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The Un-Gendering of Viola Female Power in the Language of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* redefines romantic relationships and illustrates the intangible nature of gender norms in society through its portrayal of the relationships between characters. Viola, the principal character throughout the play has two primary love interests — one male and one female. Despite her disguise that seemingly “fools” these two characters into believing her to be of one gender or another, the things that draw them to her highlight the lack of a true binary in defining the romance between two people. The qualities that make an individual masculine or feminine are so arbitrary that it is impossible to say which of Viola's potential love interest's attraction to “her/him” is in keeping with the expectations of what they should be “attracted” to as defined by society. The way that the play is interpreted is largely dependent on the time period in which it is performed. The reception, portrayal, and understanding of these characters occur through the lens of the time in which the play is read and/or performed. The dialogue between Olivia and Viola provides women with a voice in a way that many plays and positions both in Shakespeare's time and the Victorian Era did not. Viola reclaims language as a power to be wielded by women while simultaneously acting as a person without a prescribed gender engaging in relationships without the confines of culture and society defining an identity for her/his character and the relationships that emerge.

When *Twelfth Night* was written, the roles of both Viola and Olivia were played by young men who took the roles of female characters because women were not allowed to act. This convention added another layer of irony to the dialogue between Viola and Olivia due to the norms of conversation within the context of relationships, language, and gender. By the time the play was acted in the Victorian Era, the practice of hiring “boy players” was long out of fashion

allowing actresses to take the roles of women on the British stage. Audiences were no longer used to seeing a romance between two actors of the same gender take place on the stage. In “the Victorian period, men and women’s roles became more sharply defined than at any time in history” (Hughes). These extremely rigid ideas defining the proper interactions between people based on their class and gender made the relationship between Viola and Olivia an even more interesting portrayal of femininity and romance during this time. In the wake of the industrial revolution, not only did wealthier people have more time on their hands but the separation of roles between family members became more concrete. The Victorian definition of “proper” interactions between men and women shifted the way that Olivia and Viola’s relationship appeared to Victorian audiences.

In contrast to the rigid ideas in Victorian England, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* includes — what Victorians believed to be— several improper relationships between characters of the same gender. The intolerance of Victorian audiences for these kinds of relationships was particularly relevant after the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde for “gross indecency” (or romantic relations with another man) at the end of the Fin de Siècle. The attraction and romantic language shared between various characters of the same gender suggest a more fluid interpretation of gender norms uncommon during the Victorian Era. The relationship between Olivia and Viola is particularly unique because of the way the dialogue they share transfers the power and autonomy of the language used for courtship (that typically bestowed on male characters) to both female characters. Not only does Viola refuse to use the “excellently well penn’d” speech Orsino prepared, but she uses her own linguistic power to ultimately win Olivia’s heart.

Olivia’s attraction to Cesario (Viola’s alter ego) defines love not as an attraction to stereotypical physical characteristics typically associated with either men or women but instead

defines love as an arbitrary attraction to an individual regardless of their prescribed role in society. At the beginning of the play shortly after Viola disguises herself as a man, Orsino comments on the Cesario's feminine qualities stating: "For they shall yet belie thy happy years that say thou art a man. Diana's lip is not more smooth and rubious, thy small pipe is as the maiden's organ shrill and sound and all is semblative a woman's part" (1.5 33-37). While Orsino later falls for Viola the "woman" he believes to be a "man"; at the same time Olivia is falling for the "man" who later reveals herself as a "woman". The fluid nature in which Viola has both male and female qualities is further solidified when we remember that in Shakespeare's time this "woman" would have been portrayed as a "man". If instead, it was performed during the Victorian era it suggests that when Olivia falls in love with a person who possesses such feminine qualities — it is those feminine qualities that draw her attention and Viola's artful mastery of romantic language that ultimately steals her heart. Viola is capable of assuming a gender that is "not her own" by wearing masculine clothing assuming societal acknowledgment playing into certain romantic traditions while reclaiming some in a new and empowering way.

Relationships that existed between individuals of the same sex were condemned in Victorian England with the trials of Oscar Wilde bringing the issue to cultural prominence. The idea that such a beloved and well-respected author was so blatantly revolting against the cultural norms of masculinity was something that was never before considered due to the notion that "The 'sodomite', conceptually speaking, was not the man who cut your hair, made your shoes, or cured your soul, but a shadowy figure encapsulating all that was foreign and threatening to social, moral and religious order" (DiGangi 24). Although much of Wilde's work included homoerotic ideas much of this was not publicly discussed, the idea that people who engaged in these relationships were everyday citizens was disconcerting to many who saw them as shadowy

and foreign individuals. However, this idea does explain why a majority of Victorian literary critics commenting on *Twelfth Night* viewed it only as a feminist play and not as a play commenting on the fluidity of gender and the categorization of relationships between same-sex couples.

Twelfth Night redefines gender as a fluid construct dependent on language and cultural context to have the meaning it has in societies throughout history; the relationship between Olivia and Viola depicts a romance that is based on mutual power and reclaims feminine seduction as an act rooted in language rather than the body. This suggests that productions of *Twelfth Night* during this time might have been viewed as more liberal and even modern in its portrayals of women and the relationships between two individuals of the same sex. Critics have long debated how Shakespeare contributed to the cultural perception of women. His use of language as well as his ability to write complex dialogue for his female characters — particularly in *Twelfth Night* — seems to suggest he saw women as autonomous players whose desires and actions had a large impact on the other characters in the play. On the other hand, some argue that the reason why Shakespeare's female characters had so much life was due to the practice of having boys play the roles of women. In contrast, these characters may have appeared unusually strong in the eyes of a Victorian audience watching actresses play these roles. "Victorian men, including the male coterie of drama critics, reacted with anxiety as well as admiration when they beheld displays of female control on stage. Captivated by the power of an exceptional actress, they experienced under her influence a sense of danger to themselves and an apprehension...that social codes of gender were being challenged before their eyes. Could women so commanding be women at all? Could their multiple assumed identities be reconciled with the narrow domesticity which ordinarily defined femininity? (Powell 14). Regardless of Shakespeare's

intentions or the portrayals that took place during his lifetime, *Twelfth Night* remains relevant because of the themes present in the original that have continued to resonate with readers and performers.

Twelfth Night has continued to capture the imaginations of audiences whether it is by the strength and complexity of female characters that Victorian thinkers believed to be feminist or whether it is a critique on the arbitrary nature of gender that was both relevant to Shakespeare's contemporaries as well as audiences today. "The status of Shakespeare's women not in Shakespeare's time but in the afterlife of his plays. Just as his plays evade absolute interpretation and have acquired, as it were, a plural authenticity in successive interpretations, so too for Shakespeare's women in the perceptions of later generations. It was the Victorians who first associated Shakespeare with elevated notions of Womanhood" (Hankey 426). The dialogue between Viola and Olivia upon their meeting is striking because of its departure from the contextual norms that were expected for romantic encounters such as this one. These traditional roles stemmed from norms introduced by the Petrarchan Sonnet (an Italian style of verse is typically used in romantic contexts during this time). Rather than following the guidelines of this type of verse as Orsino does Viola, using her own knowledge of feminine desire can make Olivia fall for her (Cesario) almost instantly. This step away from the traditional roles prescribed to men and women not only show the failings of this particular love language but suggests that women possess equal power over the manipulations of language.

Viola's identity as an individual with no singular definable gender is sealed at the end of the play with Orsino's final lines. "Cesario, come For so you shall be while you are a man. But when in other habits you are seen, Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen" (5.1 408-411). Some may suggest that when Orsino pointed out Cesario's womanly features at the beginning of the

play he already found himself romantically attracted to “him”. This final line suggests that while Orsino still sees Cesario as the boy who once worked for him, whose gender remains fluid something that cannot be defined now, that Orsino knows him both as Cesario his eunuch but also as Viola who is soon to be his wife. The construct of gender is based on the “habit” (clothing) that Cesario/Viola wears and Orsino is to be married to both Cesario and Viola which suggests that they are open to a noticeably less rigid definition not only of romantic love but also of gender in society. “Orsino’s last two words are not about binaries but about the many becoming one. Orsino’s fancy has now ceased its flitting and found its governor in ‘queen’” (Smith 78). It appears that Orsino’s fantasy was unable to be satisfied by Olivia which is perhaps why the Petrarchan verse he sent along with Cesario was unsuccessful in wooing her. He was unable to articulate his true desires for a relationship without the binaries and confines of the traditional romantic language and his love for her was based solely on going through the motions of what is expected of a man of his status by society.

The interpretive nature of Shakespeare’s plays allows for people in different societies across time to apply the themes and relationships that exist in the dialogue to issues and events going on at the time in which they perform the play. The gaps in the text that leave the responsibility of the portrayal of the characters up to the actors and directors during the time allow those interpreters to decide the ways that these relationships and characters relate and interact with one another. Viola is ultimately a genderless character whose true identity exists somewhere between Cesario and Viola leaving the audience to interpret the ways in which other characters and genders can relate to a character with an identity that is not easily defined.

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