

Clothing as Identity and Gender in *The Merchant of Venice*

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Abstract. In Renaissance England, besides the function as currency and as fashion, clothing, a sign symbolizing meaning, reveals a cultural milieu where most people are illiteracies. Many a presentation of clothing has been described by a number of writers and inspires a lot of scholars to examine. The issue of clothing will be continually flourishing, for it is filled with a variety of significant dimensions: for example, it can be a symbol as identity or as gender. This paper aims at probing into identity and gender beneath clothing in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1598) by William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Taking the theory of Michael Foucault (1926-1984) as a frame, my paper will be a cultural study. I will argue that the female characters in Renaissance have no high social status since they execute power in disguise, by transvestism, alongside an insight into the theme that the world taken shape by clothing is the one between the real and the unreal.

Keywords: Clothing, Identity, Fashion, Disguise, Transvestism.

1. Introduction

The presentations of clothing by playwrights to explore the world inspire a number of scholars to be concerned with the issue of clothing to probe into the world. Socially and culturally, clothing may symbolize identity. Sexually, clothing may be as a symbol of gender. The symbolic clothing is the sense that exterior appearances are “credible signs,” or even “extensions,” of interior conditions (Rodini 9). In early modern England, clothing is both as fashion and as currency. Within the historical framework, clothing was a real form of payment. Renaissance clothes were piecemeal assemblages of parts, every part exchangeable for cash until completely worn out. Clothing bears on not merely visible function but also invisible power, as Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass assert: “Clothes have the power to imprint their wearers because they are a form of material memory” (200). Clothing seems to have “two dimensions: phenomenon and substance”; it not only can be understood as an “appearing surface” that lends itself to “interpretation” but it also can be considered as an “object” in the world to which things may occur (Corrigan 155). Clothing is an integral part of “social structures” on the historical, political and economical planes; therefore, it is a “key” to the meaning of the world (Corrigan 162).

Clothing in drama attracts a host of scholars’ attention, and some scholars study it, from a linguistic perspective, in terms of employing *The Fashion System* (1990) by Roland Bathes (1915-1980) whose approach tends to be reductive, failing to consider the various social space of fashion when practiced in daily life. Some scholars do researches on clothing from a psychological point of view, whereas some scholars deal with the issue of clothing from an anthropologist angle. From a cultural viewpoint, applying the theory of Michael Foucault (1926-1984) to *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1598) by William Shakespeare (1564-1616), I will argue that the female characters in Renaissance have no high social status since they execute power in disguise, by transvestism, alongside an insight into the theme that the world taken shape is the one between the real and the unreal.

2. Clothing as Identity and Gender in *The Merchant of Venice*

Clothing is a substance to protect body from cold or from hurt, and metaphorically, it is also “a form of text” (James 14). Like a language, clothing will be understood and continually read. The value of language, according to Foucault, lies in the fact that it is “the signs of things” (*The Order of Things* 33). Similarly, clothing bears on symbolic meanings. At a level of realistic function, besides protecting body from harm, clothing can beautify body, so it seems to be a metaphor to symbolize the wearer, as Ribeiro notes, clothing

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is “a common metaphor of language,” and creates “a web of meanings,” either explicit or implicit; to some degree, people are the creation of their “clothes” (3). Historically, in Renaissance clothing, people were fond of using these symbolic representations, emblems, iconography, and allegories, including almost any animal, plant, god, object, color, or foreign fashion to say something more than itself, and such visual meanings was especially important when most people failed to read (Brown 108). Since clothing is a sign symbolizing meanings, it can reveal people’s distinguished identity according to social position, gender, and race. In *The Merchant of Venice*, gentlewoman, merchants, male and female characters, Christians and Jews have their own clothing style or fashion. A variety of clothing makes the world shift between the real and the unreal. Nevertheless, the order still exists on earth. According to Foucault, “the ordering of things by means of signs constitutes all empirical forms of knowledge as knowledge based upon identity and difference” (*The Order of Things* 57). Foucault goes on an explanation: “the value of things is linked with exchange; money has value as the representation of the wealth in circulation” (199). Their “exchange” is because they have “needs” (Foucault, *The Order of Things* 204). At the beginning of *The Merchant of Venice*, their exchange results in the bond between Antonio and Shylock. In his soliloquy, Shylock reveals that he abhors Antonio not merely because he is a merchant but also because he is a Christian. Owing to the religious difference, Shylock has a deep hate for Antonio and desires to take a revenge on him: “If I can catch him once upon the hip, / I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him” (1. 3. 41-42).

The contrasted theme of love and hate in *The Merchant of Venice* is presented between Venice where middle classes live such as merchants or Jews and Belmont where aristocrats live. In addition to setting, clothing complicates the characters’ situation as well as relationship in the play since clothing may result in a gap between classes or between races. Clothing style or fashion not merely prevails in high classes but also exists in all classes; namely, it dominates people in the English Renaissance, particularly in the reign of the Elizabeth I. The Queen seems to be the icon of her people. She takes so much interest in bright color as to extremely encourage her courtiers to “dress splendidly—especially the men, who could win her favors with an elegant leg, beautiful clothes, and flattering gifts of gloves, gauzy scarves, and rare jewels” (Brown 97). The fashion in Renaissance is discussed as well as depicted in *The Merchant of Venice*, the dialogue between Gratiano and Bassanio in particular:

Gratiano: If I do not put on a sober habit,
Talk with respect, and swear but now and then,
Wear proper-books in my pocket, look demurely,
Nay more, while grace is saying hood mine eyes
Thus with my hat, and sigh and say ‘amen’: (2. 2. 181-85)

Hat, a part of clothing, is focused from the English Renaissance. Like clothing, hat can distinguish a person’s identity socially and culturally. Bassanio suggests Gratiano to wear a piece of beautiful clothing: “I would entreat you rather to put on / Your boldest suit of mirth, for we have friends / That purpose merriment” (2. 2. 192-94). For a woman who desires to disguise as a man, she is not only obligated to change her clothing, from a robe to a pantaloon, but also to wear a hat since long hair is considered “one of the main features women used to attract men” (Howey 233). Hat can conceal women’s hair, in other words, their effeminacy does not exist any longer; as a result, they can disguise as men with success.

In addition to individual identity, clothing may stand for national identity, and via clothing, people can show their patriotism. In the English Renaissance, “The rejection of Latin and the subsequent flourishing of the English language in the literature and drama of the second half of the sixteenth century were mirrored by a flowering of the decorative arts and crafts of the weaver” (Carson 60). Also, clothing can symbolize social status in a patriarchal society. Renaissance fashion, for the rich, is a riot of silks, velvets, and jewels whereas for the vast majority—peasants working the land, traders, or part of the growing class of the “middling sort” including “merchants” and landed gentry—“garments” tend to be less fitted and exaggerated, and better suited to daily life (Brown 110). Furthermore, clothing is an opportunity to draw on a variety of cultures. In the encounter between two different cultures, clothing may show oppositional imagery: battles between opposed worlds, persons and churches. In *The Merchant of Venice*, owing to race, social status, and religion, Shylock’s clothing can be easily told. Shylock says to Antonio: “You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, / And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine” (1. 3. 106-07). The gabardine is a long coat, worn loose or girded, with

long sleeves—a “useful garment” for soldiers, horsemen, or travelers, whatever their status (Linthicum 201). Loomba also indicates: Jews were marked as “different, ideologically and often literally through clothing and confinement in ghettos” (141). Judging from the difference of clothing, the Self and the Other are definitely separated. In a sense, the conflict between Self and Other is revealed in the difference of clothing.

In Renaissance, the clothing of men displays their pursuits and ideas tending to be earthier, artistic, scientific and classical (Brown 84). Whereas, by the late 16th century, the clothing of men has changed: “a ‘three-piece suit’ of doublet, jerkin, and hose with a cloak or robe over the top was worn uniformly by European men” (Brown 100). The clothing of women “had two main parts: bodice and skirt, and sleeves were often separate too” (Brown 86). Therefore, when clothing is changed, the identity will shift; namely, people can disguise themselves through clothing. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for love’s sake, Jessica, Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men by means of changing clothing, from a robe to a pantaloon. The motivation of Jessica’s disguise as a man, different from that of Portia’s, is demanded by her lover Lorenzo: “Nay, we will slink away in supper-time, / Disguise us at my lodging, and return” (2. 4. 1-2). Additionally, Jessica is inquired of masque: “Will you prepare you for this masque tonight? / I am provided of a touch-bearer” (2. 4. 2-3). Like clothing, mask has an important role to play. Prevailing during 16th and early 17th-century, masque is a form of festival courtly entertainment involving music, dancing, singing and acting: According to Stowe, women’s masks, were first devised and used in Italy by courtesans, and from then on brought into France, and there received of the best sort for gallant ornaments (1038). English women were wearing masks in 1554 when Philip of Spain came to England. The wearing of masks in public illustrates “the ways in which outer bodily accoutrements are related to the weaver’s own body and sense of self in public and to the social context itself so as to effect patterns of behaviour in public” (Entwistle and Wilson 6). In the play, although Jessica does at Lorenzo’s will, she thinks her disguise is a foolish conduct: “For if they could, Cupid himself would blush / To see thus transformed to a boy (2. 4. 39-40). Here, to a certain extent, Jessica is a feminine Other who can shift smoothly between her boudoir and the outside world in terms of her alternative identity in the light of disguise as a man though she may be desired but despised by her lover Lorenzo.

Two other women who disguise as men can be found in Act IV, Scene i of the comedy: Nerissa dresses like a lawyer’s clerk, whereas, with a letter from Bellario, Portia disguises as a young doctor, Balthazar, a name commonly attributed to one of the Biblical Magi (Three Wise Men), or an alternate form Belteshazzar, the name given to Daniel by the Chaldeans in the Book of Daniel. In the trial scene, Shylock cynically and ironically says to Balthazar: “A Daniel comes to do judgment: yea a Daniel! / O wise young judge how I do honour thee!” (4. 1. 219-20). Nomination can bear on meaning as well as things can be signs to symbolize meanings. This name Balthazar not only symbolizes that Portia is wise but also reveals that she decisively deals with the issue concerned with the Jew. Human inequality is apparent when the relationship between Portia and Shylock is built like that between master and slave, as Daniel indicates: “this punishment generates a surplus of enjoyment or pleasure, and typically this translation of pain into workings of a contract or agreement that governs the relations between master and slave” (221). The pursuit of the worldly and the material can lead to breakdown in Christianity, and the threat of the Jewish fails to be eventually driven away. New contact with Jews helps the Venetians to consolidate Christianity, but, simultaneously, it may enhance rivalry between the Venetians and the Jews for economic advantage.

Portia’s mission is accomplished only when she disguises herself as a man to take action, to execute power via law in particular. To disguise as a man is to cross dressing. In *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), Phillip Stubbes, one of the most strident Renaissance polemicists, sounds the charge against cross dressing because it is a species of hermaphroditical transgression. In the patriarchal society, women are confined to their boudoir, and it is very rare for them to move from their private sphere to public sphere. Without transvestism, women cannot realize their dream to go out to explore the world which is known to and belongs to men. Therefore, in a sense, “transvestic disguise opens a temporary space for the playful reversal of traditional sex roles and hierarchies” (James 15). It is obvious that Elizabethan and Jacobean clothing is built so as to “enforce the body to act according to correct rules of conduct” (Mirkin 155). In reality, transvestism is not so dangerous as to be prohibited in Renaissance, as Vincent points out: “Despite the language of fervent outrage

employed by the polemicists, early modern civil authority did not perceive transvestism as such a danger to the social order” (125).

In terms of transvestism, power is employed by women. Foucault observes in *Power / Knowledge*: “In feudal societies power functioned essentially through signs and levies” (125). Metaphorically, law (*droit*) in Western societies has always served as “a mask for power” (140). Foucault goes a further explanation: “law was the principal mode of representation of power,” and “representation” should be understood as “a real mode of action” (141). Foucault notes: Law is “an instrument of power which is at once complex and partial” (141). As far as the construction and function of power are concerned, according to Foucault: “Power is constructed and functions on the basis of particular powers, myriad issues, myriad effects of power” (188). As to the definition of power, Foucault sheds a new light by comparing it to clothing: All power “is actually represented in a more-or-less uniform fashion throughout Western societies under a negative, that is to say a juridical form” (201). In the trial scene of the comedy, in order to execute power via law, Portia disguises herself as “Balthasar,” a name given to the prophet Daniel when he comes to defend the Jews in the court of the Babylonian king. Foucault continues to explain: “power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour” (*Power / Knowledge* 125). In other words, power is executed from the top to the bottom, from the upper classes to the lower classes. Disguising as a doctor Balthasar coming from a high class and with a letter from Bellario belonging to a high class, Portia successfully executes power in the trial. Shylock encounters Portia disguising as a doctor Balthasar who is successful in making a metaphoric substitution, where “the debtor’s body stands nor for his bond with his creditor but for his contract with God” (Bailey 17). Besides, Portia’s disguise as Balthasar seems to perform a play in *The Merchant of Venice* as Hamlet’s performing a fighting in *Hamlet* and as the mechanicals’ play in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

In the comedy, by means of the representations of clothing, Shakespeare not only depicts the conflict and tension between the Venetians and the Jews, but also portrays male dominance over women. For love’s sake, in terms of disguising herself as a man, the Jewish woman, Jessica ventures into the Christian arena though Lorenzo still despises her Jewish birth. Similarly, the Venetian woman, Portia, via transvestism, saves Antonio, the best friend of her husband, Bassanio, but Bassanio gives the wedding ring to the doctor, Balthasar disguised by Portia, to express his most sincere gratitude. Transvestism here complicates human relation and situation as well. For women, transvestism seems to be an instrument able to break the boundary of gender; consequently, women can surpass male power. In the comedy, Jessica demonstrates that she is different from her father, Shylock’s manners in Act II, Scene iii, but her marriage and conversion win the affirmation neither of Lorenzo nor of Launcelot. In Act III, Scene v, Jessica’s effort is useless, as Loomba indicates: “Launcelot’s teasing suggests that marriage and conversion have been unable to save Jessica from the damnation her lineage confers upon her”(158). Lorenzo desires Jessica so extremely that he seems to be able to tolerate her Jewish lineage; in reality, he cannot. With a rooted prejudice, a people will conceive of other peoples according to how they imagine them, either as a desirable Other whom they wish to possess, or as a detestable Other whom they hope to kill. Jessica, the desirable Other, is seemingly destined to be possessed by Lorenzo, the Self, on account of her racial difference.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare describes Jessica and Portia’s suffering which results from patriarchy. Portia is constrained by her late father’s invisible bond which is contradictory to but as important as the visible bond between Shylock and Antonio. In the feudal society, women are required to marry according to their parents’ authority. In the comedy, Portia is destined to obey her late father’s will to marry, so impotent is she that feels tired of the vale of tears: “By my troth Nerissa, my little body / is awearry of this great world” (1. 2. 1-2). Portia is afraid that whomever she dislikes would choose the right casket, and that the one whom she loves fails to choose the right one from the three caskets and results in the loss of the opportunity to marry her. Portia is required to obey her late father’s will to choose her husband by the casket riddle, whereas Jessica is not allowed to go out except she disguises as a man to seek for her lover and to elope with him. In the Renaissance Europe, the patriarchal system which obsesses women as men’s property educates men to control women. Women are men’s captives, both in the Jewish world and in the Christian world. The Venetian women are limited to the boudoir, failing to enjoy either autonomy or freedom. Similarly, Jewish women share the same destiny with Venetian women. In a sense, Jessica is a double victim,

because she is dominated not only by her father, Shylock, but also by her lover, Lorenzo, with whom she elopes and for whom she converts Jewish to Christianity. Portia is deeply influenced by her late father in marriage, and she is, in a sense, dominated by her husband, Bassanio, when she disguises as a doctor to save Antonio who has an ambiguity with her husband. Living in a patriarchal society, women are vulnerable physically and mentally in terms of their love and sex lives, and their marriages as well. Only when they disguise as men, can they obtain a temporary freedom to explore their space from private to public and execute power as well. As a result, disguise makes women and men in the comedy become equal.

The relationship between men and women becomes complicated thanks to representations of clothing and ironical owing to transvestism in the comedy. Men's love for women is based on a false truth lurking behind the patriarchal system, that is, the ideal woman was weak, submissive, charitable, virtuous and modest. Conversely, men's relationship with women is forever the promise of love that cannot be fulfilled, a paradoxical promise whose fulfillment would destroy the promise. Comparatively, Jessica's obedience is different from Portia's, as Lampart observes: "Unlike Portia, who obeys her father's will and avoids miscegenation through her obedience, Jessica's disobedience of her Jewish father spells out only the end of his line but the potential dissolution of Lorenzo's" (166). On account of saving her husband's best friend, Antonio, Portia disguises herself as Balthasar. In this case, Portia's adoption of male attire proves more than competent to enter the masculine arena of the courtroom and to hold her own as an advocate in that arena. Her transvestism is not a psychological refuge but a vehicle for assuming the requisite power. Transvestism enables Portia to break out of her confinement to the domestic sphere and to enter into the public sphere where she can extend her awareness of the external world, communicate with men, and most importantly, execute power in terms of law. With the function of changing one's sexual role, transvestism enables Portia to attain her purpose, a deception which means that she can undertake stratagems. In this case, transvestism gives Portia the vigor to take male action. The majority of Renaissance heroines whose transvestism functions as a means of escaping from their guardians, conveying a message to their rival mistresses, or looking for their husbands, but Portia, disguising herself as a doctor, provides her with social position and male power to accomplish her mission, to save Antonio, her husband's best friend.

Clothing exposes gender in addition to revealing identity. Therefore, changing clothing can alter identity and gender as well. In early modern English history or in literature, the reason why women change their clothing to disguise as men to cross gender may result from their limit to private sphere and from their failure to act as men do. Cross-gender disguise becomes central to the action not merely in *The Merchant of Venice* but also in the mature comedies *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* and in the late romance *Cymbeline*. In the patriarchal society, "transvestites" are physiology accounted for "unruly women" who transgressed the rules of womanly decorum and were believed to suffer from hysteria. To some degree, transvestism is not only a transgression for a woman, but it also bears a further symbolic meaning. In the comedy, as a daughter of the Jew, it is impossible for Jessica to escape from her destined identity even she disguises as a man, just as Adelman notes: "Jessica's transvestism makes her a stand-in for the gelded and effeminized figure of her father" (132). Clothing is able to identify someone, and "the costumed body in the English Renaissance" is able to be regarded as "prism where the ideologies, practices and aesthetics of contemporary culture could converge" (Mirkin 144). Furthermore, clothing can provide people with an immense space, as Horn puts: "Clothing does, nevertheless, extend man's performance in many areas of activity in which he would otherwise be hampered or helpless" (442). Like any theatrical performance, out of costume, voice, and gesture, gender is constructed. Clothing reveals social status involved and generating psychological effects as well as transvestite effects in respect to the issue of individual identity.

Like clothing, gloves and ring occupy an important place in drama and are used as memories, favors, betrothal or wedding gifts. (Linthicum 226) The earliest reference to glove in English literature is that in *Beowulf*, though that indicates a sack instead of a covering for hands. Possibly owing to their use are in ecclesiastical ceremonies and in law, gloves are symbol of trust and honor. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia begs Antonio to give her his gloves: "Give me your gloves, I'll wear them for your sake, / And (for your love) I'll take this ring from you,--" (4. 1. 422-23). Consciously and evidently, the purpose of her quest for his gloves is to have his love as keepsake. Similarly, the ring bears on symbolic meanings and dominates the whole stage in the Act V of the comedy. Shakespeare seems to play words by virtue of the ring and treats the

incident concerning the ring “much more lightly as broad comedy”: he transfers the “ring” reference to “the traditional sexual sense” with a conclusion that the play is filled with “the standard Renaissance cuckoldry trope” (Margolies 106). After having been persuaded by Antonio, Bassanio cannot keep the ring with himself because he is required to express his most sincere gratitude to the doctor, Bellario, disguised by Portia, who has saved Antonio.

A theme of real and the unreal is revealed in the comedy, and the theme becomes more evident via a wide range of representations of clothing. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in his essay “The Theme of the Three Caskets” (1913) registers the dreamlike ambivalence of the scene in Belmont, bringing to bear on his analysis all that he understands in his masterpiece, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In the comedy, encountering such a world abounding with illusions thanks to a lot of decoration, Bassanio seems to be confused while making a decision: “So may the outward shows be least themselves,--/The world is still deceiv'd with ornament--” (3.2. 73-74). Like the casket, disguise reveals the theme of real and unreal. Furthermore, disguise complicates human relationship and condition since it can conceal a woman’s identity on the one hand and change her sex on the other hand. In other words, disguise can make a woman cross gender.

3. Conclusion

By virtue of the theory of Foucault, this paper has proved that clothing not only complicates human situation and relation which are constructed by a multitude of bonds but also provides female characters with the opportunity to disguise as men to execute power as well as to enter the world which belongs to men in *The Merchant of Venice*. The invisible bond between her late father and Portia is realized via the three caskets which stand for parents’ authority and upset her in respect to marriage. The visible bond between Antonio and Shylock is no longer concerning with business but with religion when the Jew insists on the Christian’s flesh. Portia and Shylock are representatives not merely of mercy and justice, but also of possessiveness and generosity when they face each other in the trial scene. Shakespeare’s treatment of the Jews with mercy, so Shylock has a stage to state his grievances. It is love that can terminate hate between two different races and religions. The bond between Portia and Bassanio seems oscillating when the ring is exchanged for saving Antonio life. Shakespeare’s light dealing with the episode of ring is a happy ending which is a traditional result for a comedy. Besides, all situations and relations reveal a theme of real and unreal, and the theme is apparent beneath clothing.

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