antonio. To convince him she gives wonderful lesson on mercy.

*The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,*

*Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway.
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself,
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
 That in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
 To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
 Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
 Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there. (4.1. 180-201)*

Shylock is very adamant, cruel, and inflexible and turns down all appeals to mercy. He even rejects to call her a lawyer. But very immediately she reverses and shocks him. He is offered to have only his pound of flesh as mentioned in the bond without shedding even a drop of blood. Later he comes to realize his inhumanity, mercilessness and cruelty.

It is obvious that during the Renaissance period women were not equal to men. So female roles were performed by young and handsome men. Naturally it would reflect upon its literature as well. Very effectively using these techniques, Shakespeare had shown the gender inequality prevailing during his time. In the play when her beloved's friend is in almost in dangerous situation, she has come for his rescue. Here she has proven her intelligence and witty by defending Antonio's case. May be those days women were not even allowed inside the public institutions like court. She with her assistant being disguised as a male lawyer came prepared and won the case by showing her immense knowledge on mercy and law. She not only taught the lesson of mercy to Shylock but to the whole world. It can be said that there is no difference as far as gender is considered, for it is just an imposed one. She argued as any learned lawyer would do. Cross-dressing in this play is used to subtly criticize the society and the mindset of the patriarchal notions.

When Portia is first introduced in the play, it is assumed that she is in the traditional dress of women as suitors come and attempt to win her hand. Portia is not in control of her fate because she must abide by her deceased father's wishes in regards to who Portia will marry. She assumes the dutiful, subordinate role of women at the time, because even though she assists Bassanio in the choosing of the right casket she does not break the rules of her father's will and is still subject to those rules.

Similarly, Portia's assumption of a masculine identity allows her the opportunity to be on equal footing with her new husband and gives her the freedom to voice against the restricting role of women. That clearly

shows that how the then Renaissance society had been gender biased. Bassanio does not place claim on her hand in marriage, but asks if she will accept him as a husband and Portia, in the submissive role that she plays in the beginning of the play, says to him that she is “an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticed” and that she “commits itself to yours to be directed as from her lord, her governor, and her king. With these expressions she gives Bassanio control of herself as well as her entire household and fortune. However, it is important to note that while this passage does emphasize much on Portia as a strong person. In giving Bassanio a ring, she says that “when you part from....let it be my vantage to exclaim on you meaning that if he loses the ring in any way he forfeits any claim he has to her, thus taking Portia out of her role of submission and placing her in a superior position to Bassanio. She throughout the play proves herself that gender is not something which is an innate, but, instead, one must have it by having various roles in the society. Despite the biological differences, both men and women are equal and unique with their characters. Anybody can have any role in the society. Biological characters cannot be parameter for analyzing one’s personality. Portia, by having the role of a male lawyer, has blurred the line drawn between men and women.

Portia’s choice of cross-dressing proves useful to her in proving Bassanio’s faith to her and testing his vow to never remove the ring he gave her. As a clerk, Portia is successful in saving Antonio from death and grateful Bassanio promises the clerk anything that “he” wishes. Taking the opportunity to test her husband’s loyalty, she asks for her own ring and Bassanio eventually agrees to give it. Portia’s test, and Bassanio’s subsequent failing of the test, gives Portia an uncomfortable level of control over Bassanio as she is now able to dissolve their marriage if she wishes. Instead, she practices the mercy that she suggested to Shylock and the ending of the play is merry in a way typical of Shakespeare’s comedies.

Shakespeare’s opinions on the role of women are not always certain because his strong female characters do eventually end up in the submissive and restraining role of marriage. But at the very least Shakespeare poses important questions on what it means to be a male or female, what the limitations of each are, and how those limitations are regulated by society.

The Merchant of Venice is a work in which gender roles are questioned and crossed in order to make a statement about women and how they are subject to the rule of men. Cross dressing allows Portia to exercise power that had previously been denied to her. It also provides her with an opportunity to prove her love to Bassanio and, accidentally, to test Bassanio’s love for her. While the play ends with Portia resuming her submissive role as a dutiful woman, now as a wife instead of a daughter, the effect that Portia has in influencing major events is not forgotten. In assuming the identity of a man, she did what none of the other men of the play could do: she saved Antonio’s life.

3. CONCLUSION

Cross-dressing in Shakespeare’s comedies makes the heroines’ gender identity ambiguous: they are both men and women, owning both femininity and masculinity, thus cross-dressing helps to deconstruct Renaissance gender stereotypes, the binary opposition of gender, and eventually, patriarchy. Shakespeare’s audience was well aware that female roles were taken by boys; indeed the plays include a number of knowing jokes about the practice. The Elizabethan England society’s gender stereotypes required women to wear women’s clothes, to be submissive, passive, silent, closed off, and immured within home. However, in his plays, Shakespeare dresses his heroines with men’s clothes, indirectly encroaching on the privileges of men, and deconstructs the gender

stereotypes. To conclude cross-dressing helps women characters to travel alone, to enter the men's world, and to act as men, instead of being confined at home having enjoyed the freedom as men do.

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