

What You Will: Shakespeare and Contemporary Gender Theory

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The relationship between our genders and our identities is not often one that we consider from a critical standpoint. We may recognize that our gender shapes the things we do or the way we value ourselves, but we rarely find occasions to seriously consider what this means for the basic components of our personalities or what would happen if we eliminated these pre-determined categories of man and woman from our concept of self. Luckily for us, sociologists have breached the surface of our long-stagnant gender structure in recent decades and begun to shed light on some of these concepts. When we look at the structure now from a sociological standpoint, we see that ideas of masculinity and femininity don't need to be part of our essential identities as people, and that when we take gender out of the equation we get a much clearer view of a person's character. Reflecting these newer notions of gender recognition and manipulation, an examination of William Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night* reveals to what extent choices of an individual outside the limits of a binary structure can make personal goals more attainable as well as disrupt the structure of gender for others. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola's choices to ignore the limits of gender give us a model for the kinds of critical decisions we are beginning to see and should be making more often in a world where we have the opportunity to assert our identities in an openly gender-conscious way.

There are several ways we may be re-evaluating gender in the modern era. Generally speaking, it is now recognized as a social construction—a fabricated, hierarchical, and reinforced system of norms and expectations that we follow in every aspect of daily life. We accept our gendered traits as part of our natural behavior for the sole reason that they are so deeply ingrained in what has become natural to us, but the more interesting question there has to do with where the behavior originates. If we begin to recognize gender as a created hierarchy in cooperation with other social constructions like race, class, and age, we can see that it is equally implanted into our

current mindsets and can be surmounted as much as any other hierarchy when attention is drawn to it. The challenge is determining where to begin drawing attention and how to recognize categories that restrict rather than stabilize us.

For Judith Lorber, a leading scholar in the field of gender studies, gender at this stage of human social development is “an institution that establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into the major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family, and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself” (Lorber 1); it is upheld at all fundamental levels of a culture. It is also, however, highly vulnerable at the individual level, where we have the choice to internalize and reproduce the interactional and institutional demands that have existed before us and pressure us to conform. If we start at this level and work our way up through Lorber’s feminist deconstructionist paradigm, which builds on previous versions of feminism to “challenge the validity, permanence, and necessity of gender” (Lorber 5) in itself before challenging its effect on other institutions, we disrupt notions of inevitable gender categories by transferring individual choices to more widespread rebellion. If “in order to dismantle the institution you must first make it very visible” (Lorber 10), the act of dismantling the gender structure starts with conscious individual visibility. We start not by challenging the entire notion, but rather by challenging its importance in how we view and present ourselves.

The elimination of gender in individual terms can happen in a number of ways. Essentially, we want to reverse gender’s insistence that despite “what men and women actually do . . . what they do is perceived as different” (Lorber 26) by making it impossible to attribute the actions or expressions of individuals to their gender alone. One of the most effective ways of doing this, when considering your public audience, is by actively highlighting and challenging the idea of a strict man-woman binary. Modern Trans* activists like Kate Bornstein encourage this approach in their support of a community which insists on a fluid gender spectrum that eliminates the need for categorization. Bornstein’s work urges individuals, in finding their own gender, to recognize it both outside of and at the intersection of one’s desire, power, and identity, and therefore more dependent on personal preference than objective expectation. The concept of a “real me” in this ideology then translates one’s inner gendered, or non-

gendered as the case may be, identity to more appropriate and substantial outer expressions in congruence with the fluidity inherent to such a personal adaptation of masculine, feminine, and agender attributes. The most promising Trans* identification to come out of this in recent years is that of “Genderqueer”, which depending on situation and choice can be the combination, alternation between, or disregard of masculine and feminine categories. Genderqueer is an identification that eliminates the need for identification by taking existing concepts of gender into its own hands, and those who identify as Genderqueer prove to us that we can form stable identities outside the limits of a binary by first making that binary visible to ourselves and others.

The same processes form one of the central focuses of *Twelfth Night*, which goes beyond the comedy of a cross-dressing protagonist and a multi-gender love triangle to emphasize the importance of internal identity and personal choice. The same patterned expectations that run through our world run through the world of *Twelfth Night* in the social structure of Illyria, and the responses of characters like Viola to the demands of a rigidly gendered environment give us the “epiphany” that the play’s title suggests (with its reference to the Twelfth Night Christmas tradition of Elizabethan England) while the ambiguity of the play’s resolution allows the subtlety of “What You Will” to come into play and let us generate our own responses to “a revealing manifestation, a sudden flash of insight, or a sudden recognition of identity” (Garber 506). The way Viola chooses to present herself, both as the disguised servant Cesario and as the original Viola, reveals a third identity which is much more important to Shakespeare’s protagonist than the demands of gendered relationships.

Within the confines of Illyrian society in *Twelfth Night*, strict standards of gender are bound to notions of class hierarchy and responsibility, perpetuating a system of empty role formation and idealization. Duke Orsino, convinced that only men feel deeply, is more involved in his fantasy of unrequited love for Lady Olivia and notion that “So full of shapes is fancy that it alone is high fantastical” (1.1.14-15) than in his actual attempts to woo his supposed love, and gives us a dramatized performance of his masculine desire. Olivia, as not only the object of Orsino’s affections but also the surviving sister of a recently deceased brother, feels it is within the demands of her duties as a lady to cloister herself off in grief for seven years and conceal her face behind a veil. Given

these models of upper-class behavior, it should come as no surprise that other members of Olivia's household have similarly skewed interpretations of aristocratic character. Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, entitled as they are to the respect and freedom that comes with their station, exercise almost no social restraint and spend most of the play generally carousing and committing acts of mischief. Malvolio, on the other hand, bound to the ideal of being a gentleman but the reality of being a servant, attempts to prove his superiority by pledging himself to condescension and strict decorum as "a kind of puritan" (2.3.139), and uses his own misguided love for Olivia as a means of envisioning his ideal future. The resulting social atmosphere of Illyria is then one of clear persona without justifiable identity. Each significant character has static habits without room for change, and in comparison to outsider characters like Viola seem hollow and strictly one-dimensional. It is only when Viola comes into the play and, as Cesario, disrupts the gender structure by invoking the love of both Orsino and Olivia that any progress is made.

Viola isn't the only character to begin dismantling gender either; the shipwreck that brings her to the shore of Illyria ushers in an entire host of outsider characters that bring their own struggles with categorization to the play and represent a more honest version of the human condition. Viola is of course the first to draw our attention, disguising herself as Cesario to serve in the court of Duke Orsino out of necessity and without question, believing she has lost both her brother and her fortunes in the shipwreck and finding all access to Olivia's court cut off. Her brother Sebastian, who unbeknownst to his sister survives the wreck, is described as "most provident in peril" (1.2.13) for his actions in survival and is brought to shore with the assistance of Antonio. Sebastian's savior in turn is troubled by his feelings of love for the brave young man, which make it so for him "danger shall seem sport" and which he accepts for himself but the interpretation of which he fears in Sebastian and others. Feste, who takes no part in the events of the shipwreck but returns to Illyria from an unexplained absence at the same time, re-enters Olivia's household as the Fool and, arguing "Better a witty fool than a foolish wit" (1.5.34) prides himself on his capacity for pointing out the lack of self-justification in others. So while, according to Viola and Feste among others, Illyrian's entirely lack "the element of *'pourquoi'*" (Garber 515), outsider characters have the

opportunity within the frame of the play to assert their own heightened understandings of their own identities, primarily through “the freeing and educative function of erotic ambiguity and disguise” (Garber 508), in the total disruption brought about by the telling “split” (1.2.10) of a shipwreck.

The most exposure that Illyrians receive to the vitality of this world of the outsider is through the presence and actions of Cesario, who (though he is less free than Feste and is in fact bound to the class-based gender demands of aristocratic households) presents the most striking “riddle of identity” which “exploits the plurality of meaning” (Belsey) by reversing Illyrian expectations in an appealingly genderless persona. Cesario appeals to members of both sexes, particularly Orsino and Olivia, and maintains his identity outside the realm of gender in a way that neither of them is able to fully comprehend. Thus the redemptive quality of Viola’s manipulation of masculinity and femininity as a means to an end lies in Cesario’s refusal to settle on one category and his exposure of binary with the intention of dismantling it. With no accepted hierarchy to dictate what is and is not reasonable, Cesario exemplifies the best qualities of each category and leaves his audience questioning their own ranking system.

Presented as they are with an individual who resists definition, Illyrians are left to fixate on the aspects of Cesario they can at least partially access. The first of these aspects is appearance, which Orsino highlights in his double appreciation of Cesario knowing “no less but all” (1.4.14) and having in his physical figure “all . . . semblative a woman’s part” (1.4.37). Orsino’s painfully obvious descriptions of “Diana’s lip” (1.4.34) and “small pipe” (1.4.35) in a supposedly male and highly trustworthy servant concentrate on the difficulty he encounters in reconciling both sides of Cesario. Similarly, when first asked to describe Cesario to Olivia, Malvolio can only identify what he is not, explaining that he is “not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy” (1.5.155-56) and failing to attribute Cesario’s appearance to anything but the rationality of age. In ways that are strikingly similar to how we approach individuals of questionable gender today, Cesario cannot be accepted as a man without first being recognized as partially effeminate in appearance.

The same tendency emerges in Cesario's refusal to adhere to patterns of masculine action. When he is challenged to a duel, he makes every excuse to avoid it. When he is approached romantically by Olivia, he insists that she understand herself more fully before she attaches herself to another person. Olivia's reaction to Cesario is potentially more disappointing than Orsino's, as she is crucially responding to a woman disguised as a man and can do little else but inquire after that man's "parentage" (1.5.281) to judge his worth. Cesario's individual autonomy, though it sparks something in Olivia concerning the falsity of pre-scripted interactions and the value of personal choice, can still only be appreciated as the accomplishment of a man with some peculiar qualities. In the end, "Olivia and Orsino both fall in love with someone, something, they half recognize and do not know. Something similar to, as well as complementary to, themselves" (Garber 520) in agreement with what their predetermined and unexplored understanding of gender tells them to fall in love with while Viola continues to reflect the constant changes at play within her own person, and the task of communicating that fluidity is left largely to soliloquy and double meaning. Viola swears she is not what she is, but that divide between her assumed self and her essential self is not an easy thing to explain.

The best conceptualization of Viola's understanding of self emerges in her love triangle realization soliloquy, where the dangers of false or incomplete identity formation are discussed and criticized. Realizing that Cesario's task of indirectly courting Olivia, despite the fact that Viola is in love with Orsino, has been undermined by Olivia's falling in love with Cesario, Viola begins by criticizing the concept of "disguise" (2.2.27) in relation to the actions of a "pregnant enemy" (2.2.28) assumed to be the devil. As a comparison, she then offers the behavior of "proper false" (2.2.29) men setting their "forms" in "women's waxen hearts" (2.2.30), but she also critically distances herself from that same category of women. Drawing instead a distinction in the line "For such as we are made of, such we be" (2.2.32) between a blameless, all-encompassing, genderless "we" and a "we" of "frailty" (2.2.31) and "waxen hearts", Viola chooses to recognize the difference between the uncorrupted self and the self of adopted gender attributes and behaviors. Viola is able to recognize the internalized expectations in her mind as well as in the minds of others, and in finally choosing to identify herself as a "poor monster"

(2.2.34) she effectively removes herself from those demands and the distinctions of masculine and feminine social scripts. She also leaves the rest of the dilemma to time, as she often does, in a gesture of mutability and adaptation.

By these parameters, if they could be so termed, Viola embodies the intent of *Twelfth Night* by refusing to be satisfied with any one tangible identification or interpretation. As a character who strives for honesty rather than acceptability, she is quick to appreciate genuine thought and action in others, most notably in Feste and the sea captain who helps rescue and disguise her. Having a “mind that suits” one’s “fair and outward character” (1.2.53-54) is of the utmost importance to Viola, so having a clear sense of self outside the disguise of Cesario is far more important than the disguise’s effectiveness in securing her employment. Unfortunately, this is not the case with the play’s other characters.

When *Twelfth Night* draws to a close, as most Shakespearean comedies do, with a series of marriages, the question of gender posed by the play’s protagonist is left largely unanswered. The revelation of Cesario’s true identity and the resulting confusion shows the major differences between Viola and her peers by allowing them to revert to old habits in their recognition of gender manipulation. Olivia, having mistaken Sebastian for Cesario and married him, abandons the person she actually fell in love with and can only relate to Viola as a fellow woman. Orsino, convinced of Cesario’s worth and simultaneously open to Viola’s affections, nevertheless insists on calling her “boy” (5.1.279) and “Cesario” (5.1.408) through the play’s conclusion. His offer for Viola to become “master’s mistress” (5.1.343) upon a change of clothing similarly draws distinctions between her masculine and feminine selves. Viola, on the other hand, discards the option to choose between these selves and refers to her “masculine usurped attire” (5.1.261) and “maiden weeds” (5.1.267) with equal measures of disdain. Having achieved a level of self-recognition above the limits of a gender binary, perhaps before the events of the play itself, and achieved her goals through her peculiarly genderless appeal rather than through exploits as a man or a woman, Viola exits the play as a sort of Genderqueer model. She has made the gender binary visible to herself and others around her, and chooses to disregard it as an inconsequential social construction, for although she is “recognized as a woman, but still dressed as a boy

when the play ends, Viola fascinates because she makes perpetual for the audience the trace of an alternative possibility, a gender not restricted by a binary opposition that isolates what we are from what we might be” (Belsey). And we, as readers and sympathizers, are left to do what we will with this exceptionally human portrait.

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