

**“THE MASTER  
MISTRESS OF MY  
PASSION”: CROSS-  
DRESSING AND GENDER  
PERFORMANCE IN  
*TWELFTH NIGHT***

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Shakespeare presents a fascinating exploration of the manipulation and construction of gender and identity in *Twelfth Night*. Through a common theatrical practice of disguise in drama, the bard explores the significance of gender and identity in relation to performance, bringing in the performative aspect of gender and identity. Throughout the play text, Viola-Cesario's identity, especially her / his gender, remains elusive. She / he sexually appeals to both man and woman: Olivia is attracted by “him,” and so is Orsino. In disguising as a man, Viola constructs a male semblance through an imitation of the image of her supposedly dead brother Sebastian, a gesture hinting at the cultural construction of one's gender identity, a construction that culminates here in the sumptuary codes and gender performance.

Viola's cross-dressing disguise explicitly illustrates the fashioning of one's identity through clothing. It is a fashioning reflecting socially imposed and regulated construction on one's gender identity. Moreover, the performative aspect of gender intelligibility in Viola's disguise as Cesario highlights the volitional construction of one's gender identity on the stage. The ambiguity inherent in the character of Viola-Cesario challenges the belief in a coherent and stable gender identity. The meaning and nature of sexual identity, therefore, are not fixed, stable, or permanent, as they seem to be. Moreover, the sense of ambiguity and split inherent in Viola's disguise does not evaporate with the final revelation of her identity. On the contrary, the split male part is to be materialized and subsumed in the character of Sebastian, facilitating Olivia's transference of passion from Cesario to Sebastian.

Dost thou think, though I am caparisoned like a  
man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition?  
*As You Like It*, 3.2.191-93<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare presents a fascinating exploration of the manipulation and construction of gender and identity in *Twelfth Night*. Through a seemingly common theatrical practice of disguise in drama, the bard, however, explores

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Shakespeare are from D. Bevington's edition (1992).

the implication of gender and identity in relation to performance, thereby illustrating the performative aspect of gender and identity. Like *Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night* develops its exploration of identity with twins. But the issues of identity are much more complex in the latter because of the twins' gender difference. With its heroine's cross-dressing, the play complicates its development with the theatrical disguise and brings forward the comic plots of an entanglement involving Orsino, Olivia, Viola, and Sebastian.

Viola, after surviving from a shipwreck, disguises as a male page, Cesario, thereby assuming a male appearance. In disguising as a man, Viola constructs a male semblance through an imitation of the image of her supposedly dead brother Sebastian, a gesture hinting at the cultural construction of one's gender identity, a construction that culminates here in the sumptuary codes and gender performance. In other words, the example of Viola's sexual reversal through cross-dressing disguise brings to the foreground the cultural and social construction of gender identity, illustrating the fashioning of one's identity through clothing. The convention of Elizabethan transvestite stage, or boy actors playing female roles (male cross-dressing), makes gender issues even more complicated, often raising the implication of homoeroticism. The boy actor, playing the female character Viola, who then disguises as a male page Cesario, becomes a contention site for gender identities competing to become intelligible with each gender configuration.

Judith Butler points out the hegemonic nature of the concept toward gender within a heterosexual framework: "[T]he 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality" (1990: 31). Under the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality, gender is rendered as a binary system of feminine / masculine, female / male, or woman / man. Such a framework not only reifies gender configurations for the purpose of fitting them into the model, but also excludes those other than the prescribed gender identities. As Butler puts it,

The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist" —that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender. (Butler 1990: 17)

Cesario, an example of female cross-dressing in the theatrical representation at hand, dramatizes a gender identity which is difficult to be categorized within the binary framework. The play text plays on the abundant implications of such an ambiguous gender identity. For example, Malvolio describes Cesario, who is waiting to see Olivia outside, in following comparisons:

Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy; as a squash is before 'tis a peascod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple. 'Tis with him in standing water between boy and man. (1.5.153-156)

The elusiveness of Viola-Cesario's gender identity provides a contrast to the more traditional gender identity formulated under a binary framework. The ambiguity inherent in the character of Viola-Cesario destabilizes the belief in a coherent and stable gender identity.

First, I would like to discuss the performative aspect of gender intelligibility. The play text begins Viola's encounter with Olivia with playacting metaphors, calling attention to the underlying structure of role-playing in Viola's disguise. As requested, Viola-Cesario plays a role of wooer on behalf of "his" master. "He" uses language full of playacting implications in defining "his" mission, addressing to Olivia in words reminiscent of an actor's profession:

I pray you, tell me if this be the lady of the house, for I never saw her. I would be loath to cast away my speech; for besides that it is excellently well penned, I have taken great pains to con it. (1.5.167-70)

As it turns out, Cesario does effectively *act* Orsino's woes with "his" histrionic power to charm Olivia in their very first encounter.

Cesario makes it clear that "he" *acts* on Orsino's behalf. In other words, "he" comes to Olivia under a mission, which is largely defined in histrionic terms. But "his" acting does not provoke a revulsion of being merely pretense. On the contrary, the performance is taken at its face value by Olivia, who equates the proxy-wooer to the wooer, and involuntarily falls in love with the proxy. Similar to a play-watching experience, the audience (Olivia) cannot help identify the actor (Cesario) with the role he impersonates. Like plague, love creeps quickly and stealthily into Olivia's heart right after her first meeting with Cesario: "Even so quickly may one catch the plague? / Methinks I feel this youth's perfections / With an invisible and subtle stealth / To creep in at mine eyes" (1.5.290-93). Not only does Olivia unwittingly fall in love with a woman in disguise as a man, but also relinquish a vow to live in seclusion. As in his other romantic comedies, the bard here ridicules the irrationality and blindness of love in presenting Olivia's immediate passion for the young Cesario.

Viola is trapped in a triangular relation when she learns of Olivia's love for her. Not knowing how to untangle the knot, she leaves everything to time. In appearance, Viola impersonates a man, thus suggesting a lack of resolution in a man. In a sense, Cesario's rather timid and soft personality somehow undermines the traditional masculine value given to a male subject. Of course, we should remember, the representation of Cesario's feminine temperament,

despite the male appearance, is also a reminder of her underlying female identity. In contrast to Viola's passiveness to her baffling situation, Olivia, a counter-example of gender stereotype, is much more active and out-spoken. She plays a leading role in the relationship with Cesario and Sebastian. She daunts and mocks at Cesario in a defiant gesture to disrupt the patriarchal value when the latter tries to praise her beauty on the one hand, and blame her cruelty on the other, in the Petrarchan conceit:

O, sir, I will not be so hardhearted. I will give out divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried, and every particle and utensil labeled to my will: as, item, two lips, indifferent red; item, two gray eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth. (1.5.239-44)

Olivia, in her comic and satirical ridicule of Viola's urge to accept Orsino's love, refuses to be assimilated into the Petrarchan tradition by ridiculing the poetic device of blazoning her physical parts. Her active role in a love relation, with either Cesario or Sebastian (mistakenly taken for Cesario), is reminiscent of other Shakespearean unruly heroines, who are not afraid to go forward and pursue their love and marriage.

The gender issues become even more complicated and slippery when the boy actors cross-dressing as female characters is taken into consideration. On a meta-theatrical level, boy actors play female roles on the stage, mimicking the female voice, gesture, pose, and so on. As the term "gender role" indicates, gender intelligibility relies heavily on socially expected behavior, a configuration involving performance. The Elizabethan transvestite convention, having boy actors playing female roles, acts out and repeats the construction of gender. Phyllis Rackin points out the playacting nature of gender roles on the Elizabethan stage:

On a stage where female characters were always played by male actors, feminine gender was inevitably a matter of costume; and in plays where the heroines dressed as boys, gender became doubly problematic, the unstable product of role-playing and costume, not only in the theatrical representation but also within the fiction presented on stage (1987: 29).

To further differentiate the double layers of meanings in a Renaissance theatrical representation, Dymphna Callaghan terms the theatrical representation (the play) as the "primary level of Renaissance practice" (2000: 31), and the fiction presented on the stage (the disguise or the play-within-the-play) as the "secondary level of the text's fiction" (30). On the secondary level, Viola, concealing her female identity, crossdresses as a male page (an "eunuch") Cesario to serve in the Duke's household after her survival from a shipwreck. She assumes not only a new identity, but a new gender in Illyria. This disguise illustrates, as Jean E. Howard argues, "that gender differences are culturally

constructed and historically specific, rather than innate, and that the hierarchical gender systems based on these differences can therefore be changed” (1988: 419).

The performative aspect of gender intelligibility, in Viola’s disguise as Cesario, highlights the volitional construction of one’s gender identity on the stage. Viola’s disguise as a man calls attention to the “primary level” of representation, that is, the theatrical convention of male cross-dressing characterized on the early modern England stage—a disguise that foregrounds the theatrical illusion of accepting female roles played by young boys. Stephen Greenblatt illustrates the ambiguity of gender on the transvestite stage with Orsino’s comparison of Cesario’s boyishness to a woman’s part:

This perception of ambiguity, rooted in early modern ideas about sexuality and gender, is one of the elements that enabled a boy actor in this period convincingly to mime “a woman’s part.” (Greenblatt 1997: 1766)

In his introduction to *As You Like It*, Greenblatt gives an account of the early modern ideas about sexuality and gender. In short, according to the Renaissance anatomical theory, “men and women had the same anatomical structures:”

[W]omen’s genitalia were just like a man’s—with the vagina and ovaries corresponding to the penis and scrotum—except that they had not been pushed outside the body as a man’s had been. (Greenblatt 1997: 1595)

In a sense, gender becomes a matter of clothing and performance. As explicitly defined in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, the page (or a boy actor), who is assigned to play a female role, should adopt the “grace, / Voice, gait, and action of a gentlewoman” (Ind., 131-32). With female attires and cosmetics, young boys playact female roles on stage. In like manner, Viola assumes male attires and gesture to become Cesario.

Seen against this consideration of the Elizabethan transvestite stage, Viola-Cesario appears to be feminine to other characters like Shakespeare’s other cross-dressing heroines. For example, Orsino calls attention to Cesario’s feminine appearance and physical characteristic: lips more smooth and rubious than Diana’s, a small pipe as “the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,” and “all is semblative a woman’s part” (1.4.33, 34). Orsino’s comments emphasize the underlying feminine characteristics of Viola’s male disguise, which, in turn, calls attention to the performative nature of the boy actor’s histrionic performance of mimicking a female role in disguising as a male page.

Cesario’s feminine quality and youthfulness turn “him” into an object of desire for both men and women. Being a young and beautiful “boy,” like Adonis in *Venus and Adonis*, Cesario is characterized as an “androgynous” youth (“an eunuch”) with both masculine and feminine qualities. Orsino utilizes

Cesario's attraction to women as his messenger: "It shall become thee well to *act my woes*; / She will attend it better in thy youth / Than in a nuncio's of more grave aspect" (1.4.26-28, emphasis added). But what Orsino does not consciously aware is the possibility that a young boy, not yet reaching full maturity as a man, possesses a unspeakable attraction for being like a woman. The boy arouses a hidden homoerotic desire in Orsino, a possibility suggested by Orsino's sudden shift of passion from Olivia to Viola (Cesario) in the final recognition scene. In an exchange about men's and women's constancy, Orsino boasts his incomparable love for Olivia: "Make no compare / Between that love a woman can bear me / And that I owe Olivia" (2.4.101-03). When he learns of the secret marriage between Olivia and Cesario (actually Sebastian), he even threatens to kill the latter in a fit of jealousy. But within a few minutes, when he finds out Viola's true identity, he is ready to marry Viola right away, putting Olivia all behind. It will be difficult to make sense of Orsino's change unless the hidden homoerotic desire, which will surface to account for the arbitrary ending and provide a possible explanation for Orsino's sudden shift of love from Olivia to Viola, is taken into consideration. But, with the revelation of Cesario's "true"<sup>2</sup> sexual identity, the unspeakable homoerotic desire is changed into a heterosexual desire.

Next, I would like to look at the fashioning of identity through clothing. The imposition and construction of one's gender identity with the assumption of male / female attires become explicit in the plot of Viola's disguise. The stricter the sumptuary rules, the easier the fashioning of identity through costume. The formation of gender identity is exemplified through Viola's assumption of male costume. Cesario swears to Olivia "I am not that I play" (1.5.180) —a description bringing into double layers of meanings at once. On the primary, or dramatic level, Cesario is not a young man "he" appears to be. On the secondary, or meta-theatrical level, the boy actor, playing the role Viola, is not a woman he dramatizes. As mentioned earlier, the histrionic metaphor calls attention to the performative aspect of the construction of gender identity. In *As You Like It* the boy actor playing Rosalind concludes the play with the epilogue:

If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not; and I am sure as many as have good beards or good faces or sweet breaths will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell. (Epilogue, 16-22)

The boy actor's disruption of the dramatic illusion once again highlights the construction and fiction of gender identity.

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<sup>2</sup>On the "secondary level," Cesario is Viola, a woman. But the fact of male cross-dressing convention on the stage makes it difficult to fix the sexual identity of Cesario.

However, the dramatic illusion will not be dismissed sometimes even after the fact has been disclosed. It persists and lingers, turning illusion into reality. Take Viola’s disguise for instance. By assuming the male garb, Viola transforms herself in appearance into a man. The transformation goes even further beyond the surface, as implied in the play, with a possible change of the essence of her sexual identity. The Elizabethan sumptuary codes set up strict regulations of clothing for people of different social ranks and gender. Viola’s cross-dressing disguise explicitly illustrates the fashioning of one’s identity through clothing. It is a fashioning reflecting socially imposed and regulated construction on one’s gender identity. Viola calls herself “poor monster” (2.2.34), lamenting her dilemma of being a man in appearance and a woman in reality.<sup>3</sup> The sense of monstrosity Viola mentions about her disguise arises from the fashioning capacity of the male clothes since the moment she assumes. Her painful lamentation explains the making of one’s identity with the assumption of clothes. Stephen Greenblatt also points out the constitution of gender with the assumption of clothes when he glosses the implication of “poor monster” in his introduction of the play:

“Poor monster”: in *Twelfth Night*, clothes do not simply reveal or disguise identity; they partly constitute identity —or so Viola playfully imagines— making her a strange, hybrid creature. (Greenblatt 1997: 1761)

The duplicity of Viola-Cesario’s gender identity endows her / him a gender configuration difficult to be classified within a conventional gender framework. The role of Viola-Cesario becomes a site for the contesting forces of gender representation, and thus puts the conventional binary framework of gender into question.

The implication that the assumption of clothes has a deeper imprint on one’s identity than it might appear is further reflected in Orsino’s insistence on calling Viola, Cesario, with the male attires still on “her” when Viola’s real identity has been disclosed. Through Orsino’s insistence, it is implied that Viola’s feminine self will be acknowledged only when she returns to her female costume.

Finally, I would like to discuss the elusive boundary between the copy and the original involved in Viola’s disguise. Viola imitates her supposedly dead brother Sebastian when she assumes the male disguise, signalling the formation of identity through mirror image in the imaginary register (Lacan 1977: 4). Mistakenly recognized as Sebastian by Antonio, Viola, surprised and

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<sup>3</sup>Or, in meta-theatrical level, the boy actor laments his being a woman in appearance and a man in reality.

confounded by the possible survival of her twin brother, reveals her role model for her male disguise:

I my brother know  
 Yet living in my glass; even such and so  
 In favor was my brother, and he went  
 Still in this fashion, color, ornament,  
 For him I imitate. (3.4.379-83)

In other words, Viola's assumption of male role is an imitation of a role model, her brother Sebastian. Thus, the construction of a male identity here is depicted in terms of mirror image. Viola constructs a male identity with the imaginary projection and imitation of her brother. The mirror image also captures a sense of split ego Viola suffers in her disguise. The sense of split ego becomes a source of torture: Being a man in appearance, "he" woos Olivia on Orsino's behalf, and wins her love; being a woman in reality, "she" has to suppress love for Orsino.

The implication of Viola's disguise becomes more and more slippery. At certain point, the copy could even usurp the original. In the final recognition scene of the twins, the metaphor of perspective Orsino uses to characterize the identical twin resonates with a ring of ambiguity:

One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons,  
 A natural perspective, that is and is not! (5.1.216-17)

Hyder Edward Rollins enlists many explanations to the term "perspective." For example, Capell interprets "perspective" as "reflection": "this last enterer [Sebastian]... is surely a reflection of the other, an appearance of nature's forming that seems a body and is none" (Furness 1901: 299). Capell's interpretation turns Sebastian a reflection, thus an imitation, of Cesario—a reversal of the disguise plot. Another critic Halliwell takes "perspective" to mean a "mirror": "Shakespeare probably here means a simple mirror, such as either a looking-glass, or the natural mirror of water and other substances; or, perhaps, a mirror thus made by nature, which really is a reflected substance, but is merely a shadow, when considered in reference to its being a mirror" (299). Rollins himself annotates: "by '*natural* perspective' Orsino means that an effect has been produced by nature which is usually produced by art" (300). These different interpretations partly reflect the difficulty to settle down the complication of Viola's disguise into a simple conclusion that Viola is a copy of her brother Sebastian.

Antonio's ensuing remark of the division of self further illustrates the difficulty to distinguish the original from the copy:

How have you made division of yourself?  
An apple cleft in two is not more twin  
Than these two creatures. (5.1.222-24)

Cesario and Sebastian are as mirror reflections of one another to the other characters. But, who is substance, and who is shadow? To the other characters, Sebastian is a reflection, a shadow, of Cesario. But to Viola herself, her male disguise Cesario is a reflection, a shadow, of Sebastian. The final resolution, however, relies on the implication to take Sebastian as a reflection of Cesario.

In a sense, the male part of Viola-Cesario created from the disguise is assimilated into the twin brother: the figure of Cesario will be subsumed by Sebastian. Olivia’s seemingly problematic and arbitrary transference of passion from Cesario to Sebastian will be less arbitrary if the sumptuary imprint on one’s identity is taken into account. Olivia could substitute her object of love from Cesario to Sebastian because Viola impersonates her brother Sebastian when she disguises as a man. Since Olivia cannot marry Cesario, she could love another “Cesario” —Sebastian, making the latter a replacement of the former. In this connection, Sebastian becomes a reflection of Cesario. Sebastian comically comments on Olivia’s mistake in marrying himself in a misconception of a union with Cesario.

So comes it, lady, you have been mistook.  
But nature to her bias drew in that.  
You would have been contracted to a maid,  
Nor are you therein, by my life, deceived.  
You are betrothed both to a maid and man. (5.1.257-61)

Sebastian first points out the fact of mistaken identity in his betrothal with Olivia, who has married a total stranger, and concludes with a note of intervention from nature on their marriage with an emphasis on Olivia’s “correct” choice. But a “maid and man” in the last line is very interesting and produces many guesses. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, the Arden edition editors, adopt Mahood’s widely accepted annotation of “a maid and man” as “virgin youth” (1975: 145). Some scholars try to excavate different implications from the last line. Joseph Pequigney, for example, plays with the following possibility:

That “you are betroth’d both to a maid and man” is not a deception but precisely right: to “both” twins, the maid who elicited your love and whom you thought you were contracting to marry, and the man who accidentally and unbeknownst to anyone substituted for her, and to whom you are in fact engaged. (1995: 183)

Pequigney argues the line to favor his reading of the major characters, Orsino, Olivia, Viola, and Sebastian, to be bisexual (1995: 182). But for my part, the

last line serves as a textual suggestion for the conflation of identities in the character of Sebastian, making Olivia's marriage with him less problematic. Olivia's (lack of) response to the marriage due to mistaken identity indicates her acceptance of Sebastian. The masculine identity Viola creates in her disguise as Cesario does not disappear after the final disclosure of identities. It is incorporated into Sebastian. Sebastian becomes Cesario.

In conclusion, Viola's cross-dressing disguise illustrates the construction of gender identity through gender performance and clothing. The elusiveness of Viola-Cesario's gender identity suggests the fashioning capacity with female / male attires. Moreover, the male identity created from Viola's disguise does not evaporate with the final revelation. On the contrary, the fictional male part is to be materialized and subsumed in the character of Sebastian, facilitating Olivia's transference of passion from Cesario to Sebastian.

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