

SEARCHING FOR IDENTITY IN FEMALE CHARACTERS IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES

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Abstract: This paper explores the complex questions of identity in female characters in William Shakespeare's comedies, focusing on *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Through an analysis of transformation, disguise, and resistance to patriarchal structures, the study reveals how female characters actively construct their identities, often disrupting dominant gender hierarchies. The research applies feminist and psychoanalytic criticism to analyze the roles of gender, performance, and language in the process of identification and self-discovery, positioning these characters as agents of their own liberation. Focusing on Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Viola in *Twelfth Night*, it argues that Shakespeare crafts their identities through linguistic performance, ambiguity, and rhetorical control. These women subvert conventional gender norms not just through disguise or defiance, but through speech acts that constitute identity. The essay adopts a feminist and performative framework, particularly Judith Butler's concept of performativity, to analyze how language enables these characters to negotiate, redefine, and assert their subjectivities in a patriarchal context.

Keywords: *identity, female characters, language, comedies.*

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

In the late Renaissance, female identity in literature was predominantly defined through a woman's relation to a man—as daughter, wife, or lover. However, Shakespeare's comedies offer a space for re-examining these roles. The female characters are not only active participants in the development of the narrative but often challenge the status quo through disguise, dialogue, and subversion. At the core of these plays lies the struggle for self-definition, where the search for identity emerges as a fundamental motif.

Shakespeare's comedies are often perceived as tales of romance, disguise, and humor. Yet they also provide fertile ground for examining identity, especially in female characters who contest, displace, or transform socially assigned gender roles. Through the active use of disguise, ambiguity in speech, and play with social norms, these characters create space for reflection and redefinition of the self. This paper analyzes these aspects through an interdisciplinary lens, incorporating feminist theory, cultural criticism, and performance analysis. In Shakespeare's comedic world, where inversion, misrecognition, and disguise often structure the plot, language emerges not only as a means of communication but as the medium through which identity is constructed and challenged. For female characters, whose identities are socially and culturally constrained by early modern gender norms, language becomes a subversive tool—allowing them to exert power, articulate desire, and perform autonomy. In *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*, Rosalind, Viola, and Katherina respectively use language to shape their identities, reframe their positions within male-dominated spaces, and expose the instability of gender itself.

2. GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND DISGUISE: ROSALIND AND VIOLA

Rosalind (*As You Like It*) and Viola (*Twelfth Night*) are characterized by remarkable intelligence, courage, and adaptability. Their disguises as male figures not only enable them to survive but also allow them to explore new dimensions of their own identities. Disguise allows Rosalind and Viola to establish relationships that transcend traditional gender boundaries. Viola, for example, forms an intimate bond with Orsino precisely because of her male disguise, while Rosalind teaches Orlando how to love. Identity here is dynamic, shaped through dialogue and reinterpretation.

In *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare crafts female characters who transform into male figures—an act that shifts their role from passive objects of romantic desire to active agents of communication and action. Rosalind, as Ganymede, forges an intimate connection with Orlando, using her male disguise not only for protection but also as a tool for internal discovery. Viola, as Cesario,

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utilizes her transgressive identity to enter a love triangle that highlights the complexity of love, gender, and perception.

As Butler (1990) argues, gender is not an essential category but a construct maintained through performative practices—socially learned and repeated acts. Shakespeare's heroines challenge the binary of male/female through such performances, raising the question: What does it mean to be a woman?

They instinctively embody this theory through their ability to control the narrative by shifting the gender code. Disguise enables not only physical mobility but also subjective authority.

3. LANGUAGE AND THE METAPHOR OF IDENTITY

Shakespeare's female characters are not merely actors in the plot but masters of language. Rosalind in *As You Like It* has more lines than any other character in the play, representing a form of verbal dominance. She shapes the narrative of love on her own terms, using language as a means to command space and situation. Rosalind is one of the most verbally active characters in all of Shakespeare's works, which is especially significant given the relative silence of most female characters of the time. Her language is agile, ironic, and manipulative—a tool through which she shapes reality and constructs her identity.

Similarly, Viola expresses deep empathy and emotional intelligence through language. With witty and ambiguous lines, she creates her position as the moral and emotional center of *Twelfth Night*. In a situation of bodily uncertainty—where her appearance does not align with her gendered truth—language becomes the primary means through which she asserts her identity.

In these contexts, language becomes a medium for negotiating gender and subjectivity. According to Greenblatt (2005), Shakespeare's use of language serves both to reveal and conceal truths about identity.

Rosalind is perhaps Shakespeare's most linguistically empowered female character. In *As You Like It*, she not only speaks more lines than any other character but also uses her words to actively construct her identity. Disguised as the male Ganymede, she navigates the Forest of Arden with rhetorical agility, creating a performative space where she can experiment with desire, gender, and agency.

Her dialogues with Orlando serve as both romantic instruction and identity play. By adopting a male persona, she ironically gains the authority to define what it means to be a woman in love. As Ganymede, she parodies gender roles and courtship rituals, destabilizing fixed binaries. According to Butler (1990), gender is performative, not inherent—a concept Rosalind enacts by treating masculinity as a role she can inhabit and abandon. Her wit, irony, and verbal dexterity allow her to construct a layered identity that is at once sincere and ironic, masked and authentic.

Language thus functions as both her disguise and her revelation. Through it, she reclaims authorship over her narrative, using speech as a metaphorical mask that both conceals and reveals.

Viola's journey in *Twelfth Night* similarly underscores the centrality of language to identity. After being shipwrecked and assuming the identity of Cesario, she enters Duke Orsino's court and quickly establishes herself as a sensitive and eloquent interlocutor. Her speech is marked by emotional intelligence and rhetorical precision, enabling her to influence those around her even while hiding her true self.

Viola's dual identity—female by biology, male by disguise—positions her at the intersection of gendered expectations. Her ability to speak intimately with Orsino, while being perceived as a man, challenges traditional courtship dynamics. In her famous speech about her "sister" (Act 2, Scene 4), she uses metaphor to veil and simultaneously expose her feelings. This act of veiled confession exemplifies how language allows her to navigate her ambiguous position without sacrificing her integrity or emotional truth.

Language for Viola is both a shield and a bridge—a metaphorical fabric that clothes her unspoken identity. Her verbal agility reflects her inner complexity, illustrating how Shakespeare crafts identity not through fixed traits but through dialogic interactions.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina's relationship to language is more confrontational but equally transformative. Initially characterized by sharpness, sarcasm, and aggression, her speech marks her as unruly and undesirable in the patriarchal marriage market. However, it is precisely her refusal to conform to the expectations of feminine silence and obedience that gives her power.

Her verbal sparring with Petruchio is not just a battle of wills but a performative struggle over identity. Language becomes the site where her subjectivity is both challenged and asserted. While many interpret her final speech as a capitulation to male dominance, a closer reading—especially through a contemporary feminist lens—suggests a more ironic performance. The tone and delivery of her monologue can be seen as theatrical compliance, a strategic use of language to satisfy social expectation while retaining personal agency.

As Charnes (2021) and Smith (2022) argue, Katherina's "submission" is best read as rhetorical camouflage: she learns to manipulate the same language that was used to silence her. In doing so, she reclaims control, embodying resistance through performance.

Across all three comedies, Shakespeare crafts female characters whose speech functions metaphorically as the site and symbol of their identity. Whether through the verbal play of Rosalind, the emotional resonance of Viola, or the strategic irony of Katherina, language is never neutral. It is performative, transformative, and deeply tied to the self.

Stephen Greenblatt (2005) notes that Shakespeare's characters often construct themselves through their words, revealing not just personality but existential orientation. For female characters, who are already marginalized within the social order of the plays, this self-construction becomes a radical act. Language allows them to exceed their prescribed roles and participate in the shaping of their own narratives.

4. RESISTANCE AND STRATEGIC SUBMISSIVENESS: KATHERINA AND THE AMBIVALENCE OF "TAMING"

The *Taming of the Shrew* is a complex play often interpreted as misogynistic. However, from a contemporary feminist perspective, Katherina can be seen as a woman who understands the context in which she lives and uses the performance of submission as a means of survival. According to recent studies (Charnes, 2021; Callaghan, 2023), Katherina's "taming" can be understood as a conscious play with expectations—she remains a subject within the imposed structure.

In her final monologue, Katherina formally expresses submission, but the way she delivers the speech—with an ironic tone and theatrical distance—suggests a deliberate play with power. In doing so, she retains her inner integrity, which is a key moment in the stabilization of her identity.

Katherina has long been interpreted as a victim of patriarchal order. However, newer critiques consider her transformation as a conscious strategy of survival and adaptation. As some authors suggest (Smith, 2022; Tomlinson, 2021), Katherina is not truly "tamed," but chooses to play the role tactically in a world where her power is denied.

Her final speech can also be read as a sarcastic parody of submission, rather than a sincere acceptance of patriarchal authority. Thus, Katherina reinterprets the female role in marriage not as passive but as active—even subversive.

5. CONCLUSION

The female characters in Shakespeare's comedies are far from passive figures in a male world. They are active participants in their own self-construction, using disguise, language, and resistance as strategies of identity formation. In their search for selfhood, they transcend the boundaries of gender stereotypes and demonstrate literature's potential to be a space of freedom and experimentation. Shakespeare, with his subtlety and sensitivity to the complexity of human nature, creates characters that remain relevant in contemporary discussions of identity and gender. Shakespeare's comedies offer more than romantic entanglements and mistaken identities—they are sophisticated meditations on the role of language in shaping who we are. Through Rosalind, Viola, and Katherina, we see how women use language not merely to speak but to become. In a world where silence equates to submission, these characters reclaim voice as identity, metaphor as liberation. Their words are not only their weapons but their essence—demonstrating how, in Shakespeare's hands, language is both mask and mirror of the self. Shakespeare's female comedic characters represent complex subjects whose search for identity exceeds the gendered, social, and cultural constraints of their time. Through performativity, linguistic skill, and critical engagement with power, they become prototypes of female subjectivity and autonomy. These characters not only reflect the societal discourse of Shakespeare's era but also reshape it. Their stories challenge us to rethink what it means to be a woman, a subject, and a human being within the historical and literary context.

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