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**Master-Mistress of My Passion: Gender  
Fluidity in Shakespeare's Comedies**

**Master Thesis**

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**Prohlášení**

*Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla úplný seznam citované a použité literatury.*

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*Podpis .....*

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## Introduction

In a more open and accepting society, it is important to include diverse representation in books, media, films, and everyday conversation. This is what the Globe Theatre attempted to do in May 2017 by posting a blog post promoting the production of *Twelfth Night*. In the blog post, the author “compared Viola’s disguise as Cesario to the experience of contemporary transgender and gender-nonconforming youth.”<sup>1</sup> This comment opened the classical drama to the younger generation and made it more accessible to youth. It shows that gender fluidity is not just a 21st century concept but appeared in the past.

It is no wonder then that William Shakespeare’s poems and plays are often discussed using the queer theory lens. There is more than one work which includes queer undertones. The queer aspects can be found in his plays and poetry alike. They are either visible or one must look a bit deeper to uncover them by an analysis in context.

William Shakespeare is one of the most famous writers in the world. His works have been discussed by many critics and from many different points of view. Shakespeare’s plays and poems can be interpreted in an almost infinite number of ways and every reader can find what they are looking for in them to connect with the writings. By focusing on the queer elements, contemporary youth can find a representation of their own identity.

It is quite common for William Shakespeare’s male characters to cross-dress as women, especially in his comedies. Shakespeare employs this trope to make the storyline of a play more complicated and to explore different expressions. The cross-dressing explores the different relationships between the characters and how they behave and think.

This thesis focuses specifically on the plays which include the element of cross-dressing and thus the fluidity of the gender. In the theoretical part of the thesis, the queer theory itself is briefly introduced. A connection is made to feminism and how sexuality and

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<sup>1</sup> Sawyer Kemp, “Shakespeare in Transition: Pedagogies of Transgender Justice and Performances,” in *Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare: Why Renaissance Literature Matters Now*, ed. Hillary Eklund and Wendy Beth Hyman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 36.

gender are treated in the general society. The concept of gender fluidity is described in more detail.

The second part of the theoretical section focuses on the description of the time when Shakespeare lived. Specifically, it pays attention to the cultural renaissance during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and the continuation during the reign of her successor King James I. General historical-cultural background is provided along with specifics about clothing, gender, and its expression during these times. A short introduction to William Shakespeare is provided.

In the analytical part of the thesis, the main focus is given to the analysis of gender fluidity in three comedies which were selected for this thesis. The plays are *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* and *As You Like It*. Each of these comedies includes the element of cross-dressing as a major plot device. The plays are compared concerning the reasons behind the female characters' decision to put on a male costume and the consequences their actions have. Academic and critical background and opinions are presented for each of the above-mentioned topics in combination with a personal analysis of the plays.

# 1. Critical Background

## 1.1 Queer Theory

The development of queer theory dates to the mid-1980s. During this period, theoretical interest has increased in the study of sexuality. The term queer had previously been used solely in a homophobic context and as a slur. The gay and lesbian community adopted the term queer for their own use and appropriated it. Through this development and increased interest, the term queer, as Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan note, “has come to be associated with a new militancy in gay and lesbian politics – a determined push for visibility and a celebration of the transgressive.”<sup>2</sup> The negatively used word has turned into a word celebrating the identity of people who do not fit the heteronormative society. It blurs the boundaries between the heterosexual and the homosexual. The main goal of using the word with positive connotations is to reduce the injustice of punishing or abusing individuals based on their sexual identity.

The queer theory aims to question what is considered to be normal in the society. For most people and especially in the past decades, the normal is heterosexual. It was viewed as a normal behaviour. Queer theory, on the other hand, questions this notion of normalcy along with the privileges heterosexual people receive compared to those who are viewed as sexual outlaws. Queer theory refuses to be rigidly fixed, labelled and categorised into specific boxes – it plays around with different identities and is, according to Pilcher and Whelehan, a “deliberately provocative political and theoretical stance in that it foregrounds sexual identity, pleasure, and desire, and their part in the construction of our knowledge of self.”<sup>3</sup> Following the theory allows people to experiment and focus on their inner desires, explore their feelings and begin to understand who they truly are in an environment that is open to accepting them in their real identity.

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: SAGE Publications Inc, 2004), 129.

<sup>3</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 129.

The term sexuality does not relate only to sex but also to a person's identity. The terms heterosexuality and homosexuality are quite recent, appearing only at the end of the 19th century. After they were defined, the terms began to refer to specific people, lifestyles, and history. There are many links between sexuality and deviance which appeal to the natural ways of the world. They have led to the creation of what is considered to be normal, as noted by Pilcher and Whelehan: "Heterosexual penetrative intercourse is regarded as *the* determinant of heterosexual sex because it facilitates procreation, seen as governing 'normal' sexual response."<sup>4</sup> In this definition, it does not matter whether the two individuals involved in the heterosexual sex act prefer the opposite gender or not. The heterosexual act seems to be accepted mainly due to its procreative possibilities.

## **1.2 Feminist Theories**

The main idea of the feminist theory is, as Judith Butler mentions, that "there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued."<sup>5</sup> Out of this brief definition, as Butler notes, there are two controversial terms. One of them is the politics, as the society remains reluctant to accept women as leaders. The connection between politics and feminist theory is not as strong as before and is being challenged. The second controversy is the fact that representation aims to increase the visibility and legitimacy of women as political subjects, but it is also a function of language that either reveals or distorts what one assumes to be true about women.

Language development and language itself is an important part of the feminist theory. It is needed for words and expressions to adequately represent and include women. When it comes to the word "woman" itself, Butler says that even that is controversial. It is because "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of

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<sup>4</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.



discursively constituted identities.”<sup>6</sup> It then becomes difficult to separate gender from politics or any other domains. Another term that is being widely criticised is universal patriarchy. This term is needed to “strengthen the appearance of feminism’s own claims to be representative.”<sup>7</sup>

During the late 1960s, a new branch of feminism appeared – the second wave of feminism. Compared to the previous wave of the 19th century until the 1920s, the thoughts and focus of feminists changed. Rather than fighting for more rights, they aimed to be liberated from “the oppressiveness of a patriarchally defined society.”<sup>8</sup> During this time, the gender perception has changed. Women started to focus more on their bodies, highlighted their biological differences and attempted to find freedom for themselves. New ways of thinking about bodies have risen. They began to talk about more pressing issues, which were “termed ‘sexual politics’ – such as the family, abortion, sexuality, the sexual division of labour, rape and domestic violence.”<sup>9</sup> Those topics were not common in female discussions before, at least not openly.

When it comes to the cross-discipline of feminist theory and queer theory, it is the radical feminists who are sceptical. For them, the queer theory is “overly fascinated with SM and sexual violence and valorising gay male culture at the expense of lesbian culture and the feminist critique of heterosexuality as a main site of women’s oppression.”<sup>10</sup> Radical feminists came from the left political side and civil rights movements. They were quick to be seen by the public as they were visible and loud in the streets.

The concept of patriarchy is important within feminist studies. When explained literally, it denotes a male person standing as a ruler of a social unit. This person has the power to rule over everyone in the unit, even other men. In feminist terminology since the early 20th century, it is defined as a “social system of masculine domination over

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<sup>6</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 144.

<sup>9</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 145.

<sup>10</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 131.

women.”<sup>11</sup> From the point of view of radical feminists, patriarchy is the fundamental and main social division in any society. It can also be the family institution, which often serves as a way for men to rule over women and for them to have stronger control of women's bodies.

### 1.3 Gender

In the discussion of gender, two key terms must be defined: gender and sex. The distinction between these two terms originally aimed to dispute the belief that a person's biological build-up represents their destiny. It is against the notion that there are only two genders, and one must conform to identifying as the gender assigned at birth.

Sex is commonly understood as the physical, biological characteristic of a person's body. Gender, on the other hand, is a concept that started to be commonly used in the 1970s. Its use is to describe “an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviours and competencies, which are then assigned as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’.”<sup>12</sup> People argue that the effects of biological differences had been used to maintain the system of power built within patriarchy and to enforce the idea that women are suitable more for domestic roles. It is mostly the Western culture that does so and keeps a belief, as Pilcher and Whelehan note, that “any tampering with these roles would diminish happiness, but this type of argument has a blatantly disreputable history and should have been discarded long ago.”<sup>13</sup>

In the more typical fashion, traditional gender views connected to sexuality can be described in the following way, as Julie L. Nagoshi, Craig T. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy do:

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<sup>11</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 93.

<sup>12</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 56.

Traditional heteronormative beliefs about gender assume that male gender identity, masculine gender roles, and sexual attraction to females are one natural and inevitable gender package, while female gender identity, feminine gender roles, and sexual attraction to males are the only other natural and inevitable gender package. Because of such heteronormative assumptions, one's gender identity is often assumed to be consistent with a particular sexual orientation, and homosexuals are often assumed by heterosexuals to have the opposite gender role and gender identity.<sup>14</sup>

This description shows how the traditional society rigidly views gender. There are categories and assumptions that one makes based on what is thought to be normal in society. The specific gender roles one should have, and others expect them to have, constrain the diverse expression of gender one can have. This is why society insists on the labels and characteristics of the binary spectrum.

Gender is more and more believed to be simply a social construct and people tend to blur the boundaries of it. Butler, on the other hand, argues that if “the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one”<sup>15</sup> and vice versa. According to her, sex and gender cannot be split as radically. There are still connections between the two that must be referred to. The strict connection between gender and body, however, cannot remain in place. Gender does not always relate to the sex assigned at birth or is not as easily determined and fits into a category.

The queer theory questions the gender binary. It focuses on investigating how useful it is to have gender binary distinctions labelled for female and male and what role they should have in the central view including heterosexuality. A new term was introduced within queer studies – genderfuck, which includes a “sense of the liberatory potential of

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<sup>14</sup> Julie L. Nagoshi, Craig T. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy, *Gender and Sexual Identity: Transcending Feminist and Queer Theory* (New York: Springer, 2014), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 10.

playing with gender categories through pastiche and exaggeration.”<sup>16</sup> The inclusion of the non-binary and fluid concepts is very common in the queer sphere. It allows people who do not fit into any category to find a label they can identify with and use for themselves.

### ***1.3.1 Gender Fluidity***

In contemporary society, it is generally more acceptable for each person to find their own identity and to identify as so. One does not have to be constrained within the binary opposition of male and female when it comes to gender. Gender is viewed as more of a spectrum rather than a simple binary opposition.

As was mentioned previously, the main issue with gender is the fact that the binary system assigns gender based on social characteristics and sexual anatomy. There is a high number of people who strongly believe that gender is rooted in the biology of a person and therefore must be the same as the body. What the people who strictly follow the biological view of gender often omit is the fact that, as Julie L. Nagoshi, Craig T. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy point out, “among humans individuals are often born with sexually ambiguous characteristics, which challenges the culturally-based binary system of sex and gender.”<sup>17</sup> There are, then, people who based on biology itself do not fit into either of the female or male categories but find themselves somewhere in between them. The society, however, often requires them to undergo a medical intervention to be able to fit one of the categories. There is a need to categorise people even against their will. Contrary to this, when a transgender person wants to transition, it is much more medically complicated, and many people stand against it.

When a person meets another for the first time, they try to assess the gender of said person based on different cues. Julie L. Nagoshi, Craig T. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy identify them in their book *Gender and Sexual Identity* as follows:

Physical cues include the body, hair, clothes, voice, skin, and movement of the individual. Behavioral cues include mannerisms, decorum, protocol, and deportment.

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<sup>16</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 130-131.

<sup>17</sup> Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy, *Gender and Sexual Identity*, 3.

Textual cues are the histories, documents, names, associates, and relationships which support a desired gender attribution. Mythic cues include cultural and sub-cultural myths which support membership in a given gender and support the myth of male superiority, such as the terms “better half” and “the weaker sex.” Power dynamics as cues include modes of communication, techniques, and degrees of aggressiveness, assertiveness, persistence, and ambition. Sexual orientation, as a cue, is whether the individual is heterosexual or homosexual.<sup>18</sup>

Simply, all these cues are there to aid people in identifying the gender of another person. The society expects to find those cues with certain categories. Gender fluidity happens when an individual does not fit only into one of those categories but displays all variants of the cues, a mixture of some from both categories. It might be, therefore, confusing for the other person who is trying to assess them. They might not come to a single resolution as the person they are looking at fits both male and female or neither.

In connection to gender and gender fluidity, it is important to also mention the concept of gender identity. As Julie L. Nagoshi, Craig T. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy describe it, gender identity is “an individual’s internal sense of self as being male, female, or an identity between or outside these two categories.”<sup>19</sup> As was previously mentioned, since gender is categorized into binary female and male characteristics and behaviours, those are then assigned to bodies. It is important to note that, as the definition above says, an individual’s gender identity does not have to fit perfectly into one of the categories. A person can be in between male and female, identify completely out of the binary or as belonging to both categories at the same time.

#### **1.4 Discussions of Masculinity and Femininity**

There is a rather clear binary between masculinity and femininity. In the centuries prior, both masculinity and femininity have been defined and divided separately. Currently,

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<sup>18</sup> Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy, *Gender and Sexual Identity*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Nagoshi, Nagoshi and Brzuzy, *Gender and Sexual Identity*, 4.

the boundaries between the two notions are becoming blurrier and the notions of genders are less stable. Today, people have more freedom to identify as their true selves depending on what gender or sexuality they are. Although there is still a lot of judgment, there is also much more acceptance.

Masculinity is what a society views as being attributed to being a man. It is a set of social practices, characteristics, and cultural traditions. The concept of masculinity differs from culture to culture, from one group to men to another, as well as throughout history. Each specific society might have slightly different notions of what it means to be masculine. There are also many differences in how each person or scholar views masculinity and what specifically are the attributes of a traditionally masculine man. Looking at the view of natural sciences, masculinity means having the physiological features of males, specifically hormones or chromosomes. When it comes to social sciences, the definition leans closer to power relations between men themselves or between the two genders. In this case, masculinity rises “from the social contexts in which men live, for example, from their positions in the various institutions and organisations of their society and/or in the context of the socially available discourses about gender.”<sup>20</sup> Overall, masculinity is not a part of an individual but rather an idea, ideology, of what men should be in a culture and a society created to bring sense to people’s lives. In the opinion of some masculinity scholars, contemporary society destroys the masculine ideas from the past and they recommend for men to spend time together in bonding retreats with only men.

Masculinity can be divided into two different levels of gender hierarchy. The top one is the “culturally dominant ideal of masculinity centred around authority, physical toughness and strength, heterosexuality and paid work.”<sup>21</sup> This level is what society expects from men, the ideal they must strive for to be accepted as masculine. The majority of men, however, can never live up to the ideal. Only a few are capable of doing so. The lower level is much more easily reachable and includes the rest of the subordinate masculinities. Those are the ones that do not exactly match the cultural ideal. It is important to note that

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<sup>20</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 83.

<sup>21</sup> Pilcher and Whelehan, *Gender Studies*, 83.

masculine characteristics can be attributed to people who identify as women. It is mostly about the behaviour and attitude rather than the biological make-up of people.

## 2. Historical-Cultural Background

### 2.1 Elizabethan England

Queen Elizabeth I was born in 1533 as a daughter of King Henry VIII and Queen Anne Boleyn, his second wife. As a second monarch of the Tudor line, King Henry VIII believed that his heir must be a man. Because Queen Anne was not able to provide him with a son, she was beheaded, and Princess Elizabeth lost a mother while her father did not show much interest in her. King Henry VIII's third wife managed to sire him a son and Elizabeth was no longer a princess. Elizabeth is described as a bright child who got along well with her half-sister Mary and half-brother Edward. Although King Henry VIII marked both daughters as illegitimate, before his death he changed the English law to acknowledge them as true princesses without the ability to inherit the throne directly.

Queen Elizabeth I reigned during the Renaissance era. This was a period of development and flourishing of European culture, marking the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern age. Renaissance thinking was born in Italy during the 14th century and spread throughout Europe in the next three centuries. Society focused on humanism, human nature, and individual expression in literature and art. The ideals of the Renaissance were inspired by ancient Rome and Greece. The development did not take place only in art and culture, but also in politics with the division of power between church and state, in the commercial sphere with the development of banks, in education with the help of the invention of printing, in the reformation of the church – especially by Henry VIII, and in the exploration of the world and the beginning of the establishment of colonies. The highest development in the English Renaissance was in literature, with the important people being summarised by Charles Boyce: “leading figures in poetry were Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and Shakespeare, and in drama, Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson. The leading writers of prose included Thomas More and Francis Bacon.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Boyce, *Critical Companion to William Shakespeare: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York: Roundtable Press, 2005), 874.



### ***2.1.1 Clothing and Cross-dressing***

Clothing was connected to both class and gender so strongly that whenever someone transgressed these rules, it caused controversy and led to many consequences. James I, for example, in 1620 “ordered the preachers of London to inveigh from the pulpit against the practice of women dressing mannishly in the streets of London.”<sup>23</sup> Whenever any woman was caught in an article of clothing that was specifically assigned to men, she was accused of prostitution. Women often had other reasons to cross-dress. As Howard notes, the reasons included among many others travelling to war with their husbands as male servants to accompany them.

William Harrison, an author of a historical account of Elizabethan England in the year 1577, also comments on the contemporary situation of clothing and how it was changing. His account is not objective but emotionally charged with his own opinions. First, he briefly describes what he saw in England and how it was changing, lamenting over women even from a higher society who started to wear clothes meant for housewives only. His opinion is also based on religion and part of his account is as follows:

Their fardingals, and diversely coloured nether stocks of silk, jerdsey, and such like, whereby their bodies are rather deformed than commended. I have met with some of these trulls in London so disguised that it hath passed my skill to discern whether they were men or women. Thus it is now come to pass, that women are become men, and men transformed into monsters; and those good gifts which Almighty God hath given unto us to relieve our necessities withal ... not otherwise betowed than in all excess, as if we wist not otherwise how to consume and waste them.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Howard, “Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England,” in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1988): 420, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2870706>.

<sup>24</sup> William Harrison, *Descriptions of Elizabethan England, 1577* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2001), 61.

Harrison was clearly dissatisfied with what he saw and considered the cross-dressing of both men and women as an abomination that could not only destroy England but the whole Commonwealth. He viewed it as a practice that is against God's wishes and ruins society.

Many of the women who took to cross-dressing were unmarried women. Based on Howard's research, they were either employed in taverns or served tradesmen or were of such low economic status that they were driven to prostitution to survive. The male clothing then served as a sign of this profession. Many women cross-dressed as men for protection while they were travelling through London and the country overall since a lone female traveller was in much danger. Howard speculates that for women who were wives of London citizens, wearing male clothing served as a sign of wealth and independence, while for lower-class women it was a way of feeling less vulnerable.

During carnivals, men sometimes dressed up as women. This was a common practice for celebrations and festivals. They cross-dressed to play practical jokes, take part in games, punish their neighbours, show social protest during riots, or escape being identified. For more practical reasons, men dressed as women to escape from prison. There are instances of men who "may have disguised themselves as women to infiltrate a forbidden place or to make a rendezvous with a lover,"<sup>25</sup> to fulfil their erotic stimulation or for personal gain overall.

Clothes served as the main marker of one's gender and class during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. If a person were to dress in a way different from what was assigned to them, it was considered to be a transgression and disruption to the social order. The state of early modern England oversaw regulating who could wear what, for example, "Elizabethan sumptuary proclamations list those who could wear certain colors (such as purple), certain fabrics (such as silk), and certain adornments (such as spurs, daggers, jewels)."<sup>26</sup> Clothes served as quite a precise indication of one's status and degree due to this. The rules for both different classes and each gender were needed since for the society, the social order depended on maintaining the distinctions between each of them. When

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<sup>25</sup> David Cressy, "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England." *Journal of British Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996): 459, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/176000>.

<sup>26</sup> Howard, "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," 421.

women dressed in men's clothes, symbolically, they left their subordinate positions and transferred to the same level as men, becoming masterless women. Cressy summarizes the reasons why women dressed up as men: "to plead at law, regain a fortune, or practice a profession barred to women; to advance a stratagem, win back lovers, or fight a duel; to travel alone, avoid rape or molestation, and to have adventures."<sup>27</sup> Some of these reasons were used in the three plays concerned in this thesis.

Looking at it from the other side, for men to cross-dress as women was less common and less needed. It was often not viewed as a punishable offence, depending on the level of cross-dressing and the amount of feminine attributes. Wearing feminine clothes and accessories "merely undermined the authority inherently belonging to the superior sex and placed him in a position of shame."<sup>28</sup> If they wore clothes specifically assigned to women, that was considered to be monstrous and misplaced. Overall, putting on anything even slightly considered to be feminine made their image more tender and the man was made weaker in the eyes of other men.

The most common arguments against cross-dressing came from religion. It was believed that God divided and specified what clothes each gender should wear and in using clothes from the opposite gender, one was acting against his will. Female cross-dressing became such a problem that in 1620, King James I ordered the clergy to preach against the practice. Three misogynist pamphlets were written, one of them being *Hic Mulier*. Cressy notes that this pamphlet criticised cross-dressing and described the clothing women wore: "They cropped their hair, sported broad-brimmed hats, donned doublets, pulled on boots, and equipped themselves with swords."<sup>29</sup> From a contemporary point of view, such a way of dressing is commonly acceptable, but for the Elizabethan and Jacobean society, it was rather shocking and scandalous. Women were arrested and cited for wearing male clothing more often than men were for wearing female clothing.

Women who were cross-dressing were treated differently than the men doing the same during the Elizabethan era: "Women who not only cross-dressed but *passed* as men

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<sup>27</sup> Cressy, "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing", 440.

<sup>28</sup> Howard, "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," 423-424.

<sup>29</sup> Cressy, "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing", 444.

were prosecuted for *fraud*, while their main counterparts were called to court for sodomy.”<sup>30</sup> It is also obvious from William Harrison’s account quoted above: cross-dressing women in his eyes only became men, but men who cross-dressed were monsters. For women, the breaking of the law consisted of pretending to be someone they are not, in lying about their true identity and gender. They were expected to be the embodiment of truth. When they tried to become men for various reasons, they were therefore tried for lying rather than sodomy. It was the male population who cross-dressed as women that were tried for sodomy rather than simply the fact that they pretended to be somebody else than they were. A man pretending to be a woman was seen as something much worse and wrong in the eyes of society.

## **2.2 The Role of Women in the Elizabethan Era**

The Renaissance society during the reign of Elizabeth I and James I was inherently patriarchal. It did not give many opportunities to women to express themselves and to be independent. For this reason, there were many instances of women cross-dressing as men with the goal of securing a better life for themselves. Their motives often had purely practical reasons, connected with gaining more agency, or actions to achieve a certain effect, and economic and social stability.

The invention of printing has brought with it both positive and negative changes when it comes to the position of women. Slowly, the literacy of women started to increase, and they gained access to things they did not have before. They were able to read the scripture by themselves, could read books, or even start writing them themselves, all of which allowed them slightly more freedom. The patriarchal society, however, has used this development to control women more and instil in them the ideals they wanted to see. This was done through an increase of books specifically targeted towards women. The books focused on the proper manner a woman should behave or topics such as housewifery.

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<sup>30</sup> Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 110.

Ella Caroline Lapham summarizes the role of women in industry and employment in her article “The Industrial Status of Women in Elizabethan England.”<sup>31</sup> According to her, English women had a certain charm for both English and foreign people even though there were many issues with health and sanitation. Citizens, for example, often shared their living quarters with livestock. Women were able to be employed by the male members of their families, whether they were husbands or fathers. After the death of a husband, a widow was allowed to continue the business with all the privileges their husbands enjoyed. Although according to the custom of the time, all wife’s earnings belonged to their husbands, a married woman had a higher position than the unmarried one. Married women could, for example, be tried by law or carry independent businesses. When their husbands left to serve the government, they were entrusted with full control over the household. Women were responsible for taking care of the household and taught everything connected to the management. The employment of women varied – working with cloth and creating clothing, repairing buildings, taking care of cattle, cooking for the family, and working in the food industry. It is thanks to the latter and the contribution of housewives that Cheddar cheese was created, for example. Unless they were of a higher rank, they could not afford to lead an idle life. Especially in the class of yeomen. The biggest presence of women can be found in the industry of printing – “among the London publishers and printers of the period from 1553 to 1640 are the names of more than seventy women”<sup>32</sup> which for that period is a high number. These female printers received the business after their husbands’ deaths and usually only spent a couple of years closing the business down in profit. Some, however, ran the business for up to nineteen years.

Although most people believed in the patriarchal society and saw women as something lesser, there is no denying that the Elizabethan era saw many improvements in the position of women, starting from the head of the country being an independent woman. The Queen herself was an example of a woman who could be equal to men. She ran

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<sup>31</sup> Ella Caroline Lapham, “The Industrial Status of Women in Elizabethan England.” *Journal of Political Economy* 9, no. 4 (1901): 562–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1819353>. The following summary is taken from this source.

<sup>32</sup> Lapham, “Industrial Status of Women,” 589.

international trade, signed the first East India Company contract, and worked with other women as many had invested in said contract. Many women were able to become shareholders in colonies or even provided loans. Unfortunately, as Lapham puts it at the end of the article, “much of the progress made by Elizabethan women was lost in the next age; but that impulse to earn a foothold, to justify existence, never died out.”<sup>33</sup> It is, however, clear from the historical records that the Elizabethan society was much different to both the preceding and the following ages.

### ***2.2.1 Marriage***

Marriage in Early Modern England could be classified as an exchange between men, a commercial transaction that was allowed only based on the size of a dowry the woman’s family was able to afford, what alliances were between men, and what land the families possessed. Women were one of the commodities traded in the marriage: “Daughters were pawns in the political and social maneuvers of their families, particularly their male kin.”<sup>34</sup> It is generally known that during the past eras, women had no say in who they would marry, and once married, they were solely in the possession of their husbands. Wives were expected to behave based on their husbands' wishes and commands, especially in patriarchal societies such as the one in Elizabethan England.

### **2.3 Elizabethan Theatre**

Both courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I supported theatres and allowed the people in the theatrical business to gain prestige. Many actors and other professions connected to the theatre were able to become rich. Protests against theatre, acting and drama were common in England of this era. During the Early Modern Era, English theatre insisted on purely male acting companies who performed as both men and women.

As recent studies of the Elizabethan era have shown, “a major transformation in cultural life took place during the early decades of Queen Elizabeth’s reign and that this

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<sup>33</sup> Lapham, “Industrial Status of Women,” 599.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Newman, “Portia’s Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in The Merchant of Venice” in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1987): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2870399>.

cultural revolution manifested a complex interaction among religious, socio-economic, and political processes.”<sup>35</sup> This included the development of the theatre. The act of entertaining people through performance has its roots in medieval times – for example in juggling, dancing, or fencing. Slowly, it began to turn into the art of performing a play. At first, theatre had the form of travelling companies that went through the country and performed in different towns and cities. Theatre buildings gained popularity during Shakespeare’s life and more of them were established. The most important theatrical companies were Leicester’s Men, Queen’s Men, Admiral’s Men, and Chamberlain’s Men. They were supported by the namesakes of the groups. It was typical for Elizabethan drama to be written in collaboration of two or more authors, sometimes even teams. The theatrical groups were important not only as a way to connect the actors but also as a place for playwrights to cooperate on writing drama.

The Elizabethan era of drama and theatre is considered to be the Golden Age of English drama with William Shakespeare as the leading figure. Drama began to be written in the 1570s as a result of competition between children and adult theatre companies. Children performed plays suited to their education while adults tried to appeal to the public more. In the 1580s, “Elizabethan drama was dominated by a group of playwrights known as the University Wits, who brought together various influences: classical literature and its contemporary imitation in academic drama, morality plays, and contemporary renaissance literature from Italy and France.”<sup>36</sup> In the 1590s, Shakespeare and other playwrights emerged. William Shakespeare is now considered to be the most notable author from this era. He was able to showcase well the relationship between the show and language as he mastered the art of working with English.

There were two common genres – tragedy and comedy. The tragedies were revenge plays such as *Hamlet*, which included the downfall of a powerful ruler, or the so-called Roman plays. Comedies were romantic ones that focused on young love, comedy of

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<sup>35</sup> Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 22.

<sup>36</sup> Boyce, *Companion to William Shakespeare*, 735.

humour with bold characters ridiculing contemporary behaviour and court comedy focusing on noble audiences.

Jacobean drama during the reign of King James I is often considered to be part of the Elizabethan drama but displays slightly different characteristics. It naturally evolved out of the Elizabethan drama and changed from 1610. Jacobean drama turned more decadent, spectacular, and bizarre. Shakespeare has continued to write in his own style even when this new period began and was not majorly influenced by Jacobean drama. His romances mirror the newfound interest in exotic locations, romantic characters, unrealistic plots and spectacle while still adhering to the Elizabethan tradition.

Howard poses a question of whether the theatre had any role in disturbing the social order through various degrees of cross-dressing. First and foremost is the level of men in the acting companies who had to take on female roles within the plays. Hand in hand goes the fact that during the Elizabethan era, plays including the cross-dressing elements were rather popular. They were not topical as the cross-dressing often was not meant to disturb anything but served as a rather comical element within the plays. Examples can be found of the plays aiming to threaten the sex-gender system quite intensely. Howard concludes this by saying that “the plays are themselves sites of social struggle conducted through discourse, and they were produced in a cultural institution that was itself controversial and ideologically violate.”<sup>37</sup> The three Shakespearean plays discussed in this thesis do not seem to inherently aim at disrupting the social order. They still include elements that support the need to make the distinctions between the genders smaller.

Cressy notes that in Jacobean comedy, “the transvestite male appears more energized than emasculated by his temporary change of clothes.”<sup>38</sup> There are many plays in which a man dressed as a woman does not become a victim of the practical joke being played in the drama. They are the ones outwitting people around them and successfully achieving what they set out to do. The most common cross-dressing, however, is aimed to be played for amusement rather than disruption of the gender system. A man cross-dressing as a woman

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<sup>37</sup> Howard, “Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England,” 429.

<sup>38</sup> Cressy, “Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing”, 453.



was quite common in theatres. The amount of literature with cross-dressing suggests “that the inner and outer signs of gender identity formed a topic of continuing concern, at least among playwrights and playgoers.”<sup>39</sup> There is some fascination with the topic and a need to explore it more. The fact that so many plays include the motif of cross-dressing leads to the conclusion that gender identity as a topic was discussed often.

Howard describes the Elizabethan theatre in the following way:

The theatre as a social institution signified change. It blurred the boundaries between degrees and genders by having men of low estate wear the clothes of noblemen and of women, and by having one’s money, not one’s blood or title, decide how high and how well one sat, or whether, indeed, one stood. To go to the theatre was, in short, to be positioned at the crossroads of cultural change and contradiction—and this seems to me especially true for the middle-class female playgoer, who by her practices was calling into question the “place” of woman, perhaps more radically than did Shakespeare’s fictions of crossdressing.<sup>40</sup>

This summary shows the importance of theatre in the society. It connected people from all backgrounds and their treatment did not depend on their status or class. Everyone had the same opportunity. For some, it was easier to pay money for a better place to sit or stand, but even the lower classes had the opportunity to save up and get a better spot. The different classes shared one space, watching the same entertainment. This began the blurring of boundaries. Women were allowed to come to the theatre as well and this allowed them to gain more opportunities.

Costumes in the Elizabethan theatre were not as important as they are now. They were rather expensive, and each company had a limited amount of costumes and money to spend on acquiring new ones. The historical records focus more on the theatre and setting. The people who recorded the contemporary situation of costumes saw no need to write

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<sup>39</sup> Cressy, “Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing”, 458.

<sup>40</sup> Howard, “Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England,” 440.

about them. At the same time, the costumes were essential for establishing who each of the characters was. The symbolism of each piece of clothing that was common during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I was being challenged by the actors in the theatres. A character of a king was easy to recognize because the actor wore clothes typically assigned to a king. The main controversy comes from the fact that “much Elizabethan uneasiness about playing arose because the actors represented identities not their own, dressing in garments of fabrics and fashions reserved for their betters.”<sup>41</sup> People from the lower social level were wearing clothes of all the social classes as well as all the genders on the stage in order to showcase and embody the character properly which caused discomfort in citizens who preferred for the established order to be kept. The main issue in the view of society was that “to wear clothes which identified the wearer as if of a different sex or rank than his true one could be construed as a revolt against God his maker, even if worn in an acknowledge fiction.”<sup>42</sup> The belief that clothes are assigned by God and thus a law that cannot be broken was rooted deeply in Elizabethan society. It was mainly the young boys who were cast in the female characters and thus had to cross-dress as one.

From the historical point of view but mainly the contemporary one, male cross-dressing is viewed from two different points of view: “either as, by and large, a neutral convention, or, alternatively, as a site marked by male homoeroticism.”<sup>43</sup> The fact that cross-dressing happens in various contexts, for various reasons and is called different names marks it as something that can be explored further and is diverse. They also allow for further complications of the plot.

## **2.4 Gender in the Elizabethan Era**

There seem to be strictly categorised labels of femininity, masculinity, sexual attraction, and overall identity nowadays. All these notions are being challenged by many

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<sup>41</sup> Jean MacIntyre. *Costumes and Scripts in the Elizabethan Theatres*. (Canada: The University of Alberta Press. 1992), 7.

<sup>42</sup> MacIntyre, *Costumes*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in the Elizabethan Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Assessment, 2008), 123.

people who choose to express themselves in a way that has not been pre-described to them. As Casey Charles comments in his article, the concept of masculinity and femininity was not as essential and clearly divided during the Renaissance as today's categories of man and woman are. Although "arguably more patriarchal, more homophobic, and more misogynist than contemporary western culture," Charles continues, "the polarized rhetoric of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe nevertheless masks a decided anxiety about what is feared to be the actual fluidity of gender."<sup>44</sup> Women were viewed simply as incomplete men by many scientists.

Overall, "discourse of gender in the Renaissance were overwhelmingly hierarchical, with men and women first and foremost described, respectively, as dominant and subservient, perfect and less perfect, fit for rule and unfit for rule."<sup>45</sup> These notions and rules were set by men which makes it clear why this gender is considered to be the superior one. They were based on arguments of different capacities for reason or the ability to control emotions and passion.

Female sexuality in Elizabethan England was not derived only from the gender or the role the woman was prescribed. There was a difference in the way male transgression of gender and the male role in society was viewed compared to the female one. Traub summarizes it in the following way: "Deviations in gender roles did not automatically implicate women as 'unnatural' in their sexual tastes; deviations in erotic behavior were not necessarily coded as gender transgressions."<sup>46</sup> It is clear from these observations that the female gender and sexuality were looked at using a different perspective than both the modern women's perspective and the perspective used to view their male counterparts of the age. Male transgressions of this type were viewed as a bigger threat to the society than the female ones and that is why they were not described as sodomy in the courts. For neither of the genders was sexual identity a primary characterization of their identity. They rather

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<sup>44</sup> Casey Charles, "Gender Trouble in 'Twelfth Night,'" *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 2 (1997): 124, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3208678>.

<sup>45</sup> Howard, "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," 423.

<sup>46</sup> Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, 111.

identified themselves based on their role in society, their position within the hierarchy and their status.

## 2.5 William Shakespeare

There is not much information that can be said to be true about William Shakespeare. Many sources describe his life, but scholars are not certain which ones are reliable and trustworthy. The following paragraphs include commonly known information about the author to provide his background using Charles Boyce's *Critical Companion to William Shakespeare: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* as a source.<sup>47</sup>

William Shakespeare is said to be born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford upon Avon. On the same day fifty-two years later, he died in 1616. Shakespeare was born into a yeoman family which advanced into a gentleman status over his life, in part thanks to his earnings in the theatre business. His father, John Shakespeare, was a businessman, official of the town, and a glover. In 1596, he was awarded a coat of arms, thus becoming a gentleman. Mary Arden Shakespeare, William's mother, was from a higher class than his father. She was part of the gentry. Shakespeare attended the Stratford Grammar School. During his childhood, Shakespeare learned a lot about the life of people in Stratford and the countryside as well as about the business and trade his father performed. This knowledge is then used in his plays quite accurately.

Almost no information is known about Shakespeare between the years 1585 to 1592 which are framed by historical records. Because of that, these years are called the dark years of Shakespeare's life. There are some speculations about what happened: Shakespeare was poaching and got caught, therefore he ran away from Stratford to London to hide; he became a soldier in the Netherlands or against the Spanish Armada; he worked in the London publishing industry; and many more. The first historical record after the dark years puts Shakespeare into London because he was already involved with a theatrical company.

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<sup>47</sup> Boyce, *Companion to William Shakespeare*.

By 1592, Shakespeare has already established himself as an actor and playwright alike. Some of his plays were already popular – such as *The Comedy of Errors* or the *Henry VI* plays. It is assumed that many of his early plays were written in collaboration with other playwrights as was typical of Elizabethan drama. He might have started his career of playwriting as a collaborator on other authors' plays. Shakespeare's first plays were performed by the Pembroke's Men for whom he wrote and acted. In 1594, he was officially employed by the Chamberlain's Men with whom he stayed for the rest of his career.

A plague broke out in 1592 and closed the theatres down for two years. During his time, Shakespeare wrote his long poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). By this time, Shakespeare was already considered to be a great writer and was popular with the public. The society, however, did not consider theatre to be a proper career for a serious writer. Shakespeare managed to find a patron among the nobles who supported him in writing the poems. They are dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. The dedications develop from an expected address to a patron into one of friendship in the second poem.

During the 1590s and perhaps after, Shakespeare continued writing poems, this time turning to sonnets. These are works of complex sequences of love poems and are considered to belong among the masterpieces of English poetry. Scholars assume they represent feelings of love towards both a woman and a man. It is not clear whether they truly do or not as they do not include many details of Shakespeare's personal life which could provide clues to identifying the people addressed in the sonnets. The title of this thesis comes from Sonnet 20 which is addressed to a person that displays both male and female characteristics, thus being both a master and a mistress of passion.

After the theatres were open again in 1594, Shakespeare was an official part of the Chamberlain's Man. In his first years with them, he produced many successful plays – *Romeo and Juliet*, *Love's Lost Labour*, and *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. It is believed that until the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, more than a dozen plays were written, including *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*, which are discussed in this thesis. The first published play in William Shakespeare's name was *Love's Labour Lost* in 1598. At the same time, "in the same year Francis Meres cited him as among

England's best playwrights for both comedy and tragedy and compared his poetry to the greatest of the ancients."<sup>48</sup>

In 1599, Shakespeare became one of the partners of the Globe Theatre in London. It turned into a successful enterprise which helped Shakespeare's wealth to grow. It was not usual for a playwright to be one of the owners of the acting company – if they were involved more, it was as actors, not as partners. Shakespeare himself appears on several cast lists but it is not clear what characters he played. Shakespeare's company became a part of the royal household after King James became king in 1603 – the Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men. The company performed more often at the court and plays such as *Othello*, *King Lear* or *Macbeth* were written. After acquiring the Blackfriars Theatre, Shakespeare began to write romances to fit the new audience.

Shakespeare's plays include repeated motifs and concepts. The history and Roman plays show political conservatism and how reluctant people were to accept change. Overall, he "places a high value on the preservation of social order and distrusts the disorder that he sees in popular political assertiveness."<sup>49</sup> Shakespeare often expresses fondness towards the common people in England, and celebrates love, sexuality, and marriage.

There is not enough provable evidence about Shakespeare's life and his connection to the plays, and there is a controversy relating to the authorship of the plays. Scholars who believe in Shakespeare not being the author argue that he was "an ignorant, perhaps illiterate, minor actor who was surely incapable of producing such literature."<sup>50</sup> A learned, noble person would be able to do so but they would not want to be associated with the theatre. The majority of scholars, however, attribute the plays and poems to William Shakespeare.

### ***2.5.1 Shakespeare and the Queer Theory***

To make a connection between William Shakespeare, his works, and the queer theory, one does not have to go far. Shakespeare has been discussed in the context of queer theory

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<sup>48</sup> Boyce, *Companion to William Shakespeare*, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Boyce, *Companion to William Shakespeare*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Boyce, *Companion to William Shakespeare*, 673.

for many decades, more so in the recent years. Stephen Guy-Bray opens the topic in the following way:

Queer theory began as gay and lesbian studies, and (in the field of English literature, at least) these studies tended to be rooted in the biographies of writers and their characters. Shakespeare was an especially productive source for this kind of research. Interpreted as autobiographical, the sonnets have often been taken to give us a glimpse of a bisexual man, one who moves over the course of the sequence from desiring a man to desiring a woman and whose romantic problems crucially come from the personalities of his love objects and not from any inner torment over what we would now call his sexual orientation.<sup>51</sup>

Whether the sonnets were addressed to the man in a platonic way or a romantic one, the critics in general are not sure. The ambiguity and uncertainty are, however, one of the main reasons why Shakespeare's works first caught the attention of gender studies academics. Shakespeare's life remains more or less a mystery since the historical records are not detailed and the majority of the details known are a speculation. It is then just as possible that Shakespeare was a bisexual man writing sonnets about his lovers as it is possible that he was a heterosexual man writing the same sonnets dedicated to a man as a character, from the point of view of a different persona, trying to challenge himself and his writing. Critics are now trying to find out who the mysterious man to whom the sonnets are addressed is – whether it is a single man or more of them. Some historical figures are assumed to be the addressor of the sonnets.

In addition to his sonnets, many of his plays include queer-coded characters and elements. The queer concepts range from same-sex attraction to the problematics of gender identity and expression. One of the most striking instances of same-sex attraction in Shakespeare's plays can be found in *Twelfth Night*. Antonio is quite obviously enamoured

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen Guy-Bray, "Shakespearean Sexualities" in *After Queer Studies: Literature, Theory and Sexuality in the 21st Century*, ed. Tyler Bradway and E.L. McCallum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 21.

with Sebastian, Viola's brother. He treats Sebastian as an object of his desire, taking actions typical for someone who is trying to protect their loved one. Similar instances can be found in other plays. The notion of gender in Shakespeare's comedies is discussed further in the thesis.



### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Overview of Gender Fluidity in Shakespeare

William Shakespeare is widely studied for many various reasons, one of them being the inclusion of queer elements in his works. His sonnets, where the reader cannot be sure to whom they are addressed, or his plays, are both concerned in these studies. It is theorized that a certain number of the sonnets is addressed to a man. It is unclear, however, who this man exactly is. It is not surprising then that other Shakespeare's works include queer characters or discuss the fluidity of gender.

Although scholars are looking at the queer problematic in Shakespeare's works through the modern lens, the analysis has to be situated into the culture in which the plays have been written and staged. As Casey Charles argues, contemporary notions of sexual identity are often applied to "an early modern culture in which the categories of homo- and bisexuality were neither fixed nor associated with identity."<sup>52</sup> It is often merely a socially constructed idea that gender identity determines sexuality. Each society and culture have established basis for what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. Shakespeare challenges these characteristics in his plays containing cross-dressing even if their conclusion is always a heterosexual marriage between a man and a woman.

Shakespeare plays with gender fluidity in his plays mainly. The most notable ones which contain characters dressing up as the other gender and thus complicating the storyline include *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *The Midsummer Night's Dream*. Not including the last-mentioned play, all three will be discussed further in this thesis in relation to the motivation and reasons for the characters choosing to pretend to be the other gender, namely a man in these cases.

Early Modern English theatre insisted on an all-male cast in all the productions. This reality has to be taken into account as the staging of the three plays analysed in this work challenges gender androgyny even further. Not only is there a man playing the part of a woman, having to learn how to behave like a woman to deliver the performance properly,

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<sup>52</sup> Charles, "Gender Trouble", 121.

but there is also the problem of the female character pretending to be a man. We then end up with a man playing a woman who is playing the part of a man.

It is believed that girls disguising themselves as boys had mainly functional reasons, especially during this era. It is, therefore, not surprising that it was reflected in the writings of the time. It is then possible, as Catherine Belsey notes, that “plots, as we are led to believe, were accordingly selected for the stage where heroines disguised themselves as boys, and the young performers were able to relax into their parts,”<sup>53</sup> since all the actors were men. At the same time, however, the practice of female characters cross-dressing in the plays is not found in a high number of plays. In Shakespeare’s works specifically, the cross-dressing characters appear solely in the comedy and romance plays. Female characters in his tragedies remain purely female.

Most literary critics agree on the fact that the presence of cross-dressing includes in itself some homoerotic suggestions. The main problem is in identifying the exact kind included in the plays. A materialistic point of view, as Valerie Traub mentions, would mean that “the homoeroticism embodied by the cross-dressed heroine is implicitly male: If Olivia is attracted to Viola/Cesario, or Phebe to Rosalind/Ganymede, the presence of boy actors suggests that the homoerotic exchange occurs between the transvestized boy actor playing Olivia or Phebe and the boy actor who ... is now back in masculine dress.”<sup>54</sup> At the same time, Traub counters with the fact that female desire towards another woman is included in the plays. She points out the distinct lack of historical data concerning female-to-female relationships during the Elizabethan era and the fact that the little historical evidence available suggests that there were no courts dealing with female sodomy. This is contrary to the male population, who have been accused of committing sodomy with other men quite often. Although women who dressed as men were discussed more regularly in society as transgressing rules, the male actors playing women were considered to be a sodomy as well.

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<sup>53</sup> Catherine Belsey, “Gender in a Different Dispensation: The Case of Shakespeare,” *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), 8. <https://doi.org/10.11116/jdivegendstud.1.1.0007>.

<sup>54</sup> Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, 107.

According to Traub, the “homoerotics of Shakespearean comedy are most accurately perceived as a cultural intervention in a heterosexually overdetermined field.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, one cannot simply view the attraction of women towards women and of men towards men – even if they are women disguised as men – outside of the culture and the society in which they were written about. Traub also prefers to call the fact that women dress up as men as transvestitism rather than a disguise or cross-dressing. Her arguments include the notion of transvestitism including eroticism as well which she finds to be a part of the texts themselves and not attributed to only one person. Although eroticism and sexual desire is included in the roles of the characters and the costumes as well as in the bodies themselves, this thesis does not employ the same view and prefers to use the terms disguise or cross-dressing to describe the behaviour of the female characters.

The plays containing cross-dressing treat gender more as discontinuous because the characters move on the scale of gender and the boxes of characteristics and norms. More specifically and importantly, “young women are liberated psychologically, as well as physically, from the confines of conventional femininity when they adopt male costumes.”<sup>56</sup> The costumes open new possibilities and opportunities the women would not be able to use in their usual clothing. Shakespeare might have been trying to portray what the women in Elizabethan society wanted but could not have. There is a clear difference between the words and behaviour of the characters when they are in male and in female clothing.

Catherine Belsey also makes a distinction between pretending to be someone through impersonation, which means simply pretending to be somebody else to achieve something, or becoming someone through impersonation, meaning truly embodying the essence of the person being impersonated. Because the characters are able to fluidly move between the two genders, it can be said that Shakespeare’s female characters become the male versions of themselves. As Belsey notes, most notably through “fluency, wit, and the power of persuasion, Shakespeare’s male-impersonators are more than equal to their masculine

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<sup>55</sup> Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, 118.

<sup>56</sup> Belsey, “Gender in a Different Dispensation,” 8.

interlocutors.”<sup>57</sup> The characters are able to face their male counterparts and often they manage to overpower them even. They also adapt their personality to suit the different situations they find themselves in. It is important to point out that the original female under the disguise does not disappear but is extended, her identity explored further.

Shakespeare’s concealment of the characters in his plays was not simply of the actor but the artificial person themselves. It created a secrecy between the audience and characters as well. Thanks to Shakespeare’s involvement of different types of theatrical elements, the cross-dressing did not stand out entirely. The audience usually did not accept the disguise as something serious because “disguise, in other words, is a dramatic convention that can scarcely be said to be in aid of lifelike resemblance,”<sup>58</sup> especially in connection to the real-life cross-dressing of the Elizabethan era and the fact that it is not generally common to dress up in order to pretend to be someone else in a serious way.

Women were not as free in the society compared to their male counterparts. Because of that, “the arresting power of performance must have served as a buoyant stimulus in the qualities of such heroines as Portia, Rosalind, Viola, and Imogen, with their refreshing sense of independence, their sprightly and vivacious bearing.”<sup>59</sup> The newly gained freedom was special for these characters and allowed them to experience much more than they could as women, as is discussed more deeply in the following section. The disguise itself “both does and does not serve the representation of feminine dignity, initiative, sovereignty, and sentiment.”<sup>60</sup> They do not lack a structure but rather provide an opening that can be further negotiated and worked with. It allows them to transfer into somebody else and behave in a different way.

Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster differentiate the cross-dressing found in Shakespeare’s plays from the other instances within the plays from this era. They describe it as in a following way:

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<sup>57</sup> Belsey, “Gender in a Different Dispensation,” 9.

<sup>58</sup> Weimann and Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power*, 119.

<sup>59</sup> Weimann and Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power*, 120.

<sup>60</sup> Weimann and Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power*, 130.

Shakespeare's disguised heroines differ from most ordinary uses of disguise and role-playing in that the secondary level of role-playing – that of page or youth – is more consistently developed in interaction with their primary roles as young women and their material ground in the boy actor. In fact, it may even be said that this secondary level is fortified at the very point where it serves as both a foil to and an extension of the primary role. Even so, it is a level on which the act of performance is made to shine through the representation of character: it is here that, sexually and socially, the perception of both difference and affinity between performer and performed is inescapable. It is bifold authority at its finest and most complex.

Shakespeare's boy-heroines possess a space for an undetermined range of functions, according to which their attempts at disguise can serve either closure or aperture in the representation of female roles. In conjunction with the existential act of performance, the secondary role of page or youth can either appropriate or surrender the iconic and symbolic territory occupied by the primary female role.<sup>61</sup>

It is clear from this description that the double cross-dressing is an important part of the plays. If only the fact that the boy-actors are disguised as women was discussed, it would be simpler and less intriguing. On the contrary, Shakespeare's heroines spend almost as much time in the disguise of a page, a youth, or a lawyer, as they do in their original clothing, sometimes even longer. Their second identity thus becomes as important as the original one. Even if they come back to the original female version of themselves at the end of the play and conform to the typical society's expectations, the female characters have experienced something that has changed their perception and power. A certain deconstruction of the character takes place and creates something other than is typical. The cross-dressed person disturbs the norm, the gender-connected conventions and boundaries.

Due to the Elizabethan practice of only men being allowed to be actors, "the act of counterfeiting a semblance of identity in the person of an imaginary other therefore presupposes a tension, dramatically usable, between imaginary representation and staging

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<sup>61</sup> Weimann and Buster, *Shakespeare and the Power*, 136.

practices.”<sup>62</sup> The element of a cross-dressing character then adds a certain depth to the story and makes the connection with audiences imagination more dynamic. Since the Elizabethan theatre did not put much importance on the costumes and mainly focused on presenting the characters in an understandable way to the public, imagination was important in making the dramatic act come to life.

As William W.E. Slights mentions in his article, “by using the myth of the androgyne, Shakespeare incorporates in his play whole sets of attitudes, some earnest and some humorous, on the union of man and woman in the enterprise of loving.”<sup>63</sup> The myth of the androgyne comes from Ovid and focuses on the person who is both and neither gender at the same time. The androgyne exists outside of the binary opposition. At the same time, the use of the androgyne myth gives Shakespeare both “serious and comic perspectives on sexual union because the figure, as pure idea and grotesque image, was considered both an amusing freak and a serious symbol of the marriage of true minds and bodies at the turn of the seventeenth century.”<sup>64</sup> The union is then complete with the help of the transvestite disguise that appears in the three plays discussed.

Compared to the contemporary experience of gender fluidity and trans people, some critics have identified Shakespeare’s treatment of transitioning into another gender as too simplistic. In order for a person to be able to their desired gender in the eyes of the society and the people close to them, they need to work hard on fitting the categories ascribed to said gender. For Shakespeare, on the other hand, just changing the costume seems to be enough. It is a quick transformation, sometimes even magical. As Sawyer Kemp mentions, “characters like Viola may present a *utopian* vision of transition: one of such ease and striking completeness that even your own brother would instinctively use the right pronoun.”<sup>65</sup> To a degree, this presents the ideal way of how gender transition would work. That is, however, not the case.

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<sup>62</sup> Weimann and Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power*, 142.

<sup>63</sup> William W.E. Slights, “‘Maid and Man’ in ‘Twelfth Night’” in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 80, no. 3 (1981): 328. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27708834>.

<sup>64</sup> Slights, “Maid and Man,” 329.

<sup>65</sup> Kemp, “Shakespeare in Transition,” 38.

Three main motivations behind the female characters cross-dressing as men and the consequences of these actions can be identified. The female characters are forced to dress up as men due to unforeseen circumstances and not of their own volition, in order to get closer to the man they love, or in order to escape their own lives. Therefore, the first motivation is gaining freedom and agency. The question of attraction to both the same and different gender is raised many times within the plays and holds an important role in the development of the stories. The ambiguous attraction is a second consequence. In a way, it is also a motivation, as some characters use the disguise to get closer to the object of their attraction. Shakespeare uses the dichotomy of gender to focus on the commentary about stereotypes of his time connected to each gender.

### **3.2 Gender and Agency**

The act of disguise and transformation is not foreign to Shakespeare. It does not concern merely the comedies discussed in this thesis. The theme of disguise is common across many of Shakespeare's works. As was mentioned previously, the reasons for Shakespeare's characters putting on a disguise and pretending to be someone else are varied. The most common one occurs when a female character uses her male costume to gain agency and power.

In Elizabethan times, women had less rights than men and were not allowed to do as much as them. When a woman needed to travel, she had to be accompanied by a man in order to be able to travel safely. Thus, the most common reason for the female characters pretending to be men comes from this need. In order to stay safe or achieve something they desire, the women dress up and use their new found agency to their own advantage.

Safety and gain of agency is precisely the reason why Viola uses disguise as a man in *Twelfth Night*. Viola is a victim of a shipwreck in which she believes her brother was lost. She is saved by another boat and the captain and sailors take her into Illyria, a country Viola heard about from her father but never visited before. Thus, Viola is faced by a difficult decision. Either she remains a woman, goes to Lady Olivia and serves her as she does not want to reveal her status. The other option, which Viola ends up choosing, is to pose as a man in order to have more choices. As a survivor of a tragedy, Viola needs to find

a way to establish herself again and to continue surviving. Choosing a male disguise over keeping her female appearance makes her more accepted. Overall, a lonely man is safer and more trustworthy than a lonely woman. Viola orders the captain to help her, to present her as a eunuch in order to become part of Orsino's servants, and to keep her secret. Immediately from the start, this proves to be the right decision. Even if Viola as Cesario has to follow Orsino's orders and do something she would rather not be doing, she proves to be a very loyal servant, always trying to please her master. At the end of the play, Viola shares her reasons for dressing up as a man and admits to doing it in order to stay safe and be able to live well. Being a man helped her immensely in staying alive and having something worthwhile to do.

In Jean Howard's opinion, "Viola adopts male dress as a practical means of survival in an alien environment and, perhaps, as a magical means of keeping alive a brother believed drowned, and of delaying her own entry into the heterosexual arena until that brother returns."<sup>66</sup> Therefore, it is not an act driven by political ambition but rather a psychological safe space where Viola can be. Viola often expresses unhappiness and disgust for the disguise and thus the audience is always sure that it is a woman underneath the male clothing. As Howard notes, this specific play seems to support the cross-dressed woman who does it not in order to gain power that belongs to men. Viola's disguise is definitely at first driven by the need to feel safe as she travels and is trying to find a way home. An argument can be made that once she gets more acquainted with the situation, she uses the disguise for her personal gain of Orsino's affection. Without the disguise, she would not be able to get as close to him as she did with it.

For Rosalind in *As You Like It*, the main motivation for her choosing of male attire is mostly external. Her father has been banished by the current duke, her uncle, and she is staying with her cousin Celia. Celia wants for Rosalind to stand as her sister, because she is an only child and would like to have a sibling. She welcomes Rosalind into the household without any other preconception. Celia's father, the duke, is of a different opinion, however. By his words, he only let Rosalind stay at the court for Celia's sake and he still

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<sup>66</sup> Howard, "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," 431.



considers Rosalind to be a traitor, similarly to her father with whom she was supposed to leave before if it was not for Celia. With the words “within these ten days if that thou be’st found/So near our public court as twenty miles,/Thou diest for it,”<sup>67</sup> he dismisses her from the court and lets her go to wherever she wants to matter if she has a safe place to stay or not. Celia does not take this lightly, in her love for her cousin, she does not wish for Rosalind to leave alone, therefore she stands up to her father and leaves together with Rosalind.

Because they set on to the forest where Rosalind’s father lives currently and they are two noble women, to avoid danger of being hurt, they devise a plan to stay safe. Celia decides to dress in a mean and poor clothes not to give away her noble heritage, while Rosalind decides that “were it not better,/Because I am more than common tall,/That I did suit me all points like a man,/A gallant curtal-axe upon my thigh,/A boar-spear in my hand, and in my heart/Lie there what hidden woman’s fear there will be.”<sup>68</sup> Rosalind takes on more responsibility by disguising herself as a man, becoming the strong person who will be the protector of her cousin. Similarly, to Viola in *Twelfth Night*, it is important for these two characters not to travel alone as women. That would put them into high danger as lonely women are easier targets and any thieves would not hesitate to come after them. Thus, this initial reason to pretend to be a man is of practicality and gaining power to remain safe.

When the time comes for Rosalind dressed as Ganymede to meet with Orlando, she is worried about the meeting and how Orlando will react. In the end, Rosalind decides to play a little with Orlando, keep her true identity a secret and use her power as a man to guide Orlando. They engage in a battle of wits and Rosalind ends up enticing Orlando with her tale of an uncle who taught her about getting women fall in love with men. She uses this opportunity to make fun of Orlando and to test his love, make him prove to her how much he loves her. Rosalind makes Orlando call her by her real name, not Ganymede, but does not disclose her true identity. Her goal is for Orlando to pretend that she is Rosalind

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<sup>67</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>68</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 26.

and through that, she will test his loyalty. At the same time, she uses the excuse of curing him of his love by him wooing Ganymede. This allows her to teach him how to behave towards women, how to treat them and court them. Rosalind scolds him for anything disrespectful he does. She tells him it is always better to speak before kissing or physically approaching a woman, pointing out the importance of consent in the courting. Throughout the teaching, Ganymede does admit to being Rosalind in one conversation:

ORLANDO: Virtue is no horn-maker, and my Rosalind is virtuous.

ROSALIND: And I am your Rosalind.

CELIA: It pleases him to call you so, but he hath a Rosalind of a better leer than you.<sup>69</sup>

Orlando does not take the comment seriously since he views it as a part of the wooing play. He never ceases to point out how good a woman Rosalind is, always calling her virtuous and other characteristics fitting a lady. Celia mentions that Orlando does not mind calling Ganymede Rosalind and it even gives him pleasure, but through that, she also pokes fun at Rosalind that her true form is much better than her male disguise. The pretend play goes so far as to a wedding scenario, where Celia is the officiant that marries them. Again, Orlando does not take it seriously while Rosalind does a little, again testing him and preparing for their real wedding she will make sure that will come.

Rosalind uses her position as a man in order to move the plot forward and get what she wants, a wedding with Orlando. Through her manipulation of other characters she achieves not only her wedding, but also the wedding of Silvius and Phebe, and indirectly Celia and Oliver. In the end, she manages to persuade Phebe to marry Silvius by a playing a trick on her. Since repeatedly saying the Ganymede loves no woman does not work in lessening Phebe's advances upon him, Rosalind takes a different route. She makes a deal with Phebe, Silvius, and Orlando to meet the next day and that she will solve everything. All of them will get their happy ending. She also gets an agreement from duke senior, her

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<sup>69</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 82.

father, that if Ganymede brings Rosalind to him, he will give her to Orlando. The next day, Rosalind manages to untangle all the complications of the plot by revealing her true identity to everyone. Thus, Phebe lets Ganymede go, Orlando and duke accept her as wife and daughter respectively.

The female characters in *The Merchant of Venice* use male disguise solely for the purpose of gaining freedom, agency, or an upper hand over their husbands. Jessica puts on the manly attire in order to escape from her father, Shylock. Shylock behaves in ways that Jessica does not agree with. Even if she is his daughter, she is ashamed of his manners and would prefer not to be his daughter anymore. Jessica has fallen in love with Lorenzo so deeply that she decides to use this opportunity to leave her father's house and find life with her lover. In a letter addressed to Lorenzo, she reveals her plan of escaping:

She hath directred  
How I shall take her from father's house;  
What page's suit she hath in readiness.  
Ife'er the Jew her father come to heaven,  
It will be for his gentle daughter's sake;  
And never dare misfortune cross her foot,  
Unless she do it under this excuse,  
That she is issue to a faithless Jew.  
Come, go with me, peruse this as thou goest;  
Fair Jessica shall be my torch-bearer.<sup>70</sup>

This quote clearly shows what will happen: Jessica will dress up as a page, as a torchbearer, in order to not be recognized when she leaves her father's house once he is not present. Lorenzo is to accept her as a companion and come escort her along with the belongings she is taking with her. It also shows how Lorenzo views her father, that he truly loves Jessica but condemns Shylock, regarding Jessica as a much better person. By

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<sup>70</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (London: Harper Press, 2013), 38.

successfully going through this scheme, Jessica is able to leave for a better future with her lover, thus gaining more freedom for herself.

Portia and Nerissa from *The Merchant of Venice* use the possibility of posing as men for their own gain too. Based on her father's will, Portia can marry only the man who correctly picks out one of three caskets. It is solely her father's will that dictates what her life will be like in the future even though she now stands in the position of lord of Belmont. She dreads who it could possibly be because she has started to favour Bassanio after his visit. Over time, Portia and Bassanio fell in love and the time for Bassanio to pick the casket came. Portia is afraid that he will make a mistake in picking, but he successfully chooses the lead casket including Portia's portrait, thus allowing them to confess their feelings publicly and become an official couple.

In the meantime, Portia's lady in waiting, Nerissa, fell in love with Gratiano. They suggest to hold a double wedding and both women give their men a ring which they should never take off as a promise. It is not simply a symbolic piece of metal that is given during the marriage ceremony. As Newman puts it in her article, "gift-giving was a significant aspect of Elizabethan and Jacobean social intercourse, as demonstrated by royal prestation and patronage, and by the New Year's gift roles, account books, and record of aristocratic families who vie with one another in their generosity to the monarch in quest of favor."<sup>71</sup> Looking at the ring giving from this perspective, the act of giving a gift itself takes on a much higher importance. The ring signifies Portia's love and promise to Bassanio, her compliance with the traditional marriage, subjects to her husband, and takes on her place in the hierarchy of the Elizabethan England.

With the act of giving herself to Bassanio, she also gives up her position as the lord of Belmont, passing it to her husband now. Portia thus loses the last piece of power she previously held in the society as an unmarried woman of high position and parentage. At the same time, she secures a possibility of gaining back her power. Portia gives Bassanio all the possessions while saying: "I give them with this ring,/Which when you part from, lose, or give away,/Let it presage the ruin of your love,/And be my vantage to exclaim

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<sup>71</sup> Newman, "Portia's Ring," 24.

you.”<sup>72</sup> She gives Bassanio more than he can give back, thus securing more power in the relationship because, as Newman puts it, “unequal marriages often resulted in domination by the wife.”<sup>73</sup> With these lines, Portia foreshadows what will happen as the play progresses and warns Bassanio not to break her trust. Upon receiving the ring, Bassanio expresses his love for Portia and makes a vow of his own, which is nevertheless later broken: “but when this ring/Parts from this finger, than parts life from hence,—/O then be bold to say Bassanio’s dead!”<sup>74</sup>

Because Portia loves Bassanio so deeply, she attempts to do everything in her power to help her husband’s friend Antonio. She does not shy away from actions that will mystify the people surrounding her. Portia creates a scheme for her and Nerissa to go see their husbands. In order to do so, they have to take on male professions – thus, dress up as men. Nerissa is unsure of Portia’s plan, surprised by the prospect of dressing up as men and their husbands seeing them as such. The reader does not learn about the plan until it unfolds.

The disguised women arrive to where Bassanio, Shylock, Antonio, and the others are dealing with the situation. Portia, being the main character of the play, seems to display a high amount of confidence, ability to be reasonable and to stay in the place of men. She uses her newfound power discovered by losing the restraint of marrying someone she does not want to by leading the trial, the discussion, and the results. Shylock’s threats, demands and confidence do not falter her determination in gaining an upper hand by finding little details that stand against Shylock’s case. Portia victory in this scene, and in later ones, “resists the social, sexual, and political system of which she is a part and provides a means for interrogating its distribution of power along gender lines.”<sup>75</sup>

After her victory, Portia makes to leave immediately while Bassanio invites her to dinner. Portia keeps refusing until she asks Bassanio for his ring. Because Portia remains unrecognized through all of this, such a request serves as a test of his dedication to her. Bassanio tries to resist, offering much more honourable items instead, but Portia does not

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<sup>72</sup> Shakespeare, *Merchant*, 64.

<sup>73</sup> Newman, “Portia’s Ring,” 26.

<sup>74</sup> Shakespeare, *Merchant*, 64.

<sup>75</sup> Newman, “Portia’s Ring,” 31.

accept the excuse of the ring being given by his wife. She continues her test of Bassanio who succumbs in the end by sending the ring after her. Portia proves that she is more capable than the men around her by securing yet another victory. The test of asking for the rings tests Bassanio's loyalty to Portia as well as the boundaries of the relationship he has with Antonio. As Antonio himself says, Bassanio should give away the ring rather freely since his love should "be valued 'against your wife's commandment,'"<sup>76</sup> successfully securing the fact that he is more worthy than of Bassanio's loyalty than his wife. Bassanio gives in with a heavy heart.

Nerissa decides: "I'll see if I can get my husband's ring,/Which I did make him swear to keep for ever," to which Portia replies: "Thou mayst, I warrant. We shall have old swearing/That they did give the rings, and outswear them too."<sup>77</sup> This simple sentence foreshadows what is to come – since both women successfully gained their husbands rings, they will exercise a scheme created by Portia's wit.

The women manage to come back to Belmont before their husbands which helps to put their scheme into motion. Once the men arrive and greetings take place, Nerissa starts to argue with her husband about him giving away the ring. Not solely because he gave it away, but rather because Gratiano broke a promise he made to her. Gratiano argues that the ring does not have much value, that it is "a hoop of gold, a paltry ring/That she did give me, whose posy was/For all the world like cutler's poetry/Upon a knife, 'Love me, and leave me not'."<sup>78</sup> Based on this, Nerissa and Portia unfurl their chastising of both their husbands for breaking their promises, punishing them by doing so, acting angrily.

The ever-devoted Antonio steps in, pleading with them to forgive the husbands, swearing to give up his own soul were Bassanio and Gratiano ever break the women's trust again. Portia and Nerissa give in, forgiving them and giving their husbands rings which they recognize as those they gave away. In the end, Portia reveals the truth behind the scheme. This shows their husbands that the women hold more power than they thought, and the men should be wary to break their trust again – because by posing as men, Portia

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<sup>76</sup> Shakespeare, *Merchant*, 95.

<sup>77</sup> Shakespeare, *Merchant*, 97.

<sup>78</sup> Shakespeare, *Merchant*, 104.

and Nerissa gained agency and power which they will be able to use again if needed. The whole plot demonstrates the fact that the wives are much wittier than their husbands who should stay alert to be able to keep up with them.

The whole play ends with Gratiano speaking the last lines: “Well, while I love, I’ll fear no other thing/So sore as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring.” This ending sentence secures that the women achieved what they set to do – to test their husbands and install fear in them of ever stepping out of line again. It can be assumed that Bassanio and Gratiano will spend their lives trying to keep their wives satisfied to keep both sides happy. Such situation would not be possible without Portia and Nerissa exercising their agency by taking the events of the play into their own hands, not shying away from pretending to be men, and stepping up to help their husbands in moments where the women did not believe that they will be capable of solving the problems themselves.

Throughout the play, Portia transforms from the woman who stepped up as the lord of Belmont after her father’s death, who was restricted by her fathers will to marry a man not chosen by her, and who was expected to submit in said marriage, into a woman who has regained her agency, who established her own power within her marriage, and who proved that even though certain aspects of education are denied to women, she can measure up to men. As Newman puts it, “Bassanio gives his ring to an “unruly woman,” that is, to a woman who steps outside her role and function as subservient, a woman who dresses like a man, who embarks upon behaviour ill-suited to her “weaker” intellect, a woman who argues the law.”<sup>79</sup>

When it comes to Portia’s cross-dressing overall, it is the one that disrupts the social order and gender boundaries the most. Compared to Rosalind and Viola, it focuses more on challenging the female subjectivity to men. The play begins with her complaining about the rules her father bestowed upon her and the freedom she lost through them. Portia’s cross-dressing as a male is “not a psychological refuge but a vehicle for assuming power.”<sup>80</sup> All Portia’s actions reveal that even as a woman, she can easily stand ground to men,

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<sup>79</sup> Newman, “Portia’s Ring,” 28.

<sup>80</sup> Howard, “Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England,” 433.

outsmart them, and establish her own place in the patriarchal society. It shows that all conceptions of differences between genders are social constructs, not natural consequences of being either a man or a woman.

### 3.3 Gender and Attraction

Shakespeare never directly mentions or points out that characters are attracted to any other gender besides the opposite one. He does, however, hint towards the fact often. Taking *Twelfth Night* as example, it can be argued that Antonio is attracted to Sebastian. These two characters are both men and conventionally should not show any desire towards each other. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that Antonio likes Sebastian and finds him more interesting than other men.

Similar breaking of established conventions can be seen in relation to the characters pretending to be someone else, to be the other gender. As it is mainly women disguising themselves as men, the gender the other characters feel attracted to is male. The characters are able to see something more in the disguised person, something interesting that intrigues them. As Catherine Belsey describes it, “Shakespeare’s girl-boys fascinate their interlocutors; they become objects of desire for a wide range of admirers.”<sup>81</sup> There is no difference between who finds the hidden person attractive and intriguing – it is both men and women who find themselves drawn to them for whatever reason they have.

This can be clearly illustrated by using the example of *Twelfth Night*. Viola, the female character, is disguised as Cesario, a male character. Once she arrives to the duke’s home, she is immediately accepted by others and especially by Orsino. As Valentine, one of Orsino’s men, points out, “If the duke continue these favours towards you,/Cesario, you are like to be much advanced; he hath/known you but three days, and already you are no/stranger.”<sup>82</sup> It is obvious from Valentine’s comment that Cesario has gained deep favours from Orsino during the very short time at the court. Even if Cesario has arrived very recently, Orsino seems to be rather drawn to him. The duke gives him more affection

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<sup>81</sup> Belsey, “Gender in a Different Dispensation,” 17.

<sup>82</sup> William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 37.



and love than to the others who have been with him for longer, even baring his soul to Cesario, as Orsino says himself: “Cesario,/Thou know’st no less but all: I have unclasped/To thee the book even of my secret soul.”<sup>83</sup>

Not only is Cesario accepted into the court rather quickly and warmly, his beauty is often described in a very detailed way. Often, the characters use words that would be typically used for someone more feminine. They draw attention to his youth and compare him to women: “Dear lad, believe it;/For they 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.”<sup>84</sup> Comments like these explain why men are attracted to Cesario even though they believe him to be a man as well. The fact that others find Viola as a man attractive allows her to use this power to get what she desires and get closer to the man she loves. At the same time, Viola as Cesario behaves in a manner typical to an adolescent or young adult man – cheeky and more free than the female counterpart.

Even if Viola as Cesario is not described in a manly way but rather a feminine one, even women are attracted to her. Most notably, Olivia, whom Cesario attempts to woo on Orsino’s orders, finds Cesario very good-looking and takes a liking to him very quickly. Olivia had not been allowing many people to come to her on Orsino’s orders who wanted to talk to her to persuade her to marry Orsino. Only when Cesario comes, she would allow him to come more often to deliver Orsino’s messages, but only because it is Cesario. Olivia asks him about his parentage and Cesario says that he is a gentleman. Following said conversation, Olivia describes Cesario: “Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit/Do give thee five-fold 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 my eyes.”<sup>85</sup> Olivia truly likes Cesario’s appearance and considers him to be soft – which is a quality she points out and seems to prefer. A soft man is more attractive to her than a strong and muscular one. At the end of the description, Olivia comments on the fact that she is already falling in love with

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<sup>83</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 39.

<sup>84</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 39.

<sup>85</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 63.

Cesario a little. As love enters through eyes – love at first sight – Cesario’s visual appearance is enough to intrigue Olivia and his behaviour pulls her in further. Olivia is so enamoured by Cesario that she sends her servant Malvolio after him with a ring which leads Cesario to the realization that she is falling in love with him and that was never his intention. In the first scene of act three, Olivia admits to her feelings: “A murd’rous guilt shows not itself more soon,/Than love that would seem hid. Love’s night is noon./Cesario, by the roses of the spring,/By maidhood, honour, truth, and everything,/I love thee so that, maugre all thy pride,/Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide.”<sup>86</sup> Viola is only able to answer by admitting that no other woman than herself can be in charge of it.

Love and sexual attraction, however, do not prevent the characters from mistaking someone from being someone else. Viola’s disguise in *Twelfth Night* is good enough to fool everyone around and to be as close to her brother as possible. Even her brother Sebastian’s friend is not able to tell them apart. When Viola first admits to imitating her brother to Sir Toby, he finds it very difficult to believe Cesario, calling him “a very dishonest paltry boy, and more a coward than a hare;/ his dishonesty appears in leaving his friend here in necessity, and/ denying him.”<sup>87</sup> Though Olivia is in love with Cesario as well, once she meets Sebastian, neither she is able to tell it is a different person. She insists on marrying Cesario, no matter the protests of Sebastian who she mistakes for Cesario. And Sebastian does not protest that much, in the end allowing for them to get married.

Once everything is revealed in *Twelfth Night* and all the characters know the truth, the true identity of Sebastian and Viola, and the siblings are happily reunited with each other, Viola and Orsino reveal their feelings too. Before they can fully embrace each other and become a couple, Viola insists on changing back into her female clothes to stand in front of Orsino as a woman. Orsino still calls her a boy, but he seems to mostly agree. Nevertheless, he expresses his desire with the wish of “let me see thee in thy woman’s weeds”<sup>88</sup> which leads to the conclusion that he might still be okay with Viola being Cesario. He does not say that he wants to see her true identity, just see her wearing woman’s clothes

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<sup>86</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 129.

<sup>87</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 173.

<sup>88</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 217.

rather than the man's. Orsino proceeds to release Viola from his services, offers her his hand in marriage and his last words in the play are dedicated to Viola/Cesario, while still being rather ambiguous: "Cesario, come –/For so you shall be while you are a man,/But when in other habits you are seen,/Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen."<sup>89</sup> With this quote, Orsino is once again pointing out the gender fluidity: while Viola is a woman and he wants her to wear her female clothes, he keeps calling her by her chosen male name, Cesario.

Viola's cross-dressing causes a cross-gendered disruptions to the world, leads to confusion inside of characters when it comes to who they find themselves attracted to, and as Charles argues, operates "within a world that is properly named Ill-lyria in order to demonstrate how the phenomenon of love itself operates as a mechanism that destabilizes gender binarism and its concomitant hierarchies."<sup>90</sup> The characters views have been challenged by falling in love with a person of the same gender, whether knowingly or unknowingly. But they have not strayed away fully from pursuing it as is visible by the final scene of Orsino offering to get married to Cesario even before truly seeing Viola. Orsino keeps calling Viola by her male alias and from what he says, will continue to do so until he sees Viola in her maiden clothes.

By successfully passing as a man from her position of a woman, Viola becomes an object of ambiguity when it comes to attraction which in turn becomes harder to comprehend. In conclusion, Charles argues that "the theatrical convention of cross-dressing and the androgyny it comes to symbolize thus challenge the regulatory parameters of erotic attraction through the vehicle of performance, a performance that shows gender to be a part playable by any sex."<sup>91</sup> Therefore, it does not matter what gender a person is inside as one is capable of playing the part of either.

The love story in *As You Like It* differs slightly from *Twelfth Night* in the fact that the initial meeting of the lovers does not happen when one of them is dressed up as different gender but when they are true to themselves. Orlando and Rosalind meet when Orlando

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<sup>89</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 227.

<sup>90</sup> Charles, "Gender Trouble," 124.

<sup>91</sup> Charles, "Gender Trouble," 128.

comes to duke Frederick's court to wrestle with their champion wrestler Charles. Orlando manages to triumph over Charles who has gone undefeated for a very long time. This catches Rosalind's eye, and she becomes interested in him. They talk and begin to fall in love with each other. When they meet again, Rosalind is already dressed as Ganymede and Orlando is unable to recognize her. Ganymede is repeatedly addressed as youth with different adjectives modifying the noun: good, pretty, sweet.

Interestingly, it is not the main love interest in *As You Like It* who falls in love with Rosalind dressed as a man. Orlando does show slight signs of attraction towards her in her masculine attire but does not appear to be as attracted to Ganymede as Orsino is in *Twelfth Night*. There is, however, another character who falls in love with Ganymede directly. Rosalind encounters Phebe and Silvius in the forest while they are discussing the possibility of their relationship. Silvius is in love with Phebe but she seems indifferent towards him. When Rosalind comes near them, she includes herself in their conversation and chides Phebe for not accepting Silvius' love and thinking too highly of herself. Due to this scolding, Phebe views Ganymede in a very positive light and gets attracted to him, calling him sweet. Rosalind is aware that Phebe will fall in love with her anger and pleads her: "I pray you do not fall in love with me/For I am falser than vows made in wine;/Besides, I like you not."<sup>92</sup> She is trying to mend the relationship between Silvius and Phebe and stop her from loving her. Once Rosalind leaves, Phebe immediately questions: "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"<sup>93</sup> Admitting to loving him already after a very brief meeting, she lists why she loves Ganymede. Among the main reasons are his words, the fact that even though he is proud, the pride suits him, he looks good enough and overall, it is Ganymede's boldness and ability to speak openly to her, to point out things that are not okay for her to do or not per say attractive about her directly, without hiding anything. Based on Silvius' approach to Phebe, it can be assumed that other people are softer in dealing with her and not as honest in their behavior. Thus, Phebe finds Ganymede fascinating.

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<sup>92</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 77.

<sup>93</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 77.

For Rosalind, she did not manage to pass as fully as a man as Viola did. The main difference is that Viola has been known by the other characters only as a man. Therefore, they had no possibility of seeing something else in her. Rosalind, on the other hand, has been known by more than one character still as a woman, and they saw some characteristics in Ganymede:

DUKE SENIOR: I do remember in this shepherd boy  
Some lively touches of my daughter's favour.

ORLANDO: My lord, the first time that I ever saw him  
Methought he was a brother to your daughter;  
But, my good lord, this boy is forest-born  
And hath been tutored in the rudiments  
Of many desperate studies by his uncle  
Whom he reports to be a great magician,  
Obscured in the circle of this forest.<sup>94</sup>

Based on this conversation, it is obvious that Rosalind was not as successful in passing as a man as she hoped to be. Her features were too obvious in order to be disguised in front of her father, who knows her well, and her lover, who remembers every detail. When it comes to Orlando, she manages to fool him with her behavior and the false tales she tells him. It takes a lot of effort from her side. Partly, because Orlando did see a resemblance to Rosalind in Ganymede, he did find him attractive and thus considered it easy to pretend he was Rosalind. The personality of Rosalind, hidden by her pretense, was not unappealing either.

People seem to see more in Ganymede than was planned. It is never explicitly said that the characters see something feminine in him, but they can sense that he is not a typical man. Besley describes the play as following “the laws of non-mimetic fiction: disguise is entirely convincing; at the same time, it can evoke an uncanny and unaccountable sense of

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<sup>94</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 107.

otherness in the apparently selfsame.”<sup>95</sup> This notion can be generalized for all three plays discussed in this thesis: the characters who knew the women before putting on the disguise feel there is something different about the cross-dressing females even though they fully believe that they are men since the costume is perfectly convincing. The ones who never knew the original woman sense something mysterious but in general recognize nothing.

Even if Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* uses male attire solely to escape her father’s influence, there can be found an instance of discussing the difference between her female and male form:

JESSICA: I am glad ‘tis night, you do not look on me,  
For I am much asham’d of my exchange;  
But love is blind, and lovers cannot see  
The pretty follies that themselves commit,  
For, if they could, Cupid himself would blush  
To see me thus transformed to a boy.

LORENZO: Descend, for you must be my torch-bearer.

JESSICA: What! must I hold a candle to my shames?  
They in themselves, good sooth, are too too light.  
Why, ‘tis an office of discovery, love,  
And I should be obscur’d.

LORENZO: So are you, sweet,  
Even in the lovely garnish of a boy.<sup>96</sup>

Jessica is not happy with being dressed as a man; she feels ashamed and would prefer for Lorenzo not to see her that way, but because it gives her an opportunity to escape, she goes through with it. Lorenzo is very open to having her dressed as a boy, because he sees the final result – having her as his partner by saving her from the influence of her father he

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<sup>95</sup> Belsey, “Gender in a Different Dispensation,” 12.

<sup>96</sup> Shakespeare, *Merchant*, 43.

does not agree with. He is quick to assure Jessica that even in boy's clothes, she remains the same in his eyes and is just as sweet to him. Later in the scene, he proceeds to describe the reasons why he loves her, admitting his deep feelings. Jessica recognizes the same – if Lorenzo truly loves her for who she is, he will not mind the fact that she is now dressed in male clothing but will continue to love her with no regard to her current appearance, as love is supposed to be blind. This conviction, however, does not diminish her embarrassment of the transformation into a boy.

### 3.4 Gender Fluidity and Stereotypicality

Not one person is immune to the stereotypes society sets up for everyone. Although one might try to avoid them and not use them in everyday life, it is impossible. Such stereotypes can be found in Shakespeare's works as well. Shakespeare is not a stranger to breaking said stereotypes or trying to subvert them, and there is no better way to do it than by using the gender fluidity employed in the comedies including cross-dressing characters.

Even the characters themselves are fighting said stereotypes themselves. For Viola, it is hard to come to terms with conflicting emotions: "As I am man,/My state is desperate for my master's love;/As I am woman – now alas the day! –/What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!"<sup>97</sup> Viola is confused between her duty to the Orsino, who she serves as Cesario, the man she is dressing up as, and is falling in love with quickly, and her true nature, the femininity she has as a woman, compassion towards another woman, and desire for the man she likes.

Emotions connected to strength or weakness are commented upon in *As You Like It* as well. When Rosalind and Celia are travelling to the forest to meet with Rosalind's father, Rosalind has been in her manly attire for a brief time but she is trying very hard to embody all the characteristics that she has been thought a man should be. They have been travelling for a long time and are tired, they feel hurt. At this point, Rosalind says to the viewers aside rather than to other characters: "I could find in my heart to disgrace my man's apparel and to cry like a woman; but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to

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<sup>97</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 73.

show itself courageous to petticoat; therefore – courage, good Aliena!”<sup>98</sup> Rosalind’s tiredness most likely comes from the fact that she is a noble woman not used to travelling by foot rather than she a woman and weaker than a man would be. In her opinion, because she is in the role of a man, Rosalind has to remain strong and not show her emotions. That is why she makes this comment aside and not to her company, not even to her cousin. Instead, she bottles everything inside of herself and collects energy to cheer her Celia on to have courage and be strong. Because showing her true emotions and the fact that she is exhausted would be disgracing to the fact that Rosalind is supposed to be Ganymede now, a strong man who does not show what in her eyes would be a weakness for a masculine person. Nevertheless, this shows the fact that Rosalind has embodied her role as the protector of her cousin who has remained female even in her disguise and serves the role well.

Not only is Rosalind trying to embody the emotionlessness of men she thinks she should, but she also adapts the harsher attitude towards others. She has not been soft spoken even when she was herself as a lady, but as a man, Rosalind ceases to be lady-like all together in her speech. She is not afraid to use insulting language such as “I’ll graft it with you, and then I shall graft it with a medlar; then it will be the earliest fruit i’ th’ country, for you’ll be rotten ere you be half ripe, and that’s the right virtue of the medlar,”<sup>99</sup> or any other insults she uses while teaching Orlando how to behave with Rosalind. She is strong-headed and strong willed; therefore, she is capable of using words a lady should not and can have things go her own way rather than according to the will of others. Even if she is stranded in the forest without a place to live with only a fool and her cousin for company, Rosalind is able to take care of herself and Celia. Whether this is because of her character or the fact that she has embodied the role of a man so deeply that she believes in her masculine abilities is unclear.

In contrast to Rosalind’s internal conviction that a man should be strong and not show his weakness in being tired, a couple scenes later Adam, who is travelling with Orlando,

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<sup>98</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 35.

<sup>99</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 56.



does the exact thing Rosalind is trying to avoid. Adam is too tired to be able to continue and he is not afraid to admit to it. His admission is a little bit dramatic: “Dear master, I can go no further. O, I die for food. Here lie I down and measure out my grave. Farewell, kind master.”<sup>100</sup> Adam is exhausted and too hungry to continue, but he does not try to hide it from Orlando in order to appear strong and masculine. He is not afraid to admit to his faults. Nevertheless, Orlando does not think any less of him. Adam is taken care of by him, Orlando helping him to a shelter and food. This short scene clearly shows that admitting to one’s needs to rest does not make a man any less of a man. On the contrary, it shows that one is comfortable enough with themselves and is able to ask for what they need to be able to continue on the journey.

Towards the end of the play in *As You Like It*, Oliver comes to Rosalind with a bloody napkin. Upon seeing it, Rosalind faints and the other characters are very surprised by such an event. Especially Celia is shocked to discover she has fainted, but at the same time understands the reasons as she is fully aware of Rosalind’s love towards Orlando. Oliver does not consider it too shocking to see a man faint, rather he comments that “many will swoon when they do look on blood.”<sup>101</sup> One could consider it rather unmanly to faint when simply seeing a bloody piece of cloth, but to him it is nothing special. In Oliver’s eyes, it does not take away from Ganymede’s masculinity. That is only at first. Once Ganymede recovers, Oliver says to him “Be of good cheer, youth. You a man! You lack a man’s heart.”<sup>102</sup> Meaning that a true man should not be so easily swooned and should be able to recover more quickly without help from others and to stay strong. Several lines later, Ganymede confesses that it would be better for him to be a woman rather than man, ending the discussion of how he handled the news.

The view of society that as women age, they become less interesting and beautiful is also discussed within the *Twelfth Night*. Viola and Orsino discuss Cesario’s youth and beauty while commenting on standards and aging. “Then let thy love be younger than thyself,/Or thy affection cannot hold the bent:/For women are as roses, whose fair

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<sup>100</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 42.

<sup>101</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 94.

<sup>102</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 95.

flower,/Being once displayed, doth fall that very hour,”<sup>103</sup> is what Orsino says in comment to love. This quote focuses on the stereotype that older women lose their beauty and interest in the eyes of men. It is mentioned and emphasized many times within the play that Cesario looks very young, thus leading to the assumption that Viola is truly young. Her being of a young age means that she is considered to be pretty and desirable. If she was of an older age, she would not be as interesting and attractive to others as she is now.

Rosalind’s character is subject to more gender-related twists when she pretends to be Rosalind while she is in the role of Ganymede. Through this, she is able to slightly redefine the role of a woman in a patriarchal society because in her pretending, she acts out many conceptions of femininity from the masculine, patriarchal point of view rather than from the feminine one.

Shakespeare comments on gender stereotypes in *Twelfth Night* also by using comments on Lady Olivia’s bachelorette status. Feste, the fool in the play, tells Viola that Olivia “will keep no fool, sir, till she be married, and fools are as like husbands as pilchards are to herrings.”<sup>104</sup> In his opinion, Feste compares men to fools, therefore Olivia, who is currently not in relationship with any man, is free of the fools. But once she marries a man, she will be burdened with her husband, the fool, for the rest of her life. It is obvious Shakespeare draws from the common view of men often lacking common sense and self-preservatory tendencies, which tend to be stronger in women.

All the events in *Twelfth Night* of the twins being mistaken for each other all the time, even to the extent of Sebastian being partly forced into marrying Olivia, lead to the conclusion that Sebastian possesses feminine features similar to those Viola displays when she is dressed as a man. Cesario keeps being praised for being soft, pretty and beautiful. The characters never use typically masculine adjectives to describe his looks, rather opt for those conventionally feminine. It is clear that neither of the twins is entirely too masculine, thus confirming that Viola was able to pass as a man quite easily. This shows that Shakespeare is not afraid to include characters that differ from the typical expectations

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<sup>103</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 91.

<sup>104</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 119.

for each gender or class that people have. A man does not have to display hard masculine features in order to be a man.

By using the twins as a plot device and an important part of the story, Shakespeare employs the myth of the androgyne: “the use of twins as an alternative representation of the androgyne in classical art suggests the mythic bedrock on which Shakespeare’s exploration of sexual identity rests.”<sup>105</sup> The twins seem to be the each other’s perfect copies and there is no wonder about them looking identical. The whole situation is therefore more complicated by this fact. Shakespeare, however, is able to find the resolution of this situation in a quite a simple way. A certain fear of losing one’s identity remains throughout the whole story as Viola is pretending to be her brother. The existence of both male and female version of one person, at least physically, is paradoxical and shocking to the characters.

Interesting point within the story of *Twelfth Night* that has to be mentioned comes towards the end of the play in act 5. The plot of confusion about the true identity of people is getting untangled slowly, Viola is talking with Orsino and Olivia comes to them, claiming that Cesario is her husband. When Orsino is to leave, Cesario moves to follow him but is stopped by Olivia questioning him. Cesario say that he is going “after him I love/More than I love these eyes, more than my life,/More, by all mores, than e’er I shall love wife./If I do feign, you witnesses above/Punish my life for tainting of my love!”<sup>106</sup> Meaning, Cesario confesses to loving Orsino more than loving anybody else. He is honest in front of everyone, admitting his romantic love towards another man. The other characters do not appear to be shocked by the fact that Cesario is in love with Orsino. Olivia, however, takes offence due to her belief that she is married to Cesario, and he is not being faithful to her. In Olivia’s eyes, Cesario is denouncing her, not admitting to having married her, and is going away with another person he claims to love. This is the main focus of the conversation and none of the characters seem to be phased by the fact that a man has declared love to another man.

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<sup>105</sup> Slights, “Maid and Man,” 329.

<sup>106</sup> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 205-207.

Interestingly for Shakespeare, a character can be both very manly and emotional at the same time. This is obvious in the character of Orlando in *As You Like It*. From the beginning of the play, he is characterised as a strong young man, muscular and able to beat even the long-term unbeatable wrestling champion. This means that his body is very masculine and not soft at all. As the play goes on and more about Orlando is revealed, his soft insides come into the light. He is deeply in love with Rosalind, and he does not stray away from expressing his love. Orlando writes poems for her and hangs them up on the trees all over the forest, not caring who sees them and what people think about them. When he meets Ganymede, Orlando is willing to undertake lessons from him in order to be a better lover for Rosalind. This shows that he is not the typical masculine man as they would never willingly accept someone else's help with emotions and courting a woman. On the contrary, Orlando wants others to see how much he loves Rosalind and what an amazing woman she is in his eyes: "O Rosalind, these trees shall be my books,/And in their barks my thoughts I'll character/That every eye which in this forest looks/Shall see thy virtue witnessed everywhere."<sup>107</sup>

The characters continue mentioning different gender stereotypes as the story goes on. For example, one private conversation between Rosalind and Celia goes as follows:

ROSALIND: Never talk to me; I will weep.

CELIA: Do, I prithee; but yet have the grace to consider that tears do not become a man.

ROSALIND: But have I not cause to weep?

CELIA: As good cause as one would desire: therefore, weep.<sup>108</sup>

After encountering Orlando in the forest for the first time as Ganymede after meeting him at the court, Rosalind is full of emotions she is trying to process. Her first reaction is the need to cry because she likes him so much. Celia immediately comments that is not

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<sup>107</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 52.

<sup>108</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 72.

very manly for a person to cry. In her opinion, men should not cry as it is not masculine. Rosalind tries to argue that since she has a reason to weep, she should be allowed to do it whether she is a woman or disguised as a man. This point is leading to the view of gender equality and the possibility for any gender to be able to express their feelings freely without judgement.

Rosalind comments on the way men treat women in general. When she meets Orlando while disguised as Ganymede, she creates a story about old religious uncle and expresses gratitude: “and I thank God I am not a woman, to be touch’d with so many giddy offences as he hath generally tax’d their whole sex withal.”<sup>109</sup> Her comment is to show that men are able to go to great lengths in order to gain the affection of a woman. By saying this, Rosalind expresses unhappiness about the fact that bad things can happen while men do so and it is not always comfortable to women. They usually do not have much choices and have to endure whatever men decide to do in order to woo them.

When playing with Orlando and telling him about how she cured a man out of love, Rosalind makes a little speech full of stereotypes. Orlando asks if she has ever cured anyone, to which she replies:

Yes, one, and in this manner. He was to imagine me his love, his mistress, and I set him everyday to woo me. At which time would I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, change-able, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something, and for no passion truly anything, as boys and women are, for the most part, cattle of this colour; would now like him, now loathe him, then spit at him; than I drave my suitor from his mad humour of love to a living humour of madness, which was to forswear the full stream of the world and to live in a nook, merely monastic. And thus I cured him, and this way will I take upon me to wash your liver as clean as a sound sheep’s heart, that there shall not be one spot of love in’t.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 64.

<sup>110</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 66.

In her made-up scenario of curing a man of love, she uses many stereotypes about women. She describes women from the male point of view as very unstable, changing their mood all the time. Not having the same opinion about someone and approach to them either. She goes through many different types of emotions that women have and uses them to cure the person out of wooing her. Because in the end, nobody would like to have someone this unstable as a partner. At the same time, it tests the strength and willingness of a man to be committed to the person they love. She allows Orlando to try out whether he truly loves Rosalind or not.

According to Rosalind, there is a difference between men and women when it comes to the beginning of relationship and marriage: “men are April when they woo, December when they wed: maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives.”<sup>111</sup> Taking into account the common knowledge of the months of the year, it can be assumed that when men are trying to begin a relationship with a woman, they are warm and colourful, soft and full of light. Once they marry the woman, they become cold, dark, and hostile. For women, as unmarried maids, they are even warmer and full of life, the embodiment of spring. When they get married, they do not change as rapidly as men do, but their behaviour does change, nevertheless.

A few scenes later, Silvius comes to Rosalind with a letter from Phebe and upon reading it, Rosalind comments: “Women’s gentle brain/Could not drop forth such giant-rude invention.”<sup>112</sup> Phebe has in a previous scene expressed a desire to write a letter to Ganymede to show her feelings toward him, the combination of hate and love she was feeling. Her intention was to send the letter through Silvius, which he now delivered. Based on the content of the letter, Rosalind cannot fully believe that a gentle woman would be able to write such words as they are also full of anger and harsh words. As she reads on, it is harder to comprehend the connection to Phebe, even though she is not necessarily a soft woman. The juxtaposition towards Rosalind’s behaviour when disguised as Ganymede is

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<sup>111</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 85.

<sup>112</sup> Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 90.

obvious – she also does not stray away from using harsh words and commenting directly on things she does not like. In the end, that is the exact reason why Phebe begun to both hate and like Ganymede from the first brief encounter.

When it comes to stereotypes connected to gender hidden in *The Merchant of Venice*, many of them are mentioned in Portia’s conversation with Nerissa while planning the visit of their husbands in male attire:

They shall, Nerissa; 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 accoutred 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 honourable ladies sought my love,  
When I denying, they fell sick and died –  
I could not do withal. Then I’ll 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 practise.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Shakespeare, *Merchant*, 74.

Here Portia clearly describes the type of men she wants to embody and her own view of such people. It is obvious she has met several men behaving like this, and it is possible that her whole experience with men is similar since she can draw from it so easily. In her opinion, men constantly brag about what they have done, especially connected to women they conquered or whose company they refused.

It is important to note here that all cross-dressing women “agree that affecting the personality of a young, bravado-filled boy is the formula for passing. This spectacle of waggish masculinity seems particularly out of step in the contemporary cultural landscape, where discovery is fatal and stealth is a virtue.”<sup>114</sup> All the characters have approached the role of men in the same way. Their alter-ego is energetic, focused, and confident. It is not simply about the male clothing they put on but also how they behave in the role of men.

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<sup>114</sup> Kemp, “Shakespeare in Transition,” 40.



## Conclusion

There is no argument about the relevance of William Shakespeare's works in the contemporary world. Both his poems and plays are full of details waiting to be discovered. Almost an infinite number of possible interpretations are included in them. It is not difficult, then, to relate them to contemporary issues and topics being discussed. The queer theory's point of view is one of the most used interpretations nowadays. Whether it comes to sexuality and homosexuality, or specifically to gender, its expressions, identity, and fluidity. Many young people struggle with their own identity and seeing themselves represented even in classical literature helps them to overcome fear and uncertainty.

This thesis focuses on the exploration of gender fluidity in William Shakespeare's comedies and connects it to the contemporary point of view. The analysis is based on the queer theory which focuses on the experience of people who do not fit either the heteronormative or gender binary categories of sexuality and gender. It is a relatively young discipline, only originating officially in the 1980s. Due to the interest in the study of sexuality and the determination of people, they were able to reclaim the word queer. It was previously used in derogatory ways mainly but was transformed into a word that celebrates the differences and diversity. There is a difference between sex, which are the physical characteristics of one's body, and gender, which is considered to be a social construct rather than a scientific category. It includes males and females.

Gender fluidity is then everything that does not fit into the binary opposition. Any person who does not identify as either male or female, they are somewhere in between or both at the same time, can fit this definition. There is no exact way of one being a gender-fluid person. Compared to the male-female binary, gender fluidity is more of a scale unto which one can fit themselves based on their true identity.

William Shakespeare is considered to be one of the most important writers in English literature. He has written some of the most discussed works and still remains relevant to this day. Shakespeare's sonnets are used to express love to another person. The plays are still being produced in the original way and attract a wide audience. There are many adaptations of his works as well since there is no limit to what inspiration can be found in them. The person behind this legacy, however, still remains mysterious. Due to poor

historical records, it is not clear if the author was truly William Shakespeare, but he is generally credited for the works. William Shakespeare was born in Stratford upon Avon in 1564. His father was a businessman and official of the town, which gave young Shakespeare experience and knowledge of many different trades which he later used in his works. There is a gap in information between Shakespeare's life in Stratford and his newly found life in London. Once he established himself in London, Shakespeare became a popular dramatist and official employee of the Chamberlain's Men, later becoming a partner of the Globe Theatre in London. It is believed that Shakespeare wrote over thirty-eight plays during his career. They vary from comedies to tragedies to romances.

Shakespeare lived during the Elizabethan era in England. It was the time of renaissance and changing mindset. The culture blossomed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and later King James I. Both were dedicated supporters of art and theatre. The society of this age looked down upon people who cross-dressed and used clothing that was not assigned to them by God – whether it was wearing clothes of the opposite gender or a different class. This caused problems for the theatre groups which consisted only of men and therefore women were played by cross-dressed men. When it comes to women during this era, they were subject to patriarchal views. Women were not allowed to express themselves and had to follow many rules that were imposed on them. Their situation was slowly improving during the Renaissance.

Three of William Shakespeare's comedies were chosen for the analysis of gender fluidity within this thesis. Each one of them includes the element of cross-dressing and not adhering to a specific gender. The plays are *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. In general, there are three different reasons for the characters cross-dressing and the consequences of the action.

The first one is the need to overcome the status of women in the Elizabethan era, gain more freedom and remain safe. For Viola in *Twelfth Night*, it is important to remain as safe as possible. She is thought to be the only survivor of a boat crash, she finds herself in an unknown country, and as a woman, she would not be free to travel back home without further complications. Therefore, she chooses to pretend to be a man and ends up working for Orsino. Rosalind in *As You Like It* has a similar motivation – she is accused of being a

traitor and let go from her uncle's court. In order to be able to take care of herself and her cousin, it is better for Rosalind to become a man. A man and a woman are safer than two women. The male disguise allows them to travel to Rosalind's father and move towards a wedding with Orlando. Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* chooses to cross-dress as a man to be able to escape her controlling father. Portia and Nerissa, on the other hand, are trying to gain an upper hand over their husbands, which they manage to do by trickery. Portia does what she can to help her husband's friend, which she does dressed as a lawyer.

The second reason and consequence is attraction and connection. The characters across the plays become attracted to the cross-dressed heroines. There is no difference between men and women. Both groups of people are exploring their attraction to Portia, Viola and Rosalind. The majority of characters are confused by what they are seeing. It is a young man with feminine features; a confident youth, that catches their attention. This leads to ambiguous situations of men and women being attracted to the same gender, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

The third and final aspect discussed in the thesis is the gender fluidity and stereotypes connected to gender. By cross-dressing as men, the female characters are breaking the stereotypes ascribed to women. They are able to face other men with the same amount of knowledge and confidence the men have. There is virtually no difference between them, they can measure up to each other. This in itself proves that women are not inferior to men. On the other hand, through adopting the male personality, the characters often employ the stereotypes connected to men. Some of those stereotypes are, however, broken as well. William Shakespeare is not afraid to make his characters feel and show emotions. And he does so with no difference to whether the character is male or female.

Surprisingly, all the female characters who cross-dress as men in these three comedies employ the same strategy of becoming men. They act confident, and youthful, and embody the character of any other young man. They do, however, keep their feminine charm underneath the disguise, which leads to other characters falling in love with them.

In a typical Shakespearean way, all three comedies end in or include three weddings. Although the female characters broke the typical expectations through cross-dressing as men and proved that they are on the same level in many aspects, the typical patriarchal

expectations win in the end. The cross-dressed heroines successfully achieve their goal of securing the man they like and becoming their wives. The agency they gained through the male experience is not lost, however. Their husbands know what the women are capable of.

In conclusion, William Shakespeare's works remain relevant to this day. His characters are created with thought and deeply rooted characteristics. Applying the queer theory to his three comedies – *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night* – shows how Shakespeare, whether knowingly or unknowingly, approached the topic of gender fluidity and transsexuality. The women in his plays are strong and not afraid to break the typical expectations. Their cross-dressing as men only proves that even though women were viewed as something lesser in the Elizabethan era, they were more than capable of measuring up to their male counterparts. The ease with which they switch from women to men and the fact that they are able to identify the need to do so proves their intelligence.

## Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se věnuje problematice genderové fluidity prostřednictvím hlavních postav tří divadelních her Williama Shakespeara. Skrz příběhy Shakespearových hrdinek čtenáři a diváci sledují ženy, které se z různých důvodů rozhodnou převléknout se za muže. Účelem této práce je nejen poskytnout teoretické informace o queer teorii a genderových studiích v propojení s historií a Williamem Shakesparem, ale také analyzovat vybrané hry z tohoto pohledu. Analýza Shakespearových her na základě této teorie otvírá prostor novým poznatkům a přibližuje klasickou literaturu mladším čtenářům. Ti, kteří se sami identifikují mimo binární škálu pohlaví, tak mohou nalézt reprezentaci i v literatuře starší než pár let, nejen v té současné.

Pro analýzu z pohledu tématu diplomové práce byly vybrány tři divadelní hry. Specificky se jedná o komedie, které obsahují minimálně jednu ženskou postavu, která využívá mužského převleku pro dosažení svého cíle. Vybrané hry jsou *Jak se vám líbí*, *Kupec benátský* a *Večer tříkrálový*. William Shakespeare a jeho díla jsou mimo jiné častým tématem analýzy z pohledu různých aspektů queer problematiky. Nejčastější tématem tohoto rozboru jsou jeho sonety, které jsou adresované jak ženě, tak muži, což kritiky přivádí k myšlence, že Shakespeare byl bisexuální muž. Na základě mého výzkumu v sekundárních zdrojích jsem došla k závěru, že problematika genderu v jeho komediích ještě nebyla zkoumaná detailně.

V první části diplomové práce se věnuji představení teorie týkající se genderu, feminismu a celkově queer teorii. Cílem queer teorie je zpochybnit to, co je považováno za normu ve společnosti a znormalizovat to, co naopak společnost považuje za neobvyklé. Jedná se především o různé typy sexualit nebo o jednotlivé způsoby, jakými se lidé identifikují. Jedná se tedy například o homosexualitu nebo transgenderovou identitu. Jedním z prvních úspěchů zastánců queer teorie a jejich podporovatelů byla změna konotací spojených se samotným slovem queer. Dříve bylo používáno čistě jako nadávka, ale jeho vnímání se změnilo a dnes se používá na oslavu všech identit, které se něčím liší od typických norem.

V rámci definice této teorie jsem se více zaměřila na přesné definování genderu s kontextu tématu diplomové práce. Hlavními termíny v této problematice jsou gender a

pohlaví. Kategorie pohlaví je založena na biologických charakteristikách jednotlivce a odráží se od stavby těla. Gender je naopak spíše sociální kategorie nebo společenský konstrukt. Na rozdíl od pohlaví není spojen s fyzickými rysy ale specifickými pocity jednotlivce. Společnost většinou spojuje gender s pohlavím a předpokládá, že si sobě navzájem vždy odpovídají. Opak je ale pravdou. Fyzické rysy jednotlivce ne vždy definují jeho gender. Tradiční pohled na gender je binární s kategoriemi maskulinní a femininí. Jednotlivec se však může pohybovat na škále mezi těmito vymezeními kategoriemi, stát mimo ně nebo spadat do obou z nich. Toto odpovídá termínu genderová fluidita, kdy se jedinec může identifikovat kdekoli na této škále a pohybovat se po ní na základě aktuální identity.

Na konci této sekce jsem se zaměřila na krátkou diskusi maskulinity a feminity. Každá z těchto kategorií má přiřazené charakteristiky, jejichž plnění se očekává od lidí, kteří se v ní identifikují. Oba tyto termíny jsou především definované společností, ve které se jedinec pohybuje a mohou se lišit země od země nebo i kolektiv od kolektivu.

Druhá sekce teorie se věnuje historicky-kulturnímu vymezení doby, ve které William Shakespeare žil. Jedná se především o představení společenských znaků spojených s problematikou vymezenou tématem práce. Alžbětinská renesanční Anglie se vyznačovala několika specifickými rysy. Oděv byl vnímán jako důležitá součást identifikace jedince a jako pravidlo určené vyšší mocí, specificky křesťanským bohem. Pokud někdo tyto pravidla porušil, stávil se mimo společnost. Byl zde však rozdíl v zacházení s lidmi, kteří se převlékali za jiné pohlaví. Ženy byly souzeny pouze za podvod, kdežto muži za sodomii.

Nejčastější důvody pro převlékání žen za muže jsem na základě výzkumu literatury klasifikovala následovně. Pokud žena potřebovala cestovat o samotě, bylo pro ni bezpečnější vystupovat jako muž, protože pak byla méně zranitelná. Manželky londýnských měšťanů někdy využívaly mužský oděv jako známku svého postavení. V případě, že manželka chtěla odjet se svým manželem do války, musela vystupovat jako muž. Mužský oděv pro ženu byl ale nejčastěji známkou toho, že se jedná o prostitutku.

Během renesance se pozice žen zlepšila a získaly více pravomocí. Stále se však jednalo o patriarchální společnost. Ženy tedy nemohly studovat, ale většina z nich pracovala a po smrti svých manželů vedly rodinné podniky. S vynálezem knihtisku se

rozšířilo vzdělání i ženám a ty mohly začít číst nebo i psát knihy. V rámci manželství si však stále nemohly moc vybírat a partner jim často byl vybrán jejich mužským příbuzným, obvykle otcem.

Divadlo se za dob vlády královny Alžběty I. stalo populární destinací na trávení volného času. Z kočovných hereckých společností se stala pevná kamenná divadla po celém Londýně. Ke konci vlády královny Alžběty I. již byla tato divadla plně funkční a vznikalo jich čím dál tím více. William Shakespeare se řadí mezi nejvýznamnější autory tohoto období. Historická pojednání o divadlech zmiňují kostýmy používané během představení jen málo. Obecně je ale známo, že hercem se mohl stát pouze muž, tudíž pro roli ženské postavy byl kostým potřeba. Již tato skutečnost přivádí pozornost k genderu a jeho zpodobnění.

V analýze vybraných komedií jsem se zaměřila především na prvotní důvody ženských postav k převléknutí se za muže a jaké dopady tyto akce měly na ně samotné i jejich okolí. V kontextu alžbětinského divadla, kdy herci byli pouze muži, je situace o něco komplikovanější. Jedná se vždy o muže, který hraje ženskou postavu, která se převléká za muže. V případě *Jak se vám líbí* takto převlečená ženská postava v roli muže předstírá, že je žena.

V rámci analýzy her jsem motivace a následky převlékání rozdělila do tří kategorií. První kategorie se věnuje především tomu, co ženské hrdinky získaly tím, že vystupovaly jako muž. Vzhledem k postavení ve společnosti, které ženy v té době měly, jim mužská podoba dodala větší svobodu a bezpečí. V případě Violy ve *Večeru tříkrálovém*, její primární důvod pro převlečení za muže je zajištění bezpečnosti po ztroskotání její lodi. Díky tomu, že je v mužské podobě, může Viola bezpečně cestovat a sloužit u knížete Orsina. Podobně je na tom i Rosalind v *Jak se vám líbí*. Její strýc ji vyhnal z hradu a její sestřenic Celia se k ní přidala. Aby se obě ženy bezpečně dostaly k Rosalindinému otci, Rosalind na sebe bere podobu muže, čímž dokáže ochránit sebe i Celiu. Svůj převlek využívá také k tomu, aby se dostala blíže k objektu své touhy, k Orlandovi. Pro Jessicu je v *Kupci benátském* hlavní motivací pro mužskou podobu útěk od jejího otce. Portia a Nerissa naopak mužský převlek využívají k tomu, aby pomohly dobrému příteli manžela Portii a vyzkoušely své partnery.

Druhá kategorie analýzy se soustředí na to, jak se projevuje přitažlivost ve spojení s problematikou převleků a změn genderu. *Večer tříkrálový* se touto situací zabývá nejhluběji. Viola, převlečená za Cesaria, se sama zamiluje do knížete Orsina. Olivia, u které se Cesario přimlouvá za Orsina, se zamiluje do něj. Orsino také projevuje Cesariovi větší náklonost než ostatním svým mužům. Toto je způsobené tím, že Cesario v sobě skrývá charakteristiky jak muže, tak ženy, a je jako jedinec zajímavější pro okolí. Ostatní postavy popisují Cesaria jako velice pohledného mladého muže a často používají slova, která by byla použita spíše pro ženu. Tento fluidní pohled na postavu Cesaria definuje jeho měnící se gender a identitu. Cesario je však dostatečně přesvědčivý jako muž, protože jeho dvojče Sebastian je automaticky považovaný za Cesaria. Rosalind jako Ganymede nebudí tak velkou pozornost u mužů v svém okolí. Podobně jako do Cesaria se do něj však zamiluje žena, Phebe. Ganymede se liší od ostatních mužů, a proto je pro Phebe přitažlivý. Rozdíl mezi Cesariem a Ganymedem je ten, že Rosalind některé ostatní postavy znaly před jejím převlekem a nedaří se jí tedy být stejně přesvědčivá. Jessica neustále přemýšlí nad tím, že je v mužské podobě, a vede interní konflikt. V *Kupci benátském* se přitažlivost ve spojení s genderovou fluiditou objevuje nejméně.

Třetím zaměřením analýzy jsou stereotypy a samotná genderová fluidita. Shakespeare prozkoumává různé typická charakteristiky, které jsou připisované jednotlivým pohlavím a skrz své postavy je překonává. Emoce například hrají velkou roli v *Jak se vám líbí*. Rosalind jako Ganymede bojuje se svými emocemi a snaží se je neprojevat, protože to se od mužů předpokládá. Podobně se také snaží stále vystupovat jako muž. Mění i způsob řeči a vyjadřování se. Rosalind také otevírá problematiku toho, jak se muži chovají k ženám. Portia skrz svůj převlek ukazuje, že se jako žena dokáže vyrovnat mužům. Úspěšně se ujímá role právníka a dokáže si při řešení konfliktu bez problémů vybudovat u ostatních respekt.

Díla Williama Shakespeara jsou zkoumaná již stovky let. Zároveň se však jedná o díla, ve kterých se dá najít spousta různých detailů, které je dobré prodiskutovat. V průběhu mého výzkumu jsem nenašla velké množství sekundárních zdrojů, které by se specificky věnovaly tématu genderové fluidity v *Jak se vám líbí*, *Kupci benátském* nebo *Večeru tříkrálovém*. Většina zdrojů se zaměřuje na specifické situace a detaily, ne však komplexní



analýzu. Toto zjištění mě vede k závěru, že se jedná o směr prozatím málo prozkoumaný s potenciálem dalšího výzkumu. Queer tematika je v současné době aktuální téma, které se bude postupně dál rozvíjet. Je tedy důležité se tímto pohledem vrátet i ke klasickým dílům. Shakespeare nadále zůstává jednou z nejdůležitějších postav v anglické literatuře.

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## **Annotation**

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**Title of the Thesis:** Master-Mistress of My Passion: Gender Fluidity in Shakespeare's Comedies

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The thesis analyses William Shakespeare's comedies with focus on gender fluidity and its expression in chosen plays. The analyzed comedies are *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The thesis provides an overview of critical background of queer theory, gender politics, feminist theory, and discussions of femininity and masculinity. The historical-cultural background and society of Elizabethan England are also discussed.

## **Anotace**

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**Název práce:** Pane-paní mé vášně: Genderová fluidita v Shakespearových komediích

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**Klíčová slova:** William Shakespeare, renesanční drama, renesanční Anglie, queer theorie, gender, gender fluidity, *Večer tříkrálový*, *Kupec benátský*, *Jak se vám líbí*

Diplomová práce se zabývá komediemi Williama Shakespeare a zaměřuje se především na téma genderové fluidity a její znázornění ve vybraných hrách. Analyzovanými komediemi jsou *Večer tříkrálový*, *Jak se vám líbí* a *Kupec benátský*. Diplomová práce obsahuje přehled kritického pozadí queer teorie, genderové politiky, teorie feminizmu a diskuzi o feminitě a maskulinitě. Dále se věnuje také historicko-kulturnímu pozadí a společnosti alžbětinské Anglie.