Motifs of Disguise/Imitation in European Literary Tradition
(From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century):
Comic Effect vs. Tragic Pathos

Abstract: The article defines and examines the connection between the disguise/imitation motifs and the categories of comic and tragic within European literary tradition (from Antiquity to the Eighteenth century). The authors of this research explain the factors that make these motifs popular means of creating comic effect or tragic pathos and highlight the trends in their functioning. Disguise/imitation motifs are shown to be mostly related to situations that violate the usual norms of conformity, hierarchical relations, behavioural canons, and for this precise reason, they have a powerful affective potential, i.e. become capable of evoking strong emotions. The disguise/imitation motifs are appropriate for comic effect due to their archaic genetic links with ritual-laughter culture and their conformity to the very nature of the comic, which is based on contradictions. Tragic pathos arises as a result of tragic consequences of one’s identity loss within disguise/imitation situations, it prompts awareness of the injustice of society and the “cruelty” of fate, which are the cause of the forced rejection of one’s self. The article indicates the prospects of researching disguise/imitation motifs in modern art, where they are often employed in adventurous narratives to increase the plot’s dynamism, heighten dramatic tension, and intensify intrigue.

Keywords: motifs of disguise/imitation; the comic; humour; pathos; the tragic; tradition.
Introduction

The dissonance between the visible and the real is a theme of art that attracts writers from different eras and countries. Motifs (typical situations) related to disguise/imitation, on which numerous plots of European literature are built, deserve special attention.

All these motifs are united by the fact that they have a powerful emotional potential: after all, everything that contradicts the established rules, and destroys the canons always makes a person excited, and worried, and stirs their feelings. Even temporary and purely formal refusal of one’s identity, of a position determined and fixed by social norms with the help of disguise and imitation, is perceived as something unusual, out of the ordinary, something that incites strong feelings in the recipient. Therefore, it is not by accident that the corresponding motifs are attached to definite genres, turning into clichés, which gives reason to perceive them as traditional ones.

In this context, even if the aim of using disguise/imitation motifs can be different, the following can still be distinguished among their leading functions: to produce comic effect, i.e. to make a recipient laugh; to create tragic pathos, i.e. to make the addressee sympathize with someone else’s suffering, to feel the tragedy of life.

This article aims to define and examine the connection between disguise/imitation motifs and the comic and tragic categories in the European literary tradition (from Antiquity to the Eighteenth century).

As there is an abundance of information on the topic, the authors of this research do not aim at its holistic disclosure, but rather strive to prove its significance and the prospects of research in the designated direction. Secondly, the idea here is to find out what exactly makes these motifs popular artistic means of creating a comic effect or tragic pathos. Finally, it is considered necessary to single out the most important trends in the functioning of these motifs, as well as to explain why, by the end of the eighteenth century they had turned into “formulas”, which were significant for the formation of specific genres: in any case, it was the nineteenth century that marked the completion of the processes of formation of many genre canons and the beginning of their significant transformations with orientation towards destruction of traditions. The “rebellion” of the Romantics against established laws launched a powerful trend in European culture that was to determine its further development up to the twenty-first century. It refers to eliminating the “laws of the genre” and the “sacredness” of the aesthetic guidelines established by the “great predecessors”, the approval of the cult of the Creative Personality, absolutely free from any rules and genre schemes.

The topicality of the present study is determined by different factors. First of all, by a necessity to consider the topic “humour and pathos” from the standpoint of modern literary studies in general and to refer to the question of artistic means of their creation in various genres in particular. Secondly, by lack of a comprehensive study dedicated to the specifics of the creative representation of the “eternal” discrepancy between the true and the visible, its emotional potential, and cultural-historical determinants.
Theoretical and methodological basis of the study

The theoretical foundation of the present study mainly rests on scholarly works that highlight the question of the nature and genesis of the comic. The results of relevant academic research allow us to understand the reasons for the extreme popularity of the disguise/imitation motifs as an artistic means of creating the comic in European culture since ancient times until the present days. A lot of theorists of the comic, philosophers, and psychologists, directly or indirectly indicate the organic correspondence of dissonances between the visible and the real, of the deformation of the natural to the very essence of the comic, based on contradictions.

Aristotle in *Poetics* claims that: “[t]he Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain” (Aristotle 46). J. Beattie draws special attention to the fact that human laughter “seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage” (Beattie 318): we find it funny when “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them” (Beattie 320). A. Schopenhauer states: “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (Schopenhauer 95). Henri Bergson directly points to the comical nature of the disguise motif in its broadest sense, as of any simulation in general: “A man in disguise is comic. A man we regard as disguised is also comic. So, by analogy, any disguise is seen to become comic, not only that of a man, but that of society also, and even the disguise of nature” (Bergson 15b).

In addition to the above mentioned, one should also take into account yet another possible explanation for the dissemination of disguise/imitation motifs as artistic means that create a humorous effect, i.e. M. Bakhtin’s and O. Freidenberg’s theories of archaic genetic links of such motifs with the comic element. For example, M. Bakhtin pays attention to the instances of disguise and mystifications in the context of ancient carnival, the culture of popular laughter (Bakhtin 527), while O. Freidenberg interprets situations involving substitutions and pretence within the framework of ritual and parody discourse (Freidenberg 387-394).

Secondly, the authors of this article refer to the academic research devoted to the issues of the essence of tragic pathos, as well as to a comparative analysis of the tragic and the comic, as basic theoretical guidelines. At the same time, taking into account the huge number of studies, this article lays special focus on those that allow determining the reasons for the spread of disguise/imitation motifs as artistic means of constructing the tragic in creative art.

Thus, Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* recognizes the importance of pathos, and emotionality in speech, while in *Poetics*, analysing the nature of tragedy, he notes that the tragic is
connected with peripeteia (transitions from happiness to unhappiness and vice versa) and anagnorisis (Aristotle 1453a). In this way, the art theorist implicitly points to the tragic potential of situations with essential-formal dissonances. It is noteworthy that theoreticians frequently pay attention to contradictions as a common source of the tragic and the comic that seem to be extreme opposites. For example, the philosopher S. Kierkegaard writes the following: “The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction…” (Kierkegaard, The problem of the Crumbs 63). J. Beattie admits that there are cases when contradictions and inconsistencies do not generate laughter, but produce other emotions, including sympathy and pity (Beattie 420). In turn, as F. Schiller points out in his work On the Tragic Art it is the human capacity for compassion that is the basis of the tragic in art.

Finally, the studies that present the peculiarities of disguise/imitation motifs functioning in various national literatures are worth mentioning among the theoretical milestones of this research. Their comprehensive analysis, significantly supplemented by the scholar’s observations, is presented in Nikolova’s monograph Pseudomorphic Characters of Ukrainian and Russian Literatures of the Late Eighteenth – First Half of the Nineteenth Centuries (in the Context of European Tradition) (Nikolova 12-9).

This research is grounded on the principles of comparative methodology, which allows one to make generalizations through the comparison of artistic works of different eras and national cultures; it also helps to determine important trends in the application of motifs of disguise/imitation by writers in order to create a comic effect or tragic pathos in their pieces of literature.

**Motifs of disguise/ imitation as means of creating the comic**

The motifs of disguise/ imitation as artistic means of creating the comic are pretty common in European literature, dating back to the time of antiquity: a certain set of such plot clichés is actively used by writers of many countries within the genre traditions of comedy and comic epic (its large and small forms) to entertain and make a potential audience laugh. At the same time, it should be taken into account that “comedies of intrigue” and “comedies of characters” initially were based on different motifs.

The tradition of playing on the themes of disguise/imitation in “comedies of intrigue” is rooted in Antiquity. The corresponding tendency is notable in particular in the Fabula palliata (the Roman “comedy of the himation” of the third Century – first part of the second century BC), referring, in its turn, to the plots of the Attic comedy. However, the comedies of Plautus are, of course, the most significant ones from the point of view of the further formation of the European tradition. They present such comic situations with the episodes of disguise/ imitation as: “marital substitution” when an outsider pretends to be the husband of someone else’s wife and, through this deception, has an intimate relationship with her (Amphitryon); “social substitution” when the master and his servant exchange clothes and places (The Captives); “transgender travesty,” when a man is mistaken for a bride (Casina).
Following Plautus, European Renaissance comedians also built the plots of their comedies on numerous instances of disguise and imitation. To exemplify this, one can mention the motifs of “social substitution” in L. Ariosto’s *The Suppositi* based on *The Captives*; “marital substitution” in L. Dolce’s *Il Marito* grounded in the *Amphitriton*; “transgender travesty” in N. Machiavelli’s and P. Aretino’s works (*Clitia* and *Il Marescalco* created with reference to *Casina*), N. Secchi’s comedy *Gli’ Inganni*; in Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena’s *La Calandria* the author presents a double travesty as a boy puts on a woman’s dress for the sake of love affairs, and a girl pretends to be a young man, etc. Many scholars pay attention to the great significance of the motifs of disguise/ imitation in W. Shakespeare’s comedies, the comprehensive analysis of which are presented in O. Nikolova’s monograph (Nikolova 65-66). The comic effect in the works by the English playwright was very often created by transgender travesty (*The Merry Wives of Windsor, The Merchant of Venice, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Twelfth Night, or What You Will, As You Like It*). The mentioned motifs of disguise/ imitation are also typical of Italian Commedia dell’arte: the motif of “social substitution” is present in M. Troyano’s script of *Conversations*, “transgender travesty” is depicted in such as comedies as *A Man, Alexandrian Carpets, Three Pregnant Women*.

French literature in general and J.-B. Molière, in particular, played an important role in forming the tradition of the disguise/ imitation motifs in “comedies of manners”. The tendency to use the motifs of “a sinner pretending to be a saint” and “a fool acting as a wise head” as artistic means of creating a comic atmosphere in such works is quite notable. As for the first motif, it spread largely due to the popularity of Molière’s *Tartuffe* (probably written with reference to *The Hypocrite* by P. Aretino). The second motif was actualized also owing to the talent of J.-B. Molière (*The Affected Young Ladies, The Learned Ladies, The Bourgeois Gentleman, The Doctor in Spite of Himself*). Though it can also be genetically linked to the heritage of ancient mime scenes, the Atellan Farce (masks of the “haughty fool” Buccus and the charlatan scientist Dossennus), medieval farces and Italian commedia dell’arte that were inherited by this famous French playwright of the seventeenth century.

The tradition of using disguise/ imitation motifs developed in European drama of the eighteenth century with the reference to Renaissance and J.-B. Molière’s comedies. This tradition combines the achievements of “comedy of intrigue” and “comedy of characters”. Thus, there are “social substitutions” in pieces by A.-R. Lesage (*Crispin, his Master’s Rival*), P. de Marivaux (*The Game of Love and Chance, The Unexpected Joy*), P.-A. de Beaumarchais (*The Barber of Seville or the Useless Precaution*); “transgender travesty” in pieces by J.-F. Regnard (*The Follies of Love*), P. C. de Ch. de Marivaux (*The Triumph of Love*), P.-A. de Beaumarchais (*The Mad Day or The Marriage of Figaro*); “a sinner pretending to be a saint” in J.-F. Regnard’s *The Residuary Legatee*; “a fool feigning a wise man” in W. Congreve’s *The Double Dealer*, R.B. Sheridan’s *The Rivals*.

The motif of “an ordinary person who pretends to have superpowers” (an alchemist, an astrologer, a magician, etc.) also deserves special attention. Comic situations based on the imitation of the possession of superhuman skills (for example, the ability to predict the
future, read the signs of the planets, perform miracles, etc.) were very popular in the Italian comedies of the Renaissance (G. Bruno “The Torchbearer”, The Necromancer by L. Ariosto), and they were in special demand in the French comic opera of the eighteenth century, e.g. The Village Soothsayer by J.-J. Rousseau and The Soldier Magician by L. Anseaume, The Sorcerer by F.-A. Philidor, The Loves of Bastien and Bastienne by Ch.-S. Favart, Bastien and Bastienne by W. A. Mozart. Pretending to be sorcerers, the cunning tricksters in these pieces of writing could easily get whatever they wanted.

As for the drama, the use of all the motifs highlighted in this article allows the playwrights to create comic situations in which both the swindlers and their victims become the objects of ridicule. In most cases, the fraudsters, who are traditionally condemned, are presented in a satirical light, while the gullible simpletons who evoke the sympathy of the recipient are depicted humorously.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the process of traditionalization of these motifs in the European comic tradition had been completed: the above-mentioned plot situations were finally approved as effective means of creating a humorous effect. However, motifs of imitation and disguise continue to function in modern comedies as well. The cinematography of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries inherits and modernizes all aforementioned typical situations, which have not lost their relevance as comic means.

The motifs of disguise and imitation as means of creating comic effect are also used in epic works, in large as well as in small genre forms of adventurous and anecdotal content. This tradition dates back to Antiquity, e.g. the story of a robber disguised as a woman in Ovid’s Metamorphoses or the satirical mockery of the ignorant Trimalchio, who pretended to be an educated person in Petronius’ Satyricon. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, these motifs became an integral feature of small comic genres of urban democratic literature such as fabliaux, Schwanks, and novelistics. So, good instances are provided by the French fabliaux about the trickster Trubert, who wears women’s clothes for the sake of love adventures, about lustful churchmen who pretend to be saints (Richiot, The Tale of the Nun, The Priest and Alison, Brother Denise); German Schwanks by M. Montanus (where a man pretends to be a woman for the sake of love affairs) and numerous other Italian and French novellas. In The Decameron, Boccaccio plays on such motifs as “a sinner pretending to be a saint,” “marital substitution,” “transgender travesty.” It is also necessary to mention the situation when

a man, pretending to be a girl, enters a nunnery to have fun with nuns (“Novel Pastimes and Merry Tales” by B. des Périers) or under the guise of a monk arrives at a hermitage where he spends time with three recluses (101st novella of the collection Novelle by F. Sacchetti), hypocrisy helps the abbot of Toulouse to make a clerical career (149th novella by Sacchetti) and assists the bishop of Lombardy in relationship with an abbess (45th novella of The Novels by M. Bandello), etc. Episodes with the spouse swaps are also repeatedly reproduced: 35th novella by M. Bandello, 8th and 48th novellas in Heptameron by Marguerite de Navarre, etc.; motifs of cross-gender travesty are used to create a comic effect (“a boy pretends to be a girl...
for love pleasures” in 28th novella by F. Sacchetti, 11th novel from Il Novellino by G. Masuccio (Nikolova 213).

As for the big epic genres, the motifs of disguise and imitation are most often used within the framework of the Spanish picaresque novels and texts related to its traditions to create a comic effect. The formation of this genre naturally involves the depiction of various forms of roguery, which are impossible without travesty and play: cunning fraudsters, who are the main characters of such works, constantly resort to various hoaxes, which should amuse and entertain readers.

Poor people pretend to be rich (History of the Life of the Swindler, called Don Pablos, Model for Hobos and Mirror of Miser by Francisco de Quevedo, The Marten of Seville, and Hook in the Bags by A. de Castillo Solórzano, Moll Flanders by D. Defoe, The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane by A.-R. Lesage, The Comical History of Francion by Ch. Sorel), and rich men pass themselves off as poor kinsmen (The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane by A.-R. Lesage, The Comical History of Francion by Ch. Sorel), sinners imitate saints, and fools pretend to be intelligent people (Crispin from The Marten of Seville, and Hook in the Bags by A. de Castillo Solórzano, pseudo-doctors Gil and Sangrado from The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane by A.-R. Lesage, Madame de Ferval from The Fortunate Peasant by P. de Marivaux). (Nikolova 214).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the formation of this tradition had been completed: certain typical situations with disguise/ imitation continued to function within novels and novellas, but no longer as comic, but rather as adventurous ones, contributing to the creation of intrigue, enhancing the dynamism of the plot, which is due to the trends of transformation of these genres. It is in this quality that they retain their relevance for modern adventure narratives.

Motifs of disguise and imitation as means of creating tragic pathos

In contrast to the ones discussed above, situational clichés using disguise and imitation contribute to the creation of the opposite effect in European literature, they produce tragic pathos.

At the same time, these motifs often prompt philosophical reflections on injustice in the world and the complexity of moral choices. The source of potential tragic pathos can be the following: the fact that characters lose their own identity, which is associated to moral conscience, together with a hardly deserved lowering of status (humiliation of a worthy person who “deserves better”); a situation in which characters find themselves due to pretence, which is not the result of their personal flaws (like in the comic tradition), but of the “cruelty of fate”.

It is noteworthy that motifs of disguise/ imitation with a tragic colouring, unlike comic ones, are not characteristic of the genre canon of tragedy itself. It can be explained by the traditions of the ancient “tragedy of fate”, that presents the dissonances of the visible and the real as a result of sheer coincidences, and not of the character’s deeds. In addition,
disguise and imitation have long been perceived as typical motifs for the opposite vector of development of European drama, i.e. comic and entertaining, blending of these traditions was not considered to be appropriate until the eighteenth century.

The motifs of disguise/imitation as a means of creating tragic pathos became widespread in European Renaissance literature and remained popular in Baroque art: they were extensively used in Italian and Spanish dramas, novellas, and literary fairy tales. At the same time, attention is drawn to the fact that tragic pathos is mainly created by those situations that depict disguises/imitations involving girls or women. On the pages of Renaissance texts, there appear active heroines who strive to oppose unfavourable circumstances, they are ready to meet all the ordeals and willing to take on personal responsibility for their actions.

In this regard, the previously considered comic motif of “transgender travesty” is quite vivid, especially when “a woman or a girl pretends to be a man.” In the literary tradition, the depiction of male travesty, aimed at the visual change of sex, creates purely comic effect. At the same time, female travesty is often presented as heroic and/or tragic. This phenomenon can be explained as follows:

A man resorts to such travesty, led mainly by selfish desires: by the want of love adventures (deception allows unhindered communication with a woman, avoiding punishment for that), by the need to escape from prison (self-rescue). The girl, on the contrary, pursues a noble goal which is to save or return her beloved, to punish a treacherous lover or a slanderer, to establish justice. (Nikolova 65)

The writers show that women and girls who are forced to resort to visual gender swap often undergo unjust suffering. They are mostly oppressed and abused by men: slandered, seduced, abandoned. Cross-dressing and imitating the male gender is associated with calamity and becomes a serious test in a society where a woman cannot move safely and even exist without male supervision.

For example, in Boccaccio’s The Decameron a slandered wife saves her life by wearing men’s clothing, and then endures six years of misfortunes. In the nineth tall tale from Patrañuelo, by J. de Timoneda one can read the story of an unfortunate girl forced to disguise herself as a man. The Novel of How the Revelation Source was Discovered by A. de Eslava depicts a girl, dressed as a man, looking for her lover and overcoming all the obstacles. Ladies in men’s attire left without their loved ones are portrayed in The Fortunes of Diana by Lope de Vega, Life is a Dream by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Don Gil of the Green Breeches by T. de Molina, etc. In search of unfaithful lovers, girls in male outfits are forced to fight for survival in the cruel world all by themselves; their fate is tragic and reflects the position of women in the patriarchal Europe of those times. In the course of gradual positive shifts in the gender hierarchy of European society that became noticeable in the late eighteenth century, this motif, for obvious reasons, lost its relevance as an artistic means of creating tragic pathos.

Another means of creating tragic pathos is the motif of a noble girl pretending to be
a commoner, which functions in literary fairy tales and novellas related to the fairy tale tradition: *Novella di Bianca di Tolosa* by L. Alamanni, *Daughter of the King of Britain* by F. M. Molza, “Donkeyskin” by Ch. Perrault, etc. The tragedy of the situation in this case is triggered primarily by the loss of the typical high status and the need to endure all the trials that befall a poor person. It is notable that in these stories, misfortune is also caused by powerful selfish men who seek to use girls utterly for the satisfaction of their desires: in the former literary piece, it is the groom, in the latter two, it is the father of the heroine. L. Alamanni refers to the well-known fairy-tale plot about a haughty beauty who becomes a victim of the revenge of her fiancé offended by her refusal to marry him. F. M. Molza and S. Perrault make use of an international fairy-tale plot about a king’s daughter who is forced to flee from her father because of his desire to marry her and needs to disguise as a poor woman to avoid the sin of incest. It can be assumed that the popularization of this fairy-tale motif is due to the growing importance of the fairy-tale tradition in European fiction, primarily in the process of the evolution of the novel. The further transformation of the genre with the strengthening of philosophical and social issues and the reduction of the role of the adventure and fantasy elements explains the disappearance of this motif from the artistic arsenal of the novel’s tragic means.

**Conclusions**

Thus, summing up, it is necessary to emphasize that the motifs of disguise/imitation are related to the depiction of situations that violate the usual norms of conformity, hierarchical relations, behavioural canons, this being the precise reason why they have the powerful affective potential of evoking strong emotions in the recipients. So, it is natural that they are actively used as comic or tragic artistic means. In European literature, such motifs are associated with certain genre traditions, the formation of which stretched over a long period, from Antiquity to the eighteenth century. The appropriateness of disguise/imitation motifs for comic effect is justified by their archaic genetic links to ritual-laughter culture and their conformity to the very nature of the comic, which is based on contradictions. Tragic pathos arises due to the demonstration of the tragic consequences of losing one’s identity in the process of disguise/imitation, which at the same time leads to the awareness of the injustice of society and the “cruelty” of fate, causing the forced rejection of one’s self. Comic situational clichés often occur in comedies, small epic genres of the anecdotal type, and novels, whereas tragic patterns are typical of Baroque dramas and Renaissance novellas of adventure and fantasy content. Such motifs as “marital substitution,” “social substitution,” “transgender travesty” (male or female), “a sinner pretending to be a saint”, “a fool imitating a wise person,” “an ordinary person faking superpowers” are traditionally used as means of humour and satire.

Tragic pathos is usually associated with the motifs of “transgender travesty” (when a girl or a woman wears male clothing) and “a noble girl pretends to be a commoner”. In the art of the twentieth and twenty-first century, disguise/imitation motifs are often employed in adventurous narratives to increase the dynamics of the plot and dramatic
tension, and sharpen the intrigue. This issue can become a topic of a separate study and this article lays the basis for it.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Oleksandra Nikolova https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2327-1941

Kateryna Vasylyna https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7885-5418

Works Cited:


Nikolova, Oleksandra. Pseudomorphic characters of Ukrainian and Russian literature of the late 18th - first half of the 19th century (in the context of European tradition) Zaporizhzhya: Zaporizhzhya National University, 2017.


Notes on Contributor(s)

Oleksandra Nikolova, PhD is a Professor at the Department of German Philology, Translation and World Literature, Zaporizhzhia National University, Ukraine. She is author
of two monographs and approximately 80 scholarly articles. Her research interests include comparative literary studies, theory of literature, and trends in the development of modern Ukrainian culture.

**Kateryna Vasylyna**, PhD is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Philology and Linguodidactics, Zaporizhzhia National University, Ukraine. She is author of two monographs and approximately 100 scholarly articles. Her research interests include comparative literary studies, Intermediary Studies, Renaissance Literature, and Gender Studies.


**Received:** August 16, 2023 | **Accepted:** September 21, 2023 | **Published:** October 01, 2023