

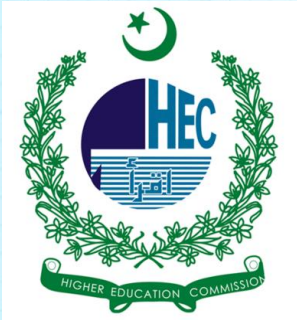
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**Disguise as a Reflection of Sociopolitical and Cultural Norms in
Elizabethan England: A New Historicist Analysis of
Shakespearean Comedies**



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Abstract

In this paper, the authors examines the phenomenon of disguise in Shakespearean comedies with the help of New Historicist approach to understand the sociopolitical and cultural context of Elizabethan England. The play examines the concerns of class rivalry, female role and identity through the function and the outcome of disguise. Thus, the research illuminates the extent to which disguise not only served functional dramatic and comic purposes but also reflected the instability and rigidity of power and gender relations in expectation-proffered Elizabethan culture. In this context, this analysis aims at showing how the playwright employed disguise in order to perform the discursive debates of the society at his time and provide the readers with the necessary insights into the cultural and political subtexts of his works.

Keywords: Shakespearean comedies, disguise, New Historicism, Elizabethan England, sociopolitical norms, class mobility, gender roles, identity, cultural context.

Introduction and Background

This paper employs the New Historicist approach to analyze Shakespeare's application of disguise and reveals its sociocultural value and concern with the dominant culture of the Elizabethan period. Disguise as the topic of focus in William Shakespeare's comedies about identity, class and gender as the motifs of disguise indicate it is a rich subject in literature and theatre. Of the various aspects that occupy the thematic spectra of Shakespeare, disguise is not limited to the creations of mere farce but forms an important play within the play of the sociopolitical and cultural lanes of Elizabethan England. While *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice* show how disguise works as a tool to define and trouble the system of classes, genders, and power relations.

Elizabethan England was perennially ordered by the social stratification that provides minimal opportunities to shift from a particular status to another, and too few chances for anyone to change sex. Costume and disguise in Shakespeare's works provided characters an opportunity to cross those divisions briefly, in order to negotiate other forms of identity and status that were otherwise inaccessible to them.

This is seen in *Twelfth Night* where being in a male outfit as Cesario the

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protagonist Viola is able to maneuver through the male dominated environment and in *As You Like It* where using a male 'alias' of Ganymede as a cover the protagonist Rosalind is also able to control the events and characters around her (Bradbrook, 1952; Greenblatt, 1988).

The fact that disguise was another major element reflected Elizabethan theater's interest in performance and play. During this period, theatre involved all male cast, so young boys portrayed female characters, which was an extra challenge compounded by women dressing as men. This theatrical gesture was a sign of performative gender and identity and conducive with more general social concerns about politics of power, legitimacy of performance/representation, and essence (Howard, 1994; Berry, 2001).

New Historicism in the perspective of its founding theorist, Stephen Greenblatt, offers analytical tools to re-establish relations between Shakespeare's work and history. This theoretical perspective assumes that literature artifacts are socially constructed in their production and constructively involved in the construction of cultural discourses.

Masking in these plays as a signifying practice works then to represent and re-inscribe cultural codes; stable meanings are problematized and simultaneously reaffirmed. For instance, while some scenes such as those where female characters temporarily take on male villainous roles offers a throw down to male rule, most plays have their villains punished and order restored (Montrose 1986; Jardine 1983).

In several of his comedies, Shakespeare portrays disguise as a way of crossing over the class divide, a situation that mirrors the status of the social upward mobility known as promotion in Elizabethan England. Through disguise, the women are able to trans dress as men and therefore gain space with the nobility on seemingly equal standing; similarly, through disguise, Rosalind is able to take charge on a place that is free from the previous hierarchy as nobility and the like meet in the forest (Berry 2001; Rackin 1990). These example show how disguise is used to negotiate the construction of social selves, but at the same time, subverts and restores the social order at the end of the plays (Howard, 1994, pp. 90).

Another element of the discourse is also connected with the concept of role-play, which problematizes gender. In comedies of the period, there are many female

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characters like Viola and Rosalind who disguise themselves in male attire partly because of desire for liberty which women of the period could not have easily. This undercutting of gender conforms to Butler's social constructivist view of gender as well as New Historicism outlook toward Shakespeare's works as presenting cultural values (Howard, 1994; Jardine, 1983).

However, the Elizabethan playhouses specifically employed male actors on stage and thereby enshrined the male subject, thus being very theatrical about gender. Young male actors performing women roles only to dress up as men within the play's context was a feature that made the spectators constantly probe into the existence and fabrication of gender (Berry, 2001; McDonald, 2004) .

May Comedy of Deception essay show how people in the Elizabethan society had interest in masquerades and disguise. In Shakespeare's comedies disguise represents this aspect of culture as the characters can all act inconsiderately and liberally and perform actions which are otherwise prohibited by the culture of the society. An important subversion of gender roles in *The Merchant of Venice* is achieved through disguise when Portia in male disguise contests patriarchal arbitration; while in *Much Ado About Nothing* we have a prescribed social unmasking through the ball at which deceptions and misrepresentations are played out (Bradbrook, 1952; McDonald, 2004).

This paper examines the social relations in Shakespeare's comedies through the perspective of New Historicists, studying the topic of disguise. Illusion functions as subversion in regard to power structures in the film to an extent, but because of the story's conclusion is also a means of maintaining the existing order. Such a dual function emphasizes the multi paradigmatic approach to Shakespeare's resolution of the cultural and political systems of the Elizabethan age (Greenblatt, 1988; Bristol, 1990).

Research Statement

The purpose of the present study is, to investigate Shakespeare's use of the element of disguise in the selected comedies with reference to New Historicism as a cultural materialist approach to the analysis of literature, with particular attention to the socio-political and cultural context of Elizabethan England. More specifically, it will examine how disguise functions as a device for negotiating questions of class

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aspiration, gender performativity, and defiance of social hierarchy. Masquerade as a theme is used in *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Merchant of Venice* and other comedies to subvert social relations and roles as a man or woman, noble or commoner for a time.

Furthermore, in view of the fact that most of the plays under discussion were performed by men only, this study will also consider the impact of theatre traditions on the play's thematic elements such as gender and identity performative with reference to Berry (2001) and Howard (1994). This paper will employ New Historicism approach and analyze how these comedies negotiate history and representation so as to allow understanding of how Shakespeare's plays simultaneously encoded and endorsed the dominant socio-cultural realities of Elizabethan England (Montrose 1986; Jardine 1983).

Literature Review

Analytical examination of the issue The concept of disguise in Shakespeare's comedies has been a subject of scholarly discourse for many years. Essential for plays as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, language fulfills a dual function of illuminating and reproducing the social and political as well as the other cultural and ethnical paradigms of Elizabethan England. A literature search shows a healthy body of existing work especially in light of the New Historicist approach, which situates these plays in the light of the political, social, and theatrical circumstances of the period. Discuss where research has placed disguise in relation to class, gender and identity and society's concerns that are incorporated into these plays and where scholars have found they are tackled.

Illusion in Shakespeare's comedies can mean that, in Marlowe's sense, the characters are able to find a way around social conventions, which speaks to the social ranks of Elizabethan English society. For instance, Berry (2001) and Bradbrook (1952) have both presented how dramatist like Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like IT* uses disguise as a tool to challenge the hierarchal protocols regarding mobility of social status. For instance, the character Viola in *Twelfth Night* is able to cross dress as Cesario and be able to play male privileges as men dominated a world where women were only seen as subjugated beings. It destabilizes the nature of categorization thus undermining the tenure of hierarchical structure that accompanied

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this period's concern with social class mobility (Rackin, 1990). Unlike other critics who ascribe disguise merely as a comic device, Bradbrook (1952) argued that it is a noble conceit whereby the restoration of society is possible even within a society that is fixed in its rigidity. However, as all these plays bodily slide back into a reestablished hegemonic social order, the playful destabilization of class orders through disguise and misrepresentation can be read also as a re inscription of a status quo, a point made more cogently by Montrose (1986) and Howard (1994).

Another major spheres of study are opening the potential of disguise related to gender. Problems of gender were particularly sensitive in Elizabethan society; female parts in plays were played by men and women were invisible in theater. New Historicist critics Greenblatt (1988) and Montrose (1986) claimed that Shakespearean disguise presents a probe into the norms through the female characters who can play the male parts, thereby subverting the dominant male para-digms of gendered hierarchy. The instances of Viola dressing up as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, and Rosalind is pretending as Ganymede in *As You Like It* are the clear examples of such cross dressing. In this way, both women as characters are able to outwit the many layers of oppression that they fundamentally signify and experience social/romantic liberties that are quintessentially denied to them (Howard, 1994).

According to Jardine (1983) and Greenblatt (1988), disguise in these play forms is a perfect depiction of gender as performance. There is some appropriate reasoning here with Judith Butler's (1990) Gender performativity theory in place, where gender is not something one is, but something indeed done. In *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, disguise question the constructiveness of the gender performativity thus expose the art rather than the 'nature'. These disguises do not only challenge the discursive construction of essentialized gender roles but also expose techniques through which these roles can be negotiated and performed for specific purpose and gains, as well as to comment on the society.

An indispensable component of all disguising's in Shakespeare's comedies is the surroundings of the performance — the all-male configurations of the Elizabethan stage. This theatrical convention adds an additional complexity to the matter of disguise because male actors played both male and female characters, which additionally to the confusion of sexes meanings of characters' identities were

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gendered. McDonald (2004) and Berry (2001) have followed this line up to a point – they have noted that the use of cross-dressing male actors who play female characters disguised as men draw attention to the performance of gender and identity. This is because the audience is always aware of the duality of the theatrical performance both in terms of the play with in play action as in *As You Like It* when Rosalind ‘acts’ as Ganymede, meaning that problems of gender role are highlighted more.

L. W. Berry (2001) & B. C. Bristol (1990) have understood how this theatrical structure complements the political and social issues of the time, particularly the struggle between the two worlds-public and private. During Elizabethan time, gender and class represented certain stages of differentiation and became public signs of identity; thus, the theatre became the places where these signs were played and questioned. Notably, the authors maintain the male cast, which not only draws attention to the fluidity of gender but also reflects the problematics of class and gender/identity boundaries in current society.

New Historicism, proposed by Stephen Greenblatt, *Explaining the New Historical discipline in Literary Studies* (1988) can be regarded as a useful approach to the interpretation of Shakespeare’s comedies. New Historicist researchers argue that it is only right that a piece of literature is considered, understood, and interpreted on the historical, cultural, and the political platform within which it was written. Therefore, while Shakespeare uses disguise merely as a dramatic plot device he uses it also as a portrayal of the cultural anxieties and aspirations of Elizabethan society.

According to Montrose, Shakespeare has habitually provided the reflection of the political realities of his time in his plays. Reflexively, disguise provides a commentary of the unstable political and social environments at the twilight years of the Tudor Kingdom, which had a problem of sovereignty and authority. According to Greenblatt (1988), Shakespeare’s comedies perform a dialogical function with regard to the societal processes of his era, i.e. it explains how literature mediates and constitutes culture.

Such use of disguise enters into play with the general Renaissance preoccupations with the nature of the real and the counterfeit. In *Twelfth Night* the play examines such matters of looking and deception as the topics studied philosophically by the Renaissance writers as noted by Rackinpadx. Through disguise,

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these plays problematize the notion of identity for the unknowledgeable audience, especially within a milieu where status and gender roles are malleable and constructed. Submitted to *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Culture, Power and Justice*.

This disguise in comedy corresponds well enough with the cultural, political and social issues in England around the Elizabethan period. This it gives understanding of plasticity of class and gender hierarchies and how these categories are produced and performed. In the framework of New Historicist approach scholars have depicted how Shakespeare's comedies are at once, engaged with and commenting on the ideology and culture of the time. Discussions of disguise in Shakespeare's plays document the high complexity of such works and the enduring relevance of such themes in contemporary discussions of identity and status.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this study, which is on the motif of concealment in Shakespeare's comedies, identified via New Historicism, makes use of the analysis of text, evaluation of historical context and synthesis across disciplines. In this approach, texts such as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and *the Merchant of Venice* will be evaluated as to how the theme of disguise works as a plot device to examine and subvert Elizabethan social and political norms of class, gender and identity. Masking the identity will be presented and discussed as farce and an analytical tool of the contradictory aspects of identity/role, gender/sexuality, and power/relations. This will be done in light of the New Historicist criticism which tries to understand how a work of literature reflects and responds to the culture and politics of the age of its production as Wheeler (1986), Greenblatt (1988) and Montrose (1986) have suggested for the works of the Renaissance. Feminist and queer, performance theories bolstered by Butler, 1990, and Howard, 1994 will enhance the analysis of gender performance and the role of cross dressing as a tool throughout early modern theatre. Legal documents, social tracts and political overlays will help set the stage for discussions on class and more on gender, taking into account how concealment undercuts and challenges the strict codes of behavior of the day (Rackin 1990, Berry 2001). New Historicism is going to be used as the major theoretical framework for the analysis of power relations in Shakespeare's plays, however, social themes are going to be inferred from literary motifs through thematic analysis of the plays

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corresponding to New Historicist theories that concentrate on studying text as a historical artifact. In this methodological approach an attempt is made in order to study the comedies of Shakespeare so as to gain an understanding of how literary works reflect the attitudes of a society, as well as to illuminate the 'social' factor in the writing-process.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses New Historicism as the critical approach; which contextualizes literary works within their production's sociopolitical, cultural, and historical domains. According to Stephen Greenblatt, New Historicism postulates that the texts analyzed to a significant extent are associated with the characteristics of society, politics, and economy of the period under consideration. This framework will assess the way in which Shakespearean comedies such as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice* navigate the Elizabethan English social structure of class, gender and identity. New Historicism holds that literature reflects those 'social energies' present in a particular epoch, as well as serving to affirm and/or subvert the discursive formations of that epoch (Greenblatt 1988; Montrose 1986). The main theme of disguise in the theme of comedies by Shakespeare is disorientation to analyze identity, gender roles and social statuses to understand social structure and the possibilities in the society which is divided in great Levels. This will be improved by critical theory especially Feminist and Queer theory spear headed by Judith Butler's (1990) theory on Gender performativity which considers gender not as an innate identity but an activity, an enactment. Disguise in Shakespeare's plays especially where women adopt male characters is going to be analyzed as a rebellion to the patriarchal society of the society. In addition, Bickel (2012), Stapleton (2013), Howard (1994), and Berry (2001) will also help engage with the ways in which social mobility and class are both fragilely destabilized by disguise, which articulates the desires and anxieties of Elizabethan culture. Specifically, this research aims to understand how Shakespeare uses the theme of disguise both in relation to the contemporary culture and in terms of broad themes such as power relations and social status by engaging with New Historicism in conjunction with feminism and gender theories.

Data Analysis

This paper considers the theme of disguise in Shakespeare's comedies with focus on

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new historicist approach to the study of literature, where literature and history intertwine. In *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, disguise serves as a powerful tool in demonstrating how fluid identity is in the face of the rigid social realities of the Elizabethan age as defined by class and gender roles. This paper finds that disguise works to subvert and maintain the sociopolitical order through an evaluation of the critical scene speeches of these plays. In this regard, disguise primarily reveals the comic aspect of his play, but also the discursive key to engage with the political, social, and cultural presuppositions of the Elizabethan society.

"I am not what I am." (Twelfth Night, Act 2, Scene 2)

These remarks are made by the protagonist Viola who in disguise as a man, Cesario, say what can be regarded as the play's pith. This line undermines the gender and class stupidity of the Elizabethan age that only allowed the lower classes for women and did not allow them at all. Viola confesses that she pretends to be somebody she is not and therefore male gender instability represents performance. Of all the disguises, the question of gender is most important because a woman has the right and freedoms that are characteristic of men only because she puts on men's clothing. In this remark, Shakespeare provides an insight into the societal expectations concerning the gender-role expectations in Shakespeare's own era, although he opens the possibility that such roles may be recreated as well as he underlines that identity of male is the performance.

"Your lord does know my mind, / I cannot love him. / Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble, / Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth; / Invoices well divulged, free, learned, and valiant, / And in dimension and the shape of nature / A gracious person. But yet I cannot love him." (Twelfth Night, Act 1, Scene 5).

In this moment, Olivia, shedding her feminine mask, reveals a conflict that is universally encapsulated by the sentiment: I want to, but I must not. In the play, Olivia represents the stipulated roles since she accepts Orsino, whom she intends to marry, as deserving and of high rank. The play, therefore, depicts Olivia as disabled from loving Orsino, her intended spouse. Pursuit of marriage for rank rather than affection is prominent in postmodern comedies being exemplified in the disguise and subterfuge in *Twelfth Night* through social class. Olivia's speeches explain and also provide

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commentary to the notion of love, marriage in the society where the degree of mobility and freedom of choice is limited by status and rank.

"I know your answer." (Twelfth Night, Act 1, Scene 5)

Such a simple but profound claim is made by Viola when she is in male disguise as Cesario; it complements the dramatic presentation of the role that is an essential theme of many comedies and tragedies Shakespeare. In this instance, Viola, in the disguise of Cesario, seems to guess Olivia's reaction before its utterance, it is for this reason that all actors are merely playing, or acting as, is implied by the words they use, which, in essence they are. In its traditional sense, disguise has socio-political connotations; but, in this respect, it turns plot into experiment or gender's boundlessness. Viola disguises herself as a male servant, thus reversing established gender roles, although she meets expectations throughout her dialogue with Olivia, who is certainly restricted by the gender roles of the mid sixteenth century society.

"I will ask you what you will do with the love you bear me." (As You Like It, Act 3, Scene 2)

This is a prose dialogue said by Rosalind when dressed as Ganymede in the play *As You Like It*. Used here it is also not only the means for Rosalind to travel around dressed as a man, but also puts the characters, including Orlando, in front of the performance of love. Obviously to grasp the nature of the sociological roles in Elizabethan world, the problems of identity and gender performance in the play *As You Like It* are crucial. Disguise is being used purposefully as a tool of dramatic irony, with Shakespeare being able to create a situation where complicated relationships between public and private are analyzed along with gender and emotional authenticity.

"No, I shall never love you. / But if I do, I shall never tell you." (As You Like It, Act 3, Scene 2)

This saying which Rosalind said while disguised as Ganymede shows the relation between the theme of identity and disguise. This change of sex here allows Rosalind set the premise and rules of love and wooing in this play. Elizabeth and Orlando do not express their love for each other and do not try to build something more than friendship because the format of relations in the Elizabethan period is limited. Rosalind chooses a disguise, which erases the conventions of a society and makes people pay attention to the nonsense of love, marriage, and gender roles.

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"The quality of mercy is not strained, / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven." (The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1)

The following impressive line is spoken by Portia in her male disguise as a lawyer in *The Merchant of Venice* in this speech, the author demonstrates the position of the gig giving and receiving justice in the framework of Venetian society hierarchy. The disguise lets Portia work as an attorney which is impossible for a woman in the Shakespeare's play and in Elizabethan society. This passage shows the differential sense that the disguise in Shakespeare's comedies has the purpose to invert gender and study power and agency. Because of the disguise and the change of sex, Portia provokes the readers and the play's audience to the triumph of male-oriented culture, stressing at the same time that justice, mercy, and authority belong to any gender.

"The pound of flesh, which I demand of him, / Is dearly bought; 'tis mine and I will have it." (The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1)

This line from Shylock though not in the context of disguise do identify with the social and legal norms of the *Merchant of Venice*. Thus, while Portia manages to use disguise to get justice, speaking at the same time for both the dumb and the dead, Shylock's desire to have a pound of flesh, his blackmailing of Antonio and his Jewishness signify the opposite – the lack of Venice's possibility for interchangeable identity, the frozen, contractual reality of Venetian mercantilism. Significantly enough, Portia in male dress rescues Antonio, One of the main features of disguise, the subversion of stability in 忒 society and the exposure of the war between justice, mercy and the masquerade of the society.

"You shall have justice more than you desire." (The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1)

In this scene, through Balthazar Portia demonstrates her knowledge of the law and law courts and how the man she is disguising should enslave. This remark helps to explain how disguise enables the women of Shakespeare's play specifically by defying the gender expectations of the day. Cross dressing as a man, Portia moves in the male constructed hierarchy and gets to know the court inside out before she can change it and dispense justice in a way that is acceptable to her. She is leaving alone a critique on the fact that legal and social realities have pervasively simplified the existence of the subjects today, especially on issues of gender power relations.

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As with the wordplay examples represented in this paper the analysis of these tricky symbols shows that disguise in Shakespeare's comedies is a multi-faceted comment on the societal, political and cultural realistic of Jacobean England. At the same time, the kind of disguise used from Shakespeare evokes the dramatic aspect of the matter and the profound importance of the theatrical role in picturing the difficulties throughout growth and maturity processes and the tension between the I and the Other. This study situates these plays within their historical contexts to demonstrate how the use of disguise must be understood both as reflecting and contributing to the politics and culture of Shakespeare's day in order to illuminate the ultimate cultural semiotics of his plays.

Conclusion

The present paper has traced the presence of the motif of disguise in Shakespearean comedies from the perspective of the New Historicist approach to better understand the representation of the sociopolitical and cultural ideas of Elizabethan England. Through the analysis of *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice* it has furthered been shown that disguise is more than a form of the joke the framework was introduced for, it is a tool to explore the given society's gender, class and identity discourses. Murder and disguising provide critique on many issues of the Shakespeare's Elizabethan society, particularly the instability and narrowness of the gender roles imposed between men and women.

The paper reveals how Shakespeare's characters assume their alter egos in order to cope with the conflict between the individual and the society and talk about performativity of both gender and class. In analyzing these works with respect to the period in which they were written, the paper has illustrated how Shakespeare's orientation to problems as class migration, women's place, and the volatility of persona exposes the undertones of sociopolitical debate in the English renaissance.

Finally, Shakespeare comedies, exemplifying the use of disguise as their main plot point, contain such multifaceted portrayal of the concept of identity and power as might be seemingly expected in the Elizabethan society's glance. Masking serves and plays many important roles in this light: thematic and diegetic – it also subverts gender and social class boundaries, makes both these works useful and commenting upon their society's norms and values, original and current worries over subjectivity,

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