

# From Convention to Subversion: Female Masculinity in Shakespeare's Heroines- Viola & Rosalind

<sup>1</sup> Amit Sarkar, <sup>2</sup> Dr. Dheeraj Kumar

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Research Scholar, English Department, Mangalayatan University, Beswan, Aligarh- 202146, Uttar Pradesh, India.

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Mangalayatan University, Beswan, Aligarh- 202146, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email – [amitk.sarkar35@gmail.com](mailto:amitk.sarkar35@gmail.com) ; [dr.dheerajkumar2011@gmail.com](mailto:dr.dheerajkumar2011@gmail.com)

## Abstract:

This paper explores the idea of female masculinity as a way of resistance and survival in Shakespearean comic heroines, specifically, **Viola** (*Twelfth Night*) and **Rosalind** (*As You Like It*). Located inside the patriarchal and strictly gendered social structure of the Elizabethan era, Shakespearean comedy provides the moment in which the traditional gender roles are shaken up through disguise, acting, and role-switching. Based on the prevailing theory of gender and feminist criticism, this paper will contend that Viola and Rosalind are strategic in adopting masculine identities not only as tools used in theatricality but also as empowering tools, which allow mobility, power, and independence that women otherwise lack. Their masculine acts challenge conventional masculinity and femininity binaries to expose gender as dynamic and performative, and socially constructed. By prefiguring female masculinity, the paper will show how Shakespeare foreshadows contemporary debate of gender performativity and criticizes the role of hegemonic masculinity by using comedy to resolve the conflict. Finally, the paper argues that Shakespearean heroines can turn convention into subversion in which masculinity serves as an instrument of self-preservation, negotiating desire, and social agents in comic settings.

**Keywords:** Female Masculinity; Gender Performativity; Shakespearean Comedy; Viola; Rosalind; Cross-Dressing; Convention to Subversion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The use of Shakespearean comedy as a fruitful area to explore the issue of identity, transformation, and even social inversion is not new. One of its most notable aspects is the motif of cross-dressing, which is repeated throughout this play and in which female characters dress up as men and defy the restrictions that women in early modern England were supposed to have. Although this device has been used by previous critics as a comic tool of comic interest or romantic misunderstanding, recent scholarship is increasingly coming to the interpretation that it is a potent site of challenging gender ideology. In this critical approach, the term of feminine masculinity provides an effective perspective on the negotiation of power, independence, and survival of Shakespeare's heroines.

Feminine masculinity, which Judith Halberstam has theorized the most, presents a challenge to the notion that masculinity is a natural or even exclusive function of the male body. Rather than that, it theorizes masculinity as a set of performative practices and social privileges that can be performed by women. This paradigm can be reused with Shakespearean comedy to reconsider heroines like Viola and Rosalind, who can achieve intellectual power, verbal freedom, and physical mobility because of their masculine disguise, which they are denied as women.

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola is able to enter the male-dominated court of Orsino as Cesario to enable her to assert her emotions as well as utilize her power in terms of love interest. And just like in *As You Like It*, the act by which Rosalind takes the place of Ganymede allows her to take over the Forest of Arden by use of wit, logical argument, and instructional power over Orlando. In both instances, masculinity is not only a form of concealment but a form of empowerment strategy that disrupts the normal gender structures.

This paper contextualizes Viola and Rosalind to the socio-cultural background of Elizabethan patriarchal society, where women were mainly silenced and their functions reduced to submission and housewifery. The comedies of Shakespeare, although, put these limitations on hold, making some areas where gender roles can be re-envisioned and renegotiated. Assuming masculine roles, Viola and Rosalind reveal the performativity of gender and disclose the social norms as constructed. It transcends the conventional interpretations of Shakespearean comedy and takes place in the present discussions of feminist literary criticism, gender studies, and performance theory by concentrating on female masculinity and not disguise. It claims that the heroines of Shakespeare turn tradition into perversion, in which femininity becomes a survival strategy, a way of self, and agency, which prefigures subsequent theoretical debates of gender fluidity and resistance.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Criticism of the cross-dressing in Shakespearean drama traces its origins to the early twentieth-century formalist and character-based criticism of Shakespeare, which tended to identify disguise as an expedient of the comic or the plot. Nevertheless, this discourse was reconstructed by feminist criticism of the late twentieth century in the primary way that it predicted the issues of gender, power, and representation. Other scholars like Lisa Jardine (1983) and Juliet Dusinberre (1992) stressed the characteristics of the heroines of Shakespeare to go against patriarchal bests, by virtue of smartness and independence, but the theorization of the masculine as a gendered performance was not explicitly expressed.

The advent of gender performativity theory, best said by Judith Butler (1990), was a pivotal change in Shakespearean criticism. The statement by Butler of gender being a construct of repetitive acts, and not a biological nature, presented fresh meanings of interpreting cross-dressed heroines. Under this, Viola and Rosalind turn into a representation of gender unsteadiness, showing that masculinity and femininity are not inborn identities but roles learned in the social context.

As the continuation of Butler, *Female Masculinity* (1998) by Judith Halberstam offers an essential theoretical base for the interpretation of Shakespeare heroines. Halberstam claims that female masculinity has been relegated or minimized over time because it is a threat to male supremacy. When applied to Shakespeare, this idea shows that such characters as Rosalind and Viola usurp masculine power and, at the same time, do not abandon their femininity, thus disrupting the gender dichotomy.

Other critics like Stephen Orgel (1996) and Phyllis Rackin (2005) contextualize Shakespearean cross-dressing in early modern theatre practices where all the female characters were played by boys. This is a stratified performance that makes it difficult to consider gender authenticity and contributes to the supposition of gender performativity. Orgel writes that Shakespeare capitalizes on this theatrical undecision to reveal that the term of sexual difference is unstable in itself.

Feminine agency and survival in Shakespearean comedy are more and more pre-empted in recent criticism. Howard (2016) stresses the rhetorical power and the opportunity of social mobility of cross-dressed heroines, and Traub (2020) addresses the topic of the intersection of desire and gender in the festive comedies by Shakespeare. An example of the application of pedagogizing in *As You Like It* is that by pedagogizing Rosalind, she has been understood as claiming masculine rationality that ultimately expresses a criticism of romantic idealism.

The masculinity of Viola, on the contrary, has been interpreted as being less flamboyant but emotionally smart. According to scholars, her sensitivity has made it hard to explain traditional conceptions of masculinity because she combines empathy with vulnerability (Callaghan, 2018). This reenactment of masculinity is in line with the modern concept of alternative masculinities that are resistant to aggression and dominance.

Altogether, the available literature confirms that Shakespearean comedy serves as a gender experimentation. Nevertheless, a comparative study of female masculinity with a narrow focus on the use of masculinity as a strategic adaptation to survive in Viola and Rosalind has not been fully examined. This paper attempts to fill that gap by integrating feminist, queer, and performance-based approaches to show how Shakespeare has turned convention into subversion using female masculinity.

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The present study aims to investigate the representation and significance of **female masculinity** in Shakespeare's heroines Viola and Rosalind, with particular emphasis on its survival mechanism and empowerment in comic form.

The following are the specific objectives of this research:

- i. **To analyze the construction of female masculinity** in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, examining how Viola and Rosalind adopt masculine identities through language, behavior, and social interaction.
- ii. **To examine gender performativity** in Shakespearean comedy by applying contemporary gender theory, particularly the works of Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam, to demonstrate the fluid and constructed nature of gender roles.
- iii. **To explore the relationship between masculinity and agency**, highlighting how masculine performance enables the heroines to access authority, mobility, and autonomy within patriarchal social structures.
- iv. **To contextualize female masculinity historically**, situating the plays within the socio-cultural realities of early modern England while also acknowledging the theatrical conventions of the Elizabethan stage.
- v. **To contribute to feminist and queer Shakespearean scholarship** by offering a comparative reading of Viola and Rosalind that foregrounds survival, resistance, and subversion rather than romantic resolution alone.

Through these objectives, the work aims to prove that the comic heroines of Shakespeare not only follow the masculinity, but re-strategize it, turning all traditional gender norms into the tools of empowerment and social commentary.

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES:

To analyze female masculinity in Shakespearean comedy, this study adopts a multi-faceted methodological approach:

This study's methodology includes textual analysis, historical context, and theoretical interpretation. The methodology involves three primary steps:

#### a. Textual Analysis:

The close analysis of the major scenes of the plays "As You Like It" and "Twelfth Night" revolves around the instances when the female characters take on masculine roles. In the readings, female masculinity is underlined with the use of language, behavior, and dramatic structure.

#### b. Historical Contextualization:

Gender normative research on the Renaissance comprehension of gender is founded on the discussion, particularly the portrayal of gender fluidity as portrayed by Shakespeare.

#### c. Theoretical Framework Application:

The study draws on the concept of female masculinity developed by Judith Halberstam and the queer and feminist theories. It also examines how performative gender has been used (theorized by Judith Butler) to disrupt stable gender categories in Shakespearean Comedy.

### 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Judith Halberstam's work in *Female Masculinity* (1998) is the primary analysis that challenges the lexicalization of masculinity with male bodies and looks at how women embody masculine traits in subversive and powerful ways. Based on Halberstam's

scheme, gender is not fixed, and it is also performatively masculine in the manner that the dramatic strategies of Shakespearean comedy adopt.

This analysis is supported by Judith Butler's gender performativity, laid out in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler contends that gender is not a fixed identity, but a series of done things, a series of done dispositions. Female characters in Shakespeare's comedies who perform masculinity expose the oneness of gender and its reliance on social and cultural situations.

Renaissance gender studies, including the work of Stephen Orgel and Lisa Jardine, also provide historical insight into the cultural norms and theatrical conventions of the Elizabethan era. However, these scholars remind us that the early modern stage was a space in which fluid gender was performed, with male actors performing female roles, further complicating the concept of female masculinity on that stage.

## 5.1 FEMALE MASCULINITY AND SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY: A THEORETICAL FRAME

Shakespearean comedy repeatedly employs disguise and role reversal as mechanisms that enable social stratifications, particularly gender stratifications. In this festive and carnivalesque space, female characters who dress as men do not simply disguise their own sex but instead practice masculinity to receive those powers, speech, and autonomy. Based on the concept of female masculinity introduced by Judith Halberstam, this discussion argues that **Viola** and **Rosalind** are tactical adopters of masculine signifiers in their efforts to bargain for their survival in the patriarchal systems. Their masculinity is not second-hand, imitative, but practical, with the effect of making them able to negotiate social restrictions and, at the same time, disclose the performativity of male gender itself.

## 5.2 VIOLA IN "TWELFTH NIGHT": SUBDUED MASCULINITY AND EMOTIONAL AUTHORITY

The fact that **Viola** takes the role of **Cesario**, believing it to be that of a man, is not by choice, but necessity after her shipwreck and isolation in Illyria. The mask of a man makes Viola survive in a society where women are deprived of free movement and economic stability. Nonetheless, in contrast to traditional programming of aggressive or dominant masculinity, Viola portrays a suppressed and emotionally sensitive masculinity, which is covertly aggressive to the hegemonic norms.

Being **Cesario**, Viola is given access to the inner world of Duke Orsino, a chance that has not been available to a woman in general. This is because of the quality of masculine acting that allows her to convey emotional truths that even male characters have a hard time doing so. It is interesting to note that the speech made by Viola about love, which is characterized by patience, empathy, and depth of emotions, redefines the concept of masculinity to encompass vulnerability instead of pushing it away. Such a revision upsets the traditional gender dichotomies, showing that characters whose traits are culturally defined as feminine can be present in masculinity.

The female masculinity of Viola is consequently defined as a restraint of ethics and the power of affection. She does not impose herself physically and verbally; she can control the relationships by means of rhetorical intelligence and emotional intuition. Her power does not stem from coercive power but from her capacity to compromise the desires of the opposing sides, namely the romantic idealism of Orsino and the emotional antagonism of Olivia. In this regard, the masculinity of Viola is a silent subversion of patriarchal power, which presents another example, and it combines compassion and social agency.

Simultaneously, the psychological price of the gender performance is emphasized in the inner turmoil of Viola, who is in love with Orsino, yet she remains in disguise. The fact that she does not say what she is really, indicates the limitations that are put on women even when they have taken up the masculine roles. In such a way, female masculinity used by Viola reveals the potential of subversion in Shakespearean comedy as well as its boundaries.

### 5.3 ROSALIND IN “AS YOU LIKE IT”: ASSERTIVE MASCULINITY AND COMIC SOVEREIGNTY

In contrast to the subdued masculinity of Viola, the performance of Ganymede by Rosalind is audacious, aggressive, and didactic. Being exiled from the court, Rosalind is an active participant who opts to use a disguise of a man as a form of security and liberation. The traditionally pastoral and liberating space of the Forest of Arden is where Rosalind can survive and even control the social and discursive environment, due to her masculinity.

**Rosalind** plays the role of Ganymede, which means that she takes the leadership in romantic talk, especially during her relationship with Orlando. She embraces a role of masculine logic, teaches Orlando about what love is, and reveals the extravagance of Petrarchan idealism. This pedagogical power is in line with early modern ideas of masculinity as the intellectual control and the control over oneself. Nevertheless, the performance of Rosalind is also a comedic parody of these values that exposes their unnaturalness.

Comic sovereignty is also characterizing the female masculinity of Rosalind. She manipulates and dictates story flow as well as dictates the comic resolution. Contrasting with Viola, Rosalind does not have much psychological struggle in her disguise; rather, she flourishes in it. This trust indicates a more radical argument on gender hierarchy because Rosalind proves that masculine power could be persuasively and fruitfully occupied by a female object.

In addition, the masculinity of Rosalind disrupts heterosexuality by adding homoerotic tension, especially in the relationships between Orlando and Ganymede. These scenes highlight the elasticity of the desire and make strict gender distinctions even more complex. The fact that eventually Rosalind becomes feminine does not diminish her masculine agency; on the contrary, it supports the notion that gender is situational and performative as opposed to being inherent.

### 6. COMPARATIVE INSIGHT: FROM CONVENTION TO SUBVERSION

Although the two heroines dress up as men, their masculinity is acted out differently and with different tones and purposes. The masculinity of Viola is dynamic and conflicted within, and it focuses on the emotional intelligence of power. The masculinity of Rosalind is aggressive and physically confident, focusing on intellectual and social superiority. The two of them represent a range of feminine masculinity that breaks the monolithic gender definitions.

More importantly, Shakespeare employs comic form in order to make this subversion socially acceptable. The festive resolution brings back the normative order by using marriage, but the audience has at the back of their mind that the aspect of gender stability has been theatrically revealed as temporary. The aspect of female masculinity, then, is not lost at the close of the plays; it comes as an indictment of the artificially created gender roles.

### 7. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored female masculinity in the examples of **Viola** and **Rosalind** in the plays of Shakespeare by positing that the representation of masculinity in the Shakespearean heroes is a survival strategy, an agency strategy, and a subversion strategy. In overcoming the classical interpretations of cross-dressing as a comic effect, the analysis has revealed that female masculinity is an effective issue in the early modern gender ideology.

The soft version of masculinity demonstrated by Viola in *Twelfth Night* gives us another prototype of masculine power, which is based on emotional intelligence, control, and morality. The way she performs makes hegemonic masculinity tricky because she incorporates the aspects traditionally linked to femininity, thus disrupting strict dichotomies. Instead, aggressive masculinity on the part of Rosalind in *As You Like It* anticipates intellectual mastery, social control, and pedagogical authority. Her belief in occupying masculine space allows her to control the discourse of romance as well as the form of narrative, more overtly manipulating gender. Collectively, these heroines help to show how Shakespeare was careful when exploring the subject of gender as a performance and not as a way of being. Their experiences preempt contemporary theoretical knowledge provided by gender performativity and queer studies, specifically the claim that masculinity is not necessarily male, but a product of social production and strategically performed practices. It is through Shakespearean comedy and its festal and luminal spaces that this experimentation is made possible, and the precariousness of patriarchal norms is revealed at the same time.

Though the comic endings restore traditional gender order by getting married, they do not eliminate the power of female masculinity that has been transformed. Rather, the plays provide the viewers with a lasting consciousness of the unsteadiness of gender and the possibility of opposition to the existing systems. Viola and Rosalind are not simply women in agreement with the norms of society; they are women who redefine the norm, demonstrating the fact that the norm itself is a nest of subversion.

Finally, the female masculinity depicted by Shakespeare draws attention to what women can do with masculine power appropriately and redefine it without losing their identities. These heroines not only disrupt the principles of the traditional, but also render the principles of patriarchal structures subversive as they provide an alternative notion of gender that can be described as fluid, strategic, and thoroughly human.

## 8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although the scope of this study is analytical, it has a number of limitations that should be mentioned. On the one hand, the analysis is limited to two Shakespearean heroines: Viola and Rosalind, and so, the conclusions will be limited in generalizability. Although these characters are one of the most noticeable examples of female masculinity in the Shakespearean comedy, a larger corpus like Portia, Viola, or Imogen would provide a more in-depth view of the phenomenon.

Second, the research mostly utilizes the current gender theory, specifically the notion of gender performativity and feminine masculinity, which will likely subject early modern literature to the imposition of modern theoretical constructs. In as productive a way as this, some of the historically particular cognitions of gender in Elizabethan England might be downplayed. These performances could also be better placed into the context of a more thorough involvement of early modern social history and conduct literature.

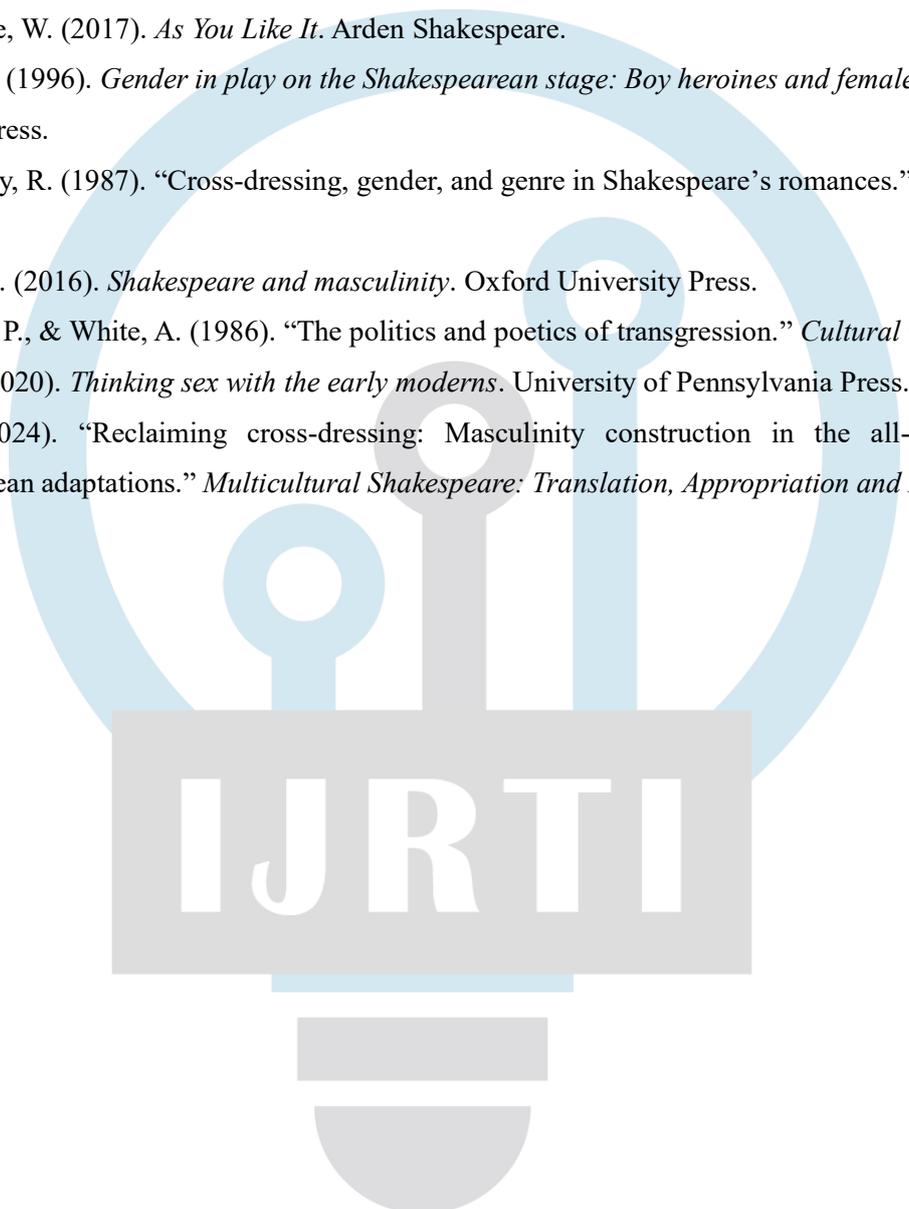
Third, the discussion of the literary representation and characterization of the texts takes precedence over the history of performance and the response of the audience. The theatrical aspect of gender ambiguity should be examined further since Shakespearean plays were initially performed by male actors in the role of women. With performance-based analysis, much more may be added to the discourse concerning embodied masculinity.

Lastly, the paper focuses on subversion and not containment. Although Shakespearean comedy permits the provisional breakage of the gender norms, the social order, which is restored with the aid of marriage, makes it a bit harder to indicate the radicalism. The contradiction between subversion and containment can be fruitfully investigated in future studies to determine the ideological effects of female masculinity over time on Shakespearean drama.

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