En Masque: Power in Disguise in Shakespeare's Comedies & the Renaissance Theatre

"Disguise is, after all, essentially anarchic, inverting systems and relationships, creating distance between appearance and reality, turning the world upside down."

- *Peter Hyland*

Introduction

Throughout the early modern period, the act of being disguised stands as a consistent theme in Renaissance drama, and although the motif is used across many genres, the primary genre that it proves to be most popular in is comedy. Indeed, Peter Hyland states in his article "Disguise and Renaissance Tragedy" that "although disguise was occasionally used in [other genres], its use was usually confined to special areas, as it was considered to be primarily a comic device" (Hyland 162). Although some cases of disguise in Renaissance drama rely on deception as an obstacle, others rely on disguise as a method of cunning, and both are critical for displaying power during scenes. This power can be defined in a sense as power received in social situations—that is, power based either in courtship methods, in a patriarchal society, or in the case of power given by the general self.

In specificity, I will be closely examining two of William Shakespeare's comedies, which relied heavily on disguise as the lead theme of the climaxes of the plays—*Love's Labour's Lost* being the first, and *The Merchant of Venice* being the second. Because these scenes are the most climactic, it can be argued that a sense of power throughout the characters is distributed most heavily during these scenes, and in these plays in particular, this distribution of power is contributed by the act of being disguised. I propose that the concept of disguise lends power to Shakespeare's characters through four main lenses: gender, motive, dress, and action. I will also

talk about how these disguises and their transfer of power were portrayed on the early modern stage through costumes and the traits of the players' themselves and their performances.

It is inherent that the use of disguise automatically provides the deceiver with an advantage over those they are trying to deceive. The deceiver has a knowledge that the deceived does not: in most cases that we will be examining in this essay, that knowledge consists of a concealed identity. By using or withholding this knowledge, the deceiver enters the situation with a level of power that is innately belonging to them, and I will be examining this power between the relationships of Shakespeare's characters.

Exploring Disguise in Shakespeare's Time

Before analyzing the concept of disguise in Shakespeare's comedies, it is first vital to explore why disguise appears so frequently in his works. The most significant reason, in my opinion, is the religious context surrounding the late sixteenth century in which Shakespeare wrote these plays. When Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558, the entirety of England was converted from a Catholic nation to a Protestant nation, and Protestant citizens that were previously living in secrecy under the rule of Mary I were allowed to practice their denomination. Due to the previous persecution, however, there was already an established distrust between Catholic and Protestant Englishmen, and one of the key elements that contributed to this distrust was the Catholic practice of "casuistry"—or, in other words, disguising the truth without committing the sin of lying. In *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe*, Perez Zagorin defines casuistry succinctly for his readers: he explains that casuistry "consists in application of the general rules of morality to concrete situations in which the particular circumstances involve conflicting duties and create doubt or confusion as to what is right or licit to do" (Zagorin 153). The "science" of

casuistry, Zagorin later writes, was embraced by the Catholic church through the act of confession. Because priests were bound by a vow of silence concerning their parish's confessions to them, they had to create a way to explain their concerns with the confessions without breaking that vow. Since Protestants believe in a direct communication link to God, and do not require confession with a priest, the practice was unfamiliar and suspicious to them—as Zagorin would put it, Catholics who practiced casuistry "became objects of fear and distrust to Protestant Englishmen", which he described as being "understandable" under the circumstances (155).

In general, Zagorin mentions that the typical response to the Catholic Church's use of casuistry was that "it is opposed to the integrity of the Christian spirit and is fatally flawed by subtleties and chicanery", and that it "was rejected as the introduction of human inventions and perversions into Christian morality" (160). From this evidence, it can be assumed that Protestants believed that casuistry was merely a way for Catholics to project their dishonesty onto others without holding themselves accountable for their sins. In essence, if the clergy was allowed to use casuistry, then there was nothing stopping everyday practicing Catholics from using it as well.

Lastly, there was the act of equivocation that was similar to casuistry and strengthened the distrust of Catholics for Protestant on an even deeper level. As Zagorin goes on to explain, equivocation is "the aim of both being to conceal or dissimulate the truth without incurring the sin of lying", and it "entailed the use of words or expressions with a double meaning different for the speaker than for the hearer" (Zagorin 163). As we will analyze in the following sections of this essay, several characters that utilize disguises in Shakespeare's plays will practice this use of "double meanings" in their lines, which I argue was intentionally done by Shakespeare in order

to address the use of casuistry and equivocation in Renaissance society. If disguise is inherently deceptive, then perhaps Shakespeare is implying that the use of these Catholic sciences is inherently deceptive as well.

Disguise in *Love's Labour's Lost*

It is important to first note when considering disguise by action that the actions of being disguised in this play were put into effect differently by the female characters than by the male characters. In Act Five, Scene Two of the play, Boyet tells the Princess and her attending ladies that the King, Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine are coming to them once more, and "that, by and by, disguised they will be here. Their herald is a pretty knavish page, that well by heart hath conned his embassage. Action and accent did they teach him there: 'Thus must thou speak, and thus thy body bear'" (5.2.93-100). Unlike the men, the women have the upper hand in knowing that their suitors will each be disguised, meaning that the power through this knowledge transfers from the deceivers to those being deceived. *Shakespeare's Theatre: A Dictionary of His Stage Context* supports this theory in the entry under "disguise" by stating that disguise "fails mostly when it is openly revealed", and then goes on to cite *Love's Labour's Lost* as a specific example of this phenomenon.

Then, with this newfound power, the women turn the act of disguise onto the men—in the Princess' words, "There's no such sport as sport by sport o'erthrown, to make theirs ours, and ours none but our own" (5.2.152-4)—and display this power by manipulating the men into showing their true intentions with the ladies of their individual choice. Instead of allowing the men to deceive and beguile them, the women steal the power in that ability and use it to their own advantage.

The reader can also consider that the Princess and her ladies acknowledge both the identity of their disguises and their own identity when they are manipulating their male counterparts. In his book *Guise and Disguise*, Lloyd Davis states that the concept of disguise promotes that "[the] personae of sovereignty, subjection, and gender are revealed as authoritative but not unquestioned images of selfhood", and that the "use of disguise in fashioning such figures turns them into complex hybrids who interrogate their own ideal presence and position it in the social structure" (Davis 11-12). These "hybrids" that Davis speaks of define a mixture of identity between the women: in this case, they must act as the correlative of the favor they wear—their fellow lady's "match" with the man they speak to—while simultaneously keeping in mind the person that is supposed to be acting as themselves. In fact, they all agree that they will not dance with the men because of this thought, as it may disclose the fact that they are not who they seem.

The men, on another note, have an arguably easier time enacting their disguises, as they do not have to keep in mind an identity that is separate to them but exists in the real world—they simply have to pretend to be foreign, fictional strangers. Their disguise, as Boyet implied, is not only in appearing as Muscovites by disguising their dress, but also as sounding like Muscovites by disguising their voices. Interestingly enough, the only actions that are not in disguise from the men are their reactions to the disguised women. Berowne, for instance, displays his contempt with the actions of the women by saying, "By heaven, all dry-beaten with pure scoff!" (5.2.263) The king likewise illustrates his distaste by departing with the slight, "Farewell, mad wenches. You have simple wits" (5.2.264). These responses are not made with a strange Muscovite figure in mind—they are genuine. Although the men are indeed in disguise, they are displaying their

true selves in these reactions rather than acting apart from their own identities, and it is because of such that the women take such offense to their departing lines.

Once the women no longer have to parade as an alter lady, they also revert to their true feelings as their own identities. Once the women are among only themselves again, the Princess states, "Twenty adieus, my frozen Muscovits. Are these the breed of wits so wondered at?..."O poverty in wit, kingly-poor flout! Will they not, think you, hang themselves to-night? Or ever but in vizards show their faces? This pert Berowne was out of count'nance quite" (5.2.266; 5.2.268-273). Rosaline, additionally, voices her discomfort as a mock of the king's departing lines by saying, "Well-liking wits they have; gross, gross; fat, fat…[the men] were all in lamentable cases" (5.2.267; 5.2.274). By dropping their alter identities and shedding themselves of their disguises once their company was out of sight, they again gained the power to express their true thoughts rather than keep them hidden or act as another would.

There is also power in disguise by motive. For instance, the Princess tells her ladies that her motive for greeting the men while disguised themselves is "to cross [their intent]. They do it but in mockery merriment, and mock for mock is my only intent. Their several counsels they unbosom shall to loves mistook and so be mocked withal upon the next occasion that we meet, with visages displayed, to talk and greet…Therefore I do it, and I make no doubt the rest will ne'er come in if he be out. So shall we stay, mocking intended game, and they, well mocked, depart away with shame." (5.2.138-144; 151-6). The Princess is stating that, because the men are approaching them with deceptive intentions, then it is only fair and just that the women meet them deceptively as well as a type of punishment; and in this implication of righteousness, the power is shifted from being with the men to being with the women—instead of an act of mockery, the women's motives are acts of justice.

Boyet also makes an important point as far as the women's motive is portrayed; however, his comment is more in favor of the men rather than the woman he serves. When the Princess discloses her plan in front of him, he replies, "Why, that contempt will kill the speaker's heart, and quite divorce his memory from his part" (5.2.149-150). In saying this, he is essentially telling the women that, in their disguises, they have to power to "kill the heart" of the respective men that they refuse—which, as far as the women are concerned, progresses their motive even further despite the warning that the men might cease to remember the positive interactions they experienced with the women and, thus, fall out of love with them.

The reasoning for the king and his men to disguise themselves "like Muscovites or Russians" in the first place is, as Boyet mentions to the ladies, "to parle, to court and dance; and every one his love-feat will advance unto his several mistress, which they'll know by favors several which they did bestow" (5.2.122-5). These favors—a diamond for the Princess, a pearl for Rosaline, a glove for Katharine, and a necklace for Maria—were given as signs of courtship, therefore enforcing gender roles associated with early modern England at the time. After these favors were given, it was traditionally implied that the woman in the courtship then had the power to decide whether or not to accept the giver's love or to reject it.

However, because the women made the decision to switch these favors for the purpose of justice by deception, they are displaying a type of power that calls these gender roles into question and, as Hyland puts it, "puts the disguised girl[s]…in control of [the] situation" (Hyland 165). The Princess herself tells her ladies that the "gallants shall be tasked: for, ladies, we will every one be masked, and not a man of them shall have the grace despite of suit, to see a lady's face" (5.2.126-9). Referring to the idea of "seeing the faces of ladies" as a "grace", then, suggests that courting the women while lacking a deceptive nature is a privilege rather than a

right, and as the women have control of this privilege, they also have the power that would have originally been granted to the men by society's expectations. By switching these favors among themselves, the female characters are insisting that they take their courtships into their own hands, which was quite the provocative suggestion to audiences during the sixteenth century.

After their initial confrontation with the disguised men, Rosaline suggests to the Princess that they should shed their disguises when the men returned as themselves. In the last half of Act Five, Rosaline says, "Good madam, if by me you'll be advised, let's mock them still, as well known as disguised. Let us complain to them what fools were here, disguised like Muscovites in shapeless gear; and wonder what they were, and to what end their shallow shows and prologue vilely penned, and their rough carriage so ridiculous, should be presented at our tent to us" (5.2.301-308). This way, each woman retrieves the power that the favor lent to the one that was disguised as her, and in doing such, they also retrieve the power to speak to their own respective courtier—the ones that are their proper matches rather than their previously pretend matches. It also calls attention to the aforementioned point that, when disguise is involved, the party that knows about the identity of the one disguised in advance has the upper hand in the situation.

When discussing the concept of disguise, it is imperative to include the manner of dress that the characters disguise themselves in. Power can also be lent to the disguised person through their attire, and such is the case when the women exchange favors for their disguises. The Princess describes this exchange of power in Act Five, when she instructs, "Hold, Rosaline, this favor thou shalt wear, and then the king will court thee for his dear: hold, take thou this, my sweet, and give me thine; so shall Berowne take me for Rosaline. And change you favors too; so shall your loves woo contrary, deceived by these removes" (5.2.130-135). By doing this, the Princess is giving Rosaline power over the king; Rosaline is giving the Princess power over

Berowne; Maria is giving Katharine power over Longaville; and Katharine is giving Maria power over Dumaine, since each women holds the power in their own courtship affairs, as it is their duty to respond in some way to the men's advances.

It is also relevant that the men chose to dress as foreigners rather than Englishmen. According to Hyland, it is beneficial to take that necessary extra step in disguise, as simply disguising themselves as other Englishmen would not be far enough removed from themselves, in their minds, to appropriately act as mere strangers to the women. In his book, *Disguise on the Early Modern Stage*, Hyland states that if "it is true that early modern English theatre developed in part as a reflection of a growing concern with national identity, then clearly disguise situations that involve taking on the disguise of an alien, whether English people posing as foreigners or foreigners as English people, are significant; as John Gillies has noted, 'The need to constitute an identity by excluding the other is not just primal, but perennial'" (Hyland 142). In this case, it is "English people posing as foreigners", and it is considered "primal" and "perennial" due to the reoccurring idea of the mask, one that is a critical pillar to the concept of disguise: wearing a mask that looks like yourself, if you will, is not going to be an effective method of disguise; but wearing a mask that looks like someone that is "alien" to you, as Hyland puts it, is far more likely to be convincing of the idea that you are someone else—especially if the person that you are trying to convince is part of the same "group" as you are. In this case, the familiar group are the English, as all of the characters in the play are English, and the "alien" group are the Russians.

Dress, then, is vital to an effective disguise and the power that comes with it. This power by dress is not always linked to race, nationality, or gender—unlike most instances of power by

systematic oppression, for instance—but by adequately ensuring that one is disguised to the best of their physical potential.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the comedic motif of courtship in drama plays an effective setting in the transfer of power by disguise, and with this transfer of power comes the suggestion that women have more say in the act of courtship than early modern English society insisted they have, especially when they believe their cause for disguise to be justified.

Disguise in *The Merchant of Venice*

Before getting into analyzing *The Merchant of Venice* through the lenses of gender, motive, dress, and action, I believe that it is first important to discuss the two types of disguise that are uniquely prevalent in this play. Peter Hyland makes these two types of disguise quite clear in their differences: the first, constructed by Victor O. Freeburg in 1915, mentions dramatic disguise as "'a change of personal appearance which leads to mistaken identity. There is a double test, change and confusion'", and the second, constructed by Muriel Bradbrook in the later twentieth century, mentions dramatic disguise rather as "'the substitution, overlaying or metamorphosis of dramatic identity, whereby one character sustains two roles'" (Hyland 161). Portia and Nerissa take on both of these definitions of dramatic disguise during the last two scenes of the play, and as a result, the power that they hold over their respective situations changes drastically. Hyland also mentions that there is "a distinction between 'disguise' as a theatrical event, that is the physical changing of appearance, and the related but different act of 'role-playing,' which includes such performances as Hamlet's feigned madness and the hyocrisies of Angelo and lago, but does not involve a change in appearance" (Hyland 161). Portia in particular portrays both of these distinctions—the first and more obvious example is her donning judge's robes and serving as a judge in the trial, but I believe that the "role-playing" disguise for

Portia comes in previous to that scene: the end of Act Three, in particular, displays Portia already acting as a judge of Antonio's situation when she offers Bassanio the money to "pay the petty debt twenty times over" (3.2.308) in order to try and resolve the case between Shylock and Antonio. It is important to note that this is just after Bassanio had won the task of the caskets in order to win Portia's hand, so at this point in the play, she did not know Bassanio nor his company on any personal level—it was just after hearing his story and knowing that Antonio was a "dear friend" to her new husband that she decided to use her power in wealth to "role-play" as judge of the situation.

Disguise by gender is arguably the strongest lens to analyze *The Merchant of Venice* with when it comes to power. Perhaps the most famous among Shakespeare's woman-as-man disguise tropes in his plays, the scene in question concerns Portia dressing as Balthazar, a Doctor of Law that has supposedly studied under the renowned judge Doctor Bellario. Portia primarily obtains her disguise by giving her servant Balthazar the instruction to take a letter "and use thou all the endeavor of a man in speed to Padua: see thou render this into my cousin's hand, Doctor Bellario; and, look, what notes and garments he doth give thee, bring them, I pray thee, with imagin'd speed unto the tranect, to the common ferry which trades to Venice" (3.4.47-54).

By donning these judge's robes, she also dons the authority of the judge who normally wears them—something that would not be acknowledged or respected had any of the men involved in Shylock and Antonio's trial known that it was a woman who spoke to them, despite Portia's immense success in resolving all issues. Hyland states that this also has to do with the freedoms that women had in the early modern period, and that "[Portia's] final disguise [is] a demonstration that a woman can only act with freedom by taking on a masculine role - that women were trapped in society" (Hyland 167). It can be gathered, then, that by making the

choice to take the role of a male judge, Portia received the power to free herself from the "trap" that traditionally fell to women during the Renaissance, and, by insisting that Nerissa play as her clerk, she also allows Nerissa the opportunity to escape the same societal "trap" that Hyland speaks of.

On another note, *Shakespeare's Theatre: A Dictionary of His Stage Contexts* dubs this parallel donning as a "psychological disguise", in which Portia "acquire[s] a new authority"—or power—"when [she] switch[es] gender roles". To enhance this point, in her article "Monstrous Manner: Style and the Early Modern Theatre", Amanda Bailey suggests "the notion that clothes 'made' men by considering how a certain class of men used clothes to make something out of what had been made of them" (Bailey 249). Metaphorically, then, in Portia's case, wearing the judge's robes as a disguise "made" her into a man that had authoritative power over Shylock and Antonio's legal issue.

This disguise, as Hyland argues, is necessary in order for Portia to temporarily infiltrate the judicial system, which was indeed exclusive to men at the time, and receive power. The argument is as follows:

> In other cases the disguise is necessary for a woman to be taken seriously in the practical world of male business—Portia as Doctor Balthasar is able to penetrate the Venetian legal system and achieve what, apparently, no man can achieve, the defeat of Shylock. This apparent sensitivity to feminine vulnerability or superior intellectual power seems to be sympathetic to women, but it creates a problem, since the androgynous 'masculine woman' thus staged was, as Stephen Orgel writes, 'a singularly threatening symbol' in early modern culture…The cross-dressed woman, liberated into the realm of patriarchal

> privilege, suggested the potential subversion of the male right to control female action, so behind the comic device was a deep-rooted complex of anxieties (Hyland 141).

Bailey and Hyland's theories are both proven by Shylock's reaction to Portia as judge, as he only ever has high praises for her when she first begins the trial. Before Portia twists Shylock's contract in a manner that saves Antonio's life, Shylock, in great favor of the disguised judge, says, "I beseech you, wrest once the law to your authority: to do a great right, do a little wrong, and curb this cruel devil of his will" (4.1.214-217). Here, he acknowledges the authority—or power—"Doctor Balthazar" has over him; something he simply would not do if he knew the judge was Portia, a woman. Shylock also admits his impressions of the judge later on in the scene, where he says, "A Daniel come to judgement! yea, a Daniel! O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!" – "Here 'tis, most reverend doctor; here it is" (4.1.223-224; 226). We know from this that Shylock is not at all being biased of other factors that "Doctor Balthazar" cannot control, such as "his" age, "his" facial structure, or "his" lack of facial hair, as drawn from the comment about "Doctor Balthazar's" youth, but rather that "Doctor Balthazar" is using the power he has over the case in order to temporarily side with Shylock—a power that Portia holds, unbeknownst to Shylock, who in spite of his lack of bias in physical features would fault at the revelation of Portia's gender.

As mentioned in the previous section, the observation of attire is always vital when considering the concept of disguise. Like *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Merchant of Venice* is quite detailed in the appearance of the disguises that it features.

At the very beginning of the trial scene, Shakespeare does the reader the favor of starkly laying out how Nerissa and Portia are dressed—in the first scene of Act Four, we get the lines as follows:

Enter Nerissa [dressed like a lawyer's clerk].

DUKE. Came you from Padua, from Bellario?

NERISSA. From both, my lord. Bellario greets your Grace (IV.i.119-120)

Respectively, in Portia's case, we are also offered the following lines:

DUKE. You hear the learn'd Bellario, what he writes: And here, I take it, is the doctor come.

Enter Portia for Balthazar [dressed like a doctor of laws].

Give me your hand. Came you from old Bellario?

PORTIA: I did, my lord. (IV.i.167-169)

At this point in the play, there is no confusion for the reader—Nerissa is dressed as a lawyer's clerk, and Portia is dressed like a doctor of laws in her cousin's robes.

We will look back at Shylock here, who has no shortage of descriptive lines when it comes to Portia's disguised appearance, when he says that "It doth appear you are a worthy judge; you know the law, your exposition hath been most sound: I charge you by the law, whereof you are a well-deserving pillar, proceed to judgment…" (4.1.236-240). Here, Shylock notes that Portia "appears" to be a worthy judge, again, he would not say so if Portia were true to her gender. He also exclaims "O noble judge! O excellent young man!" – "'Tis very true! O wise and upright judge! How much more elder art thou than thy looks!" (246; 250-251). This line is essential to the concept of power by dress because it is the only time during the trial scene that Portia is actually called a "man" specifically rather than simply "judge". The last quoted line also carries some irony in it along with noting Portia's power—it is likely that Portia's real age would match with this level of legal expertise; however, because she does not look like a man, then she appears much younger than a man her age would actually be.

After the trial is over, when Nerissa and Portia confront Bassanio and Gratiano about giving away their rings, the following scene occurs between Nerissa and Gratiano:

GRATIANO. By yonder moon I swear you do me wrong; in faith, I gave it to the judge's clerk: would he were gelt that had it, for my part, since you do take it, love, so much at heart.

PORTIA. A quarrel, ho, already! what's the matter?

GRATIANO. About a hoop of gold, a paltry ring that she did give me, whose poesy was for all the world like cutler's poetry upon a knife, 'Love me, and leave me not.'

NERISSA: What talk you of the posy, or the value? You swore to me, when I did give it you, that you would wear it till your hour of death, and that it should lie with you in your grave: though not for me, yet for your vehement oaths, you should have been respective and have kept it. Gave it a judge's clerk! no, God's my judge, the clerk will ne'er wear hair on's face that had it.

GRATIANO. He will, an if he live to be a man.

NERISSA. Ay, if a woman live to be a man.

GRATIANO. Now, by this hand, I gave it to a youth, a kind of boy, a little scrubbed boy, no higher than thyself, the judge's clerk. A prating boy, that begg'd it as a fee: I could not for my heart deny it him. (5.1.142-165)

Nerissa displays her power by dress when she acknowledges that the "boy" Gratiano saw at the trial would never grow facial hair—something that Gratiano would have no way of knowing, as he did not yet know that it was a woman disguised. Gratiano additionally and unknowingly confirms that power when he says that the "boy" was "no higher than thyself", confirming that it was indeed Nerissa that was disguised as the person he gave his ring to.

Unlike *Love's Labour's Lost* where there are two separate cases of motive and action, the lenses are blended in *The Merchant of Venice.* Besides the action of creating a convincing performance at the trial, Portia's and Nerissa's disguises also served a more personal purpose—as a test to see if their husbands, Bassanio and Gratiano, would part with the rings they once swore to keep on their persons at all times.

To begin, when Nerissa asks Portia if the men shall notice them at the trial, Portia responds that they will indeed notice them, but "in such a habit that they shall think we are accomplished with that 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, which 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 discontinu'd school above a twelvemonth. I have within my mind a thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks, which I will practise" (3.4.60-84). This quote in particular hints at all of the skill that it would take to pull of the disguise that Portia was planning on presenting at the trial, as there are quite a number of components that go into her acting as the opposite gender.

All of these actions thus portray the power that she has, but it is a different kind of power here—it is the power of control, an aforementioned power of the general self. It is also worth noting that this takes the concept of disguise in this play a step further—not only does Portia have to disguise her attire, but she also has to disguise her womanly mannerisms and transform them into that of a man's.

Portia's power in disguise by action also shows itself during the trial in her interactions with her husband, and it is related to the power given by the general self: she is using her position as a judge to condemn his words as his wife. The following scene displays this use of power:

BASSANIO. Antonio, I am married to a wife which is as dear to me as life itself; but life itself, my wife, and all the world, are not with me esteem'd above thy life: I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all, here to this devil, to deliver you.

PORTIA. Your wife would give you little thanks for that, if she were by to hear you make the offer.

BASSANIO. I have a wife, whom, I protest, I love: I would she were in heaven, so she could entreat some power to change this currish Jew.

PORTIA. 'Tis well you offer it behind her back; the wish would make else an unquiet house. (IV.i.283-295)

Although Bassanio does not know it, Portia is essentially "scolding" him in a manner that only allows her to do so while she is disguised as a man—if she were her usual self, as a woman, she would not be in the position of power to be confrontational about this with her husband. The vague threat of "the wish would make else an unquiet house" is Portia's way of telling Bassanio outright that he should not say such things lest he produce an unhappy wife and, by extension, an unhappy household.

I would like to also further analyze the scene below, wherein Portia convinces Bassanio to give the ring to "Doctor Balthazar":

PORTIA. You press me far, and therefore I will yield. *[To Antonio.]* Give me your gloves, I'll wear them for your sake; *[To Bassanio.]* and, for your love, I'll take this ring from you. Do not draw back your hand; I'll take no more; and you in love shall not deny me this.

BASSANIO. This ring, good sir? alas! it is a trifle; I will not shame myself to give you this.

PORTIA. I will have nothing else but only this; and now methinks I have a mind to it.

BASSANIO. Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife; and when she put it on, she made me vow that I should never sell nor give nor lose it.

PORTIA. That 'scuse serves many men to save their gifts. And if your wife be not a mad woman, and know how well I have deserv'd the ring, she would not hold out enemy for ever, for giving it to me. Well, peace be with you. (4.1.422-434; 442-449).

As a result, the two men ended up giving their rings to "the judge Balthazar" and "his clerk" as thanks for winning the trial—although not without some wise convincing from the disguised women—and, in doing so, symbolically reclaimed the power that they had originally given away to their husbands at the beginnings of their marriages. In his article "Handkerchiefs and Early Modern Ideologies of Gender", Will Fisher states that "Renaissance notions of femininity were bound up with historically specific material objects", and as rings would be among these objects, then Portia and Nerissa's power through disguise allowed them to take back their own femininity.

The power dynamics stay in play even after it is known that Portia and Nerissa were in disguise at the trial. In their confessions, Portia discloses "that Portia was the doctor, Nerissa, there, her clerk" (5.1.269-70), which relieves the two of their physical and psychological burdens of disguise and discloses their power and ability to their husbands, but it does not erase the

power that Portia and Nerissa have over Bassanio and Gratiano, as they still had the task of explaining how they ended up persuading their husbands to give them the rings.

We can see this power at play at the end of Act Five, when Antonio explains that Bassanio and Gratiano both shamefully departed with their sworn symbols of affection, and Portia discloses the following:

PORTIA. Then you shall be his surety. Give him this, and bid him keep it better than the other.

ANTONIO. Here, Lord Bassanio; swear to keep this ring.

BASSANIO. By heaven! it is the same I gave the doctor!

PORTIA. I had it of him: pardon me, Bassanio, for, by this ring, the doctor lay with me.

NERISSA. And pardon me, my gentle Gratiano; for that same scrubbed boy, the doctor's clerk, in lieu of this last night did lie with me. (V.i.254-262)

In implying that the "judge" and the "clerk" slept with them, Portia and Nerissa are holding power over two separate cases: the first being their own bodily autonomy, and the second being the way they prioritize their own persons. Though subtle, it is first a nod to Bassanio and Gratiano that they hold the control to engage in affairs with whomever they may choose, as the husbands' initial reactions signify—Gratiano in particular asks if they were to be made "cuckolds" by these confessions. It is more heavily, however, an indication that Portia and Nerissa put themselves over anyone else—they will first meet the needs of themselves before they consider their husbands, a notion that rebels against common gender roles expected by women at the time of the play's creation.

Through the two separate definitions of disguise that applies to *The Merchant of Venice*, power is present in authority rather than courtship or any other comedic trope, and because of such dares to draw into question the female ability to perform traditionally male duties.

On another note, one can also consider the use of disguise as the power to convince or persuade, and one of the ways that Shakespeare puts this into effect is through the faux conversion of Shylock towards the end of the play. Jeffrey Shoulson would likely describe such a conversion as the power to "destabilize", as he mentions that conversion "is an inherently destabilizing process" in Fictions of Conversion: Jews, Christians, and Cultures of Change in Early Modern England. Although Shylock claimed to have converted to Christianity as per the agreement in the falling action of the play, it is evident by his speech and attitude that this conversion was not legitimate—although it is not a physical disguise that Shylock is donning here, the connection can be made that he is disguising himself as a newly-converted Christian in order to persuade the other characters to let him be relieved from any further loss. For example, shortly before Shylock's claim of conversion, he laments about his daughter marrying a Christian, exclaiming "'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!" (II.viii.15-160). It is unrealistic to assume that Shylock would be so eager to convert to Christianity after this lament, where he is implicitly portraying Jessica's new Christian husband as a negative acquirement—while his riches are welcome to Shylock, his religion is not. Shoulson writes that the scene where we last see Shylock is "the play's final, most memorable conversion", which acts as "the [scene] that lingers most uncomfortably, as the Jew-turn'd-Christian sulks off the stage: 'I pray you give me leave to go from hence. / I am not well. Send the deed after me, / And I will sign it' (IV.i.394-96)" (126). This conversion is perhaps, as Shoulson claims, the most memorable because it is the only conversion that does not belong with the "happy ending" that we see with the conversions of the other characters—Shylock is clearly resentful of his faux conversion, and as a result, it leaves the audience with an uneasy, unresolved feeling. It is my opinion that this was intentional of Shakespeare in order to

illustrate the power of disguise through a non-physical form of deception—with Shylock's false conversion, he is equally as capable at deceit as Portia and Nerissa are.

Disguise in the Renaissance Theatre

As fascinating as these disguises are in Shakespearean literature, the challenge of portraying such disguises on the Renaissance stage was a different goliath entirely. Many of the costumes and the attire that players wore while performing these comedies were obtained through several obstacles: the main trials being collecting the costumes themselves, how the costumes confronted wealth and class issues, and what costume protocol was based on Elizabethan expectations of gender and the portrayal of feminine and masculine presentation.

During the middle and later Renaissance, London was a highly active center of trade for a number of goods and commodities—and, among these goods were "secondhand clothes", which, as the name might suggest, were fabrics and attire that had previously been worn by aristocrats and plebeians alike but were no longer needed by those that owned them. Because clothes and fashion were such a large part of social and political circles throughout the Elizabethan and Jacobian periods, popular style was consistently changing among royalty and courtiers, and English citizens were left constantly trying to keep up with the times. In *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass mention that "there were virtually no ready-made clothes in Renaissance England (except for certain forms of underwear, stockings, and some loose gowns. Named pieces of clothing like the jerkin…are almost certainly *second-hand* clothes*"* (Jones and Stallybrass 185). This trade of secondhand attire was how theatre troops and acting guilds obtained the items they needed in order to portray the characters appropriately. Certain vendors in London were known for selling secondhand clothes, including "frippers, brokers, and anyone with luxury clothes for sale", and these vendors

were looking for "new outlets" to sell to—and the theatre was one of these outlets. (Jones and Stallybrass 187).

There were, however, obstacles that caused complications with theatre players wearing such secondhand clothing—namely, because Elizabethan law at the time forbid people of middle and lower classes to wear anything resembling nobleman clothing. Indeed, Bailey informs us that while "Elizabeth's clothing symbolized her majesty, the clothes of her subjects symbolized their various social positions", and that "status…was represented and constituted by the material, and apparel was one of the preeminent forms by which individuals experienced and expressed their sense of social value" (Bailey 249). These players, who were not regarded in a high form of social status, wore the clothing of those of high status due to the secondhand apparel trade market—therefore donning a disguise of sorts themselves, and one that was not usually approved of by Elizabethan aristocrats. In his book, *Disguise on the Early Modern English Stage,* Hyland says that players' "costumes were made of the finest materials", and that some "were the actual cast-off clothing of nobles and gentlemen that came to them in various ways, sometimes as gifts, perhaps more often indirectly through the second-hand clothing trade" (Hyland 29). Though these costumes were technically allowed for actors on the stage, there were typically legal charges for players that wore their costumes off-stage and in public, as it broke Elizabethan fashion laws.

Presentation was another challenge that Renaissance stages had to face in regard to costumes. Bailey states that actors would usually "[perform] in plays that demonstrated the perils and pleasures of changing and exchanging sumptuous clothes and introduced their audiences to the guilty pleasures of wearing prohibited apparel" (Bailey 251), and it can be argued that this is especially relevant to the portrayal of Portia obtaining judge's robes as a disguise, something that

was forbidden for women to wear during the early modern period. This is also backed by what *Shakespeare's Theatre: A Dictionary of His Stage Contexts* would refer to as "dramatic irony" when in disguise—where "actors are performing on two levels: sustaining both their basic roles and their assumed ones, or reacting to a disguise in ways the audience knows to be inappropriate". In general, by critics of those that consider the theatre's presentations to be in poor or offensive taste, players are assumed to all be liars in the sense that they are not of the social status that their attire portrays them to be, and, to an extent, the characters that they play and the plays they are in serve as a further platform for their lies (Bailey 265).

Although some costumes served well as disguises in Shakespeare's comedies like *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Merchant of Venice* on the Renaissance stage, some of these disguises were seen with contempt, and the players were challenged with the view that the costumes they wore were disguises in and of themselves through a multitude of early modern societal expectations and viewpoints.

Conclusion

The reader can then consider such questions and how societal expectations of gender, wealth, and class were changed for the better through these portrayals of disguise, and thus how more freedom was gained in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because of the confrontation of these suggestions. Additionally, it is also important to draw attention back to the way that Shakespeare intentionally put these disguises into his plays as a result of the religious contexts that surrounded him while he was writing The Merchant of Venice and Love's Labour's Lost. Deception, it seems, is a common theme throughout these two comedies, and it is my opinion that this is not a coincidence: considering Shylock especially in The Merchant of Venice and his apparent false conversion from Judaism to Christianity echoes the disguise that

Protestants needed to adorn when Mary I ruled and even after, when tensions between Catholics and Protestants during Elizabeth I's reign remained staunch and ruinous. Moreover, in Love's Labour's Lost, the Princess and her ladies assume themselves both their own identities and the identities of the women that they are portraying to their respective suitors, which is a strong example of casuistry and equivocation. They are, indeed, the Princess and her ladies, but they are not the women they claim to be, and so this double meaning behind their identities remains dishonest, but not quite a lie.

Disguise as a motif in Renaissance drama is a constant in Shakespeare's comedies, and although it is used as a form of comic effect on the surface, there are certain questions that go along with viewing disguise through the lenses of gender, motive, and action—and often these questions were challenging or even uncomfortable for early modern society to confront. The importance, then, in recognizing power in disguise, is that although this power can be gained through the act of malicious deception, it can also be gained through the act of a more innocent and cunning deception, like what is portrayed in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Merchant of Venice.*

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