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Cross-Dressing and Female Agency in Shakespearean Comedy

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between cross-dressing and female agency in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. Focusing on Viola and Rosalind, the study explores how male disguise changes the freedom, movement, and social possibilities available to women within the two comedies. Both characters initially adopt masculine identities in response to danger and uncertainty, but their experiences of disguise develop differently. As Cesario, Viola gains access to Orsino's household and greater social movement, yet she also becomes trapped within the emotional confusion created by her hidden identity. Rosalind, in contrast, gradually uses Ganymede as a means of controlling her courtship, testing Orlando, and directing the comic resolution. Through close reading of the plays and selected critical perspectives on gender and cross-dressing, the paper considers the importance of clothing, behaviour, and performance in shaping social identity. It argues that cross-dressing creates temporary spaces of female freedom without completely removing the limits of gender expectations. Although both comedies finally return Viola and Rosalind to female identities and marriage, their experiences as Cesario and Ganymede reveal the instability of fixed gender roles and demonstrate different forms of female agency.

Keywords: Cross-Dressing, Female Agency, Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, Gender, Disguise, Gender Performance

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Introduction

Cross-dressing is an important dramatic device in Shakespeare's comedies, particularly in plays where women adopt male identities in order to move through situations that would otherwise restrict them. In *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, Viola and Rosalind disguise themselves as men and enter the social world as Cesario and Ganymede. Their disguises initially arise from difficult circumstances. Viola is alone in an unfamiliar country after a shipwreck, while Rosalind has been banished from the court and must travel into the Forest of Arden. Yet male clothing soon becomes more than a means of concealment. It changes how the two women are seen, spoken to, and permitted to act.

The importance of cross-dressing in Shakespeare's comedy is closely connected with questions of gender and social behaviour. Jean E. Howard observes that female cross-dressing could carry considerable symbolic force because it challenged assumptions about the naturalness of gender hierarchy (Howard 428). Clothing in these plays does not merely cover the body. It creates expectations about courage, speech, freedom, and social position. Phyllis Rackin describes cross-dressing as a temporary "theatrical holiday" that frees Shakespeare's heroines from some of the restrictions attached to their roles as women in a male-dominated society (Rackin 70). The word "temporary," however, is important. The freedom created by disguise exists within the comic action, but both plays eventually move towards marriage and the restoration of female identity.

A later theory of gender also provides a useful way of examining these disguises. Judith Butler argues that gender should not be understood simply as a stable identity but as something constituted through repeated acts and socially recognizable forms of behaviour (Butler 178–79). Although Butler writes in a very different historical and theoretical context, her argument helps to explain the theatrical importance of Cesario and Ganymede. Viola and Rosalind do not become men, yet masculine clothing, names, speech, and behaviour cause other characters to recognise and respond to them as young men. Shakespeare's comedy repeatedly draws attention to the difference between a person's hidden identity and the identity that social appearance creates.

Viola and Rosalind, however, do not use cross-dressing in exactly the same way. Viola's disguise is mainly connected with survival and security. As Cesario, she gains employment in Orsino's household and moves freely between Orsino and Olivia, but her disguise also traps her within a complicated love triangle. She cannot openly declare her love for Orsino, while Olivia falls in love with the male identity Viola has created. Rosalind

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gradually exercises greater control over her disguise. As Ganymede, she approaches Orlando, directs his courtship, and even performs the role of "Rosalind" while still appearing as a man. Her disguise becomes an active means of testing love and controlling the direction of her own romantic story.

This paper examines the relationship between cross-dressing and female agency in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. By comparing Viola and Rosalind, it argues that masculine disguise creates new possibilities of movement, speech, and action for both women, but does not produce identical forms of freedom. Viola uses Cesario primarily as a means of survival and access, while Rosalind develops Ganymede into a more active instrument of control and self-expression. At the same time, the return to female clothing and marriage at the end of the comedies raises questions about the limits of this freedom. Cross-dressing may be temporary, but the experiences of Viola and Rosalind reveal how strongly identity depends upon clothing, behaviour, and the expectations of others.

2.Viola: Disguise, Survival, and Limited Freedom

Viola's decision to dress as a man begins with necessity rather than rebellion. After the shipwreck, she finds herself alone in Illyria and uncertain about the fate of her brother. Her immediate concern is how to survive in an unfamiliar place. She asks the Captain to "conceal me what I am" and help her adopt a disguise suited to her purpose (*Twelfth Night* 1.2.56–58). Viola therefore chooses the identity of Cesario because it offers protection and a practical way of entering Orsino's household. Jean E. Howard similarly describes Viola's disguise as "a practical means of survival in an alien environment" (Howard 431). This distinction is important because Viola does not initially dress as a man in order to challenge male authority. Her disguise grows out of insecurity, but it soon gives her opportunities that would have been difficult to obtain as an unknown young woman.

As Cesario, Viola quickly gains access to Orsino and becomes one of his trusted attendants. Orsino sends her to speak to Olivia and promises that, if she succeeds, she will "live as freely as thy lord" (*Twelfth Night* 1.4.41–42). The promise of freedom is significant. Viola's male appearance allows her to enter a nobleman's household, carry private messages, and move between different social spaces. Cross-dressing changes not only her clothes but also the kind of work and movement available to her. Rackin's description of disguise as a temporary "theatrical holiday" from the restrictions placed upon women is useful here (Rackin 70). Cesario gives Viola a degree of social freedom, even though that freedom depends upon others believing that she is male.

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The disguise, however, creates a different kind of restriction. Viola falls in love with Orsino but cannot openly tell him who she is or what she feels. When Orsino sends Cesario to court Olivia on his behalf, Viola privately admits, "Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife" (*Twelfth Night* 1.4.46). Her male identity gives her physical access to Orsino, but it prevents her from approaching him openly as a woman who loves him. Viola is therefore both liberated and confined by Cesario. She can remain close to Orsino in a way that might otherwise have been impossible, yet she must hide the very desire that makes this closeness emotionally important to her.

The uncertainty of Viola's visible identity becomes even clearer in her conversation with Olivia. Speaking as Cesario, she states, "I swear I am not that I play" (*Twelfth Night* 1.5.181–82). The word "play" draws attention to the theatrical nature of her disguise. Viola knows that Cesario is a role, but Olivia responds to the appearance and behaviour of that role as if it were a stable identity. Judith Butler's later argument that gender is constituted through repeated and socially recognisable acts provides a useful way of reading this situation (Butler 178–79). Viola's clothing, name, speech, and position in Orsino's service are enough for the people around her to read Cesario as male. Shakespeare's comedy thus depends upon the difference between what Viola knows herself to be and what others believe they see.

Olivia's love for Cesario makes the consequences of the disguise more difficult for Viola to control. When Viola realises what has happened, she calls disguise "a wickedness" (*Twelfth Night* 2.2.27). She describes herself as a "poor monster" caught between her love for Orsino and Olivia's mistaken love for Cesario (*Twelfth Night* 2.2.34–35). The language reveals Viola's discomfort with the divided position she now occupies. Her disguise has successfully protected her, but it has also created an identity that exists independently in the minds of other people. Olivia desires Cesario, Orsino trusts Cesario, and neither fully knows Viola. The freedom produced by cross-dressing therefore comes with a loss of control over the way Viola is understood.

Viola herself occasionally expresses this divided identity through language. When Orsino asks about the woman Cesario supposedly loves, Viola tells him, "I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers, too" (*Twelfth Night* 2.4.132–33). The answer is deliberately indirect, but it also captures Viola's unusual position in the play. She speaks as Cesario while quietly telling the truth about herself. Her words contain both the sister Viola and the brother-like figure that others believe Cesario to be. Cross-dressing

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allows her to move between these identities, but it does not completely resolve the tension between them.

The limits of Viola's masculine performance become comic during the duel episode. Cesario is expected to behave according to ideas of male courage, even though Viola has no desire to fight. Frightened by the possibility of a duel, she privately admits that very little would make her reveal "how much I lack of a man" (*Twelfth Night* 3.4.315–17). The scene shows that masculine clothing creates expectations that Viola cannot always comfortably perform. She can adopt a male name and social position, but the people around her also expect Cesario to display forms of courage associated with masculinity. The disguise therefore gives Viola freedom while placing her under a new set of social demands.

By the final act, the play begins to separate Viola from Cesario. Viola refers to her disguise as her "masculine usurped attire" and speaks of recovering her "maiden weeds" (*Twelfth Night* 5.1.262, 267). Orsino also waits to see her in her "woman's weeds" before addressing her fully in the position of his future wife (*Twelfth Night* 5.1.288). Howard argues that the comic narrative finally works to release Viola from masculine clothing and return her to the position of wife (Howard 431). The ending therefore places a limit upon the freedom created by Cesario. Viola's masculine identity is useful during the confusion of Illyria, but marriage requires her return to a recognisably female social position.

Viola's cross-dressing should therefore not be described as a simple act of female rebellion. Her disguise begins as a strategy of survival and gives her employment, movement, and unusual access to Orsino. At the same time, Cesario traps her within emotional misunderstandings and creates expectations she cannot always fulfil. Viola gains agency through disguise, but she never completely controls the consequences of the identity she has created. Her experience shows that cross-dressing can open social possibilities for a woman while also revealing how strongly freedom depends upon the identity that other people are willing to recognise.

3.Rosalind: Disguise, Performance, and the Expansion of Female Agency

Rosalind's disguise in *As You Like It* also begins in a situation of danger. After Duke Frederick banishes her from the court, she decides to leave with Celia and travel to the Forest of Arden. Since two young women travelling alone may attract danger, Rosalind proposes that she should dress as a man. She asks whether, because she is "more than common tall," it would be better to "suit me all points like a man" (*As You Like It* 1.3.121–23). Like Viola, Rosalind initially uses cross-dressing for protection. Yet the way she plans

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her disguise already reveals an awareness of how masculinity can be performed through outward appearance.

Rosalind does not simply put on male clothing. She thinks carefully about the signs that will make her appear masculine. Although she admits that "hidden woman's fear" may remain in her heart, she plans to present a "swashing and a martial outside" (*As You Like It* 1.3.125–27). The contrast between the hidden fear and the martial "outside" is important. Rosalind understands that courage can be displayed through clothing, weapons, and behaviour even when the person performing it feels differently within. Judith Butler's later argument that gender is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and socially recognised forms of behaviour provides a useful way of approaching this moment (Butler 179). Rosalind's disguise works because she deliberately performs the outward signs that her society associates with masculinity.

The difference between inner feeling and outward performance continues after Rosalind enters the Forest of Arden. Tired and discouraged, she admits that she could "disgrace" her man's clothing by crying like a woman. She then reminds herself that her "doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat" (*As You Like It* 2.4.4–8). Her words are humorous, but they reveal how quickly clothing creates expectations about behaviour. The doublet and hose seem to demand courage because they are associated with a male identity. Rosalind is aware of this demand and consciously attempts to act according to it. Juliet Dusinberre argues that male disguise allows a woman to express parts of her nature that society ordinarily suppresses and concludes that disguise makes her "not a man but a more developed woman" (Dusinberre 233). This idea is especially useful in Rosalind's case because Ganymede gradually becomes more than a protective costume. The disguise gives Rosalind room to develop confidence and control that she could not exercise so easily at court.

Rosalind's use of Ganymede becomes more active when she discovers Orlando in the forest. Instead of immediately revealing herself, she decides to approach him in disguise. She announces that she will speak to him "like a saucy lackey" and "under that habit play the knave with him" (*As You Like It* 3.2.299–301). The words "speak," "habit," and "play" all draw attention to deliberate performance. Rosalind knows that Ganymede is a role and chooses to use that role for her own purpose. Viola often struggles with the misunderstandings created by Cesario, but Rosalind begins to direct the misunderstanding surrounding Ganymede.

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This control becomes clearest in Rosalind's relationship with Orlando. As Ganymede, she offers to cure him of his love and tells him to "call me Rosalind" and come every day to woo her (*As You Like It* 3.2.433–35). The situation gives Rosalind an unusual position in her own courtship. Orlando believes that he is practising love with a young man pretending to be Rosalind, while Rosalind is actually listening to him speak about his feelings for her. She is no longer merely the silent subject of Orlando's love poems. Instead, she creates the conditions under which he must speak to her and allows herself to question his ideas about love. Jean E. Howard argues that Rosalind acts out culturally scripted roles for women and, in doing so, exposes their constructed nature while manipulating these representations in her own interest (Howard 435). Ganymede gives Rosalind the freedom to examine the man she loves before openly accepting him.

The mock courtship also allows Rosalind to move between male and female roles with remarkable ease. At one point, she tells Orlando, "now I will be your Rosalind" (*As You Like It* 4.1.117–19). The statement creates several layers of performance. Rosalind is a woman disguised as Ganymede, who now offers to perform Rosalind for Orlando. She can therefore step into and out of the expected behaviour of a romantic woman while still controlling the conversation as Ganymede. This makes her disguise different from a simple attempt to hide her sex. Rosalind uses performance to explore how women are imagined and spoken about in courtship. Howard's argument that she manipulates cultural representations of femininity is particularly relevant here (Howard 435). The freedom of Ganymede allows Rosalind to question romantic conventions without directly placing herself in the vulnerable position of Orlando's beloved.

Rosalind's agency extends beyond her own relationship with Orlando. By the final act, she has become the person who organises the resolution of several romantic problems in the forest. She promises to "make all this matter even" and instructs Orlando, Phoebe, Silvius, and Duke Senior to keep their promises (*As You Like It* 5.4.18–26). Rosalind therefore occupies a position of unusual dramatic control. She knows more than the other characters because she controls the secret of Ganymede's identity, and she uses that knowledge to arrange the final marriages. Cross-dressing has moved her from a banished daughter with little control over her future to the character who directs the ending of the comedy.

The return of Rosalind's female identity, however, raises questions similar to those found at the end of *Twelfth Night*. The comic plot eventually moves towards marriage, and

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Ganymede cannot remain Rosalind's public identity. Penny Gay discusses the way comic disruption may be permitted temporarily before society settles again into a patriarchal order, with marriage serving as an important sign of that restoration (Gay 3). Rosalind returns as a woman and prepares to marry Orlando. In this sense, the freedom of Ganymede is temporary. Yet the play does not entirely erase the experience of the disguise. Rosalind has already tested Orlando, controlled their courtship, and organised the comic resolution before returning to her female role.

The Epilogue makes this restoration even less simple. The speaker declares, "If I were a woman," before imagining kissing the men in the audience (*As You Like It*, Epilogue 17–19). On the early modern stage, where Rosalind would have been played by a boy actor, the statement draws attention to the uncertainty between actor, character, and performed gender. Rackin argues that the Epilogue makes the speaker's gender indeterminate by insisting upon the double identity of Rosalind and the male performer (Rackin 81). The comedy may restore Rosalind to female clothing and marriage, but its final theatrical moment once again reminds the audience that gender has been performed before them.

Rosalind's disguise therefore creates a wider form of agency than Viola's. Ganymede begins as a means of protection, but Rosalind gradually turns the disguise into a way of speaking, testing, directing, and controlling her own courtship. She does not escape the social structure of marriage, nor does she permanently remain outside a female identity. However, her time as Ganymede allows her to act with a freedom that the court did not provide. Through Rosalind, Shakespeare shows that cross-dressing can do more than conceal a woman from danger. It can create a temporary space in which she becomes an active participant in shaping her own story.

4.Comparative Discussion: Cross-Dressing, Gender Performance, and Female Agency

When Viola and Rosalind are considered together, the most obvious similarity is that neither woman adopts male clothing simply for amusement. Both disguises begin in difficult circumstances. Viola is separated from her brother after a shipwreck and finds herself alone in Illyria, while Rosalind is banished from the court and must travel through uncertain surroundings. Male clothing offers protection and allows both women to move through spaces that may be unsafe or difficult for them as women. Rackin's description of cross-dressing as a temporary "theatrical holiday" from the restrictions attached to female roles is useful in understanding this shared experience (Rackin 70). For both Viola and

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Rosalind, disguise opens possibilities that their original social positions do not easily provide.

The freedom created by disguise, however, develops differently in the two plays. Viola uses Cesario mainly to survive and gain a place in Orsino's household. Once the disguise is established, she often reacts to situations created by other characters. Orsino sends her to Olivia, Olivia falls in love with her, and Sir Andrew is drawn into a duel with her. Viola recognises the confusion surrounding Cesario but has limited power to resolve it. Her description of herself as a "poor monster" captures the uncomfortable position produced by the disguise (*Twelfth Night* 2.2.34–35). Rosalind, in contrast, gradually turns Ganymede into an identity she actively controls. She approaches Orlando, creates the mock courtship, and finally promises to "make all this matter even" (*As You Like It* 5.4.18–26). The difference is not that Viola lacks intelligence or agency. Rather, Rosalind is given greater control over the dramatic possibilities created by her male identity.

This contrast is especially visible in the women's relationships with the men they love. Viola's disguise brings her close to Orsino but prevents her from speaking openly about her love. Her statement, "Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife," is spoken privately rather than directly to him (*Twelfth Night* 1.4.46). Cesario gives Viola access to Orsino, but the same identity requires her to hide her desire. Rosalind uses Ganymede in almost the opposite way. She tells Orlando to call her Rosalind and encourages him to practise courtship with her (*As You Like It* 3.2.433–35). Although Orlando does not know her true identity, Rosalind is able to hear his declarations, challenge his romantic ideas, and influence the way their relationship develops. Viola's disguise delays open courtship; Rosalind's disguise allows her to direct it.

The two women also reveal how gender can be read through outward signs and expected behaviour. Viola is accepted as Cesario because others respond to her clothing, name, and social position as signs of masculinity. Yet the duel scene exposes her discomfort when she is expected to perform masculine courage, and she admits how much she "lack[s] of a man" (*Twelfth Night* 3.4.315–17). Rosalind is more consciously interested in the outward performance of masculinity. She plans a "swashing and a martial outside" despite acknowledging her "hidden woman's fear" (*As You Like It* 1.3.125–27). Butler's argument that gender is constituted through repeated and socially recognisable acts helps explain why these disguises work within the plays (Butler 178–79). Shakespeare's heroines do not

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physically become men, but the performance of masculine signs changes the way society treats them.

At the same time, neither play presents cross-dressing as complete freedom from gender expectations. Viola's disguise places her under new pressures because Cesario is expected to behave as a young man. Rosalind also reminds herself that her doublet and hose should appear courageous (*As You Like It* 2.4.4–8). Male clothing may remove some restrictions attached to femininity, but it introduces another set of expectations. The women gain greater movement and social access because they are believed to be male, yet they must continue to maintain that belief through performance. Cross-dressing therefore exposes the restrictive nature of gender roles on both sides. The comedy comes from the gap between the expected behaviour of Cesario or Ganymede and the private knowledge of Viola and Rosalind.

Rosalind nevertheless makes fuller use of this gap. Howard argues that, while disguised, Rosalind acts out cultural constructions of femininity and manipulates those representations in her own interest (Howard 435). Her performance as Ganymede pretending to be Rosalind allows her to move between masculine and feminine roles almost at will. Viola's language also reveals a divided identity, particularly when she describes herself as “all the daughters” and “all the brothers” of her father's house (*Twelfth Night* 2.4.132–33). Yet Viola experiences this division mainly as emotional difficulty. Rosalind turns the instability of performance into a source of dramatic control. In this respect, Ganymede creates a broader form of female agency than Cesario.

The endings of the two comedies appear to restore the women to conventional female positions. Viola speaks of recovering her “maiden weeds,” while Orsino anticipates seeing her in her “woman's weeds” (*Twelfth Night* 5.1.267, 288). Rosalind also abandons Ganymede and returns openly as Duke Senior's daughter before marriage. Gay discusses a conservative understanding of comedy in which temporary disruptions of gender and sexuality are followed by a return to the regulated social order of patriarchy, with marriage serving as one of its strongest symbols (Gay 3). From this perspective, the freedom of disguise has clear limits. Cesario and Ganymede belong to the temporary confusion of comedy, while Viola and Rosalind are finally placed within heterosexual marriage.

Yet the return to female identity does not completely cancel what has happened during the disguises. Viola has entered Orsino's service, gained his trust, and experienced a

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form of social movement made possible by Cesario. Rosalind has tested Orlando, shaped her own courtship, and directed the final resolution of the play. Dusinberre's claim that disguise makes a woman "not a man but a more developed woman" is particularly relevant to Rosalind, but it also helps explain the wider importance of cross-dressing in these comedies (Dusinberre 233). The women return to female clothing, but the audience has already seen them speak and act beyond the limits normally associated with their original positions.

The comparison between Viola and Rosalind therefore shows that cross-dressing creates different degrees of female agency. Viola gains safety, employment, access, and movement, but she often remains caught within the consequences of Cesario's identity. Rosalind develops greater control over Ganymede and uses disguise to examine love, perform gender, and organise the direction of her own story. In both cases, male clothing reveals how strongly social identity depends upon appearance and behaviour. Shakespeare eventually restores the women to female roles, but the comic experience of disguise has already exposed the instability of the boundaries that separate masculine and feminine behaviour.

5.Conclusion

The comparison of Viola and Rosalind shows that cross-dressing in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* is more than a source of comic confusion. For both women, male disguise begins as a practical response to danger. Viola needs protection and a place in an unfamiliar society, while Rosalind must travel safely after her banishment. Yet once they become Cesario and Ganymede, their disguises change the way other characters respond to them and create opportunities that would have been more limited in their female identities.

Viola gains access to Orsino's household and moves freely between Orsino and Olivia, but her disguise also creates emotional difficulties. Cesario allows her to remain close to the man she loves while preventing her from openly expressing that love. Rosalind develops greater control over her male identity. As Ganymede, she tests Orlando, directs their mock courtship, and finally helps organise the resolution of the relationships in the forest. The difference between the two women demonstrates that cross-dressing does not produce one fixed form of female agency. Its possibilities depend upon how each woman uses the identity she has created.

The disguises also reveal the importance of outward behaviour in the construction of gender. Viola and Rosalind are treated as young men because they wear male clothing

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and perform socially recognisable signs of masculinity. At the same time, both plays show the pressure involved in maintaining these roles. Cesario is expected to fight, while Ganymede must appear courageous even when Rosalind privately feels fear. Shakespeare's comedy repeatedly exposes the gap between inner identity and the behaviour that society expects from a masculine or feminine appearance.

Both plays eventually return Viola and Rosalind to female identities and move towards marriage. This limits the freedom created by Cesario and Ganymede, but it does not make the disguises meaningless. Viola has experienced greater movement and social access, while Rosalind has actively shaped her own courtship and the comic ending. Their return to female clothing cannot erase what the audience has already seen them achieve while disguised.

Ultimately, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* use cross-dressing to question the apparent stability of gender roles. Viola and Rosalind do not permanently reject their female identities, nor do they simply become men. Instead, their disguises reveal how clothing, behaviour, and social expectations influence the freedom available to women. Through Cesario and Ganymede, Shakespeare creates a temporary space in which female characters can move differently, speak differently, and take a more active part in shaping their own lives.

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