

Gender Ambiguity and Desire in *Twelfth Night*

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Recent criticism of Shakespearean comedies has significantly focused on topics such as cross-dressing and the role of the boy actor. Feminist scholars have undertaken especially the study of comedies like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590-94), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-98), *As You Like It* (1599) and *Twelfth Night* (1601), in which the female protagonist disguises herself as a man. In addition, there has been extensive comment on the theatrical fact of an all-male acting company on the Renaissance stage in England. Therefore, it seems that any approach to the above-mentioned comedies cannot be made without some controversy.

In 1975 the feminist critic, Juliet Dusinberre, offered an optimistic view of the Shakespearean female characters; according to her thesis, Shakespeare, in portraying witty and high-spirited heroines, transcends patriarchal social prejudices about women and sees “men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal” (quoted in Hidalgo 1987: 167). Later Dusinberre relates the freedom and independence enjoyed by Shakespeare’s heroines with the actual situation of women in the Renaissance. Thus Dusinberre belongs to that first group of critics that Lisa Jardine distinguishes within a feminist perspective (1983: 1-8).

Other feminists such as Clara Claiborne Park take a very different approach to Shakespeare’s drama since, for them, Shakespeare had a limited view of women as did the society he lived in. In this sense, Park argues that once Portia, Rosalind or Viola disguise themselves as men they can be as saucy as they like, however if they do not wear male garments, “feminine assertiveness is viewed with hostility” (108). Moreover, these crossdressed women take their male disguise off willingly, suiting thus male expectations.

Yet it is Linda Woodbridge who concentrates on Dusinberre’s thesis and wonders if Shakespearean comic heroines succeed in disrupting the gender system once crossdressed. Woodbridge comes to the conclusion that “a woman’s essential nature (...) shines through any kind of clothes” (155). Therefore there is no such a gap opened in the gender system, although some plays participate more actively in the recuperative process than others, as it will be developed below.

The fact that female parts were played by boy actors cannot be ignored and a great number of scholars have devoted their studies to the transvestite actor. Lisa Jardine stands out among those critics and - together with Kathleen McLuskie and Jean E. Howard - belongs to the “materialist feminism” against the idealism defended by Dusinberre, for example. However different their positions are, all of them agree in considering gender as socially formed. Therefore gender changes across time and also depends on the culture in which it is embedded - here, early modern England -. Jardine privileges the boy actor and focuses on contemporary comment this convention caused among antitheatricalists and polemicists such as Stubbes and Rainoldes. Lisa Jardine points out that playing a woman’s role “is an act for a male audience’s appreciation” (31), consequently the boy actor is considered a sign of homosexual energies in the theatre, an object of male desire. Not only does Jardine argue for the erotic component on the Elizabethan stage, but also Stephen Orgel thinks “the basic form of response to theater is erotic” (1989: 17), hence the assumption that there is an element of homosexual eroticism in the performance of a play.

Behind all these assertions lies the importance of clothes in the Renaissance. Through sumptuary legislation there was an attempt to regulate social station, social role and gender,

especially in urban settings where some women did crossdress at the turn of the sixteenth century. Although actors were allowed to violate the sumptuary laws, this did not stop the antitheatricalists from railing against the transvestite theatre, which was seen as unnatural. These laws came to an end when James I succeeded to the throne (Garber 1992: 23).

Twelfth Night is an excellent play in which to explore issues such as transvestism, gender and the importance of clothing. The female protagonist of this comedy, Viola - who “can sing both high and low” (II, iii, 35) -, is one of the most fascinating Shakespearean characters. Unlike *As You Like It*, nothing much happens in the comedy itself since the focus is on the crossdressed Viola and the emotions s/he arouses. Besides, Viola/Cesario is a figure who can be thought to question not only sexual difference but also gender identity. Therefore, in this paper I propose to examine these ideas in detail and, if possible, to connect them with the critical trends already mentioned.

Viola appears disguised as Cesario in the very first moments of the play and remains so. Even though s/he is significantly ambiguous - at least, for the other characters -, Viola does not hesitate to show her feminine subjectivity as soon as possible: “Who'er I woo, myself would be his wife” (I, v, 41). Ironically, she must woo Olivia on Orsino's behalf as a page, which puts her in a subservient position. Dependency is, in Lisa Jardine's terms, a shared characteristic between the heroine - Viola - and the male personification - Cesario - so “the woman preserves her ‘chaste’ self by transposing female dependency into male dependency: page instead of wife or daughter” (25). In contrast with this assertion, Valerie Traub affirms that critics usually fail to recognize the fervour, self-assertion and interest that Viola shows as Cesario when wooing Olivia (130):

VIOLA: Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
And call upon my soul within the house;
Write loyal cantons of contemnèd love,
And sing them loud even in the dead of night; (I, v, 223-26)

Often praised for its lyricism, this speech delivered by Viola mocks romantic love as Rosalind does in *As You Like It* but the protagonist of *Twelfth Night* makes a different approach since she gets herself involved as an unrequited lover and takes a new, unexpected point of view (Leggatt 1973: 234).

Feelings indeed play an important role in the comedy --especially sadness and melancholy. Viola feels unhappy with the male garments she is wearing and conveys her emotions in a soliloquy where she also rejects the misunderstandings the male disguise creates:

VIOLA: Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness,
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much. (II, ii, 24-25)

In my opinion, this speech captures the main difference between Viola and other crossdressed heroines such as Julia, Portia and Rosalind: for the first time, the crossdressed female figure takes into account the psychological implications brought about by the male disguise. As she calls herself “poor monster” (II, ii, 30) - a term usually applied to hermaphrodites and crossdressed women in the Renaissance -, Viola acknowledges “the complexities of homoeroticism by surrounding it with anxiety” (Hayles 1980: 234-35). Viola has no female companion to share her worries with, so she makes use of asides and soliloquies to turn inward psychologically. Conversely, in *As You Like It* Rosalind can open her heart to Celia, her cousin, illustrating a good example of female bonds.

Scenes like the one just commented on have led many scholars to consider the “homoeroticism residing in theatrical transvestism” (Traub 1992: 120) because not only does Orsino establish a close friendship with Cesario, but also Olivia gets infatuated with the saucy boy --who is really a woman in the theatrical fiction and a boy in reality. Although it is true that Viola/Cesario remains sexually ambiguous until the end and that much emphasis is actually given to her equivocal relationships with other characters, there are feminist critics like Jean E. Howard who do not think that transvestite theatre “promoted solely homoerotic desire” (Howard 1994: 109).

As far as gender is concerned, Viola's behaviour is seen as unnatural (Woodbridge 1984: 153-54): the audience always knows that s/he is really a woman who is longing for the happy solution. When Viola / Cesario tells Orsino a story about a woman in order to make him aware of his own selfishness, she is, in a way, telling him her own story:

ORSINO: And what's her history?

VIOLA: A blank, my lord. She never told her love,
But let concealment like a worm i'th'bud
Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like Patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. (II, iv, 105-11)

Viola skilfully portrays an image "drawn from her own experience" (Leggatt 1973: 237) and tries to awake Orsino's feelings for someone else. Catherine Belsey does not agree with this interpretation and argues that in fact there is "a speaker who at this moment occupies a place which is not precisely masculine or feminine" (187) since in this scene the notion of identity has been altered. Moreover, the whole play seems to be subversive because there is a possibility of blurring sexual difference, according to Belsey. It is not Viola, then, who is sitting patiently, smiling at grief --Viola complains about her own personal situation now and again. Another interesting analysis has been offered by Lisa Jardine. For her, the boy actor "armed with his arsenal of female characteristics and mannerisms" (33) displays a stereotype of women: patience. Many literary works in the Renaissance make reference to the virtue of patience by using two archetypal images: Lucrece and Grissill. The imprint of Grissill is easily found in Shakespearean female characters such as Julia, Viola and Imogen, who, finding themselves in a difficult situation, show a preference for passivity and silent enduring of whatever patriarchy proscribes.

Interestingly, in the introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *Twelfth Night*, Elizabeth Story Donno points out that in some circumstances Viola "remains quite surprisingly taciturn" (10). Two episodes could actually illustrate this idea: on the one hand, the meeting of Antonio - sea captain and Sebastian's friend - and Viola/Cesario, mistaken for her twin brother, Sebastian; and on the other, the attitude of Viola when Orsino threatens her at the very end of the play:

ORSINO: I'll sacrifice the lamb that I do love

To spite a raven's heart within a dove. (V, i, 119-20)

In the confrontation between Viola / Cesario and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, the female protagonist reveals her real nature in an aside: "Pray God defend me! A little thing would make me tell / them how much I lack of a man" (II, iv, 255-56). As stated previously, the audience is aware that underneath Cesario's clothes is a woman who feels uncomfortable with her male disguise. However, in this scene a metatheatrical reference, a reference to the boy actor who plays the role of Viola can be understood, so that the lines just quoted above can show a *double entendre*. In fact, ironies, puns, homosexual allusions and so on pervade the play to create the "most highly intricate misunderstandings" (Fortunati 1992: 108). If it is true that wearing male clothes can cause sexual confusion, as Belsey proposes - in opposition to Howard's thesis -, that threat is balanced with the protagonist's feminine subjectivity (Howard 1994: 113). Following Howard's line of argument, the heroine's transvestism is not such a problem for social order "if not accompanied by the political desire for a redefinition of female rights" (113).

In fact, both Lisa Jardine and Jean E. Howard argue that the real threat to the system is not Viola but Olivia. Olivia's passion for the page, Cesario, is comically presented when she decides to do without men at the beginning of the play. Ironically, it is Olivia - economically independent and self-sufficient - "whose eroticized relationship of 'service' with Cesario is most socially and sexually transgressive" (Jardine 1992: 33). Consequently, the unruly Olivia will be submitted to the control of a man, Sebastian. As Howard points out, the crossdressed Viola, the apparent threat to the patriarchal system, is rewarded whereas Olivia, the real threat to the social order, gets punished (112).

The homoerotic attachments come to an end with the heterosexual closure of the play when the androgynous Cesario splits up into two: Viola and Sebastian, where reality and imagination blur:

ANTONIO: An apple cleft in two is not more twin
Than these two creatures. (V, i, 207-08)

Despite the fact that Orsino still calls Viola *Cesario* and *boy* and that, visually, Viola does not wear women's attire at the end, in my opinion, there is no doubt that it is a heterosexual union on Viola's part --although it is not so clear on Orsino's, who has to transfer his passion for what he thought to be a page to a crossdressed woman. However, Viola's sexually ambiguous figure has led to recent scholars to privilege some issues such as eroticism and homoerotic feelings in their studying the play itself.

Even though no definite conclusion can be reached in a subject like this, I hope to have shown that both cross-dressing and sexual indeterminacy are crucial in Shakespearean comedies where a change of costume is involved. Controversial as they are, these topics provide extremely interesting ways of approaching these plays.

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