

**SHE'S THE MAN: GENDER DYNAMICS IN WILLIAM  
SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTH NIGHT***

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**Abstract:** More than any other Shakespearean play, *Twelfth Night* demonstrates how gender can be performed and impersonated with the use of voice, costume and mannerisms. The play explores the relationship between gender and desire, allowing us to understand the complex ways in which Shakespeare responded imaginatively to sex, gender and sexuality as determinants of human identity. The article also discusses various movie versions of the play.

**Key words:** Elizabethan performance, gender, identity, movie versions

William Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* (ca. 1601–2) is an improbable but entertaining fantasy that hides beneath its merry surface some of life's deepest truths. Indeed, behind all the humour displayed in this work of genius, a major truth that is both happy and sad is expressed: life is short and full of unpleasant events, so it is our duty to recognise and cherish real happiness if it comes our way.

In Shakespeare's time celebrating Christmas only began on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the twelfth night after Christmas being January 5-6, which marked the end of the festive season with the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem. Even if the theme of the play has little or nothing to do with the gifts of the Magi, it is well known that the period was one of gift-giving, partying and having fun even by breaking rules and conventions. People were allowed to play whatever roles they wanted, so that sometimes masters waited on their servants just for fun, while music, entertainment and riotous disorder were quite natural on such an occasion. The subtitle of Shakespeare's play is *What You Will*, which

may be a reference to free options and choices as fit for the occasion, rather than reflecting condescension.

It is obvious that in order to enjoy the play we must accept some impossible situations and use our willpower to change Shakespeare's land of make-believe into a real world. For instance, we must pretend that successful long-term relationships and lasting happiness can occur even in cases of mistaken identity, and we must strongly believe that fraternal twins of opposite sexes, dressed identically, are indistinguishable. We must also accept Illyria, the setting of *Twelfth Night*, as a real country, although it is obvious that it is important for the play's romantic atmosphere and nothing more. Illyria may have been suggested by the Roman comedy *Menæchmi*, the plot of which involves a pair of twins who are mistaken for each other like Shakespeare's Sebastian and Viola, but the play's setting has several Elizabethan English characteristics. For instance, the cry of 16<sup>th</sup> century London boatmen is used in the play by Viola:

Then westward, ho! Grace and good disposition 'tend your ladyship! (Act 3, Scene I, 66),

while *The Elephant*, a pub not far from the Globe Theatre, is recommended by Antonio to Sebastian as the best place to lodge in Illyria:

In the south suburb, at the Elephant, Is best to lodge. (Act 3, Scene III, 67)

However, in this comedy, just as in some other Shakespearean plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, space is irrelevant. Shakespeare's Illyria is but an illusion, just like Duke Orsino's falling in love with Olivia (which is actually falling in love with the idea of love) or Olivia's falling in love with Cesario (who is not a man, but Viola, a woman in disguise).

Viola and her twin brother, Sebastian, are separated as their ship sinks and reunited only later after having passed through various unusual situations. The play actually focuses on mistaken identity, but unlike in Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, where the errors are purely fortuitous, as nature alone has conspired to ridicule human complacency, in *Twelfth Night* Viola intentionally disguises herself as a man and takes the name of Cesario. Her twin brother, Sebastian, is also mistaken for Cesario, but only at

the end of the play. In both plays, the doppelgänger comes out of the sea, the supreme Shakespearean symbol of mysterious uncontrollable nature, as the result of an accident, a shipwreck: it is Nature that has arranged for two people to look so alike, it is Nature again that separates them and later on reunites them. But in Viola's case, one can observe the way in which human will interferes with Nature's pranks. The theatrical device of mistaken identity that Shakespeare used so deftly in his *Comedy of Errors* takes on a more realistic shape in *Twelfth Night*: the mistakes are caused by intentional disguise. Viola's disguise as a man, besides contributing to the complexity of the plot, seems to convey additional messages as well, by suggesting that sexes are arbitrary and women are just as resourceful as men in finding a way to solve problems.

Viola arrives at the palace of Duke Orsino of Illyria disguised as Cesario and soon (s)he becomes indispensable to the Duke, who regards this charming young courtier as his confidante and messenger to the fair Olivia, the lady the Duke is fond of.

As women could not perform on the Elizabethan stage, Viola's part had to be played in those days by a young man, which made disguise much easier. Almost every human society throughout history has made distinctions between male and female gender by the type of clothing they were expected to wear, and most societies have had a set of norms or even laws defining what type of clothing was appropriate for each gender. The Elizabethan era was a period of time dominated by class structure, with the consequence that people were not allowed to dress as they liked. They had to obey the so-called Sumptuary Laws, dictating the kind of clothing people had to wear according to rank, status or social position. For instance, the *English Sumptuary Law* of 1574 (*The Statutes of Apparel*) stated the following:

Note that also the meaning of this order is not to prohibit a servant from wearing any cognizance of his master, or henchmen, heralds, pursuivants at arms; runners at jousts, tourneys, or such martial feats, and such as wear apparel given them by the Queen, and such as shall have license from the Queen for the same. (<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-costume.htm>)

The clause applied to actors and their costumes too. Historical realism was to come as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so on the Elizabethan stage, whatever the play and whichever era the play was set in, the actors wore the costumes of their own time.

Different coloured clothing, the types of materials and fabrics (velvet, silk, lace, cotton and so on) represented codes the meanings of which could be easily deciphered by the audience. For example, yellow was associated with envy, greed and treachery – this is why Olivia is so shocked to see Malvolio wearing the yellow stockings and crossed garters recommended to him by drunken Sir Toby and the clever Maria, who together engineer his downfall.

The distinction between men and women in the way of clothing helped the young male actors of the time to successfully impersonate women on the stage. Cross-dressing, which was used as a sign of protest by a number of emancipated 19<sup>th</sup> century women, did not in this case reflect a rebellious countering of norms; on the contrary, it meant obeying the rules of performance making, especially when the play dealt with mistaken identities.

The concept of mistaken identity is doubled in this play in a more complex way and on a different level than in *The Comedy of Errors*, in which two pairs of male twins contribute to creating the imbroglio; Shakespeare sticks to just one set of twins in *Twelfth Night*, but by making Viola disguise herself as a man, he establishes a second kind of mistaking identity: the other characters in the play mistake Viola for a man, and later they mistake Sebastian for Viola/Cesario. Gender ambiguities are inherent in the play's cross-dressing. Viola's disguise places her in confusing situations: on the one hand she falls in love with Orsino and cannot reveal her true feelings, as he treats her as a man, and on the other hand beautiful Olivia falls in love with Viola/Cesario at first sight, also mistaking her for a man.

As Viola has put on a mask to create another self, she cannot give up her disguise, even though she feels sorry for deceiving Olivia while experiencing personal distress of the same kind. Viola/Cesario tries to behave like a man, and although she is described by Malvolio as “not old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy” (Act 1, Scene V, 59), (s)he knows how to obtain what (s)he wants.

Still, in comparison with other Shakespearean women in disguise, such as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* or Rosalind in *As You Like It*, who seem to be completely comfortable in their impersonations and always in control, Viola is more vulnerable, more hesitant. Sometimes she seems very boyish, but there are times when there is some awkwardness in her trying to fill the role that she has to play, just as there are cases when

Viola/Cesario behaves like a woman. During her first encounter with Olivia she refers to her assumed identity and suggests that she is playing a role:

OLIVIA: Are you a comedian?

VIOLA/CESARIO: No, my profound heart: and yet, by the very fangs of malice, I swear, I am not that I play. (Act 1, Scene V, 60)

As Olivia has previously covered her face with a veil, Viola's female curiosity can no longer be repressed. It is both the curiosity of any woman and that of a woman in love, who needs to see the face of her rival and compare it with her own, that makes her quite abruptly ask Olivia to let her see her face. Under any other circumstances, Olivia would have regarded Viola's behaviour as suspicious, but apparently she is already too fascinated by the looks and the voice of the young messenger to hesitate, especially as she takes Cesario's request as the proof of his interest in her.

VIOLA: Good Madam, let me see your face.

OLIVIA: Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face?  
You are now out  
of your text: but we will draw the curtain and shew you the picture. (Act 1,  
Scene V, 60)

Olivia has long been accustomed to the admiration of men and expects to receive compliments praising her attractive looks, yet she hears something quite unexpected from Viola/Cesario, who – like a jealous woman – doubts the natural quality of Olivia's beauty, suspecting a counterfeited beauty.

OLIVIA: Look you, sir, such a one as I was, this presents: Is't not well done?  
(Unveiling)

VIOLA: Excellently done, if God did all. (Act 1, Scene V, 60)

The discourse then takes a rapid shift from female maliciousness to the seriousness of a messenger's duty, the flattery of euphemistic talk replacing the venom of envy, because Viola is honest enough to admit that she is in the presence of true, genuine

beauty and Cesario has a message to deliver. Viola/Cesario recites a text that conforms to all the conventional codes of courtly manners, including admiration for the lady's beauty and praise of her virtue under the form of a complaint about her cruelty, to which the well-known Shakespearean idea of transmitting beauty to the next generations is added, just as in his so-called *procreation sonnets* (Sonnets 1 to 17):

VIOLA: 'Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white  
Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on;  
Lady, you are the cruel'st she alive,  
If you will lead these graces to the grave,  
And leave the world no copy. (Act 1, Scene V, 60)

The idea of same-sex attraction and gender blending, presented in a roundabout way that makes some of Shakespeare's sonnets cryptic, is a characteristic of this play too. Olivia feels an irresistible attraction for Viola/Cesario, in spite of the latter's numerous warnings, while Duke Orsino is continually demanding to have Cesario by his side, in spite of his declared love for Olivia. At the end of the play each of them actually gets the correct version of the same person, as the twins are described as indistinguishable:

ANTONIO: An apple, cleft in two, is no more twin  
Than these two creatures. Which is Sebastian? (Act 5, Scene 1, 60)

The relationship between Sebastian and Antonio, which has often been neglected and placed in the background of Viola's relationship with Orsino, is also interesting and somewhat confusing. Antonio had saved Sebastian's life, and his deep affection is expressed in words that reveal feelings deeper than mere friendship:

ANTONIO: That most ingrateful boy, there, by your side,  
From the rude sea's enrag'd and foamy mouth  
Did I redeem: a wreck past hope he was;  
His life I gave him, and did thereto add  
My love, without retention or restraint,  
All his in dedication: for his sake,  
Did I expose myself, pure for his love,

Into the danger of this adverse town; [...]  
And for three months before  
(No interim, not a minute's vacancy),  
Both day and night did we keep company. (Act 5, Scene 1, 73)

The emotional language in which he describes Sebastian, and his anger at his betrayal, have led some commentators to suggest that there is a homoerotic attachment between the two characters – at least on Antonio's side.

ANTONIO: If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant.  
SEBASTIAN: If you will not undo what you have done – that is kill him whom you have recovered – desire it not. (Act 2, Scene I, 61)

Other commentators have criticised this attempt to impose 20<sup>th</sup> century sexual and emotional categories on the world of Renaissance drama. They argue that Antonio's impassioned expressions of friendship do not have any suspicious connotations, and that the relationship between these men is nothing but an example of the strong and celebrated tradition of close male comradeship in the English Renaissance. It is suggestive, however, that Antonio's demand *let me be your servant* sounds like the courtly love rhetoric of lover as servant which Petrarchan love poetry had popularised. (<http://jembloomfield.suite101.com/antonio-in-twelfth-night-a29871>)

Antonio is apparently taken with Sebastian as an epitome of Renaissance beauty, a handsome youth, still uncertain about his tastes, feelings and/or sexual orientation. The beauty of Olivia appears so striking to Sebastian that he consents to marry her on the spot, without thinking twice. One of Shakespeare's favourite themes, the difference between appearance and reality, finds suitable illustration in Sebastian, who is quick to judge by appearances. Compared with her brother, Viola is a determined young woman who knows what she wants – and she wants to become Orsino's wife; still, when Malvolio tries to describe the disguised Viola to Olivia, he uses words which seem to describe not only an adolescent but also an androgynous person.

Viola and Sebastian may look very much alike, but their behaviour and ways of thinking are different. Viola is a clever, resourceful and independent person who

deliberately disguises herself in order to protect herself and preserve her freedom. She never abandons hope and thinks of her brother as having been saved from drowning, just like herself.

VIOLA: And what should I do in Illyria?

My brother he is in Elysium.

Perchance he's not drown'd; - What think you, sailors?

CAPTAIN: It is perchance that you yourself were saved.

VIOLA: O, my poor brother! And so, perchance may he be. (Act I, Scene II, 57)

By contrast with his sister, Sebastian is less optimistic and has lost all hope that Viola may be alive, so he sheds bitter tears when he thinks of her.

SEBASTIAN: [...] my stars shine darkly over me; the malignancy of my fate might, perhaps, distemper yours [...] some hour before you took me from the breach of the sea, was my sister drowned. [...] she is drowned already, sir, with salt water, though I seem to drown her remembrance again with more. (Act II, Scene 1, 61)

He is also an accommodating character. This is why he needs the protection of a mature friend like Antonio and then submits to Olivia's decision that they should be married. Olivia, as suggested by Jean Howard in her *Crossdressing, the Theater, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England*, is in a way a masculinised woman. Olivia, she writes,

is a woman of property, headstrong and initially intractable, and she lacks any discernable male relatives [...] to control her or her fortune (Howard, 1988: 432).

Seen in this light, Olivia appears to be the dominant presence in her relationship with Sebastian, just as Antonio had been in his relationship with the youth. The ambiguous words Sebastian uses when telling Olivia:

You are betrothed both to a maid and a man (Act 5, Scene 1, 74)



may also be interpreted as him acknowledging that he has had a passionate relationship with Antonio. This is the last line Sebastian speaks in the play, a cryptic statement that sounds like a warning, presaging a questionable domestic atmosphere.

Beautiful and sweet as she might seem, Olivia is very much like Viola, a woman of action, strong-willed, intelligent and capable of taking care of herself. Both Olivia and Viola fight for what they want, leaving contemplative meditation to men like Orsino and Sebastian.

Just like Sebastian, Orsino – who is older but none the wiser – readily agrees to marry Viola/Cesario, without even having seen her in her *maiden's weeds*, while the words he utters upon making such a hasty decision sound as cryptic as Sebastian's:

[...] 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. (Act 5, Scene 1, 75)

Orsino's love declaration is rather bizarre or at least strangely phrased, as he continues to address Viola by her assumed male name, even after her true identity is revealed. He never calls her by her real name, continuing to recognise Cesario as a legitimate identity for his future wife. A possible continuation of the disguise in their home is alluded to, in which Viola, dressed up as a woman, would meet the expectations of Orsino's desire to have a mistress.

The complexity of the play has always been regarded as making it challenging for actors, stage and movie directors - hence the large number of performances given all over the world, as well as the numerous adaptations of it for the stage, the silver screen, radio and television. It is interesting to observe that in all cases the stage and/or movie directors have chosen actresses to perform the double role of Viola and Sebastian, that some of the very best actors and actresses have tried to match up to the demands imposed by the mix-ups of the comedy, and that some of the most lasting achievements in this genre are still regarded as great movies today.

A short silent adaptation was released by the Vitagraph Studios as early as 1910, with Florence Turner playing the part of Viola.

The 1996 *Twelfth Night* movie directed by Trevor Nunn and adapted to be set in the 19th century employed a group of excellent actors, including Imogen Stubbs as Viola, Helena Bonham Carter as Olivia, Toby Stephens as Duke Orsino and Ben Kingsley as Feste, the Clown. The film also features Mel Smith as Sir Toby, Richard E. Grant as Sir Andrew, Imelda Staunton as Maria and Nigel Hawthorne as Malvolio.

The Shakespearean spirit is present in spite of the 19<sup>th</sup> century setting, with references to swords and other weapons being carefully preserved and strengthened by the assumed military ranks of the male characters. The movie director's vision is rather a gloomy one, as observed by Peter Holland in an article entitled "The Dark Pleasures of Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*", published in the *Shakespeare Magazine*:

The darkness of the play is palpable on screen. It is there not just in the gloomy autumnal landscape of the film's world but also in the oppressive interiors of the buildings. Viola transforms Olivia's house from a house of mourning by the simple expedient of opening the curtains to let light flood in. It is also there in the militarism of Orsino's kingdom, where soldiers chase Antonio when he is recognized, and where the shipwrecked Viola and sailors scurry for cover when a troop of Orsino's horsemen investigate the debris of the wreck on the seashore. (<http://www.shakespearemag.com/spring97/12night.asp>)

As a specialist in staging Shakespeare, Peter Holland (Director Designate of the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon, England) observes that Trevor Nunn's choice of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for his movie was dictated by the fact that this was the most relevant period for gender contrast in all respects: clothes, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships.

Nunn has chosen to set the film in a 19th-century Illyria (actually mostly filmed in Cornwall) because it is a world where the gender gap is strongly seen both in the extreme contrast of clothing (Nunn calls it "the dress silhouettes") and in social attitudes. It is a society where the class structures of the play's world are immediately comprehensible, where it is genuinely transgressive for Maria, Olivia's servant, to marry Sir Toby, Olivia's kinsman, and where Malvolio's final public humiliation is all the more painful for being witnessed by the servants over whom he would normally have had authority. (<http://www.shakespearemag.com/spring97/12night.asp>)

The efforts Viola makes in order to get into not only the shape of a young man but also the world of men, which are never clearly revealed by Shakespeare, are made obvious in the movie and can be visualised in detail:

But, above all, the choice of period makes clear and powerful the journey Viola has to make. Nunn shows Viola changing her silhouette into Cesario's: cutting her hair, binding her breasts, putting on men's clothing. But she then has to negotiate the world of male activity: she must relearn how to walk or how to yawn and learn new skills like fencing or, most awkwardly for her, how to have a conversation with her master while Orsino is in the bath. The distance she travels to make that transformation is clear, and the profundity of its effects on her and on all who come into contact with her is equally striking. (<http://www.shakespearemag.com/spring97/12night.asp>)

*Shakespeare in Love* (1998), directed by John Madden and written by Marc Norman and the playwright Tom Stoppard, contains several references to *Twelfth Night*. It is a charming story which attempts to put together an imaginary account of the period in which the young Shakespeare, lacking money and suffering from writer's block, is trying to write *Romeo and Juliet*. Against this background of writing about love and desperate lovers, he meets Viola, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, a strong-willed and independent young woman, who disguises herself as a boy to become an actor in spite of all restrictions, and she becomes his true Muse. Near the end of the movie, Queen Elizabeth I (Judi Dench) asks Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) to write a comedy for the Twelfth Night holiday, which he starts with Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow) on his mind.

One of the most interesting recent adaptations is Andy Fickman's 2006 film *She's the Man*, which modernises the story as a contemporary American teenage comedy (as *10 Things I Hate About You* did with *The Taming of the Shrew*). It is set in an American prep school named Illyria where Duke Orsino (Channing Tatum) is sharing his room on the campus with the newly arrived Sebastian Hastings (Amanda Bynes). In fact the Duke's new room-mate is Viola, Sebastian's twin sister, whose girls' soccer team has just been disbanded and who desperately wants to play in order to beat the Cornwall team and humiliate her ex-boyfriend, Justin. While Viola is playing soccer with the boys, she is

also covering for Sebastian (James Kirk), who has gone to a music contest in London with his new band.

Unlike Viola, who is a fine athlete and very good at playing soccer, Sebastian is a romantic boy, fond of music and poetry. When he meets Olivia (Laura Ramsey) for the first time he is impressed not only by the passionate kiss he receives from her but also by finding out that this girl can recite his poems.

Besides using the Shakespearean device of making the fake Sebastian the Duke's friend and confidante, the movie director also included here the "courtship rehearsal" employed in *As You Like It*, when Rosalind/Ganymede pretends to counsel Orlando to cure him of being in love.

Amanda Bynes as Viola/Sebastian is simply charming, if not always convincing. In a much sunnier atmosphere than that of Trevor Nunn's movie, the American Viola binds her breasts, tries on wigs and make-up, men's T shirts, blue jeans and suits. Disguise in itself not being enough for this modern background, the young girl freely uses boyish gestures and language in order to make her *campus-Sebastian* more credible. She follows various men in the street, trying to imitate their movements and gestures, with her efforts at times resulting in ridiculous situations. Extra help is provided by adding to the cast a couple of Viola's friends who pretend to be dumped girlfriends, to increase Sebastian's credibility as a ladykiller among his dorm mates. Shifting roles in a hurry, Viola tries to run around and do both her and her brother's jobs at the Junior League carnival, performing a genuine *tour de force*, dressing and undressing, changing places, avoiding in turn her mother and Monique, Sebastian's ex-girlfriend and managing to fool both of them. In expanding the basic premise and adding comedic elements, the movie director used both Mack Sennett chase elements and the *snowball effect*, common clichés in cartoons and modern theatrics.

The American Viola is a real tomboy, although she is supposed to be and behave like a Southern belle. Her behaviour at the course for débutantes is outrageous, shocking and even disgusting (on purpose) at times. She hates the artificial pretended delicate feminine gestures taught there and protests by entering the room at a totally ungraceful pace and by eating in a distasteful manner. The course is a fiasco, culminating in Viola, Olivia and Monique fighting in the restroom in a most unladylike way.

Sebastian/Viola succeeds in playing soccer with the boys, her team is victorious, and the game ends with the Duke quoting the words of Malvolio in Shakespeare's play:

Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them. (Act 2, Scene V, 65)

The final part of the movie takes everybody to the débutante ball where Olivia comes in accompanied by the real Sebastian and Viola – finally agreeing to wear a dress – has the Duke as her formal date.

Although inspired by Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *She's the Man* is a much lighter version of the story, in which it is entertainment and not serious considerations about life and its problems that comes first. Some of the important characters in Shakespeare's play (Sir Toby, Andrew Aguecheek, Maria, Feste etc) are merely shadowy presences in the movie, acting as necessary but not indispensable class or dorm mates, while Malvolio simply becomes Malcolm, Feste's pet: a hairy tarantula. Much of Shakespeare's philosophical thought and wit is in this way lost, the intention of the producer being directed towards providing amusing situations and images instead of entertaining but at the same time deep dialogues.

Nevertheless, the main message of this Shakespearean romantic comedy is still there: love comes in various shapes, love means trouble and pain – or, as the Duke puts it in the movie: when you're in love *you have issues*, but love can also be the most beautiful thing in the world. Moreover, unless we experience a certain situation, we do not know what it is like; unless we walk in somebody else's shoes we don't know what he/she really feels. Shakespeare's comic, romantic tale of loss and love, disguise and gender continues to teach wise life lessons, no matter what shape it comes or will come in.

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### **Movies**

*Twelfth Night* (1996) *Director*: Trevor Nunn *Writers*: William Shakespeare (play), Trevor Nunn (screenplay). *Stars*: Helena Bonham Carter, Richard E. Grant, Imogen Stubbs, Steven Mackintosh.

*Shakespeare in Love* (1998) *Director*: John Madden *Writers*: Marc Norman, Tom Stoppard. *Stars*: Gwyneth Paltrow, Joseph Fiennes, Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush, Judi Dench.

*She's the Man* (2006) *Director*: Andy Fickman, *Writers*: Ewan Leslie (story and screenplay), Karen McCullah Lutz (screenplay), Kirsten Smith (screenplay). *Stars*: Amanda Bynes, Laura Ramsey, Channing Tatum, James Kirk