

## **Cross-Dressing in the Plays of William Shakespeare: A Study**

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### **Abstract**

Cross-dressing is a significant theme in many of William Shakespeare's plays, serving as a mechanism for exploring gender identity, societal roles, and the fluidity of human relationships. This paper examines the function and implications of cross-dressing in Shakespeare's works, focusing on key plays such as "Twelfth Night," "As You Like It," and "The Merchant of Venice." By analyzing these plays, the paper aims to uncover how Shakespeare uses cross-dressing to challenge contemporary gender norms, create comedic and dramatic effects, and reveal deeper truths about identity and human nature.

### **Introduction**

William Shakespeare's use of cross-dressing in his plays reflects the complex dynamics of gender and identity during the Elizabethan era. In a society where gender roles were rigidly defined, Shakespeare's plays offered a subversive commentary on these roles by portraying characters who disguise themselves as the opposite sex. This device not only allowed for comedic situations but also provided a platform for critiquing the social construction of gender. This paper explores the thematic and narrative significance of cross-dressing in three of Shakespeare's plays, highlighting how this device contributes to character development and plot progression.

### **Cross-Dressing in "Twelfth Night"**

"Twelfth Night" is perhaps the most famous of Shakespeare's plays to employ cross-dressing as a central plot device. The character Viola disguises herself as a young man, Cesario, after being shipwrecked in Illyria. This disguise sets off a complex chain of events involving mistaken identities and romantic entanglements.

1. **Gender Identity and Fluidity:** Viola's disguise as Cesario allows her to navigate a male-dominated world and explore her own identity. Her interactions with Duke Orsino and Lady Olivia reveal the fluidity of gender roles, as both characters are drawn to her, unaware of her true sex.
2. **Romantic Comedy:** The comedic elements of "Twelfth Night" are deeply intertwined with the theme of cross-dressing. The misunderstandings and mistaken identities lead to humorous situations, such as Olivia falling in love with Cesario, while Orsino grows increasingly fond of his new page.
3. **Resolution and Revelation:** The resolution of the play hinges on the revelation of Viola's true identity. Her unmasking restores social order but also highlights the arbitrary nature of gender roles, as characters quickly adjust to the truth without significant upheaval.

### **Cross-Dressing in "As You Like It"**

"As You Like It" features another prominent example of cross-dressing, with the character Rosalind disguising herself as a young man named Ganymede. This transformation is central to the play's exploration of love and identity.

1. **Freedom and Agency:** Rosalind's disguise affords her a level of freedom and agency that would be unattainable as a woman. As Ganymede, she can move freely in the Forest of Arden and engage in behaviors that would be deemed inappropriate for her true gender.

2. Courtship and Role-Playing: The disguise allows Rosalind to test the sincerity of Orlando's love. By adopting the persona of Ganymede, she can interact with Orlando in ways that challenge traditional courtship norms and explore the performative aspects of gender.
3. Revelation and Transformation: The eventual revelation of Rosalind's true identity serves as a catalyst for resolution and transformation. The characters' acceptance of her dual identity underscores the play's message about the fluidity and constructiveness of gender roles.

### **Cross-Dressing in "The Merchant of Venice"**

In "The Merchant of Venice," cross-dressing is used less extensively but still plays a crucial role in the plot. The character Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer, Balthazar, to save Antonio in court.

1. Empowerment and Intelligence: Portia's disguise allows her to demonstrate her intelligence and resourcefulness, qualities that would be overlooked in her female persona. As Balthazar, she commands respect and authority in the courtroom.
2. Legal and Moral Themes: The cross-dressing in this play intersects with legal and moral themes, as Portia uses her male disguise to manipulate the Venetian legal system and deliver justice. Her success in this role highlights the disparity between appearance and reality.
3. Revealing Character: Portia's disguise and subsequent unmasking reveal much about her character and the perceptions of women in Shakespearean society. Her ability to navigate both male and female roles underscores her versatility and challenges contemporary gender expectations.

### **Conclusion**

Shakespeare's use of cross-dressing in his plays serves multiple purposes, from creating comedic scenarios to challenging societal norms. Through characters like Viola, Rosalind, and Portia, Shakespeare explores the fluidity of gender and the constructed nature of identity. These characters' disguises allow them to navigate their worlds in ways that transcend the limitations imposed by their true genders, offering a commentary on the performative aspects of gender and the potential for subversion within rigid societal structures. Ultimately, Shakespeare's treatment of cross-dressing enriches his narratives and provides a timeless reflection on the complexities of human identity.

### **References**

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