

Discuss the function of cross-dressing in renaissance drama.



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Cross-dressing on the early modern stage was a highly exploited theatrical device. It subverted the traditional conceptions of gender, evoking a recurring sense of dramatic irony. Jean E. Howard explains that “ behavioural differences” and “ distinctions of dress” were considered very significant in the Renaissance period because anatomical theories of the sexes held men and women to be practically identical. In England, cross-dressing, male casts of players attracted severe criticism from Puritans, who deemed their plays “ public enemies to virtue and religion.” But the homoerotic effects of transvestism have overshadowed the supplementary functions it can serve in Renaissance drama, namely emitting a prevailing sense of meta-theatricality, distorting gender boundaries and empowering the heroine. Early modern attitudes towards cross-dressing on stage were rather self-contradictory. Janette Dillon highlights why Puritans were especially repelled by transvestism. She quotes Stephen Gosson, a former playwright and poet, who fiercely remarked that to dress as the opposite sex was to “ forge and adulterate, contrary to the express rule of the word of God.” So when Celia censures Rosalind in *As You Like It* for assuming male dress, she is articulating a prevalent Renaissance view. As Celia harshly states; “ You have simply misus’d our sex in your love-prate. We must have your doublet and hose pluck’d over your head.” The harsh sound of “ pluck’d” accentuates the fierceness of her reproach, establishing a shift in the power balance between the two women. Contemporary audiences may find this unduly condemning of Rosalind’s behaviour, considering she almost single-handedly restores order to the social hierarchy. But to the authorities, contravening ‘ God’s will’ would have been seen as extremely sinful.

Ironically, however, Celia was traditionally a man dressed as a woman, hence <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-function-of-cross-dressing-in-renaissance-drama/>

she too would have been guilty of 'misusing' her sex. Nevertheless, cross-dressing may have been an accepted practice amongst the lower orders at the theatre. Historian David Cressy cites Linda Woodbridge as having found evidence of a "full-blown 'female transvestite movement' in early modern England." Women would primarily dress as men for practical reasons; "to plead at law, regain a fortune, or practice a profession barred to women." In *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines are similarly pragmatic. Rosalind effectively facilitates the marriage of four couples through her role as Ganymede, whilst disguised Viola undertakes a man's profession as Orsino's servant. But, in a sense, their independence is curtailed because both women conclude the play by entering into marriage, re-assuming submissive female personas. By contrast, Portia and Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice* successfully defend their own husbands in court, disguised as a doctor and a clerk. Their spouses, Bassanio and Graziano, are shocked that two women could achieve such a feat. Graziano himself asks; "What, are we cuckolds ere we have deserved it?" Neither woman, of course, actually commits adultery. But these words allude to the idea that, through trickery, Portia and Nerissa have made a mockery of their husbands' masculinity. For Elizabethan audiences, this probably constituted the main comedy of the play. Moreover, Stephen Orgel insightfully remarks that females constituted a considerable share of the audience, so a play's success was "significantly dependant on the receptiveness of women." Thus perhaps playwrights utilised female cross-dressing in a direct attempt to appeal to ambitious early modern women. Paradoxically, many Elizabethan critics and players would not tolerate the introduction of actresses onto the stage as a solution to the issue of cross-dressing. Dillon quotes playwright

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Thomas Nashe, who argued that an exclusively male cast produced “representations honourable and full of gallant resolution, not consisting...a whore.” Nashe is referring to the fact that many actresses were drawn into prostitution; the theatre was a notoriously licentious arena. But he somewhat unfairly categorises all actresses in this bracket, suggesting he held a deeper prejudice towards female actors. This, Dillon implies, was because “the idea of [women] belonging to professional companies was virtually unthinkable in England.” At best, an actress could hold a mere amateur status, which would perhaps become enhanced if she married a man of respectable class.

Snobbery towards actresses was commonplace in Renaissance England; one had to travel abroad to observe more equal treatment. Shakespeare’s contemporary, Thomas Coryat, wrote of his surprise at witnessing female actors in Venice; “They performed it with as good a grace, as ever I saw any masculine Actor.” On the whole, however, it was not considered appropriate for a woman to ‘lower’ herself by acting. Much emphasis, therefore, has been placed on Renaissance cross-dressing as a vehicle for homoeroticism.

Valerie Traub is a strong advocate of this view. She argues that the practice of boy actors playing female roles “made possible complex desires and fantasies, and mediated cultural anxieties.” She suggests that it was only through theatre that “homoeroticism could be safely explored.” This assessment certainly seems partly true of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*; Rosalind’s male persona acts as a medium through which both gay and lesbian desire can develop. Critics Stephen Orgel and James Saslow are in overwhelming agreement that Shakespeare (as an educated man)

purposefully chose the name ‘Ganymede’ for Rosalind as a classical

homoerotic allusion to Greek God Zeus’ lover. Hence whilst Rosalind’s flirting
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may appear innocent, encouraging Orlando to “ woo” her, there is a clear homosexual undercurrent to their meetings. Furthermore, Rosalind herself was traditionally played by a male actor. Shakespeare thus revels in reminding us of her true identity, as Ganymede ironically says; “ I should have been a woman by right.” The dramatic irony cleverly operates on two levels here; firstly because the disguise of Ganymede is concealing Rosalind, but also because the actor playing Rosalind is actually a man. Shakespeare even alludes to the possibility of a lesbian relationship between Rosalind and Phoebe. The young shepherdess, Phoebe, reflects on the uncharacteristically “ pretty redness in [Ganymede’s] lip.” She concludes ambiguously; “ I love him not, nor hate him not,” presumably because she cannot reconcile his attractive female qualities with his male identity. Correspondingly, the homoerotic undertones in Twelfth Night are undeniable. Orsino’s hasty proposal to the recently unveiled Viola suggests that he previously harboured desires for her as Cesario. Orsino grandly states that “ You shall from this time be /Your master’s mistress” , implying that Viola’s public transformation has legitimised his secret homosexual love for his servant. Orsino’s earlier claim that “ no woman’s sides/ Can bide the beating of so strong a passion/ As love doth give my heart” starts to take on a new, homoerotic meaning. Ironically, Orsino previously took Cesario aside and candidly declared, “ If ever thou shalt love, / In the sweet pangs of it remember me.” Concurrently, even if one considers Viola as definitively female, Orsino’s proposal is still rather sinister. It appears symptomatic of his attempts to maintain a strict patriarchal society in Illyria. One assumes that Viola accepts his proposal, but her silence feels practically deafening.

Furthermore, Viola attracts considerable female attention from Olivia when <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-function-of-cross-dressing-in-renaissance-drama/>

she is disguised. After their first meeting, Olivia dwells on Cesario's supposedly masculine features; "Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit/ Do give thee five-fold blazon." In a highly illuminating aside, Olivia perceives genuine love in Cesario's eyes, asserting, "A murd'rous guilt shows not itself more soon/ Than love that would seem hid." Even then, in the literal sense, Viola is still a man playing a woman, as is Olivia who marries Viola's twin, Sebastian. The ostensible reinstatement of patriarchal values through marriage might therefore be interpreted as an affirmation of homosexual love. But the main difficulty with accepting Traub's view is that many Renaissance plays contain examples of homosexual love, even if that affection cannot be consummated. Cross-dressing is not always necessary for homosexual desire to flourish. In *Twelfth Night*, Antonio's implicit love for Sebastian becomes increasingly complicated when he mistakenly believes Cesario (actually Viola, Sebastian's twin) to be the object of his affection. When one considers that Cesario would traditionally have been a man playing a woman, impersonating a man, then the gender boundaries become insurmountably blurred. Antonio concludes his part somewhat puzzled, asking- "Which is Sebastian?" But crucially, in this play, the homosexual undercurrent to Antonio and Sebastian's relationship can be inferred from their earlier dialogue, without the aids of female dress. Sebastian addresses Antonio like an agitated lover; "Antonio! O, my dear Antonio,/ How the hours racked and tortured me/ Since I have lost thee!" This torture motif is recurrent in traditional Petrarchan-style love poetry, hinting at a deeper passion within Sebastian's heart. Similarly, in *Romeo and Juliet*, there is an obvious homosexual tension between Romeo and his friend, Mercutio. The two friends' constant sexual wordplay becomes akin to a duelling contest, <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-function-of-cross-dressing-in-renaissance-drama/>

with each trying to exceed the other. In one exchange, Romeo concludes with the explicit comment; "Why, then is my pump well flowered," meaning his penis is sexually active. These overtly homoerotic moments undermine the notion that Shakespeare's play is a tragic tale of young, heterosexual love. Traub's argument is therefore better applied to woman's love for woman in Renaissance drama. Lesbianism was barely even recognised as a form of sexuality; thus perhaps cross-dressing males could express the possibility of lesbian love better than two actresses. Most notably, Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It* are described as symbolic of "Juno's swans," insinuating a closer intimacy than mere cousins. Charles the Boxer reinforces this romantic image, remarking; "never two ladies loved as they do." It is worth noting, moreover, that renaissance attitudes towards homosexuality were strikingly inconsistent. Fascinatingly, lesbianism was not openly unlawful. But whilst the terms 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' would not have been used as they are today, the act of sodomy was explicitly condemned. Charles R. Forker goes so far as to say that male homosexual acts were "equivalent to satanism according to scriptural exegeneses." Yet Forker proposes an interesting argument against the conflicting laws of the age, asserting that, "it was normal for two men- apprentices, travellers, students...to occupy the same bed" thus "[society] might be said to have promoted the abomination it so strenuously condemned." Renaissance playwrights were also striving to invoke a sense of meta-theatricality in their productions, through the art of cross-dressing. This re-asserted the spectacle of performance over reality. Early modern plays were often very self-referential, articulating theatrical conceptions within the plays themselves.

Jacques' "All the world's a stage" speech in *AYLI* is probably the most
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famous example of this trope. In Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* this concept is explored very literally in Hieronimo's play. By placing the characters on a stage within the production itself, Kyd highlights Bel-Imperia's superficially feminine dress. The incestuous and homoerotic tensions between siblings Bel-Imperia (typically played by a man) and Lorenzo become explicit through their personas 'Perseda' and 'Erasto.' As Erasto, Lorenzo articulates his implied sexual longing for Bel-Imperia, proclaiming, "Sith his Perseda lives, his life survives." It seems an unlikely coincidence that Hieronimo, and by implication Kyd, cast them as hapless lovers. Lorenzo is peculiarly controlling of Bel-Imperia throughout the play, arranging her marriage to Balthazar under the pretence of saving her "honour." Hieronimo's tragic play induces an unravelling of Lorenzo and Balthazar's lust for her. Theatrically, it is a heterosexual desire, but underlying the costumes there are also complicated homosexual desires. This tendency to refer explicitly to theatre partially originates from the elaborate nature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean court. Queen Elizabeth enjoyed dressing up as various queens from ancient mythology, whilst King James's courtly decorations were notoriously excessive. In *Twelfth Night*, gender boundaries and distinctions between truth and falsehood are both further blurred through references to the theatre. Frustrated with his ambiguous responses, Olivia sarcastically asks Cesario; "Are you a comedian?" to which he boldly rejoins, "No, my profound heart, by the very fangs of malice I swear- I am not that I play." The double negative of "no" and "not" complicates Cesario's meaning. He is deliberately elusive because his identity is so complex. Again, on a theatrical level, he exposes his female identity as Viola, but also on a literal level, he discloses his true identity as a

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male actor. It therefore seems necessary to consider the words of Catherine Belsey, a critic who has given special attention to cross-dressing in Shakespearean comedies. She maintains that the ingeniousness of female characters adopting a male disguise is often that the actor becomes genderless, leaving us to question, "Who is speaking?" Although the layers of illusion are lessened if a male actor remains female throughout a play, the same question still applies. We are left forced to constantly re-evaluate the appearance and behaviour of individual characters. Hence, cross-dressing deconstructs our preconceptions of script and theatre in addition to our understanding of gender.