

CROSSDRESSING AS PERFORMATIVE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY IN
SHAKESPEARE'S *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

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'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'
'The question is', said Humpty-Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'

Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking Glass*

Selected from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the epigraph of my essay can be read as a message about language and power dynamics. If we look at the picture that illustrates these words¹, we shall notice that Humpty-Dumpty, the egg, represents the male teacher sitting upon a wall, elevated physically above Alice who stands beneath him in a much less powerful position. He declares that he shall be master of language: he shall make words mean what he wants them to mean. He uses language in an over-confident style and asserts power through his assumption of the right to control language and thereby interpretation. Alice, in her role of a clever student, perceives the incongruity of his declaration, but she is, nevertheless, not in the position (either literally or figuratively) to challenge his authority.

Although Humpty-Dumpty's affirmation is a logical inversion, it makes us think about the fact that what we say is not always what we intend to mean. In the excerpt quoted above, Humpty Dumpty's last remark tells us that he is not trying to 'make words mean so many different things', but is interested in precise denotation; he wants to make a word mean only *one* thing, the thing intended by the user and nothing else. This univocality of language is exactly what modern language philosophers attack. Like Lewis Carroll, Shakespeare seems to have been aware of the paradoxical nature of truth long before Wittgenstein, as well as of the power of language to affect people in real or symbolic ways.

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¹ I refer to the picture on p. 196 of the 1939 edition of Lewis Carroll's *Complete Works*, listed in the bibliography.

In Shakespeare's time the theatre was not only a place for social gatherings but also a political institution, an arena where established values were questioned and challenged. Although playhouses were closely monitored by the State and both companies and plays had to be licensed, the institutional position of the theatre was extremely complex:

On the one hand, it [the theatre] was sometimes summoned to perform at Court and as such may seem an extension of royal power; on the other hand, it was the mode of cultural production in which market forces were strongest, and as such it was especially exposed to the influence of subordinate and emergent classes. We should not, therefore, expect any straightforward relationship between plays and ideology: on the contrary, it is even likely that the topics which engaged writers and audiences alike were those where ideology was under strain. (DRAKAKIS, 1985, p. 211)

In his plays, Shakespeare used to reflect on power relations in everyday life, exposing the contradictions in the fabric of the patriarchal discourse. However, he was perfectly aware of what could be said overtly and what should better be only suggested: he knew that the ideological content of a text can be much better apprehended by implicit discourse rather than explicit.

Shakespeare, long before Freud, revealed himself a keen observer of life's subtext, since he detected the covert springs of human behavior, illuminating the distance between overt behavior and masked motivations. In his play *Twelfth Night* (I, v, 191-201), he plays with the concepts of "text" and "subtext", by including a great deal of double-talk in the scene where we see Viola acting as Orsino's go-between to win the heart of Olivia. When Olivia asks the page "Now, sir; what is your text?" and, some minutes later "Where lies² your text?" – she is alluding to something beyond the words she utters, namely to the fact that she is able to read the message of the go-between before he opens his mouth, since she knows it is something *déjà lu*, a formulaic text composed by another, the usual pastiche of Petrarchan verse appropriated by Orsino to court her. When Viola asks her to uncover her face, she replies "You are now out of

² Shakespeare also plays with the pun implicit in the verb "to lie" which includes several meanings, such as not to tell the truth and to copulate.

your text” – not realizing that it is she that is out of her text, since she misreads Viola for Cesario and falls in love with him/her. Olivia ends up denouncing her dotage for Viola/Cesario through her decorous text being betrayed by her subtext (HAWKES, 1996, p. 148-49).

Shakespeare’s employs a great variety of subtextual strategies in his work. In those comedies where mistaken identities dominate, subtext can be detected not only in both discourse and action, but also in his artistic fashioning of dramatic conventions to suit his own purposes. Consequently, a great number of possibilities emerge from the implied dimensions of his texts, which permit us to problematize the issues and contest traditional readings.

Most scholars agree that because of Shakespeare’s extraordinary insight into human nature, he succeeded in portraying men and women with equal artistry and cunning, making evident women’s capacity to transcend the limits of their condition within the patriarchal system. In his comedies, he ingeniously turns the dramatic convention of crossdressing into a subversive weapon to question gender issues. Through his creative use of double disguise (the boy actor impersonating a woman who puts on men’s clothes), he succeeds in breaking widely accepted frames. His strategy of blurring and confusing identities shows that rather than being a fixed attribute in a person, gender must be seen as a fluid variable which shifts and changes according to circumstance in different times and contexts.

Shakespeare attitudes towards women are complex and demand critical attention. Through crossdressing, the bard succeeds in establishing a confusion of identities within the universe of his comedies, which contradict and subvert the traditional view of what is a woman, suggesting that the concepts of “masculinity” and “femininity” are cultural constructs and, as such, stereotyped behaviors learned along

the process of socialization, which conditions the sexes differently to assume specific roles and functions as if they were part of their own nature. This naturalizing process, which sees woman as the inferior sex is questioned, undermined, ridiculed and occasionally even subverted in Shakespeare's comedies.

Played by male impersonators travestied as female, Shakespeare's women become free from sexist prescriptive behavioral norms when disguised as men. When crossdressed, they can do everything forbidden for their sex: they can move in and out of places reserved for men's affairs and assume roles supposed to be suited only for men. The disguise helps them to get liberated from the restrictions of their feminine condition, illuminating the issue of the artificial nature of all mechanisms of construction of social behavior. Shakespeare uses the convention of crossdressing as a frame-break, as artistic strategy to make the audience reflect on the artifice of construction of a creature named woman: the double crossdressing of the actor can be seen as an emblem of the equality of the sexes, independently of the clothes they wear, disrupting sexual difference and calling into question the binary oppositions that assert the superiority of men.

After the 80's and 90's, feminist criticism provided visibility to Shakespeare's women characters, which were not very much valued or textualized by traditional Shakespearean criticism. Elaine Showalter, Catherine Belsey, Carol Thomas Neely, Juliet Dusinberry, among others, departing from the critical concepts of Simone de Beauvoir and her French sisters (Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray, etc), have demonstrated in their critical reflections that Shakespeare's heroines are strong, intelligent and witty, showing courage, independence of spirit, versatility and verbal fluency. Most of them are determined; they know what they want and fight to achieve their goals. Some are unruly, indomitable and uncontrollable.

Rejecting all answers based on metaphysical, essentialistic or deterministic concepts, the materialist-feminists have discussed what it means to be a woman, investigating female subjectivity in Shakespeare's plays in specific historical and theoretical contexts. Their findings show that the bard's texts allow different readings: they can be seen as an affirmation or negation of sexist ideologies. We can see them as a re-affirmation of the bases of the patriarchal system, but it is also possible to activate the subtext which enriches the texts, not only through word-play and rhetorical emphases, but also through the clever articulation of certain conventions, such as crossdressing.

Through crossdressing, Shakespeare problematizes gender issues. The discourse which this strategy inaugurates becomes a kind of subversive language which confirms the theoretical premises of recent feminists, who have argued that the body is a *situation* (MOI, 1999, p.117) – concretely experienced while signified and socially/ historically situated – i. e., a woman is not a fixed entity, but a living being in constant process of change, making and remaking herself through successive lived experiences in time while interacting with the world. The discourse of crossdressing can also be related to the theory of the social psychologist Erving Goffman (1959, p. 25-76), who in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, sees the individual behavior in daily social life as a *performance* of the subject. His main premise is that “all the world's a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players” (SHAKESPEARE, 1964, p. 227), that everybody is constantly, consciously or not, representing a role and that the individual subject is a product of the social interaction rather than the author of his own *performance*.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1999), departing from the intersections of feminism, sociology, speech act theory, among others, Judith Butler makes a reassessment of Goffman's theory of the individual's performing self and goes a

step further. She is interested in how gender is constructed and attributed to individuals, trying to identify the processes through which ideology constitutes subjects. Butler also borrows from Foucault, who in his critical essays postulates the existence of the body prior to cultural inscription. His insight that subjects are produced and controlled by regulating powers constitutes a fundamental premise of performative gender theory.

In the last section of her groundbreaking study mentioned above, entitled “Bodily inscriptions, performative subversions”, Butler discusses some issues related to the performance of gender subversion:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of the bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true or false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity. In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonation in America*, anthropologist Esther Newton suggests that the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricated mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place. I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity. (BUTLER, 1999, p. 174)

According to Butler, drag is a double inversion, attesting that appearance is an illusion, since drag’s outside (appearance) is feminine, while the inside (body) is masculine. Furthermore, an opposite inversion takes place, namely drag’s feminine essence (inside) in a male body (outside). Butler asseverates that those behavioral traits attributed to gender create the concept of gender, and if these specific characteristics are lacking, gender does not materialize, since there is no essence that gender is prone to express or exteriorize.

This paper focuses on critical revisiting of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, in the light of Butler’s theoretical premises. My main objective is to concentrate my analysis on Portia, one of the androgynous heroines of the play, to investigate Shakespeare’s appropriation and recreation of the dramatic convention of crossdressing, which he transformed into an artistic strategy to problematize gender issues. Through the figure of the boy-actor and his transvestite roles, Shakespeare questions the notion of an original or primary generic identity, indirectly discrediting stereotyped pre-established

social and sexual roles. The principle of double inversion which is foregrounded in the creation of Shakespeare's androgynous heroines erases the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. As Butler has aptly put it

[...] we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance [...] In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. (BUTLER, 1999, p. 175)

Through the three transvestite female roles, namely those of Portia, Jessica and Nerissa, Shakespeare both dramatizes and problematizes contemporary anxieties about women, power and money in *The Merchant of Venice*. His three androgynous heroines in male disguise enable him to frame the issues according to several perspectives. According to Carol Leventen,

It is not difficult to understand the destabilizing effects of developments that implicitly challenged English women's status – as object, gift, commodity, property – in a social system that had vested interest in preserving the *status-quo* and defending itself against disruptive change. Nor is it difficult to imagine why Shakespeare might well have been interested in dramatizing divergent responses to these pressures and possibilities in such a way as to accommodate, and possibly provoke, similarly divergent audience responses. (WAYNE, 1991, P. 65)

Portia is a rich heiress from Belmont, whose dead father still wants to exert control over her after his death, according to the prerogatives of the father in the patriarchal system: the young woman complains that she cannot choose nor refuse anyone of her suitors (15)³. However, since the very beginning, it becomes evident that everything she says is contradicted by her actions, since she is very clever in manipulating persons and situations to suit her own purposes. Bassanio's choice of the

³ All references and quotations from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* are taken from the Arden Shakespeare edition of the play listed in the bibliography, hereafter cited in the text by page numbers in parentheses.

right casket, for example, is a show directed by the heroine: she literally conducts the action of her suitor by providing him with clues to choose the leaden ark. To achieve her goal, Portia hired a group of musicians who succeed to put an end to Bassanio's doubts by singing a song whose lyrics are very suggestive, since several line-endings rhyme with "lead". This makes us realize that Bassanio did not choose, but was chosen by her.

Immediately after this initial victory, Portia's discourse of submission and dependence, which on the surface seems to reaffirm the codes of patriarchy, since she speaks of her fragile nature, her insecurity, a girl not very bright and without experience, who will be glad to submit her body and spirit to Bassanio, so that he can guide her as "her lord, her governor, her king" (86), is contradicted by her own counter-arguments and subsequent daring attitudes. She asseverates that she was "the lord/ Of this fair mansion", not the lady, and then offers him a ring, which once lost shall give her the "right" of protesting (86).

We can see, from the very first moment, that it is she who imposes conditions. Her subsequent initiatives, when she decides to substitute the judge Bellario, travestied as Balthazar, determined to assume the role of the lawyer, not only to defend Antonio, but mainly to save her own marriage, show that she is neither fragile nor dependent, but strong-willed, intelligent, sly and even authoritative.

Carol Leventen, in her essay entitled "Patrimony and Patriarchy in *The Merchant of Venice*", asserts that through Portia's discourse of submission, Shakespeare dramatizes the power of patriarchal ideology, making one part of the audience believe that the heroine has internalized the discourse of cultural imperatives, embodying the "patriarchal fantasy of an ideally compliant daughter to which Jessica is contrasted", as the disobedient, rebellious daughter (WAYNE, 1991, p.72). I agree with the feminist critic's arguments that although Portia manipulates a great deal, she does not challenge the

system openly like Jessica. However, I disagree when Leventen claims that Portia subjects herself entirely to the game of chance in the casket plot, because “she has thoroughly internalized her father’s values; the way she perceives herself is determined by her father’s will, and she cannot think well of herself if she considers acting in opposition to him” (WAYNE, 1991, p. 67). I think it becomes very clear that Portia is the playwright and director of the third act of the casket plot, a play within the play, and that her submission discourse, is one more evidence of her power of dissimulation and creation: she pronounces words she is sure Bassanio would like to hear, and she does so to become desirable in his eyes.

Portia is constantly reinventing herself to exert power upon her future husband, always imposing conditions. This process of identity construction culminates with her entrance into the male world, disguised as a man, in this case a lawyer, where she triumphs over her adversaries. In her gender and professional performance, she proves to be equal to any man and/ or lawyer. She writes down her own credentials in a letter to assume the lawyer’s role, and then succeeds in twisting the law with her intelligence and language proficiency, which was considered a male prerogative.

Portia assumes this role of the lawyer for her own sake and not for Antonio’s. She knows she must break the stranglehold of the male bond in order to solidify her power base in her own marriage. Throughout the play we gather evidence that there is a rivalry between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio’s affection⁴, an argument which can be legitimated by Bassanio’s speech during the trial scene, when he declares that he is ready to renounce everything, including the love of his wife, to save his friend (115).

⁴ Coppélia Kahn, in an essay entitled “The cuckoo’s note: male friendship and cuckoldry in *The Merchant of Venice*”, argues that Shakespeare “structures the ring plot so as to parallel and contrast Antonio and Portia as rivals for Bassanio’s affection, bringing out a conflict between male friendship and marriage which runs throughout his works.” (WALLER, 1991, p.129)

Portia reveals great insight into stereotyped pre-established social and sexual roles, when she appropriates herself of the male discourse in order to legitimate her thesis that a change of clothes and behavior will be sufficient to make the all male cast of the courtroom incur in an error of judgement, which brings us to the crux of Shakespeare's problematization of gender troubles. She tells her waiting woman, Nerissa, whom she makes assume the role of the lawyer's attendant, that they will gain visibility in the courtroom:

[...] but in such a habit ,
 That they shall think we are accomplished
 With what 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 a manly stride; and speak of frays
 Like a fine bragging youth: and tell quaint lies
 How honorable ladies sought my love,
 Which I denying, they fell sick and died:
 I could not do withal: – then I repent,
 And wish for all that, that I had not kill'd them;
 And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell,
 That men shall swear I have discontinued school
 Above a twelvemonth: I have within my mind
 A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks,
 Which I will practice. (97)

Her satiric discourse about the male organ implies the power which masculinity represents. In fact, when travestied as a man, it is not important that she is not accomplished with what women lack; what matters is that people believe she possesses this trump, as in a poker game. What she achieves when usurping male prerogatives is a travesty of the law, since according to studies published by contemporary lawyers, Shylock's lawsuit was entirely legitimate and in accordance with the laws of Venice.

This travesty of the law is perfectly realized by the heroine, whose female identity is hidden through her disguise. Here we have a complete inversion of social and sexual roles. After her success in the courtroom, Shakespeare's heroine continues to reinvent herself with the trick of the ring, a token she had given to Bassanio on the very

day she played the casket game. After her triumph at the tribunal, she demands the ring from him, as payment for her successful performance at the trial, the selfsame ring which Bassanio had sworn never to part with. Not knowing that the lawyer is Portia, he does give him the ring to express his gratitude for having saved his friend Antonio. When she meets Bassanio at home, she recriminates him for not having valued her love-token. Completely ignoring the facts, Bassanio asks for pardon and swears eternal devotion: "Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear/ I never more will break an oath with thee" (137). Antonio, who was saved by Portia, feels it is his moral obligation to justify his friend Bassanio and ratify his oath.

With this victory over her rival in her husband's affection, Portia shows that she is in possession of the ring, which he recognizes to be the same he had given to the lawyer. Portia engages in a provocation, saying "I had it of him: pardon me Bassanio,/ For by this ring the doctor lay with me" (137). This speech contains an implicit threat of treason in case of another break of promise. Although in the end all misunderstandings are clarified as in a comedy of errors, the performance of this episode, in which again Portia assumes the role of scriptwriter and director, establishes the priority of her position as wife, and her power is reassured with Bassanio's fear of cuckoldry, a cultural anxiety of all times.

Shakespeare shows great awareness of the problematic relations between men and women. He had great insight into the anxieties of his time and he voiced them either overtly or covertly, according to his better judgment to avoid problems with censorship. He dramatizes in a highly sophisticated way the ideas he wishes to project by creating a kind of performative text in which the constitutive elements, such as conventions, formal devices and words themselves become voices in a complex argument which allow him to

interrogate the orthodoxies of his culture and discredit the misogynistic attitudes of his time.

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