

## **Women's Disguises and Men's Control in the Elizabethan Era, with Reference to Selected Plays by William Shakespeare**

Qayssar Abbas Abdulridha

General Directorate of Education in Thiqr

Email: kaiser1975@utq.edu.iq

### **Abstract:**

This study looks at how most of Shakespeare's plays treat women badly and ignore them. People have been moved by Shakespeare's female roles for many years. But that wasn't what women were really like. It looks like the new historicists were right when they said that Shakespeare's writing was affected by the time he lived in. Most playwrights of the Elizabethan era, including Shakespeare, showed women in a bad light. In the same way, many cases show how women are just an object of society, a source of pleasure, and a creature that men expect to follow their rules. In Elizabethan society, a disguise was a powerful tool. If you were brave enough to take a risk, you could change your situation right away. Also, you could change how people see you. Shakespeare's use of disguises could make people laugh or make them feel like bad things are about to happen. As a result, disguise is a very strong way to tell a story. The current study focuses on how the male characters' socioeconomic conditions and discriminatory acts affected the lives of the female characters. This paper also attempts to understand how Shakespeare attempted to portray women as subordinate characters. In the mentioned plays, however, he allowed his female characters a lot of freedom and frequently made them strong by dressing them like men. In his plays, he portrayed them as strong and unconstrained by patriarchal male behavior at the time.

**Keywords:** (Patriarchal behavior, female's role, disguise, subordinate characters, Shakespeare).

## تنكر المرأة وتحكم الرجل في العصر الإليزابيثي ، مع الإشارة إلى مسرحيات مختارة من تأليف ويليام شكسبير

قيصر عباس عبدالرضا

المديرية العامة لتربية محافظة ذي قار

### المُلخَص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة عن كيفية معاملة معظم مسرحيات شكسبير للنساء معاملة سيئة وتجاهل المرأة في ممارسة دورها بالحياة. لقد تأثر الناس بأدوار شكسبير النسائية لسنوات عديدة. لكن هذا لم يكن ما كانت عليه المرأة حقًا. يبدو أن التاريخيين الجدد كانوا على حق عندما قالوا إن كتابات شكسبير تأثرت بالوقت الذي عاش فيه. أظهر معظم الكتاب المسرحيين في العصر الإليزابيثي ، بما في ذلك شكسبير ، النساء في صورة سيئة. وبنفس الطريقة ، تُظهر العديد من الحالات كيف أن النساء مجرد كائن في المجتمع ، ومصدر للمتعة ، ومخلوق يتوقع الرجال اتباع قواعدهم. في المجتمع الإليزابيثي ، كان التنكر أداة قوية. إذا كنت شجاعًا بما يكفي للمخاطرة ، فيمكنك تغيير وضعك على الفور. أيضا ، يمكنك تغيير كيف يراك الناس. إن استخدام شكسبير للتنكر قد يجعل الناس يضحكون أو يجعلهم يشعرون بأن أشياء سيئة على وشك الحدوث. نتيجة لذلك ، يعد التنكر طريقة قوية جدًا لأخبار اي قصة او حكاية. تركز الدراسة الحالية على كيفية تأثير الظروف الاجتماعية والاقتصادية للشخصيات الذكورية والأفعال التمييزية على حياة الشخصيات النسائية. تحاول هذه الدراسة أيضًا فهم كيف حاول شكسبير تصوير النساء كشخصيات ثانوية في المسرحيات المذكورة ، سمح شكسبير لشخصياته النسوية بالكثير من الحرية وكثيرا ما جعلهم أقوى من خلال ارتداء ملابسهم مثل الرجال حيث صورهم على أنهم أقوى جدًا وغير مقيدين بالسلوك الأبوي الذكوري في ذلك الوقت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (السلوك الأبوي ، دور الأنثى ، التنكر ، الشخصيات التابعة ، شكسبير).

### 1. Introduction

The majority of Shakespeare's significant female characters are young and central to romantic tales about finding a husband. When a father and daughter disagree about who would make the best suitor, it can lead to significant family disputes, and Shakespeare frequently writes about such disputes. In the majority of Shakespeare's plays, a young woman attempts to escape away from a man's control. In the current

study, the researcher display many examples by which women are disguised to be in a safe state and to get rid of men's control.

**In the Merchant of Venice**, Portia and Nerissa's new husbands fall for their trick that they are men and give away their wedding rings in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Both wives desire an equal say in the running of the household. Women often take on male roles in Shakespeare's plays. This is commonly done to increase tension and advance the plot. Shakespeare's female characters often find themselves in situations that real women just could not have found themselves in. To achieve this, he gave his female characters alternate clothing. In *The Merchant of Venice*, none of the male characters can come up with a way for Antonio to get out of a deal that allows Shylock to remove "a pound of flesh" from his body. However, when Portia travels to court disguised as an attorney, she demonstrates that she is more knowledgeable about the law than any of the men. Shylock may have a legal right to a pound of Antonio's flesh, but "not a drop of blood" may be lost in the process, as pointed out by Portia.

**In The Twelfth Night**, Viola dresses up as the young man "Cesario" and offers to help Duke Orsino woo Countess Olivia, which is something a noblewoman could never do. Most Elizabethans thought that women didn't have the intelligence, rationality, courage, and other qualities needed for jobs that were usually done by men.

However, when Shakespeare's cross-dressing women portray roles typically played by men, they typically perform better than the men who play those roles. In Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," there are three key female characters, Viola, Maria, and Olivia, who are very important to how the story goes. Before and during the Renaissance, literature showed women as having little power and control over the plot. Men played the main parts and decided how things turned out. Women were seen as lesser things that men had power over and whose only purpose was to have children. Society's belief that women were not as smart or capable as men and couldn't do the same jobs as men made it clear that women didn't have much social standing or power. Shakespeare's images of women in Twelfth Night can be seen as radical because they show a society in which women are no longer oppressed and instead have power and authority.

## **2. Literature review**

In Elizabethan times, young men often acted the part of female characters (Garber, 1997). It's possible that this added to the confusion. No one knows for sure what annoyed Shakespeare's interest in cross-dressing, but two possibilities stand out: Shakespeare was either a closet feminist who found it hilarious when men dressed as women or a man who thought it was funny when men dressed as women. Shakespeare was a feminist for his day, Wixson (2001) argues because many of his key female characters are strong,

intelligent, capable women who go against the norm. The period during which William Shakespeare lived and wrote was known as the "Golden Age" or the "Elizabethan Age." Cultures flourished in the lulls between conflicts when people had more time for creativity. Women were responsible for some tasks. Girls from affluent backgrounds had extensive educations from the comfort of their own homes, taught by wiser women (Adha, 2020) Women's traditional roles included providing for and educating their families' offspring. Families passed wealth and property along through sons, and daughters wed men handpicked by their fathers. The only thing that didn't adhere to these standards was the royal crown, which seems like a curious choice. It's appropriate for a daughter to get. Even though she was a woman, Queen Elizabeth II encouraged dads to educate their children and hoped that all men would make an effort to educate the women in their life. Shakespeare seemed to be aware that societal norms aren't always equitable, and he was fond of the image of strong, independent women. To demonstrate that many women are as intelligent as men, he assumed a female form. Twelfth Night's Gender Roles and Stereotypes by William Shakespeare (Lee, 2019). Viola from "Twelfth Night," Portia and Nerissa from "The Merchant of Venice," all act as males for most of their respective plays. In these plays, female protagonists disguise themselves as men to achieve their goals. In "Twelfth Night," when Viola and her twin

brother are separated at sea, she pretends to be him by putting on his clothes. Viola disguises herself as her brother so that she can work and support herself because she knows it is unsafe for a woman to be alone at the time (Klett, 2008). Viola appears more confident when she pretends to be a boy. As their feelings for one other grow, she and the duke can reveal themselves to one another in this way. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia disguises herself as a man so that she can assist Antonio, the dearest friend of her husband, in court. Changing her gender was a huge step of courage for Portia, but it also gave her greater agency in her life (Newman, 1987). As the play progresses, she transforms from a woman who blindly follows her late father's wishes to one who takes command of her own life by putting Bassanio's devotion to the test.

### **3. Research question**

The following research question will limit the present paper:

Why is William Shakespeare so interested in the technique of women's disguise?

### **4. Methodology**

The research is qualitative and a descriptive method is employed for analysis. The researcher also used a comprehensive discussion

regarding the explanation of the concept of cross-dressing as well as its diverse forms of inferring patriarchal behavior and women's submission within theatrical acts, the researcher has established a general framework by which to understand patriarchal, authoritative, and hierarchy status against women during the Elizabethan era.

## **5. Findings and discussion**

By analysing these Shakespearean plays, it is not incorrect to conclude that the female characters choose cross-dressing to conceal their femininity because it does not afford them equal opportunity. They were compelled to select this option due to their subordinate status compared to the males. When women engage in cross-dressing and put on male dress, their sexual identity is altered. By reading about Shakespeare's female protagonists Portia, Nerissa and Viola, one could contend that cross-dressing provides them with safety, freedom, and political and gender independence. As soon as they put on it, they have the opportunity to engage the patriarchal pattern and weaken it. All female characters in Shakespeare's plays are relegated and considered inferior to male characters, according to the research. The social, political, and economic positions of women and males are unequal. If they are in such positions, calamity is imminent. The women are depicted as irrational and driven by emotion. . Numerous

textual examples demonstrate that women are portrayed as corrupt and are associated with negative preconceptions.

## 6. Conclusion

The current study confirms that women are incapable of handling complex issues and obstacles and, as a result, women cannot be genuine leaders. In the majority of Shakespeare's plays, particularly tragedies, women lack genuine freedom and independence, and males make all significant life decisions. However, feminism did not exist during Shakespeare's lifetime or for hundreds of years thereafter. In the end, males still performed the roles, and it was technically a man portraying a woman as a man, so the current study may conclude that William Shakespeare is not a true feminist. He employed gender roles in his plays to demonstrate to the audience that a woman may conquer a man's role. We can't view a play through the eyes of an Elizabethan audience member. Thus, the current study demonstrates how women's disguise enables female protagonists to mask themselves as males and compensate for their lack of dominance

## References:

1. Adha, R. (2020). Elizabethan Period (The Golden Age of English Literature). *JADEs Journal of Academia in English Education*, 1(1), 84-95.
2. Lee, A. (2019). Gender Performance in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night
3. Wixson, C. (2001). Cross-Dressing and John Lyly's "Gallathea". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 41(2), 241-256.
4. Klett, E. (2008). Reviving Viola: Comic and Tragic Teen Film Adaptations of " Twelfth Night". *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 26(2), 69-87
5. Newman, K. (1987). Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in The Merchant of Venice. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38(1), 19-33
6. Garber, M. B. (1997). Vested interests: Cross-dressing and cultural anxiety. Psychology Press.

## Works cited

7. Shakespeare, W. King Lear. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1977
8. Shakespeare, W. Hamlet. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1982
9. Shakespeare, W. Macbeth. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1984
10. Shakespeare, William. As You Like It .Rev. ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954. Print.
11. Shakespeare, William, and William Lyon Phelps. The Merchant of Venice. New Haven: YaleUP, 1923. Print.
12. Shakespeare, William, and Karl Young. Two Gentlemen of Verona, New Haven: Yale UP, 1924.Print.

13. Shakespeare, William. Twelfth Night; Or, What You Will. [. ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954. Print.
14. Sharma, Meena. Figuring Women in Shakespeare: A Study through Selected Plays, 2013. Thammaiah, RB. Treatment of Women in Shakespearean tragedy: A Study.1982.

