CROSS-DRESSING AND BORDER CROSSING IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S AS YOU LIKE IT: THE PARADOX OF FEMALE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

In William Shakespeare's As You Like It (1623/1994), cross-dressing is used not only as a theatrical tool to fill in a gap resulting from female physical absence on the Elizabethan stage; it also serves as a symbolic act that opens new perspectives and raises questions about socio-cultural issues related to gender roles and gender performance. This research follows the development of the cross-dressed Rosalind, a female character played by a man and disguised as a man. The study equally considers the question of female agency and power through the female character's act of disguise. It attempts to show whether Rosalind manages or fails to acquire a self-sufficient identity through her physical transvestism. The scrutiny of cross-dressing as a metatheatrical device enhances the problematization of the matter of gender performance in the play.

Keywords: *cross-dressing – identity – femininity – resilience – submissiveness – metatheatre.*

Rather than being simply a theatrical technique used as a result of women's exclusion from the Elizabethan stage, cross-dressing has deeper meanings related to the psychology and ideology of the crossdresser and his/her socio-cultural context. In William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1623/1994), Rosalind is a crossdresser who traverses boundaries and destabilizes convention. Michael Shapiro provides a comprehensive account of female and male cross-dressing social history in his book *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (1994). He states that the immediate aim of female disguise under male apparel is to conceal identity while having illicit relationships (p. 16). Some women used male disguise to meet a lover, whereas others found the male dressing a way to remain unrecognized when "they moved about in the city without being detected" (p. 18). Females using cross-dressing bothered even the authorities of the period, as David Cressey (1996) explains in his article "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England"

> King James himself was so disturbed by female accessorizing with masculine attire that in 1620 he ordered the clergy "to inveigh vehemently and bitterly in their sermons against the insolency of our women, and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn, and some of the stilettos or poniards, and such other trinkets of like mom (Cressey, 1996, p. 444).

Although cross-dressing was associated with sexual misconduct, "some women passed as men to find work and so to escape from poverty" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 19), finding cross-dressing an alternative to prostitution.

Lower-class women adopted female "covert" cross-dressing to achieve material gains. Shapiro calls this "pragmatic cross-dressing disguise" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 16) as opposed to "symbolic cross-dressing" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 20), relating to women who were economically secure and who tried to challenge the conventional gender roles established during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Wearing male swords and feathered hats, high-class women did not seek economic ends; they instead attempted to voice their overt confrontation of symbolic transgression toward ascertaining moral and spiritual equality and a better social position. Cross-dressing was thus a woman's way to overcome gender boundaries and reach social and economic success. At the same time, it was regarded by an Elizabethan patriarchal society as an abhorred sexually promiscuous behaviour.

The Elizabethan audience would not be surprised to see boys performing women's roles on stage. The audience would be astonished only to see a genuine woman impersonating a female character. Shapiro records the case of English traveller Thomas Coryate who was stunned at the sight of an actress on stage for the first time while he was in Venice in 1608:

> Here I observed certain things that I never saw before, for I saw women act, a thing that I never saw before [...] and they performed it with as good as a grace, action, gesture, and what so ever convenient for a player, as ever I saw any masculine actor. (qtd. in Shapiro, 1999, p. 42).

Michael Shapiro justifies this attitude by explaining that acting was an all-male activity in ancient Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe (Shapiro, 1999, p. 31), which implies that no female actresses appeared on the English boards, and all female parts were played by boys.

The Elizabethan stage was conventionally and religiously prohibited for women. Male-gendered and male-dominated as it was, there were no possibilities for females to perform on stage. "English Puritans, like religious authorities elsewhere in Europe, surely would have objected to the use of actresses" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 31). The religious attitude, which led to the exclusion of females on stage, originated from the fear

of female sexuality. However, no fear rose from the boy actors performing female roles, and their skill in performing the female character was not an important question as long as they provided a way to avoid female presence and body performance. David Cressey, in his article "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England." (1996), believes that cross-dressing holds a problematic nature since it challenges the classical patriarchal paradigms. At the same time, Cressey accentuates the presence of sexual ambivalence and travesty as inherent to cross-dressing. He also highlights that "two types of cross-dressing have recently caught the attention of literary scholars" (Cressey, 1996, p. 440) and shows that cross-dressing is of a double dynamic:

> First, the women of Renaissance England who began adopting masculine attire, and second, the boys and young men who took female parts, and dressed in female costume, in the course of dramatic performances on stage. The first is represented as a challenge to patriarchal values, a bold assault on oppressive cultural boundaries; the second as marking the sexual ambivalence, androgyny, and muted eroticism linking actors, dramatists, and playgoers in a sexually charged subculture of transgression (p. 440).

The audience felt at ease with male actors performing female roles. For instance, in John Lyly's *Galthea* (1587/2008), the two heroines were performed by male actors. Ben Jonson's *Eupicoene* (1609/2005) was not an exception, for male actors used to perform female roles. Audiences were familiar with William Shakespeare's Cleopatra, played by boy actors, to the point that "the English theatregoers seem to have accepted boys in women's parts as the norm of theatrical representation" (Paglia, 1991, p. 41). This attitude was reinforced by choice of actors since "a boy had to be facially feminine enough to pass as a woman" (Paglia, 1991, p. 205). The role of Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* was also performed by a male actor. Thus, it was the convention of the Elizabethan stage to obscure physical female presence and replace it with boy actors on the stage.

In this respect, Valerie Traub (1992) investigates the phenomenon of boy actors performing women's parts in Shakespearean comedies to conclude that "the boy actor is merely a theatrical convention in the lineage of medieval drama. It is also a political convention specifically necessitated by the determination to keep women, excepting Elizabeth I, off any public stage or platform" (Traub, 1992, p. 117). The examples above testify to the Elizabethan culture's construction upon patriarchy and the exclusion of female sexual identity.

Dealing with a boy who plays a female role is not a highly complex issue if one relates it to the Elizabethan social context. However, playing a male role by a female character who feigns masculinity and becomes the subject of the love of another female character renders the theatrical performance intricate and problematic.[1] In her book, *Androgyny, Mimesis and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage*, Phylis Rackin (1987) believes that "in plays where the heroines dressed as boys, gender became doubly problematic, the unstable product of role-playing and costume, not only in the theatrical representation but also within the fiction presented onstage" (Rackin, 1987, p. 113).

On a stage of maleness, Rosalind's disguise[2]. In Shakespeare's *As You Like, It* is a cultural and theatrical necessity. However, so sophisticated as it may be, Rosalind's disguise is very functional in the play as it

[1] In *As you Like It* (1623), Phebe falls in love with Ganymede, the disguised Rosalind played by a male actor. 3.2

[2] Several Shakespearean female characters are known for their cross-dressing disguise. In *The Twelfth Night* (1602), Viola is an aristocratic lady who is shipwrecked and washed up on Illyria, where she chooses to dress like a male, calls herself Cesario, and makes her way in the world. In *The Merchant of Venice* (1605), Portia is dressed as a man

turns the dramatic performance into a rebellious venture to revise and subvert an already established social reality and grant identity and voice to the marginalized female. Although the Elizabethan audience might be familiar with boy actors impersonating female roles, Shapiro (1999) believes that "the known physical presence of male performers must have registered at some level in the spectator's consciousness and thus raised questions about the stability of established gender roles" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 37). In this vein, it is likely to hypothesize that specific audiences perceive cross-dressing by boy actors as significantly subversive.

Disguising under a male's apparel and transforming from a Rosalind into a Ganymede, the female character acquires self-confidence and independence. "Being a woman, she thrives on not being a woman" (Dusinberre, 1996, p. 250). With a man's apparel, Rosalind becomes more empowered and responsible and even assumes the role of the protector of Celia, who is also in disguise yet as a female. In "Patterns of Crossdressing in Shakespeare's Comedies," Lucie Johnová (2004) states:

> Of all the cross-dressed 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 draws attention to her femininity in its first lines (Johnová, 2004, p. 68).

Rosalind becomes more fluent, and her language becomes rational and wiser. Through her male appearance, she can even advise Orlando on how he should behave with Rosalind while being able to contain her emotional fragility and hide her feelings of love.

Subversion of gender stereotypes is then made manifest through the male disguise. Rosalind's powerful discourse and advice to Orlando turn her into a self-sufficient female capable of controlling "the affairs of men rather than being herself subject to male domination" (Reynolds, 1988, p. 81). Thus, disguise is a source of female power in *As You Like It*. Through male apparel, Rosalind acquires a voice and identity.

Indeed, in disguise, Rosalind's voice is dominant over the other characters like Celia, Touchstone, Jacques, Phebe and even the beloved Orlando. She controls and manipulates the dialogue with sound, rational, and wise remarks. The disguise gives a voice to the gendered voiceless Elizabethan woman. From this perspective, one may conclude that Shakespeare believed in the assumption that gender is not an inevitable reality that is biologically determined; instead, it is performed as feminist theorist Judith Butler[3] and other modern thinkers always declare. John Riviere, for instance, refers to femininity as a performance or a "masquerade". Virginia Woolf (2019), in her cross-dressing cross-gender fantasy *Orlando*, also argues that "it is clothes that wear us and not we them. We make them take the mould of our arm or breasts, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (Woolf, 2019, p. 132). Rosalind's cross-dressing gives her heart a gendered masculine harshness, reshapes her brain with stereotypical masculine rationality, and offers her tongue a loud voice. In this case, the clothes that wear and make the bodies and the bodies that wear and make the clothes are engaged in a collaborative performance that creates a gender identity, for "bodies and clothes endlessly redefine each other to forge, adapt, adopt and deny varieties of selfhood" (Munns & Richards, 1999, p. 9). Through disguise in male apparel, female gender roles disappear to be replaced by a new identity as far as the female character is concerned.

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and shows a sense of power, freedom and cleverness. Shakespeare's history plays present female characters, like Joan in Part I of *Henry VI* (1592) and Margaret in Part III, who are dressed in masculine battle attire.

[3] See Butler, J. (1990). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Great Britain: Routledge.

In her chapter entitled "Imitation and Gender Subordination", published in *The New Social Theory Reader* by Alexander, J. C., & Seidman, S. (2008), Judith Butler conceptualizes gender and identity by relating them to performance. She refutes the essentialist theory of gender.[4], believing that "if gender is drag, an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core" (Alexander & Seidman, 2008, p. 27). Accordingly, gender becomes naturalized and constructed as an inner psychic or biological necessity. Birden (2005) criticizes the belief that sex should always be reflected in gender, suggesting that this thought should be fully inverted and displaced. “It may be that the very categories of sex, of sexual identity, of gender are produced or maintained in the effects of this compulsory performance, effects that are disingenuously renamed as causes, origins” (Birden, 2005, p. 66). Butler calls for letting gender identity fully appear in any performance, no matter how disruptive and promising it may be. Rosalind's cross-dressing is, in this respect, a performance through which she acquires a powerful identity regardless of her biological identity as a female.

Cross-gender disguise in the play is equally meant as a challenge and revision of patriarchal and social institutions like marriage and religion. Rosalind's disguise empowers her so that she can stand to patriarchal authority. Peter Reynolds (1998) says in this respect that “Rosalind does not acknowledge any parental authority to seek to govern her behaviour” (Reynolds, 1998, p. 41). The disguised woman character was close to her banished father in the Forest of Arden. Nevertheless, she deliberately announces herself known to him only when she finds it convenient. Celia's escape with Rosalind and their disguise is another instance of the female challenge against the Law of the Father embodied in Duke Frederick:

> Celia: Now go we in the content to liberty
> And not to banishment. (1.3. 144-145).

Although she is in love with Orlando, the disguised Rosalind does not reveal her true identity to him. Reynolds argues that she instead has tamed him and made him conform to her social level (Reynolds, 1998, p. 85). Correspondingly, every encounter between the disguised Rosalind and Orlando develops verbal intercourse in which Rosalind is a dominant partner. By so doing, Rosalind challenges patriarchal standards that place femininity on the margins of discourse and establishes herself as an utterly independent identity that can exceptionally have a powerful and manipulating voice even through disguise. Respectively, Rosalind "is changed by her male dress only because it allows her to express desires and delights which society suppresses" (Dusinberre, 1996, p. 233).

The disguised Rosalind defies patriarchal conventions and rebels against social institutions like marriage and religion. Her subversion of conventional gender roles prevails throughout the play to reach the institution of marriage. Though a typically sacred institution during the Elizabethan era, marriage is ironically approached during Rosalind's disguise. Marriage is mocked by the presence of a fake and a female priest: "Pray thee marry us" (V.1); Orlando and Ganymede, disguised as Rosalind, address Aliena, disguised as Celia. The conventional attitude is voiced by Celia, who highly rejects such a disguised ceremony: "I cannot say the words" (VI.1). The disguised Rosalind mocks the marriage ceremony; she asks Celia to be a priest to marry Orlando and Ganymede. Thus, the disguised Rosalind subverts marriage and religion; she

[4] The essentialist theory claims that the biological construction of a male or a female defines gender identity.

transforms them from highly sacred institutions to common earthly rites readily performed by everyone, everywhere and at any time.

During the mock marriage ceremony scene, gender disguise highlights a very problematic issue as far as Shakespeare's plays are concerned, namely the question of homosexuality and homoeroticism. David Cressey stresses the idea of homoeroticism and cross-dressing in Early Modern England in his article "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England" (1996). Cressey believes that cross-dressing is not only a theatrical convention; it is also related to the subversive dimension related to sexuality; he, in that vein, insists that

> Female transvestism on the streets of London, male transvestism on the stage, and vituperative attacks on cross-dressing by Protestant reformers are among the symptoms that indicate that the subversive or transgressive potential of this practice could be and was recuperated in a number of ways. Dressing boy actors for female roles, for example, was not simply an unremarkable convention within Renaissance dramatic practice, as some scholars have suggested, but rather a scandalous source of homoerotic attraction arousing deep-seated fears of an unstable and monstrous and feminized self (Cressey, 1996, p. 438).

In *As You Like It*, Ganymede, the male, disguised as Rosalind, is performed by a male actor. So, for an audience conscious of this "theatrical vibrancy" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 69), the mock marriage of Orlando and Ganymede is a marriage between odds since it is a same-sex relationship through which the institution of marriage is implicitly mocked. Valerie Traub investigates the "circulation of homoerotic desire" in the play, pointing out that it ranges from "Phebe's desire for the feminine in Rosalind/ Ganymede to Rosalind/Ganymede's desire to be the masculine object of Phebe's desire" (Traub, 1992, p. 126). Ganymede, as disguised Rosalind, is indeed represented as rejoicing in the role of the impenetrable male:

> Rosalind: Down on your knees,
> And thank heaven, fasting for a good man's love;
> For I must tell you friendly in your ears,
> Sell when you can, you are not for all markets. (3.5.62-65)

Another instance of "homoerotic desire" is established through Orlando's deliberate engagement in a love game with a young shepherd. During the mock marriage scene, Orlando willingly treats Ganymede as his beloved. Taking the lead in such a homoerotic relationship and being a disguised female, Rosalind not only reverses gender roles but also "disrupts alleged homoerotic roles" (Traub, 1992, p. 127). The norm underlying such a relationship is the coexistence of two partners of the same sex. The disguised Rosalind/Orlando relationship does not reflect the norm since the younger is "a more receptive partner in an erotic exchange" (p. 127). This is also not the case with Rosalind taking the lead in such a relationship. Traub states, "the boy actor works, in specific Shakespearean comedies, as the basis upon which homoeroticism can be safely explored" (Traub, 1992, p. 118). The dual identity of Rosalind/Ganymede being played by a male actor and Orlando's desire toward her/him "prevents the stable reinstitution of heterosexuality, upon which the marriage plot depends" (p. 123). Not only that, this dual identity which oscillates between maleness and femaleness, implicitly raises questions about homoeroticism which, though not uttered in words, audiences find themselves compelled to consider.

The homoerotic feature of Rosalind's disguise is similarly made manifest through her deliberate choice of Ganymede as a name. "Of all the male names available to her, she chooses that of the young lover of Zeus, familiar to educated Britons through Greek and Latin literature and European paintings" (Traub, 1992, p.

124). Even to less educated audiences, the name is telling as it is a colloquial word used to refer to the male object of male love (Traub, 1992, p. 125). Phebe's attraction to Ganymede is based on qualities which are more feminine than masculine:

> Phebe: It is a pretty youth – not very pretty
> […]
> He'll make a proper man. The best thing in him
> Is his complexion.
> He is not very tall; yet for his years, he is tall.
> His leg is but so so; and yet it is well.
> There was a pretty redness in his lip,
> A little riper and lustier red
> Than that mix'd in his cheek; it was just the difference
> Betwixt the constant red and mingled damask. (3.5.124 -132)

Through cross-gender disguise, the theme of homoeroticism and homosexuality is subtly evoked. At the same time, it would be too challenging to deal with such a theme in Elizabethan society, wasn't it for "Rosalind's adoption of masculine attire" (Traub, 1992, p. 126). Subversive and pervert, the homoerotic relationships Phebe/Ganymede and Orlando/Ganymede are an implicit way of female empowerment as in both relationships, the disguised Rosalind has the power lead.

Therefore, through male disguise, Rosalind's character and sexual identity become very complex. It is no surprise that the modern reader finds it difficult to approach the female character of Rosalind, played by a male actor and disguised as a male Ganymede. Shapiro says in this respect that "the Elizabethan boy actor, this third layer, presented a technical problem. To distinguish the female character from her assumed male disguise or his male identity, the boy actor had to establish the heroine's femininity with unmistakable clarity" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 49). Though complex and emblematic, Rosalind's disguised sexual identity subverts the cultural and social norms of convention and establishes a new sexual identity for the Elizabethan female.

In this respect, David M. Bergeron (1995), in his study of Shakespeare's characters, points out that "Shakespeare's women are liberated from the stereotypes to which they have too often been confined […]. Shakespeare in his drama questions received ideas about women" (Bergeron, 1995, pp. 137-38). He also inquires: "What does it mean if some of Shakespeare's female characters are strong and powerful when the historical record seems to say that women at the time were expected to be meek and docile?" (Bergeron, 1995, p. 17). Shakespeare's affirmative depiction of women is, to some critics, modern, for they consider him one of the earliest feminist writers who managed to "project feminism and a liberal attitude towards […] women" (Jajja, 2013, p. 34). These views about Shakespeare's female characters may seem interesting. However, fundamental engendered questions are to be raised, like: Does cross-gender disguise give the female character, Rosalind, a self-sufficient identity, though temporarily? Does Rosalind succeed in subverting and challenging the masculine-biased convention?

To these questions, a definite "No" is the answer, for, despite his seemingly optimistic portrayal of women characters, Shakespeare's attitude is part of a typical "feminist sympathy […] found in the plays of almost all of his contemporaries" (Dusinberre, 1996, p. 5) which nonetheless remains governed by the Law of the Father. Indeed, the power of disguise Rosalind enjoyed remains limited and illusory. Even her power and sexual liberty are an imaginary state created in Rosalind's mind "to alleviate her anxieties about being subordinated to a lover or husband" (Neely, 2000, p. 293). Rosalind was not empowered in the social scene;

she instead exerted her verbal power in the “Forest of Arden”. The forest is acoustically and syntactically reminiscent of the symbolically idealized Gardens of Eden. The play belongs to the pastoral tradition of the Renaissance when the savage forests provide a romantic, safe and pure life hardly available in the city or the court. “The pastoral tends to be an idealization of shepherd life, and by so being, creates an image of a peaceful and uncorrupted existence” (Cuddon, 1999, p. 664). Since the Middle Ages, the pastoral was “an image or metaphor of the Garden of Eden” (Cuddon, 1999, p. 647). In *As You Like It*, the pastoral is the realm where different forces meet and coexist on a symbolic level.

At the end of the play, the order is resumed by a return to the court and the city. Rosalind has to relinquish the disguise that has empowered her in the pastoral Forest of Arden to turn again into a vulnerable woman who conforms to re-established gender norms, which are part of the resumed dramatic order in the resolution of the plot. In her *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1991), Camille Paglia sees in Shakespeare a sort of "segregation by genre which diverts homosexuality into lyric and keeps it out of drama" (Paglia, 1991, p. 206). The powerful female identity is not an exception, too, for it is segregated by being symbolically idealized in a temporary virtual state. The male strength Rosalind acquired during disguise was also not utterly genuine, for, under the pretended masculine harshness and rationality, there exists a female who is submissive, vulnerable and fearful:

> Rosalind: I could find in my heart to disgrace my man’s apparel
> And to cry like a woman. (2.4.4-5)
> The disguised Rosalind was also so feminine that she “swooned” at the sight of blood (4.3.167). Her feminine weakness immediately surfaced when she saw Orlando’s wound, which made Oliver complain about her male identity:
> Oliver: Be of good cheer, youth: You a man?
> You lack a man’s heart. (4.3.173-74)

As powerful as she had been, Rosalind willingly falls into the gendered norms. Her return to female identity and her marriage to Orlando underscore her deliberate step toward the sphere of gendered womanhood. Through marriage, she becomes a wife, an angel at home, and a birth giver conforming to Elizabethan social conventions where “the extreme of the masculine side is the ability to kill: that of the feminine role, the ability to give birth" (Bergeron, 1995, p. 139). So, through marriage, "the voluble Ganymede […] delighting the verbal combat" (Reynolds, 1998, p. 92) vanishes to be substituted by the mild submissive Rosalind. This viewpoint can readily be summarized in Valerie Traub's view that any attempt to subvert gender in the play "is contained by the comic point from which mandates marriage in the final act" (Traub, 1992, p. 19). The power Rosalind enjoys during her disguise, and the subversion of gender roles are "a temporary, inversionary rite of misrule" (Traub, 1992, p. 123) intentionally eliminated by the comedic closure.

Thus, the happy ending of Shakespeare’s comedy is manifested through marriage and the readjustment of the patriarchal order and the conventional gender norms. Marriage, in this sense, has a reconciliatory effect since it brings Rosalind back to her female identity and established gender roles. Rosalind's unveiling of the disguise toward the end of the play turns her into a docile female who is socially and culturally able to be loved and consumed by the male Orlando. Consequently, although Rosalind and Celia appear as “fatherless” figures who openly rebel against the Law of the Father (Bergeron, 1995, p. 145) and seek to establish a female identity, they still wilfully surrender to the womanhood paradigm. Towards the end of the play, through their marriage, they highlight the stereotype of the “obedient, modest, chaste, silent and passive creature never forgetting her subordination to men, especially her father and husband” (Johnová, 2004, p. 65).

Seen from a technical perspective, cross-dressing in *As You Like It* is metatheatrical par excellence. Defining metatheatre, Lionel Abel (2019) ascertains, in *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, that

> Metatheatre is a convenient name for the quality or force in a play which challenges theatre's claim to be simply realistic — to be nothing but a mirror in which we view the actions and sufferings of characters like ourselves, suspending our disbelief in their reality. Metatheatre begins by sharpening our awareness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art; it may end by making us aware of life's uncanny likeness to art or illusion. By calling attention to the strangeness, artificiality, illusoriness, or arbitrariness — in short, the theatricality — of the life we live, it marks those frames and boundaries that conventional dramatic realism would hide. (Abel, 2019, p. 133)

The reflexive dimension of theatre permeates the play, and the metatheatrical in *As You Like It* goes hand in hand with its pastoral, fictional, and artificial atmosphere. The fictive dimension of role-playing and cross-dressing is a token of metatheatre. The forest becomes a stage where actors become spectators and characters become actors. The Duke Senior and Jacques comment on the play-acting dimension of life and the world as a vast stage in act two, scene seven

> DUKE SENIOR
> Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy.
> This wide and universal theater
> Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
> Wherein we play in.
> JACQUES
> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players.
> They have their exits and their entrances (2.7.142-148).

The above quotation not only focuses on the world as a stage; it also designates "men and women" as players with roles, costumes, and stage entrances and exits. William Shakespeare insists on specifying that his actors are both males and females. His purpose is to remind audiences and readers that cross-dressing is a theatrical transformation process allowing the shift from a masculine state to a feminine one and vice versa. Metatheatre is, thus, combined with cross-dressing. In the play, the two concepts intertwine to problematize gender representation. On the one hand, the technique of the *mise en abyme* enhances the idea of theatre commenting on itself. On the other, the costume-within-the-role and the role-within-the-role mix masculinity with femininity; they also make emasculate males and empower females via a dress and role-shifting process. In that vein, Kent Talbot van den Berg (1975) corroborates the empowering dimension of cross-dressing to the female Rosalind. He affirms that

> Rosalind's disguise allows her to control, by consciously indulging in game, both the impulse to resist the claims of love and the contrary impulse to yield too quickly-which Phebe cannot control at all once her excessively rigid defences are broken down from an unexpected quarter by Ganymede (Van den Berg, 1975, p. 890).

Van den Berg also believes that Rosalind chooses to disguise primarily to protect herself from sexual attacks and to "maintain that cautious approach to love that Celia had earlier recommended" (Van den Berg, 1975, p. 889). Cross-dressing becomes a theatrical strategy that empowers femininity and enables it to gain control. Disguise is also a token of transmigration, allowing the theatrical shift from femininity to

masculinity[5]. By the end of the play, the male actor playing the role of Rosalind, in a metatheatrical instance, breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses the audience, denying his feminine role

> It is not the fashion to see the lady the
> epilogue, but it is no more unhandsome than to see
> the lord the prologue (epilogue, 1-3).
> The boy actor goes even further by reflecting on his female role and expressing his desire to kiss the audience were he a real female:
> If I were a woman, I
> would kiss as many of you as had beards that
> pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths
> that I defied not (epilogue, 17-20).

The epilogue addresses the question of gender anxiety and transvestite controversy but alleviates it by suggesting possible analogies between love and theatricality. The boy actor playing the role of Rosalind reminds the audience that his/her acting with Orlando is nothing but an analogy to her/his role performed for the audience. Even the words addressed for women to love men are concocted within the confines of the theatre:

> I charge you, O women, for the love you
> bear to men, to like as much of this play as please
> you. And I charge you, O men, for the love you bear
> to women—as I perceive by your simpering, none
> of you hates them—that between you and the
> women the play may please (epilogue, 12-17).

The parallelism between the world of love and the world of the play situates the cross-dressing strategy and male-female relations within the fictive theatrical world. Cross-dressing is intrinsically related to metatheatre in *As You Like It*. It does not only allow to problematize questions of sexuality, gender, and love; it also enables the alleviation of the anxiety generated by such issues by drawing a parallel between love, on the one hand, and the fictive and the artificial, on the other. The worlds of the forest and the stage are as artificial as the shift of the dressing code.

From another perspective, cross-dressing plays an empowering dimension. If one considers Luce Irigaray's notion of "mimesis"[6], it will be possible to read Rosalind's disguise as an inversion to the patriarchal codes of masculinity. Cross-dressing enables Rosalind to erect a masculine power that male cultures tend to obscure. The cross-dressed Rosalind confirms the reality that gender is not a biological construct but rather an act of artifice. Cross-dressing is a performance that creates "a purported identity" (Butler, 1990, p. 25), as Judith Butler terms it in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Among many critics, Naomi Miller sees Rosalind's cross-dressing as an empowering step toward an identity that resists containment and objectification, for

[5] Zied Ben Amor (2020) explains the process of transmigration as follows:
"The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the verb "transmigrate" as "to cause to go from one state of existence or place to another" or "to pass at death from one body or being to another" (Merriam-Webster.com, 2011). In other words, transmigration denotes a process allowing an ethereal or subtle migration from one entity to another; it is then an entrance from one stage to another with rebirth and a new life" (Ben Amor, 2020, p. 25).
[6] See Irigaray, L. (2004). *An ethics of sexual difference* (C. Burke & G. Gill, Trans.). Continuum.

"in becoming a Ganymede, Rosalind […] escapes the confines of a single position, a single voice, a single gender" (Miller, 1996 p. 49). Likewise, Lesley Ferris argues that the female character uses disguise to redefine the position of women in a patriarchal order, inspire future females to overcome misogynistic ideology, and be open to more fulfilling and empowering roles (Ferris, 2005, p. 93). Nonetheless, dressed as a man and performed by a man, and constantly acknowledging her limitation as a female identity to articulate herself: "Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak" (3.2), Rosalind does not escape the law of the father. Eventually, she succumbs to patriarchal representations of femininity as a token of silence and submission.

Through the character of Rosalind in *As You Like It*, William Shakespeare establishes a kind of gender reconciliation that is suggested by Rosalind's overt call at the end of the play (the epilogue). Shakespeare, then, does not revolutionarily subvert the stage convention by exposing the audience to a female actress. He instead implicitly and temporarily questions the established gender norms through a female character in male disguise, paving the ground for new perspectives as far as gender relations are concerned. In Rackin Phyllis' words,

> the play wins both sexes with a playful androgynous appeal most appropriately expressed by the ambiguous figure who no longer has a single name or sexual identity, combining in one nature Rosalind, Ganymede, and the boy who played their parts (Rackin, 1987, p. 125).

Being nameless and sexless, the character of Rosalind fulfils Shakespeare's aim to temporarily redefine gender roles and relationships based on the redeeming power of love and the reconciliation effects of marriage. In this respect, Juliet Dusinberre (1996) maintains that a wife's submission in marriage during the Elizabethan era is a mode of behaviour which could coexist with liberty (Dusineberre, 1996, p. 108), a kind of fellowship in which women were willingly subjugated as a way to ensure their female subject.

Still, Rosalind's male disguise cannot be taken as Shakespeare's intention to transgress Elizabethan social norms and ignore established gender norms. Cross-gender disguise is meant to stimulate the audience's imagination on the possibility of changing a fixed reality and the expected comic effects of destabilizing socio-cultural norms. Shakespeare exposes his audience to a virtual scene in which a female unconventionally assumes a decisive role in a patriarchal society and comically demonstrates the possible consequences of such a new order. Throughout the play, Shakespeare repeatedly reminds his audience of the virtual disguise and Rosalind's temporarily acquired power. The recurrence of the conjunctions "if" and overuse of conditional structures stress the possibility of change but never compel a commitment to it:

> Rosalind: I would love you, if I could […]
> I will marry you, if ever I marry a woman […]
> I will satisfy you if ever I satisfied a man (5.2.119-121).

The temporary possibility of destabilized gender roles may create a sense of anxiety on the part of the Shakespearean male audiences. It may lead them to start reconsidering what is already taken for granted. It may also make the audience laugh without seriously considering gender issues and conflicting sexual identities. The play's title is suggestive in this respect. It seems that Shakespeare exposes his audience to a situation and then gives them the freedom to reach a conclusion and take it either as a burst of comic laughter devoid of any meaning or as a serious questioning of socio-cultural conventions. It is up to the audience to understand the situation as they like it.

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