

## ABSTRACT

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Title: AN EXAMINATION OF CROSS-DRESSING WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS: GENDER AND LIMINALITY ON THE EARLY MODERN ENGLISH STAGE

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This study uses Victor Turner's theory of liminality and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to investigate the theatrical performance of cross-dressing in Shakespeare's plays, focusing on *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*. While often recognized as a vehicle permitting an increased degree of autonomy for female characters, cross-dressing ultimately reinstates the patriarchal order by failing to threaten male domination, leading to a resolution accepted by both the play's characters and their contemporary audiences. If we consider the dressed body as a vehicle of expression, the influence of clothes directly impacts a character's identity, especially its allowances for transgressions within gender expression. The heroines in Shakespeare's comedies demonstrate this principle when utilizing cross-dressing as a disguise, adopting this dress to take actions that would otherwise be unachievable. This circumvention of societal limitations and their increased agency is short-lived, however, as these female characters revert to their initial gender identities once the male figure in their life is secured. The consistent lack of concern expressed by the surrounding male characters after the revelation drives this research: Why are these transgressions not substantial enough to significantly subvert the social structure? What is the impact of these contained transgressions on their contemporary audiences of all genders?