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“SIT BACK DOWN WHERE YOU BELONG,
IN THE CORNER OF MY BAR WITH YOUR HIGH HEELS ON”:
THE USE OF CROSS-DRESSING IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE FEMALE AGENCY IN
SHAKESPEARE’S TRANSVESTITE COMEDIES

by

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“Sit Back Down Where You Belong,
In the Corner of My Bar with Your High Heels On”: The Use of Cross-Dressing in Order
to Achieve Female Agency in Shakespeare’s Transvestite Comedies

Introduction:

In a culture that has become obsessed with hyper-sexuality and conformity, pop sensation Lady Gaga goes against the norm. Her war against the status quo is not merely waged with dresses constructed entirely of meat nor is it simply waged with bubble-based clothing ensembles. Lady Gaga wages her war with her blatant dismissal of societal conventions. Her outlandish outfits and innovative performances have become staples at any Hollywood A-list event. However, even fans were taken by surprise at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards on August 28, 2011 in Los Angeles, California when Lady Gaga appeared onstage dressed, not in a protein rich dress, but dressed as a man. Outfitted from head-to-toe in black leather, complete with a slick-back greaser hairdo, Lady Gaga took on the persona of her alter ego, “Joe Calderone.” “Joe” paced across the stage with a cigarette and a bottle of beer, making a passionate and enraged speech about “his” relationship with Lady Gaga before launching into a performance of “You and I.” The crowd was stunned (“Lady Gaga VMA 2011 Outfit”).

Lady Gaga, famous for her many costume changes, remained dressed as, and acting as, Joe for the entire length of the VMAs, leaving many feeling rather uncomfortable. People did not know what to do with Lady Gaga’s latest attention-seeking garb. For a woman who makes her living and her craft by going against the norm and shocking people, why did this performance cause so much of a buzz? Why would a woman’s dressing as a man be perceived as being less acceptable than any other

masquerade? Lady Gaga's female cross-dressing took her from being a wealthy and successful female pop star to being a greaser with a nicotine and alcohol problem. While cross-dressing at the VMAs, Lady Gaga was able to transform. For the duration of her performance onstage and for the show, she was able to step over boundaries. There is power that comes with the ability to seamlessly cross-dress, which can be seen in numerous biblical, literary, and pop cultural references that include the likes of the biblical story of Deborah in Judges, E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*(1859), and Julie Andrews' role in *Victor Victoria*(1982). That power, that more often than not goes untapped, can be viewed as threatening and even dangerous because it defies what is perceived by the hegemony as being the norm. For the length of the VMAs, Lady Gaga was able to transcend from her social position, thus changing her perceived reality. Cross-dressing, for a short time period, provided power. However, what would happen if that potential power were tapped in a venue outside of a performance stage? What strength and control could be derived from such an act of social defiance? Lines could be crossed, fates challenged, and lives changed.

An artist as influential and culturally popular as Lady Gaga is able to use cross-dressing as means of entertainment, self-expression, and rebellion because the use of cross-dressing as a means of social defiance is not a modern concept. For centuries, women have been using cross-dressing as a way of defying their subject position and going beyond their presumed societal role, as seen with the account of Deborah in Judges, *The Hidden Hand*, and *Victor Victoria*. It is clear through these examples that the use of cross-dressing in order to obtain female empowerment is not an unknown or foreign concept. Cross-dressing is seen in movies, novels, legends, and even the stage.

The Elizabethan stage was notorious not only for having young males playing the roles of females, but William Shakespeare was known for having cross-dressing characters within their productions. Females dressing as males were not unusual in Shakespeare's plays. However, the women's guises were not just acts of defiance, but also of survival. In his "transvestite comedies," *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare portrays noble women who make the conscious choice to step-down from their social positions as aristocrats and take on the persona of a significantly lower status male. These women take on their own "Joe Calderone." In taking on their male disguises, Viola (*Twelfth Night*), Rosalind (*As You Like It*), and Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*) are able to transcend the confines of their social roles and achieve agency and voice as both females and males. With their male disguises, they gain power and agency as lower-class males and as aristocratic females. This power correlates to the fact that they are not fully male. Their female attributes, ideas, and nature (the essence of their femininity) still come through. They are limited and marginalized as women not because of their intelligence and wit, but because of the gender, sexual, and class expectations of the day. Due to their precarious societal position, the only way for a woman to fight the social boundaries is to use the vehicle of disguising as a male of a lower class.

After being shipwrecked in a foreign land in *Twelfth Night*, Viola dresses as a young man and serves as a page to Duke Orsino, with whom she falls deeply in love. *As You Like It's* Rosalind dresses as a man and flees into the forest of Arden where she tutors Orlando in romance. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* disguises herself as a young law clerk and goes to Venice to save her new husband and his best friend from terrible fates. Their disguises are only successful because they are women. Regardless of

whether the disguises last that twenty-first century readers may want, the disguises are successful and praise-worthy, because they provide a vehicle that crosses gender lines, sex lines, and class lines. The transformations are not simply limited to gender. Gender is not enough, especially not for a twenty-first century audience. Viola, Portia, and Rosalind all impact the lines of gender, as well as class and sex.

Review of the Literature:

There has been, for years, a focus on the cross-dressing elements in the transvestite comedies *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night*. The cross-dressing female launches the action in the play and both causes and mends predicaments throughout the story's course.

Traditional readings of these plays limit female agency through cross-dressing to being a means of courtship – a strategic way for a witty young woman to obtain the man that she desires on her own terms. In the safety of a male disguise, the woman is able to mold and influence her love interest. Once the male is “ready” (or when things simply get too complicated), the woman is able to drop her male disguise and reveal herself as female, rather than, male. She is able to take up her female role again, and order is restored. Viola dresses as Cesario, serving as a page in the duke's court and quickly becomes a favorite of Orsino. During their time together, Cesario talks a great deal with the love-sick Orsino about romance and works to correct her employer's ill-fated notions of the opposite sex. When Viola's true female identity is revealed, Orsino takes her as his bride. Once Viola is set to be Orsino's bride, her disguise is no longer needed. Upon first meeting Rosalind, Orlando is smitten. When he goes into Arden, he spends his days

obsessing over her unobtainable beauty and grace. As Ganymede, Rosalind educates Orlando on how to speak the object of his desire, making him marriage material by the play's end. Once Rosalind is set to be Orlando's bride, her disguise is no longer needed. Portia is already married to Bassanio when she dresses a law clerk and goes to Venice to defend her new husband and Antonio. However, she is able to manipulate Bassanio after her triumph in court by means of a clever trick with a ring she had given him upon their marriage. In her law clerk disguise, Portia requests Bassanio's ring, which he gives the young man willingly. Later, as her female self, Portia questions the location of her husband's ring and is then able to wield her newfound power over him. Once Portia has her new husband's fidelity secure, her disguise is no longer needed. In this reading, the females lose their need for cross-dressing when a husband figure is secured in their lives. The maleness they once needed and sought through cross-dressing is now gained through marriage. The male disguise is replaced with a husband, eliminating any the female's desire or need for a male person. Marriage or the gaining of a partner serves as the "erasure of sexual determinacy" for the women (Howard 431).

Before the 1970s, most Shakespearean criticism did not focus on the cross-dressing element within *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. However, critics like W.H. Auden did note the strong female characters within the plays that helped to move the action and solve the story's problem scenarios. Transcribed and edited by Arthur Kirsch, W.H. Auden's *Lectures on Shakespeare* is taken from student notes from Auden's 1946-1947 Shakespeare lectures at Manhattan's New School for Social Research. Auden argues that there are four types of comedies that Shakespeare wrote: Plautine comedy, Comedy of Humors, Comedy of Character, and Comedy of

Emotion. *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice* both fall under the category of Comedy of character but *Twelfth Night* does not fall under any of the four categories (152-153). Auden's essays focus on the social and societal aspects of the three plays and how the women's behavior fits into the world that has been crafted. In regard to *As You Like It*, Auden focuses on pastoral and natural form to convey civility: "Of all of Shakespeare's plays, *As You Like It* is the greatest paean to civilization and to the nature of a civilized man and woman. It is dominated by Rosalind, a triumph of civilization..." (144). Auden addresses the complexity that comes with the duality of the plays civility and wild nature. The play is dominated by "a balance of dialectical opposites: the country versus the court, detachment versus love, honesty versus poetry, nature versus fortune, nature and fortune versus art" (145). The duality is balanced through faith and intellect, both of which are embodied by Rosalind as a female and as a male (151). Rosalind, a female character, sets the standard for this balance within *As You Like It*.

From the beginning of his *Twelfth Night* lecture, Auden acknowledges that it is one of "Shakespeare's unpleasant plays" (152) with a focus on the melancholy (153). The characters in *Twelfth Night* are "self-conscious, weary, and less production" (134). However, while the men fall into passive roles, the women are active and serve as driving forces in the play. Auden echoes sentiments of female strength, especially in regard to the women in *Twelfth Night*:

Women have become dominant in *Twelfth Night* and take the initiative.

Malvolio lacks self-confidence and self-control and is weak, and with the exception of Antonio, the other men are passive. The women are the only people left who have any will, which is the sign of a decadent society.

Maria, in love with Sir Toby, tricks him into marrying her. Olivia starts wooing Cesario from the first moment she sees him, and Viola is a real man-chaser. All the ladies in this play get what they want. (Auden 154)

Auden stresses that “the characters in *Twelfth Night* are rich and ideal” (153) and are primarily looking out for themselves rather than others-looking at what they can gain in any situation (154). Even in marriage the characters are only out for themselves: “The turnabouts in the marriages at the end are emblematic. The Duke, who up till the moment of recognition and thought himself in love with Olivia, drops her like a hot potato and falls in love with Viola on the spot, of meeting her for the first time” (154).

With regard to *The Merchant of Venice* Auden focuses on the societal structures of Venice and Belmont, noting that the society of the play is one that is in-between feudal and industrial as a “newborn bourgeois capitalist society” (75). Although there is an emphasis on the “issue of breeding” and the importance of the right marriage, there is a sense of the “free choice in personal relationships” in *The Merchant of Venice* (75).

Auden argues that even the casket test developed by Portia’s father is not even an arranged marriage in the traditional sense: “Even the choice of caskets is not an arrangement to provide a particular person for Portia, but a device to insure her marrying a person with a particular kind of character, someone capable of making her happy” (75-76). Portia, like Viola and Rosalind, moves the action within the play and serves as a standard of goodness and intelligence. Although Auden does not address the issue of female cross-dressing within the plays, he does clearly depict the importance of the women. They are strong characters that are forces to be reckoned with, even against the male leads.

The 1970s brought in a new age of Shakespearean criticism; a criticism that had a significant interest in the roles of women. In his 1975 work, “Refuting Shakespeare’s Endings” Richard Levin examines the trend of re-examining seemingly “ironic” endings in Shakespeare, as well as his contemporaries’ plays, and the need for “new readings” of those plays (337). With this re-examining, Levin includes female characters and their roles and what those roles mean. Levin says that Orsino is engaged to Viola solely because he liked the person he experienced as his page (Levin 338). However, Viola stays true to her nature while she is dressed as a man and does not cloak herself with the tendencies and beliefs of the “other” or the man. Although she is dressed as a man, Viola does not take on the attitudes or emotions of the man. Viola maintains her feminine qualities in spite of her male disguise. The qualities of goodness, intelligence, and wit are what draw Orsino to her. It is when her true gender is revealed that Orsino finds that he is in love with the female Viola. Orsino proposes marriage, which ensures protection for Viola. Because Viola is really a woman, Orsino appears to fall in love. However, Levin suggests that Viola’s marriage could be another form of imprisonment, “particularly when it is entered upon in such haste and for such foolish reasons” (338). The situations at the end of the play are incredibly problematic: “Olivia does not even know the name of her husband ... and Orsino is betrothed to Viola because he liked her when she was a boy. To the end his concerns are with surface judgments and self-generated images of the loved one: before recognizing Viola as a woman he must see her in feminine dress...” (338). The play’s ending is left up in the air and with it, the fate of the cross-dressing Viola and her longevity.

Levin emphasizes that it is due to the feminine qualities of the woman that cross-dressing can be successful, but Robert Kimbrough focuses on the androgynous qualities of Shakespeare's cross-dressing women as to why their disguises work. Kimbrough, in his 1982 text "Androgyny Seen Through Shakespeare's Disguise" writes about the theme and use of androgyny in Shakespeare's plays (there are seven cases altogether) and how the use of androgyny can aid characters in their quest to break free of social constrictions.

Because androgyny in its simplest form appears in Shakespeare when a character of one sex experiences thoughts and emotions beyond those traditionally associated with the gender values of that sex, transsexual disguise provides a kind of laboratory testing-ground where one can isolate such moments of heightened, broadened awareness. There are seven examples of girl-into-boy disguise in Shakespeare: Julia, Portia, Nerissa, Jessica, Rosalind, Viola, and Imogen. (Kimbrough 21)

While most readings limit the results of female cross-dressing to just gaining a husband, Kimbrough attributes much more power to the female and the results are far more liberating.

Androgyny reaches widely and deeply, and impulses toward a recognition and realization of its range run throughout Shakespeare's work. On the social plane, when a woman laments that she does not have the prerogative of men to speak out in matters of love, or when a man self-consciously states that he is being weak and effeminate in showing disgust with fighting, each is trying (to paraphrase Heilbrun) to break out of the

frustrating confines of what society has labeled appropriate behavior for a woman or for a man. (18)

Portia uses androgyny as a means to “break out” of the box that society and the world around her has created for upper-class women. Viola uses her disguise as personal protection while seeking permanent protection due to her feminine subjectivity, but Portia already has protection within her household and does not adhere to the same stereotypical feminine subjectivity.

In contrast to Kimbrough, other readings suggest that the female’s success while cross-dressing is based mainly on her sex. In her 1983 essay “The Woman’s Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare’s Plays,” Paula S. Berggren points out that women remain marginalized or remain “Other-ed” characters in Shakespeare. Their power comes from the essence of their sex. She asserts that “... The central element in Shakespeare’s treatment of women is always their sex, not as focus for cultural observation or social criticism (though these may be discerned), but primarily as a mythic source of power, an archetypal symbol that arouses both love and loathing in the male” (Berggren 18). Berggren is alluding to the idea that women like Viola, Rosalind, and Portia have power due to their sex. That power seems to be put in jeopardy as the heroines are hiding their feminine nature by dressing as men. Berggren states that the woman’s primary role in Shakespeare’s comic plays is that of mother: “The comic world requires childbearers to perpetuate the race, to ensure community and continuity” (Berggren 18). This idealized role of mother is challenged by the use of cross-dressing by Shakespeare’s romantic heroines: “It is a paradox, therefore, that the romantic heroines so frequently disguise themselves as boys, thus denying the procreative function

that makes them undisputed rulers of their terrain...” (Berggren 19). The male disguise highlights female limitations and restrictions rather than the need for a challenge to the social order:

The disregard for these limitations underscored by the change in costume might suggest a radical criticism of society, but while the wearing of pants allows expression of a talent otherwise dampened by convention, it does not, in Shakespeare, lead to a direct challenge of the masculine order. Portia does not take the bar exam and Viola does not organize a search party; they are content to reassume their womanly duties (but we must ask neither how their husbands coped with them nor how many children they had). (Berggren 19)

Viola, Rosalind, and Portia go back to their roles as aristocratic women. For Berggren, the women do not openly challenge the patriarchal conventions of their world; rather, they accomplish what they set out to accomplish and then they are done. Because they achieve enough agency to gain momentary control over their significant other, the women can remove their costumes and resume their lives as women.

Kimbrough brings up the idea of androgyny as power for Shakespeare’s women yet other critics view the state of femininity for Viola, Portia, and Rosalind as being further complicated by the fact that the characters become viewed as androgynous. Phyllis Rackin states in her 1987 work “Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage” that androgyny can serve one of two potential roles. The first is as a picture of transcendence that shows what can happen when a person transcends their social roles and limited human condition. The second is

as a picture of deformity, whether that be socially, physically, or spiritually (Rackin 29).

Viola and Portia are pictures of the former. Both women find themselves damsels in distress in some fashion. Viola is stranded on an island with no authentic means of protection, so she takes matters into her own hands and pursues a safe job dressed as a page boy. Portia's husband and friend are in grave danger, thus subjecting Portia to the same potential danger. Portia chooses to dress as a male in order to intervene in court. While in disguise, Viola finds permanent protection as Orsino's wife, thus saving herself and Portia saves Antonio and Bassanio, thus saving herself. Viola and Portia prosper in their cross-dressing endeavors because they do not become men. By dressing as males, Portia and Viola are able to successfully eliminate their damsel-like state, however they never fully become men and not just in a physical sense. They are still women, not just biologically, but spiritually and mentally, which ensures their success.

In her essay, Rackin shows that cross-dressing could be viewed as a "deformity" as well as a means of breaking societal confines. Jean Howard shows the historical views of cross-dressing in "The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England" (published in 1988). Howard begins her essay by addressing the subject of cross-dressing in Renaissance England and how it "threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination" (418). Shakespeare's plays where women dress as men are very important to Howard:

They contain, they vitiate, challenges posed to masculine authority and the traditional gender hierarchy by wealthy women, by unmarried women, by women with voices, desires, and, though not a room, a coach of their own. But that is not all-or the only thing-they do. Some also, through their

ables, enabled changes in the way gender identities and gender relations were discursively constructed in the period, and they allowed for challenges to the most repressive aspects of patriarchal ideology. (430)

Howard suggests that Portia uses her male dress as a means of gaining power, while Viola uses it as a psychological refuge (Howard 433). While Portia plays the part of the lawyer Balthazar with conviction, as Howard states, Portia stays true to her female nature. Portia's quest in disguising herself as a man is not limited to just saving the merchant Antonio. Portia is also saving herself:

Portia's actions are not aimed at letting her occupy a man's place indefinitely, however, but at making her own place in a patriarchy more bearable. She uses her disguise as Balthazar not only to rescue Antonio from death but also to intervene in the male/male friendship of her husband and Antonio and to gain control over her sexuality while setting the terms of her marriage. (Howard 433)

The 1990s continue the wave of feminist Shakespeare criticism that echoes the idea that cross-dressing can be used as a means of social defiance and change. Published in Valerie Wayne's 1991 *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Cristina Malcolmson examines the social movement, in her essay " 'What You Will': Social Mobility and Gender in *Twelfth Night* " as well as its relation to gender. Malcolmson stresses that the main issue within *Twelfth Night* is the issue of "the relationship between gender and status" (29). In a culture where women could not readily rise above their circumstances, cross-dressing provides a means of changing fates: "*Twelfth Night* dramatizes the issue of social mobility through women who, though

servants, are as capable as their male masters, and who rise out of their role as servants to become their master's mistresses" (31). The mobility of women in *Twelfth Night* is important because, as Malcolmson observes, the world in which the play is written puts a woman's place in the hierarchical society as on the margins (30). Malcolmson argues that Shakespeare uses and shifts women's place on the margins of society in order to challenge the dominant ideologies of the time (31). In a play all about desire and will, the need for "an improved social position" can be the subject of a person's appetite (32). This appetite can be satisfied through mobility by means of marriage: "Marriage may be the goal of desire in the play, but these marriages can also elevate one of the partners to a higher social estate" (32). As Malcolmson shows, the desire for raising one's estate is not limited to females; men desire mobility as well and can gain new found status with marriage (32). The social mobility suggested by Malcolmson is essentially a game changer for *Twelfth Night*. Marriage does not simply give protection for women – marriage allows agency to those (males and females) that might not be afforded that agency otherwise. It changes status and class, and thus, power.

Also part of Wayne's 1991 collection, Carol Leventen, in her work "Patrimony and Patriarchy in *The Merchant of Venice*", looks at the world of *The Merchant of Venice* and how the economics and views about wealth play into the relationships of the play: "Narrowly defined, my subject is the relationship between women and money in *The Merchant of Venice* and the ways in which the play both problematizes and mystifies that relationship (59). In the play, relationships, due to the importance of economics, are put in "economic terms" thus resulting in clashes between love and wealth (59). Leventen focuses how patriarchal ideologies are enforced throughout *The Merchant of Venice* and

how Portia's behavior as the "dutiful daughter" is rewarded and how, at the same time, Jessica's behavior as the disobedient daughter is punished (59).

As with Kimbrough and Rackin, Keir Elam focuses on androgyny, specifically looking at Viola's description of her disguise in *Twelfth Night*. Elam, in his 1996 essay "The Fertile Eunuch: *Twelfth Night*, Early Modern Intercourse, and the Fruits of Castration" looks at the use of the word "eunuch" in reference to Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Elam states that although it appears that Viola has given up her powerful femininity, in actuality she is only successful because of that femininity, not due to the lack or absence of it. She has a "fair behavior" that wins people, including Orsino, over (Elam 4). It is not simply Viola's disguise that aids in her quest – it is the essence of her womanhood that gives her power in the midst of her cross-dressing.

Elam, as others have before him, that Viola, as well as Portia and Rosalind, have the ability to change the people around them due to their nature. It is their actions while cross-dressing that moves people. Harold Bloom in his 1998 work *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* looks at the strong actions of the Shakespeare's females and how they use their disguises to gain what they want. He states that Rosalind goes to the Forest of Arden to teach and improve Orlando: "...Rosalind goes into the forest in order to mature Orlando, to improve him both as person and as lover" (Bloom 210). However, Rosalind's motives reach farther than just the goal of teaching Orlando and obtaining a husband. Bloom asserts that Orlando is not an equal to Rosalind: "Daughter of Duke Senior, the rightful if usurped Duke, Rosalind is too far beyond Orlando (a poor gentleman) to accept him as husband, but the Forest of Arden dissolves hierarchies, at least for a blessed time" (Bloom 203). For Bloom, it is not just Rosalind's disguise as a

male that allows for her freedom around Orlando, but it is also the setting of the Forest of Arden. The combination of her male persona and the Forest of Arden assist Rosalind in her efforts. Within the royal court, Rosalind is far beyond the grasp of Orlando, who is a mere gentleman while she is the daughter of a duke. Rosalind chooses to leave the confines of the court and she goes into the safety of the woods where the hierarchies that limit her mobility are removed. Rosalind, as Bloom puts it, goes to the Forest of Arden to find not simply her father, a husband, or safety, but her freedom (Bloom 219).

Rosalind uses her femininity, disguise, and the Forest of Arden in order to gain Orlando, as well as a sense of agency that she did not have within the court.

David Bevington looks at the role that the women play in changing and molding their men just as Bloom does. In his 2002 work, *Shakespeare*, Bevington asserts that it is the female's role in these plays to respond to the "hazards of courtship" (Bevington 58). It is due, in this reading, to the extreme differences between men and women that women must intervene and fix the men. The men don't know themselves as young women do, a problem which is amplified by the fact that men place their women on pedestals: "Because young men are so apt to fantasize about women and project onto them desired qualities of perfect womanhood that are unrealizable, the men are prone to disillusionment" (Bevington 59). It is up to the female to help the male to become "fully marriageable" (Bevington 75). Bevington argues that Shakespeare shows that *Twelfth Night's* Viola and *As You Like It's* Rosalind are by far the best solution for this problem concerning "unfit" bachelors: "What sort of young woman does the young man need, in order to traverse this difficult rite of passage? Writing from the male point of view, Shakespeare imagines at least two answers: Rosalind and Viola" (Bevington 75). In *As*

You Like It, Orlando is unable to speak coherently in front of Rosalind. Rosalind as Ganymede is able to talk freely with the object of her affections. Orlando's unrealistic visions of Rosalind prevent him from being with her. Rosalind as Ganymede instructs Orlando and provides council: "Orlando must be instructed how to think of his Rosalind as a flesh and blood woman, capable of bad temper and other inappropriate moods, though not of inconstancy in her affections" (Bevington 76). Once the structure of friendship and trust is in place with the love-sick Orlando, Rosalind can put on her female garments, "She can reveal her sexual identity as a woman and as the object of Orlando's desire" (Bevington 76). With this reading, the women and their womanly ways are tools to aid the men in becoming better men. Cross-dressing is then limited to being a means of gaining a husband, and in gaining a husband; the need for cross-dressing is completed.

Bevington handles the relationship between the lovers in *Twelfth Night* in the same manner as that of the lovers in *As You Like It*. Viola and Orsino's journey from friendship to romantic love in *Twelfth Night* is similar to Rosalind and Orlando's because Orsino is practically in mourning over the unreciprocated affections of Lady Olivia; Viola, as Cesario, is able to offer council and ageless wisdom to Orsino. Just like Rosalind's Ganymede, Viola as Cesario, is able to spend time with and subsequently teach the object of her desire. Orsino quickly comes to trust the young Cesario and cares deeply for him. When Cesario is revealed to be Viola, Orsino acknowledges his love for the young woman he had previously thought was his page: "A deep, loving friendship, made possible in the first instance by the seeming lack of gender between Orsino and Cesario, now ripens into a sexual partnership between Orsino and Viola. Friendship

needs to come first because that is the more spiritual relationship; thereafter, sex is not only permissive but wonderful” (Bevington 77).

In this courtship-minded reading, the female is obligated to “become a man” in order to become accessible to the male. Being as immature as they are, the males idealize the females to a maladaptive and self-depreciating degree that is virtually unfathomable. The female becomes idolized and is placed on a dangerous pedestal; the male basically functions around her. However, that female becomes accessible to some degree when she puts on her male disguise. To the male, she is now a “he” and a male of a lower status in relationship to both parties. Said female steps willingly off of the pedestal and is beneath the male. In coming down from the pedestal, the female puts herself in a position she was not granted or afforded before – she is able to develop and nurture a relationship with the man that is based on a friendship free from sexual constraints and idealized notions of love. Because their relationships are primarily constructed from friendship, Bevington implies that they will last and prosper rather than eventually fizzle away like those based on lust and gratification: “A companionate marriage is in prospect because husband and wife began their relationship as friends. At the height of his achievement in romantic comedy, Shakespeare perfects a pattern of emotional development that enables the male to move through friendship to erotic desire with as little trauma as possible. The process requires a Rosalind, or a Viola, or a Juliet to ensure success” (Bevington 78).

The Power of Cross-Dressing:

The issue with focusing on femininity within the success of female cross-dressing in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Merchant of Venice* is that it limits the heroine's accomplishments, while dressed as a male, to being the product of some mystical feminine power rather than a product of her own human nature. The heroine's use of cross-dressing serves as a vehicle to achieve voice and agency. Idealized and marginalized by a patriarchal society, the aristocratic woman chooses to change her situation through the means of disguising herself as a male and, in doing so, she removes herself from the pedestal upon which she has been placed. However, when the disguise's success is attributed to a mystical feminine power, the heroine is placed back on the pedestal from which she escaped. The women in these plays are not goddesses or deities (although many of the men seem to think so); in reality, they are ordinary people who do extraordinary things with what they innately possess as human beings. Using their innate wit, intelligence, intuition, and courage, Rosalind, Viola, and Portia gain not only protection and marriage, but they are able to challenge preconceived lines of gender, sex, and class. In this way, their accomplishments are not limited to momentary protection or female empowerment, because those accomplishments, as valid and important as they are, simply aren't enough. The heroines in these romantic comedies, through their use of cross-dressing, challenge more than gender. They challenge the patriarchal views of gender, sex, and class and, in challenging those lines, obtain agency and voice for other marginalized individuals other than women. Viola, Rosalind, and Portia save more than just themselves, giving them more than feminine power, but human power.

Cross-Dressing and Gender

The use of cross-dressing as a vehicle to achieve female voice in Shakespeare's transvestite plays gives females temporary control over men due to the challenging of gender lines and roles that occurs before, during, and after the woman dresses as a man. Viola, Rosalind, and Portia all gain voice and agency through the challenging of gender roles. They dispute preconceived notions of gender within the texts. The plays set up the stereotypical notion of gender that exists during the setting of the play from the very first scene. These women are living within societal structures that view and create women as second class citizens. Appropriately, each of the three plays begins, not with the heroine, but with the central male figures. The play's male figures, within the first scenes, introduce the play's central social, economic, or emotional issue that must be ratified by the play's conclusion. However, it is always the female counterpart to the male that offers the solution to the problem presented at the play's opening. Only through her cross-dressing can order be restored. The disguise that was first created to serve as protection for the female against males serves, in the end, as a tool to ratify the problems initially created by the men. To correct the men's problems, the women must gain control over the men and guide them emotionally and socially.

Duke Orsino is grieving over his unrequited love for Lady Olivia in the opening scene of *Twelfth Night*:

Oh, when mine eyes did see Olivia first,
Methought she purged the air of pestilence.
That instant was I turned into hart,
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,

E'er since pursue me. (1.1.18-22)

Orsino is distraught because he has pledged his love to a woman who refuses him, despite his status, power, and wealth. Olivia refuses to marry or be seen, stating that she is mourning the loss of her brother; she goes around, self-indulgent in her misery:

The element itself, till seven years' heat,
 Shall not behold her face at ample view,
 But cloistress, she will veiled walk
 And water once a day her chamber round
 With eye-offering brine – all this to season
 A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh
 And lasting in her sad remembrance. (1.1.25-31)

Just as Olivia displays excessive emotion, Orsino does as well; he thinks of little else but his personal sorrow. Olivia's rejection has left the Orsino emotionally stagnate, which renders him unable to perform his proper duties as duke, putting the kingdom of Illyria in jeopardy.

While Orsino is lamenting over the unreturned affections of Olivia, Viola is on the shores of Illyria in a most desperate situation. After being shipwrecked on the island of Illyria, Viola is left without protection. Although she is an aristocrat, her title carries no weight outside the confines of her homeland. With her father already deceased and her brother, Sebastian apparently drowned, Viola is left alone and very much vulnerable. Viola crafts a plan to dress as a young man in order to seek employment with Duke Orsino:

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid

For such disguise as haply shall become
 The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke.
 Thou shall present me as an eunuch to him.
 It may be worth thy pains, for I can sing
 And speak to him in many sorts of music
 That will allow me very worth his service. (1.2.49-55)

She knows that her disguise and her position in the duke's court will give her vital protection and in a very precarious situation. First and foremost, Viola's disguise is a means of defense and safety but it is through her disguise as Cesario that Viola is able to bond with and bewitch Orsino. Before Viola, Orsino is stuck in his emotional state. Viola is able to teach Orsino about love; when her true identity and gender are revealed her becomes a bride for Orsino, thus removing the need for his infatuation with Olivia.

As You Like It begins with Orlando talking openly about his tyrannical brother Oliver, to the elderly Adam.

As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion
 bequeathed me by will but poor a thousand crowns, and, a
 thou sayest, charged my brother on his blessing to breed me
 well. And there begins my sadness. (1.1.1-4)

Orlando is emotionally grief stricken because of his brother's actions. Oliver has blatantly denied his younger brother the gentleman's upbringing needed to prosper politically and socially within the confines of the royal court.

My brother Jaques he
 keeps at school, and report speaks goldenly of his profit. For

my part, he keeps me rustically at home or, to speak more properly, stays me here at home unkept; for call you that “keeping” for a gentleman of my birth that differs not from the stalling of an ox? His horses are bred better, for, besides that they are fair with their feeding, they are taught their manage and, to that end, riders dearly hired. (1.1.4-11)

With his limited protection and stagnate social mobility, Orlando is unwilling placed in a precarious position that allows for little to any agency; because of the unjust actions of Oliver, Orlando is stuck.

I would thou hadst been son to some man else.
The world esteemed thy father honorable,
But I did find him still mine enemy.
Thou shouldst have better pleased me with this deed
Hadst thou descended from another house.
But fare thee well. Thou art a gallant youth.
I would thou hadst told me of another farther. (1.2.181-187)

Not only is Orlando stuck because of his political situation within the royal court but he also becomes stuck due to his love-at-first-sight infatuation with the beautiful Rosalind. Orlando becomes so in love with her that he can barely form a complete sentence around her.

Can I not say “I thank you”? My better parts
Are all thrown down, and that which here stands up
Is but a quintain, a mere lifeless block. (1.2.209-211)

Also living on borrowed time in the royal court is Rosalind who knows that her days are numbered in the court, due to her father's exile to the Forest of Arden:

You, cousin.

Within these ten days if that thou beest found

So near our public court as twenty miles,

Thou diest for it. (1.3.35-38)

When her uncle, Duke Ferdinand, banishes his niece from the court, Rosalind dons the clothes of a shepherd, going by the name Ganymede and she flees into The Forest of Arden. The court is no longer safe for Rosalind. She is on the wrong side of the political divide so she has no choice but to runaway to Arden. There, dressed as a man, she will be safe. However, while in the Forest of Arden, Rosalind is able to teach a love-sick Orlando about women, much like Viola did with her sessions with Orsino in *Twelfth Night*.

No, I will not cast away my physic but on those that are sick.

There is a man haunts the forest that abuses our young

plants with carving "Rosalind" on their barks, hangs odes

upon hawthorns and elegies on brambles, all forsooth,

deifying the name of Rosalind. If I could meet that fancy-

monger I would give him some good counsel, for he seems

to have the quotidian of love upon him. (3.2.322-328)

It is through Rosalind's tutoring, and the latter revealing of her true self, that Orlando's suffering can end with his marriage to Rosalind. His suffering within the royal court is

eliminated with the reinstatement of the usurped duke, Duke Senior. Rosalind is able to influence and change the figureheads, thus resulting in resolution to Orlando's problems.

The first scenes of *The Merchant of Venice* begin with the wealthy merchant Antonio talking with his various friends about his melancholy mood and the status of his ships.

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.
 It wearies me; you say it wearies you.
 But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
 What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
 I am to learn. And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
 That I have much ado to know myself. (1.1.1-7)

Antonio's close friend Bassanio comes into the scene and he, like Antonio, is immensely sad. While Antonio is not entirely sure what the root of his sadness is, Bassanio's sadness comes from his own emotional and financial grief:

'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
 How much I have disabled mine estate,
 By something showing a more swelling port
 Than my faint means would grant continuance.
 Nor do I now make moan to be abridged
 From such a noble rate. (1.1.122-127)

Bassanio desperately wants to court Portia of Belmont, but he does not have the economic means to do so.

In Belmont is a lady richly left,

And she is fair and – fairer than that word –

Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes

I did receive fair messages.

Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued

To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia. (1.1.161-166)

He is in a great amount of debt to various noblemen, including Antonio, to whom he owes the most money. Bassanio, like Orsino and Orlando, is stuck in his current unsettling circumstance.

Throughout Antonio and Bassanio's financial grief, Portia is in Belmont with a task of her own. Upon her father's death, he left Portia a casket test to determine her future husband. Whichever man chooses the "right" casket will win her hand in marriage. When Bassanio arrives to pick a casket, Portia is able to guide him to the proper choice that will allow him to marry her. Portia is able to bring another solution to Bassanio's problems when they learn that Shylock has demanded payment from Antonio in the form of a pound of flesh. Portia dresses as a young law clerk and defends Antonio during the trial in Venice. By protecting Antonio, Portia is protecting her new husband who is indebted to Antonio, thus protecting her own self.

The transvestite plays begin with the woman's male counterpart, thus revealing his precarious position (be it due to unrequited love, exile, or a financial crisis) that is later made right by the woman. All three women's initial appearances in the plays portray them in exposed positions that render the need to do something about their current position: being shipwrecked on a mysterious island, being exiled from the royal court, or being forced to choose a husband through a patriarchal beyond-the-grave casket

test. Cross-dressing serves to rectify these positions but that is only after their initial purpose is served. First and foremost, Viola, Rosalind, and Portia use cross-dressing as a form of protection. Viola is alone and vulnerable in Illyria with her father deceased, her brother presumed dead, and with no husband or suitors. Dressing as Cesario is how she survives and protects herself. Rosalind is on the wrong side of the royal court, being the daughter of the usurped Duke Senior. While in the royal court, Rosalind has no father (as he is in the Forest of Arden) and no husband. She is able to disguise herself as Ganymede as a form of protection while in exile. Portia's father is deceased and she has no husband, but she does have multiple suitors. Once she obtains a husband, Portia uses cross-dressing in order to protect herself and her spouse.

Cross-dressing works to resolve issues of safety for the women and to resolve the desperate situations of the men. In order for both situations to be resolved, the woman must gain control over the man before, during, and after cross-dressing. It is due to her manipulating and molding of the man (and other characters) with her wit, beauty, allure, goodness, and intelligence that the woman is able to create change. For both Viola and Rosalind, cross-dressing allows them to get to know and interact with their men, Orisno and Orlando, on their own terms, rather than the men's term. Viola and Rosalind are able to undermined traditional courting patterns by getting to know the men as "men", thus allowing them access they would have otherwise been denied. In her work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey examines the use of cinema and film as a means of furthering the "male gaze". Traditionally, the woman is the image and the man is the "bearer of the look" (Mulvey 837). Especially in film, Mulvey points out, the woman is viewed as the sexual object that men have the freedom to gaze upon (837).

However, when the concept of the “gaze” is applied to Shakespeare’s transvestite comedies, the women become the “bearers of the look” while the men become the image to be gazed upon. Viola and Portia dress as men and are able to communicate and interact with Orsino and Orlando on in a way that they would not be privileged to dress as women. The privilege of the gaze is a patriarchal construct, yet Viola and Rosalind have access to it through their disguises, thus giving them power and control. Rather than be gazed upon as objects of the man’s sexual desire, the women of the transvestite comedies are able to situate themselves so that they can view the men as objects of their own sexual desires. The women gain power as well as protection.

At first glance, Rosalind appears to be a token damsel in distress type of stock character. She has her father taken away from his role as duke and she is unceremoniously dismissed from court. Rosalind is only rightfully restored to her former standing when Duke Senior (her father) is given back his title by Duke Fredrick (the very same uncle that dismissed Rosalind from the royal court), and in the secret space of the Forest of Arden, Orlando chooses to marry her. Rosalind’s descent into the Forest of Arden is merely to find the patriarch of her family and to ensure her future by gaining a husband. However, Rosalind cannot be limited to such a desolate fate. She is fully aware that her days are numbered in Duke Fredrick’s court, as he only keeps Rosalind around for the sake of his own daughter, Celia:

She is too subtle for thee, and her smoothness,

Her very silence and her patience

Speak to the people, and they pity her.

Thou art a fool. She robs thee of thy name,

And thou wilt show more bright and seem more virtuous

When she is gone. Then open not thy lips.

Firm and irrevocable is my doom

Which I have passed upon her. She is banished. (1.3.72-79)

Once exiled from the court, it seems as if Rosalind is in a most desperate situation. She has been separated from her one source of true patriarchal protection: her father, the exiled Duke Senior who is in hiding in the Forest of Arden. However, Rosalind and Celia make the conscious decision to venture into Arden. They go into Arden to search for Rosalind's father and find their freedom. Celia is not banished by her father, but she chooses to follow Rosalind into exile, even suggesting that they go in disguise into the Forest of Arden. Celia states that "I'll put myself in poor and mean attire/ And with a kind of umber smirch my face./ The like do you. So shall we pass along/ And never stir assailants" (1.3.108-111). Celia is willing to leave the safety of the court and the security of her father's protection in order to be with Rosalind. If Rosalind cannot stay within the sanctuary and stability of the court, Celia will not stay either. Rather than obey her father, the duke and the chief ruler of the land, Celia chooses to follow Rosalind: a woman. Celia switches her patriarchal allegiance and it is all due to Rosalind.

Cross-Dressing and Sexuality:

In looking at the role of sexuality in Shakespeare's plays, Berggren suggests that "... The central element in Shakespeare's treatment of women is always their sex.... primarily as a mythic source of power, an archetypal symbol that arouses both love and loathing in the male" (Berggren 18). For Berggren, the successes and failures of

Shakespeare's women are due to the "mythic source of power" that is ingrained in their feminine essence. However, Viola, Rosalind, and Portia prove that their social mobility and power are not simply derived from an inane feminine mystique or from being female objects of male desire. Although some of the credit must be given their feminine qualities, they are successful because of their wit, intelligence, and goodness. It is due to these innately human qualities that Rosalind, Portia, and Viola are able to achieve agency and power. These innately human qualities transcend their sex. They are formable characters that influence those around them and create change. One way that Viola, Rosalind, and Portia are able to create change is through their sexuality. A woman's sex is usually perceived as being the thing that limits her: her womanhood, her feminine essence, or even her weakness. Shakespeare's three heroine's sexuality, and the challenging thereof, plays an important role in their quest for agency. By challenging traditional notions of sexuality, they are able to further their quest of agency.

In *As You Like It*, it is Rosalind's beauty that first seems to bring attention upon her. Above all else, Rosalind is a naturally good-hearted figure who influences all those that she comes in contact with. She holds great influential power within the court. Even short conversations with Rosalind yield to dramatic changes in individuals. The most obvious change is the change that occurs in her love interest: the nobleman Orlando, the youngest son of Sir Rowland de Bois. Although it is true that Orlando's love of Rosalind causes changes within the young man, the changes happen from their very first meeting. When Orlando meets Rosalind, she automatically has a profound effect on him and he doesn't even know her name or her important standing within the court as the exiled duke's daughter. He is captivated at first sight. She chooses to engage him in

conversation. Rosalind sees Orlando and chooses to bestow upon him a token of her affection – a chain from around her neck: “Wear this for me – one out of suits with fortune/That could give more but that her hand lacks means” (1.2.204). She knows that she is down on her luck and that the future is rather grim, yet she gives all she can to Orlando. After Rosalind leaves with Celia, Orlando is overcome with emotion: “

What passion hangs these weights upon my tongue?

I cannot speak to her, yet she urged conference.

O poor Orlando! Thou art overthrown.

Or Charles or something weaker masters thee. (1.2.218-221)

Orlando is so smitten with Rosalind that he cannot form a coherent sentence when called upon to do so. Her power over him is greater than that of Charles, the great wrestler.

Dressed as Ganymede, Rosalind is able to influence and guide Orlando to be a better lover. He is befuddled and seemingly hopeless when it comes to his love for Rosalind. Through their tutoring sessions in the Forest of Arden, Rosalind is able to speak frankly about the nature of love:

No, faith, die by attorney. The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love cause.

Troilus had his brains dashed out with a Grecian club, yet he did what he could to die before, and he is one of the patterns of love. Leander, he would have lived many a fair year though Hero had turned nun if it had not been for a hot midsummer night, for, good youth, he went but forth to

wash him in the Hellespont and, being taken with the
 cramp, was drowned; and the foolish chroniclers of that age
 found it was Hero of Sestos. But these are all lies. Men have
 died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not
 for love. (4.1.81-93)

Rosalind, as an aristocratic woman, would never be able to speak so openly and frankly to a man, but as Ganymede she is able to say what she thinks and feels in order to rehabilitate Orlando. She is able to control their courting on her terms and reveals herself to be a woman only when everything is ready and all parties are prepared.

Believe then, if you please, that I can do strange things. I
 have, since I was three years old, conversed with a magician,
 most profound in his art and yet not damnable. If you do
 love Rosalind so near the heart as your gesture cries it out,
 when your brother marries Aliena shall you marry her. I
 know into what straits of fortune she is driven, and it is not
 impossible to me, if it appears not inconvenient to you, to set
 her before your eyes tomorrow, human as she is, and
 without any danger. (5.2.53-61)

Rosalind, through cross-dressing is able to control her courtship of Orlando and her marriage to him.

As Kimbrough states in his work, cross-dressing creates androgyny that serves as a means to break free of social constrictions. For Kimbrough, the definition and literary use of androgyny is rooted within societal constructs:

The definition of androgyny in archetypal terms stems from its use in the personal/social sense because the unisexual myths of creation found embedded within almost every culture suggest a being or entity or personhood having- beyond a physically generative power without need for or use of sexual organs- characteristics of beneficence, wholeness, goodness, integrity, contentment, containment, and truth. From this derives the current sense of the word as a socio-psychological concept which has received rebirth and renewal mainly in the literature of the women's movement. (Kimbrough 19)

Viola, Rosalind, and Portia gain agency in terms of their sexuality while cross-dressing because they are successful in crossing lines regarding sex and gender. As three unmarried women at the beginning of the plays, they do not have sexually agency. However, because of the power that is derived through their ambiguity, they are able to obtain the agency and control that they lack. As men, they become androgynous because they are dressed as men yet they do not act as men. They maintain their femininity which helps to aid them in their quest. Viola, Rosalind, and Portia are able to go back and forth; they go from being viewed as women, to men, to women. At the play's end, they woman's disguise is revealed and she is acknowledged as a woman. She is never permanently seen as a man, thus removing her from her androgynous state.

In *As You Like It*, Orlando is not the only person that falls for the charming words of Rosalind. While dressed as Ganymede, Rosalind catches the eye of the haughty young shepherdess Penelope, who until now has renounced other suitors. Penelope is being pursued by Silvius, is actually infatuated by Ganymede, creating a messy love triangle. It

is Ganymede's personality, goodness, and innate kindness that attract Penelope, and not just Ganymede's looks. Rosalind, in the appearance of Ganymede, is just as captivating as she is in her female attire and persona. In the same way, as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, Viola attracts the affections of Olivia, who has sworn to not take a suitor upon the death of her beloved brother. Meeting Cesario, the duke's page, changes everything for Olivia. She practically throws herself at the young page in spite of all pretenses. No one else has ever been good enough for Olivia and Penelope but Viola and Rosalind as Cesario and Ganymede fit the bill. Sir Toby brings his old friend Sir Andrew to court Olivia, but she will not have him. In addition, Olivia swears that she will not marry anyone that is older or richer than herself, thus eliminating Duke Orsino from the game.

She'll none o' the count. She'll not match above her degree,

neither in estate, years, nor wit. I have heard her swear't.

Tut, ther's life in't man. (1.3.92-94)

Not only does Olivia have specified criteria for any potential suitor, she has also vowed not to take any suitors for seven years due to her mourning over her brother's death. She refuses to see Orsino's other servants, so the duke tries a different tactic to woo his lady love: he sends Cesario, his new favorite page. As Orsino points out, no one quite matches Cesario's appearance, thus making certain that Olivia will lend her ear to his love sick pleas:

For they shall yet belie thy happy years

That say thou art a man. Diana's lip

Is not more smooth and rubious. Thy small pipe

Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,

And all is semblative a woman's part. (1.4.29-33)

Viola's striking features show through her male disguise. Orsino sends his page to Lady Olivia because he hopes that Cesario's looks will appease the stubborn object of his affection. When Olivia meets Cesario, the youth's appearance and demeanor almost immediately take her. Olivia reflects on her newfound affection after her first meeting with Cesario:

"What's your parentage?"

"Above my fortunes, yet my state is well.

I am a gentleman." I'll be sworn thou art;

Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit,

Do give thee fivefold blazon. Not too fast! Soft, soft!

Unless the master were the man. How now?

Even so quickly may one catch the plague?

Methinks I feel this youth's perfections

With an invisible and subtle stealth

To creep in at mine eyes. Well, let it be. – (1.5.264-274)

Upon further investigation, it becomes clear to Olivia that Cesario matches her criteria in every possible way – as far as she can see. Viola achieves great agency and power through her cross-dressing. Duke Orsino, a leader of Illyria, is unable to win the heart of Olivia. Olivia admits how wonderful the duke is and recounts his amiable qualities, yet she chooses not to have him. Sir Andrew, in spite of his alignment with Olivia's criteria, is not chosen either. Malvolio, a ladder climbing servant is ignored by Olivia. However, it is Viola disguised as Cesario, a mere pageboy that unwillingly wins the affections of

Olivia. Olivia throws herself at Orisno's page and practically begs for Cesario's hand in marriage despite his rank, age, and status. Viola, as Cesario, does what the other three men can only dream of doing: winning the heart of Lady Olivia (although Viola never intentionally seeks that romantic outcome or scenario).

Portia is a good and admirable character. She is known for her great beauty but she is also extremely clever with a wit to match. Although she seems to be confined and limited to her father's casket test, Portia manages to manipulate the odds to gain the husband she desires. Even before she When Portia finds out about Antonio's debt to Shylock, she immediately takes action, putting the value of friendship over that of money:

Pay him six thousand and deface the bond!

Double six thousand, and then treble that,

Before a friend of this description

Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault.

First go with me to church and call me wife,

And then away to Venice to your friend. (3.2.298-301)

Portia takes charge of responding to Antonio's plight. She shows herself to be a kind and caring human being who is not willing to allow the thought of another suffering in any manner. She tells her soon-to-be husband, Bassanio, that upon their quick marriage ceremony, he needs to go to Antonio's aid in Venice, bringing with him the necessary amount to pay for the debt. Portia does not simply lookout for her own well-being, but she looks out for the well-being of those around her. Antonio put his name and credit on the line so that Bassanio could court Portia and she repays him by sending her new

husband to his aid and by intervening in the courtroom. As soon as Bassanio is gone to Venice, Portia sets a plan into motion.

They shall, Nerissa, but in such a habit
 That they shall think we are accomplished
 With that we lack. I'll hold thee any wager,
 When we are both accoutered like young men.
 I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,
 And wear my dagger with the braver grace,
 And speak between the change of man and boy
 With a reed voice and turn two mincing steps
 Into manly stride, and speak of frays (3.4.60-68)

Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice* goes further than Viola and Rosalind by gaining sexual control over her husband. Portia, dressed as a man, can control her new husband and even trick him so that she has power even after her disguise is cast aside. With the death of her father, Portia is left the sole head of the family estate, with the knowledge that the title will be given to her future husband (which is guaranteed through the casket test devised by Portia's father). Upon their marriage, Portia gives Bassanio as ring, as did her lady Nerissia to her new husband. For Portia, the ring symbolizes the giving up of the role as head-of-house, bestowing the title of lord on Bassanio, and promises Portia physically:

But now I was the lord
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
 Queen o'er myself. And even now, but now,

This house, these servants, and this same myself
 Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring,
 Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
 Let it presage the ruin of your love. (3.2.167-173)

Although the gift of the ring would appear to give Bassanio full control, the ring gives Portia power. The two women tell their grooms never to remove the rings or give them to anyone else, allowing the rings to serve as yet another test, this time as one of faithfulness. After her triumph in court, Portia (still disguised as a young law clerk) asks Bassanio for his ring and Nessia (also still in disguise) does the same with her husband. Both men give up their token of love and faithfulness.

And for your love, I'll take this ring from you.
 Do not draw back your hand. I'll take no more,
 And you in love shall not deny me this. (4.1.424-426)

When Portia and Nerissa greet their husbands in their female garbs, they question the whereabouts of the rings. Upon hearing that Bassanio gave his ring to a young law clerk, Portia swears that she will never sleep with her new husband until she sees her ring:

Even so void is your false heart of truth.
 By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed
 Until I see the ring. (188-190)

Bassanio tries to explain what happened to the ring but Portia cites him for reckless behavior, stating that she belongs to whoever holds the ring. If the lawyer holds the ring, then Portia belongs to him rather than Bassanio. In other words, Portia belongs to herself rather than her new husband.

Let not that doctor e'er come near my house!
 Since he hath got the jewel that I loved,
 And that which you did swear to keep for me,
 I will become as liberal as you.
 I'll not deny him anything I have,
 No, not my body, nor my husband's bed.
 Know him I shall, I am well sure of it.
 Lie not a night from home. Watch me like Argus.
 If you do not, if I be left alone,
 Now, by mine honor – which is yet mine own –
 I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow. (5.1.221-231)

This serves as Portia's ultimate moment of control. She was able to choose who she married by manipulating the casket test. She dressed as young law clerk to ensure that justice was served in Antonio's case. Finally, she tricks her new husband into giving her his one pawn: her ring. With ownership of the ring, Portia regains control in the relationship. She chooses who she is with and who she will allow to have any form of ownership over herself, thus defying previous notions of sexuality. Portia defies predetermined notions of sexuality while affirming them at the same time.

Cross-Dressing and Social Status:

Viola, Rosalind, and Portia cannot be limited to being successful in their cross-dressing simply due to their femininity. Yes, part of their power comes from stereotypically feminine qualities, such as beauty – that cannot be denied. It is Rosalind's

loveliness that first attracts Orlando in the royal court, leaving him tongue-tied. Portia's features are known throughout the land and Viola's fair features show through even her male ensemble. But to accredit their entire triumphs as merely a result of some mystical female power would undermine their victory. Their success is due to inherent human characteristics that allow them to protect themselves, which is the first goal of their cross-dressing. Next, it allows them to manipulate and change the circumstances of the men by creating a vehicle to mold the men into better people, along with correcting their turbulent situations. Malcolmson states in her work that it is critical to look at "the relationship between gender and status" (29). In a culture where women could not readily rise above their circumstances, cross-dressing provides a means of changing fates. Shakespeare's plays were written during times when women were placed at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy. As aristocratic women, Viola, Rosalind, and Portia are placed upon pedestals, putting them in an even more limited position. All three make the conscious effort to remove themselves from their pedestals by stepping down and clothing themselves in male garments and taking on the persona of a lower class male. In doing so, they achieve agency for themselves as aristocratic women and for the male of a lower class male that they are embodying. The change does not stop with the women – the change is far more widespread than just the confines of the women. Not only do these women defy standard patriarchal views and create social mobility for themselves, they are able to create mobility for other characters, including men. They are also able to create change within the government, thus resulting in more permanent change for the social status of those around them. By creating change in the world around them, the

women of Shakespeare's transvestite comedies are able to create permanent change. Their disguise may not last but their impact is lasting.

After disguising herself as Cesario, Viola seeks employment with Duke Orsino. In a very short span of time, despite being a mere pageboy, Viola's Cesario is able to become a key member of Orsino's court. Valentine points out the phenomenon of Cesario's rise in the duke's court in such a small amount of time:

If the duke continue these favors towards you, Cesario, you
are like to be much advanced. He hath known you but three
days, and already you are no stranger. (1.4.1-3)

It is due to Cesario's very essence and likeability that draws people and what gains Orsino's love. The duke confides in the young Cesario and seeks his counsel in matters of love. Orsino is the duke of Illyria. Cesario, as far as Orsino knows, is a mere pageboy with barely a title to speak of yet he gets to converse with a high-ranking nobleman. Knowing the Viola, through the vehicle of Cesario, changes the nobles, most notably Orsino and Olivia, for the better. At the play's beginning, Orsino is melancholy, depressed, and deeply saddened by his rejection from Olivia, yet Viola is able to aid him through the transition, thus making him suitable to marry by the play's end. While serving as Orsino's confidant, Viola is able to see his innermost feelings about love, loss, and the fickleness of human nature. Orsino shares everything with Cesario in a way that he would not with any other employee in his court and the page is able to respond in a way that defies social expectations. In the second act, Orsino requests that Cesario go once again to Olivia. The two begin a conversation in which Orsino speaks against the notion that any woman could possibly love as much as he loves Olivia:

There is no woman's sides
 Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
 As love doth give my heart. No woman's heart
 So big, to hold so much. They lack retention.
 Alas, their love may be called appetite,
 No motion of the liver, but the palate,
 That suffer surfeit, cloyment, and revolt;
 But mine is all as hungry as the sea,
 And can digest as much. Make no compare
 Between that love a woman can bear me
 And that I owe Olivia. (2.4.90-100)

In response to the duke's statement against a woman's ability to love, Viola is able to bear her own feelings about Orsino, disguised as a story about her "sister" who had once loved a man:

A blank, my lord. She never told her love,
 But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
 Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,
 And with a green and yellow melancholy
 She sat like patience on a monument,
 Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?
 We men may say more, swear more, but indeed
 Our shows are more than will, for still we prove
 Much in our vows, but little in our love. (2.4.107-115)

Through her story about unrequited love, Viola is able to express her own feelings towards Orsino as well as correct his ill formed notions of a woman's heart. Not only is Viola, a woman, getting to speak openly to Orsino, a man, but also she is doing so as a lower status male. No page, let alone a woman, would have been able to talk to Orsino in this manner and yet Viola, as Cesario, does just that. Viola, due to her goodness and admirable character, is able to make a lasting impression on the duke that gives her unprecedented agency and power. With this privilege and power, she is able to make an impact. Viola is able to change Orsino for the better by speaking to him in this way. She shows him his own flaws and improves his heart.

Like Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Rosalind is able to change noblemen for the better. Rosalind's power over Duke Fredrick is more telling than that of her power over Orlando. Rosalind holds no political office yet Duke Fredrick, her own uncle, is so worried about her possible influence that he exiles her from the kingdom. The messenger Le Beau tells Orlando that Duke Fredrick dislikes and distrusts Rosalind because of the favorable view others seem to have of her:

But I can tell you that of late this duke/ Hath ta'en displeasure 'gainst his
gentle niece,/ Grounded upon no other argument/ But that the people praise
her for her virtues/ And pity her for her good father's sake;/ And, on my
life, his malice for the 'gainst the lady/ Will suddenly break forth.

(1.2.233-244)

The mere idea that Rosalind is well thought of by others is potentially detrimental to the duke. Fully aware of the fact that Rosalind holds uncharted power that could easily topple his carefully crafted reign; the duke banishes her just as he did Duke Senior.

When Duke Fredrick confronts Rosalind, he brings with him a host of lords. It is not merely the memory of the banished Duke Senior that has Duke Fredrick in fear of his niece. She has an authority that extends beyond the duke's courts that cannot be controlled by mere threat of exile. She has a clear power over people and that gives her agency. Rosalind is exiled as a woman, goes into hiding as a man, and returns from hiding as a woman. She is able to set things right in the Forest of Arden, even ensuring Orlando's state as a gentleman, as seen with Duke Senior's speech in the final act:

Welcome, young man.

Thou offer'st fairly to they brother's wedding:

To one his lands withheld, and to the other

A land itself at large, a potent dukedom.

– First, in this forest let us do those ends

That here were well begun and well begot,

That have endured shrewd days and nights with us

According to the measure of their states.

Meantime, forget this new-fall'n dignity,

And fall into our rustic revelry.

– Play, music. –And you brides and bridegrooms all,

With measure heaped in joy to th' measures fall. (5.4.159-172)

Due to Rosalind's influence, Touchstone marries Audrey; Oliver marries Celia and rights things with his brother (Orlando), thus giving him back his rightful status as a gentleman; Phoebe agrees to marry Silvius in spite of her infatuation with Ganymede; Duke Fredrick decides not to attack Duke Senior and returns the throne; and Orlando is granted

permission by Duke Senior to marry Rosalind and subsequently is able to unite with her. Couples are united in marriage, statuses are reinstated, families united, and kingdoms returned. Rosalind's influence, in this way, supersedes the Forest of Arden and transfers into the royal court, giving her agency and social control.

Just as Rosalind is able to show her power and influence over the societal situations around her, so is Portia. Rosalind and Portia are both able to right troubling situations that present themselves as the beginning of the plays, especially in terms of status and class. Portia goes to Venice and manipulate the law in order to save Antonio, but Portia demonstrates her power against class structure and the law earlier in the play when she marries Bassanio. At the beginning of the play, Bassanio is in great financial strife. He has no money left and is forced to borrow more money from Antonio (in addition to the money he had already acquired from his friend).

In my school days, when I had lost one shaft,
 I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight
 The selfsame way with more advised watch
 To find the other forth—and by adventuring both,
 I oft found both. I urged this childhood proof
 Because what follows is pure innocence.
 I owe you much, and, like a willful youth,
 That which I owe is lost. But if you please
 To shoot another arrow that self way
 Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
 As I will watch the aim, or to find both

Or bring your latter hazard back again

And thankfully rest debtor for the first. (1.1.140-152)

Despite his lack of fortune, Portia chooses to marry Bassanio and with their marriage, she gives him a ring and makes him lord of her house. Bassanio is given a title that elevates him in society, thus giving him agency and wealth (which in a play filled with financially fueled plot lines, is a significant degree and sign of power). Bassanio could not have climbed the rungs of society without the aid of Portia. Antonio's money only gives Bassanio the ability to court Portia; it is Portia's hand that ensures Bassanio's success. By taking him as her husband Portia, a woman, gives Bassanio, a man, agency. She uses the same social institution that binds her in order to free herself.

In the same way, Portia uses the same law that allows Shylock to take a pound of flesh from Antonio as a way to free Antonio. Portia cites in Venetian law that no blood can be spilt when Shylock takes Antonio's pound of flesh as payment:

Tarry a little. There is something else.

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.

The words expressively are "a pound of flesh."

Take then thy bond, take thou pound of flesh,

But in the cutting it if thou dost shed

One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods

Are by the laws of Venice confiscate

Unto the state of Venice. (4.1.302-309)

Portia is able to manipulate the law in order to ensure that justice is served within the court. The Duke could not see a way around Shylock's bond, nor could Antonio and

Bassanio. It was Portia, a woman, who saw the means to save Antonio and distribute justice in court. Portia achieves agency not only as a woman, but she does so dressed as a young law clerk who appears to be fresh out of school.

Conclusion:

Shakespeare's transvestite comedies are often seen as being humorous stories that feature women dressed as men for the sole purpose of gaining a husband. An additional layer the cross-dressing in Shakespeare's transvestite comedies is the fact that the Shakespearean audience was fully aware that the boy actor was cross-dressing as a young woman, who was taking on the disguise of a man (Kimbrough 17). This element was often seen as comedic, making any agency achieved problematic because the audience knew that beneath the female cross-dresser was a young boy, not a woman. The disguise becomes an illusion on multiple levels. In this way, any type of power that the female characters receive is momentary and evanescent because the agency they gain does not last: it only exists for the time that they are dressed as men and when the audience suspends their belief that these women are actually boy actors. Their agency is thus fleeting, if that agency ever truly existed at all. Like with many of the views of Lady Gaga's cross-dressing, Viola, Rosalind, and Portia's cross-dressing becomes a mere show – a dress-up game that eventually ends with no lasting agency or gain as a female or as a human being.

From a twenty-first century perspective, this limited view of Viola, Rosalind, and Portia's cross-dressing is not enough. Their story cannot be condensed into a trite love story that only allows the woman enough agency to get a proper husband. This view of

cross-dressing as a means of marital bliss disregards everything that is accomplished by Shakespeare's heroines in the transvestite comedies. Their story cannot be condensed into a mere game of dress-up – a show. Giving Shakespeare's women their rightful dues is imperative especially as a modern day audience. The twenty-first century audience must seek more from their heroines because twenty-first century women are in the same precarious position as Shakespeare's heroines. Twenty-first century women are still placed on pedestals, are limited by patriarchal means, and are subjects of the male gaze. Just like Viola, Rosalind, and Portia, twenty-first century women have been placed in a corner because of they are female. Patriarchal views and expectations still exist, as much as twenty-first century men and women try to ignore it. Women are still limited. However, Shakespeare's women are able to manipulate expectations and their position in order to change their circumstances. They reclaim the gaze, they reclaim their voice, and they reclaim ownership of themselves. In order for twenty-first women to change circumstances, it is imperative to recognize how Shakespeare's women change their own circumstances as well as the circumstances of those around them.

It is clear that through cross-dressing, Shakespeare's heroines gain more than a mere husband; they gain for all those that have been pushed to the margins – women, men of lower class status, the usurped, the forgotten, and the wronged. Viola, Rosalind, and Portia each begin in precarious positions within society. Viola is shipwrecked on a strange island. Rosalind is being threatened with exile. Portia is at the mercy of a patriarchal marriage game. They are fatherless, brother-less, and husbandless in turbulent and uncertain times. Rather than fret over their predicaments, they do something to better their situations. Viola becomes Cesario, a young page boy. Rosalind becomes

Ganymede, a handsome shepherd. Portia becomes Balthazar, a law clerk. Each woman makes the conscious effort to step-down from her position as an aristocratic female and takes up the garbs of a male of a lower status. They use their disguise to accomplish great things and make lasting impacts.

The women use their male disguises to do more than simply gain a husband or protect themselves. For Viola, Rosalind, and Portia, far more than their marriage statuses and reputations are at stake and far more if up for grab. In taking on the garbs of a male of lower status, each woman is able to cross over boundaries regarding gender, sexuality, and even social status. Viola, Rosalind, and Portia gain agency due to their innate goodness of character, spirit, and heart. Their power does not simply come from their female sexuality or their position as potential objects of desire. Their power goes much deeper than such a shallow and limiting view. These women are not boxed into their own self-serving purposes. Yes, they gain husbands and agency, but they do much more. They influence those that are around them and thus create change for the better. Viola ends the self-indulgent behavior of Orsino and Olivia, Rosalind returns the throne to its rightful ruler, and Portia manipulates the law to bring justice to a friend.

It is easy and even tempting to view Lady Gaga's cross-dressing as a game of dress-up for entertainment purposes. However, Lady Gaga's feat, like Shakespeare's heroines' feats, cannot be viewed in such a shallow fashion. All four women use cross-dressing as a means to reclaim control over the male gaze and reclaim their own voices, as well as that of the marginalized. She gains power that lasts beyond her performance onstage. Although Viola, Rosalind, and Portia's disguises are revealed at the plays' closing, their agency does not disappear; their agency cannot end. The women of

Shakespeare's transvestite comedies challenge preexisting roles and expectations. They become androgynous in their disguises, are able to position themselves as men, gain privilege previously only given to males, yet are successful due to their feminine qualities. Viola, Rosalind, and Portia cross lines and defy expectations. Because their influence spreads across borders, genders, sexes, and class, Viola, Rosalind, and Portia's agency does not stop at their disguises' or the plays' end; their agency lives on. They refuse to stay in the corner that the patriarchal society has placed them in and are thus able to challenge gender, sex, and class expectations, proving the power of cross-dressing in order to achieve permanent female agency.

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