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“I am the man...As I am woman” **great title!**

An Interpretative Reading on the Ambiguity of Gender and Relationships in *Twelfth Night*

Twelfth Night, or alternatively, *What You Will*, is a play that implies immediately within its sub-title themes of flexibility and yet simultaneously a general sense of great vagueness. For the readers and even the characters themselves, there is the possibility of multiple interpretations, for while one thing may be hidden as another, it is simply the essence of “what you will” that decides the meaning for each individual in the end. When Viola, disguised as Cesario, declares, “I am not what I am,” she is thus met with Olivia’s reply, “I would you were as I would have you be,” an answer of clear obstinance as Olivia simply desires what she sees (3.1.138–39). Clearly, the vagueness between their exchange and the will of each character has presented two different viewpoints and interpretations. **This aspect of fluidity and flexibility is integrated such that each major relationship, much like the characters themselves, is crafted with multiple layers that both conceal and reveal, ultimately providing for a multifaceted reading of the play through various lens. This essay focuses on** the fluid identity of Viola-Cesario, and how this play on gender allows for a more ambiguously homoerotic reading of the character’s relationship with Orsino and Olivia in contrast to the conventional, heterosexual interpretation of the various romances present. **clear, specific, coherent**

Viola’s dual character of man and woman is one that immediately stands out as a flexible play on gender and sexual identity. In consideration to the practice of “cross-gender casting” in

Early Modern theater, where every role was played by a man, it would have been natural for audiences to see a boy don the role of a female Viola (C. Thomas 221). However, what follows is a man portraying a woman who must then act under the disguise of a male character, Cesario. Even with the already blurred lines between the male actor and the female character, the addition of Cesario creates a hybrid “Viola-Cesario,” where the character itself can call into question the nature of their doubled relationships with Orsino and Olivia and the “hidden subjectivity” of their own identity as it is interchangeably caught between the male and female side (Kietzman 260). It is then left up to the skill of the actor and their own interpretation of this “hidden subjectivity” that allows for the manifestation of various flexible readings of the identity of Viola-Cesario and how each in turn may modify the depiction of romance with Olivia and Orsino.

what does this mean exactly, "from the text itself"?

From the text itself, Viola disguised as Cesario seems to encourage and participate in active flirtations with Olivia. In 1.5, Viola delivers her famous profession of hypothetical love to Olivia, and instead of using the contrite Petrarchan blason, she declares she would cry out “Olivia!” with such fervor and passion that the lady’s name “[would] not rest / Between the elements of air and earth” thereafter (1.5.260–61). This **confession** of sorts coupled with many previous instances of witty word-play between the two certainly implies a mutual attraction. For Viola to have traveled all the way from Orsino’s court with his long-winded message, only to divert from it in order to engage in active dialogue with Olivia presents evidence of Viola taking on a new agency in her identity as a man who is capable of flirting romantically with women. To be clear, Olivia falls in love with Viola fully believing she is Cesario, and therefore, there is no question there as to the standard heterosexual nature of her attraction (M. Thomas). However, it is through this interaction that Viola, marked as the object of desire by another woman, first

smooth integration of quotations

“finds her own erotic voice” (Traub 57). In using this erotic voice, she actively reciprocates Olivia’s desire, and even though it is done under the guise of a man, the relationship between them takes on a much more ambiguously homoerotic nature as Viola participates in this flirtation of two women out of her own will. From portrayals of this scene in media, many actors have also chosen to interpret the nature of this relationship with the same homoerotic tension. In the 1996 adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, Imogen Stubbs as Viola acts out the first meeting between Cesario and Olivia in 1.5 with quick-witted, pointed flirtation. The scene sees the two actresses moving around the set, often dancing in and out of reach of one another and at certain moments, right against one another in a way that exudes obvious romantic intention (Nunn). Watching one physical interpretation of the scene reveals to the readers the great flexibility and ambiguity embedded within the complexities of the text. The actresses in this adaptation seemed to focus on the romantic undertones of the scene and therefore drew out a more homoerotic interpretation of the relationship between the two characters. What was revealed through their portrayals is certainly something that could have been glanced over or read completely differently by another individual interpreting the text. Again, Shakespeare’s characters and writing take on the quality of the title: that while there is the overall inversion of order right on the brink of returning to structure and normalcy, it is also completely subject to “what you will,” of what each individual personally sees in the story. Certainly, this means the queer nature of Viola’s relationship with Olivia could also be read in an opposing, more normative direction. The first mention of Olivia, “the daughter of a count” who, for the “dear love” of her dead brother, “hath abjured the sight / And company of men,” immediately conjures up a parallel to Viola’s own situation (1.2.34, 37–39). Both women, who happen to have very similar names, have lost the one brother they hold dear, and as a result adopt a form of concealment and withdrawal from the world as a potential

coping mechanism. Olivia physically retreats beneath her veil and stays cooped up within her estate in her refusal to see anyone, especially male suitors, for at least seven years. Viola, similarly expresses concealment in masking her identity as a noblewoman by donning a male character with similar mannerisms to what is believed to be her dead brother. There is then a sense of kinship in the grief shared between these two women, who would both rather retreat from an identity which dictates certain obligations to society in order to properly mourn the passing of their brothers. Viola, upon hearing of Olivia's state, wishes "O, that I served that lady...Till I had made mine own occasion mellow, / What my estate is," expressing her desire to hide for a moment from the responsibilities of her status until she was ready to reveal herself once again to the world (1.2.39, 41–42). Again, this supports the similar sentiments of retreat and concealment expressed by both women, leading to a reading of the relationship as one of kinship founded on shared grief instead of one of homoerotic attraction. However, note that Viola wishes to serve Olivia — not to converse, visit, or befriend, but to *serve*. As a noblewoman, it would be simple for her to announce her estate and attempt to gain audience with Olivia, especially with their shared background of family tragedy. Instead, she explicitly states her desire to serve the lady rather than befriend her as an equal. For an individual from an aristocratic background to willingly subject herself to a state of servitude, implies a great devotion that goes beyond the structures of status and even gender. Servitude in this way does not act as a hindrance to love, but instead "creates the conditions for the development of personal affection" and especially of an "erotic desire" which becomes apparent with the great difference between master and servant positions (Schalkwyk 90). A servant is subject to the commands of a master, and in further consideration of one who willingly subjects themselves to this state of complete submission, it implies a degree of intimacy and eroticism that is not present in the same way between equal

lovers. Lovers are capable of subjecting and reciprocating equal will and desire over one another in a relationship, while one who willingly serves enables the will and pleasures of another to be complete master over their own agency. With regards to this context of a purposeful consent to an imbalance in power, Viola's desire to serve Olivia then allows for a very homoerotic reading of the relationship between these two women. There are, in fact, multiple instances where Viola even uses the servant-master relationship to flirt with Olivia, effectively enabling the further development of romance in their relationship. In their second meeting, Viola, once again as Cesario, makes witty word-play: "Your servant's servant is *your* servant, madam" (3.1.100). This is in response to Olivia stating that Cesario is Orsino's servant, and Viola supplying that since Orsino in his love was a devoted servant to Olivia, Cesario is the servant's servant and by proxy subject to Olivia's will as well. By purposefully implying she is servant to Olivia and her desires, Viola is again actively using her erotic voice found through the skin of Cesario to flirt with another woman and in part, encouraging the attraction between them. Viola, as the "actor-author" of the Viola-Cesario complex, has demonstrated awareness of both parts of her crafted identity in her engagement with those of the same sex in ways that are not strictly coded as the behavior of man or woman, but instead as an intermediate that is capable of blurring the lines between both (Kietzman 262). and here is the end of a 3-page paragraph! Where can you divide

While homoerotic implications can certainly be read in the interactions between Viola and Olivia, it is made explicit that Viola is in love with Orsino. Viola rejects Olivia's love upfront in 3.2, saying that "no woman has, nor never none / Shall mistress be of [my heart]" as she would rather that a man, Orsino, be its master (3.1.156-57). For most of the play, Orsino is caught up in his own attraction towards Olivia and seems to favor Cesario only in ways that encourages playful banter between men on the woes of love and women. Of course, the resolve

here begins another marathon paragraph! Aim for about 7-10 sentences

of *Twelfth Night* ultimately ends in the marriage between Orsino and Viola with the full acknowledgement of Viola as a woman who is to be “Orsino’s mistress, and his fancy’s queen” (5.1.383). However, returning again to the complex ambiguity of relationships surrounding the character of Viola-Cesario, the dynamic between Cesario and Orsino can be interpreted through a lens that reveals a disruption of the normative, heterosexual structure. One such example is in the use of gendered speech in 2.2, where it is unclear as to which identity in the Viola-Cesario complex is speaking and what desires or intentions are being expressed from each. Right after Viola realizes Olivia has fallen in love with her, she laments seemingly from both a man and woman’s perspective:

As I am man,
 My state is desperate for my master’s love.
 As I am woman (now, alas the day!),
 What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!
 O Time, thou must untangle this, not I.
 It is too hard a knot for me t’ untie. (2.2.36–41)

There are multiple ways to interpret these lines, of which certain versions imply an ambiguity in the gender and desires of Viola-Cesario. Even though it is Viola who is love with Orsino, a love stemming from the heart of a woman, it is Cesario who is the man and servant that is truly desperate for his master’s love. A forbidden and homoerotic dynamic then arises from this reading of a male servant prostrating himself before his master in desperate longing. This is especially ironic when considering the “heterosexual identity” of Viola who wishes to have her genuine desire as a woman in love with a man be fully reciprocated in such a heterosexual manner (Charles 133). With passionate longing for master addressed from the perspective of man

and pity for fellow woman trapped in unrequited love viewed through the perspective of a woman, it is no doubt that the state of these intermingled relationships is in a knot too tangled to untie. However, this metaphor serves not only to accurately describe the love triangle at play, but also the state of Viola's own identities and desires becoming so ambiguous that even she, as the actor-author of it all, can no longer sort out her own distinctive state of being. In fact, Viola's exchanges with Orsino on the matters of love between men and women provides evidence of her great awareness of the roles of both genders, implying the great extent of entanglement and integration of her two identities within one body. Orsino boasts that no love from a woman could compare to what he feels in his unrequited longing for Olivia, but Viola as Cesario argues that women "are as true of heart as [men]" and that while it is men who "may say more, swear more," they only "prove / Much in [their] vows but little in [their] love" (2.4.106, 116–18). In contrast, a woman loves just as much, but instead of loud gestures she "[pines] in thought...Smiling at grief" until she becomes a metaphorical statue in her prolonged melancholy (2.4.112, 115). Viola asks, is this not the same painful and perhaps even more meaningful love than what is held in the empty shows of affection that men seem to put on? In this way, Viola-Cesario has identified the distinctive way both men and women seem to love through a single mouthpiece that represents the meeting point between the two. Furthermore, the observation on the empty vows of men in "love" could be interpreted as an indirect judgement of Orsino's shallow attraction towards Olivia, but simultaneously of his genuine relationship with Cesario. In his courting of Olivia, Orsino has simply come to desire an ideal. To him, she is the Petrarchan blason, a perfect cliché of parts. There has never been enough reciprocated dialogue between the two to even develop a budding relationship or any mutual attraction. However, this is in direct to contrast to the flowing dialogue between Cesario and Orsino, where the two converse openly on matters of love. In fact,

this relationship holds much more reciprocity and significance than any one that could be formed between men and women as women were regarded as intellectually inferior and incapable of discussing the same things that occupied a man's thoughts. For men and women, there is no exactly equal recognition of interests and therefore, no possibility of a bond built on deep and mutual reciprocation. However, there is actual potential for the formation of a genuine and mutual love between men, an attraction which can be expressed to the great extent of ardent masculine passion, as boasted by Orsino, a passion that is noticeably absent and impossible in the empty promises reserved for women (DiGangi 41). The natural and powerful desires between men then present a marked contrast against the stilted clichés found in the flirtations of man and woman. Therefore, from Viola-Cesario's astute observations on gender, the relationship between Orsino and Cesario can once again, much like the one between Viola and Olivia, be interpreted through a much more ambiguous, homoerotic lens.

Shakespeare's writing in *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* emphasizes fluidity and flexibility in the overarching theme of the play, its characters, its relationships, and even in its language. At the center point of this ambiguity is the character of Viola and Cesario, who is not presented as simply just one or the other but as shifting complex between and of both. The identity of the character fluctuates throughout the play, allowing for multiple interpretations by readers and actors, and even great ambiguity and confusion in the way the character seemingly regards the self. Thus, with the fluidity of Viola-Cesario, all the relationships that develop in conjunction to the character take on the same ambiguous and flexible nature, especially those of the same sex. Certainly, Olivia's attraction for Cesario could be read as a hilarious and accidental misunderstanding, and Viola's love for Orsino, even under the guise of a man, as strictly heterosexual. However, there is simultaneously a much more ambiguous and homoerotic side to

the very same relationships that can be viewed through straightforward, comedic, and heteronormative lens. This **kaleidoscopic diffraction** of interpretations resulting from the multifaceted nature of Shakespeare's writing of Viola's character, and truly for all of his works, is what carries his stories on from generation to generation. Certain themes and interpretations become more or less apparent with each era, and yet there is always something so universal about his portrayal of human relationships that seems to resonate among us no matter what the time period. In that sense, *Twelfth Night* as a reading on the fluidity of gender and non-heteronormative relationships becomes that much more applicable in the now twenty-first century, where the growing understanding of identity and love beyond the binary structure has become a central preoccupation in our current consciousness.

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