



Gender as an incidental aspect of love in *Twelfth Night*

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Abstract:

Orsino thus realizes that he loves Viola as a female rather than Olivia as he had been subliminally attracted to his effeminate eunuch in the play throughout and now that it is disclosed that she is indeed the beautiful Viola it is Viola in her female dress that he loves instead. Twelfth Night thus discloses, with the ready falling in love of Olivia with Sebastian and Orsino with Viola at the end of the play that gender is incidental to love as it is the person and character of Viola that Orsino has come to love and that indeed Olivia had fallen in love with Viola as Cesario.

Keywords: Twelfth Night; Gender; Sexual ambiguity; Love; Romance

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, gender is depicted as incidental and indeed accidental to the occasion of love. This is seen in the way Olivia falls for Viola as Cesario and is ready to transfer her affections to Sebastian once it is revealed that Cesario is actually a woman, Viola and Orsino's ready affection for Viola upon the revelation that she is female rather than the male eunuch Cesario she had disguised herself as. Love thus exceeds gender and it is revealed to be invested rather in one's persona as Olivia falls for Viola as Cesario and Orsino likewise falls for Viola once it is revealed that she is female rather than the male eunuch he had taken her for.

If music be the food of love, play on
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die
That strain again, it had a dying fall.
O, It came o'er my ear like the sweet sound

That breathes upon a bank of violets

Stealing and giving odour. Enough, no more

'Tis not so sweet now as it was before. (1.1, 1-9)

In the above quote Orsino is seen to be thoroughly love sick and filled with longing for Olivia, and he is indeed sick as his love for her is unrequited, thus breathing upon a bank of violets, stealing and giving odour and not was sweet as it was before because his pursuit of Olivia is in vain given that she is in mourning and refuses his advances in wooing her.

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid

For such disguise as haply shall become

The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke,

Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him.(1.2,50-54)

Viola disguises herself as a male in order to get close to Orsino, whom she in fact, is in love with as she has heard of his noble heritage. This occasion however leads to much complication and a love triangle when upon being sent by Orsino to woo Olivia Olivia falls for Cesario whom she is convinced is a beautiful male who is more enticing than Orsino.

Make me a willow cabin at your gate
And call upon my soul within the house,
Write loyal cantons of contemned love
And sing them loud even in the dead of night

Halloo your name to the reverberate hills,

And make the babbling gossip of the air



Cry out 'Olivia!' O, you should not rest
Between the elements of air and earth
But you should pity me.(1.5,257-265)

In the above quote Viola as Cesario renders an intensely moving speech pleading for Olivia to return love to Orsino but the passage of communication as a meditation on Olivia's riveting beauty that confounds nature moves Olivia to fall for the messenger Cesario instead as she is moved by the poetical ode to her beauty and believes it originates from Cesario rather than Orsino. This is the occasion of much complication for Viola as she cannot and does not love Olivia as she in fact a woman herself and is rather, in love with Orsino, thus creating a love triangle.

Oh Time, thou must untangle this, not I.
It is too hard a know for me t' untie(2.2 40-41)

Viola is caught in a deep dilemma and love triangle as Olivia has fallen for her as Orsino's messenger after her moving speech on Olivia's beauty with the result that Viola does not know how to escape the situation as she indeed is not in love with Olivia but rather her rival in love as she loves Orsino too while Orsino pines for Olivia.

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. Was not this love indeed?
We men may say more, swear more, but indeed,
Our shows are more than will; for still we prove
Much in our vows, but little in our love."(2.4 110-118)

Olivia is here disclosing her plight to Orsino who does not realize she is talking about herself as she has disguised herself as Cesario to get close to Orsino and she discloses that she pines for Orsino as much as he pines for Olivia. She

discloses that she has been waiting patiently for Orsino to see beyond the concealment but he has proven to be ignorant of her love and pining for him.

O, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful
In the contempt and anger of his lip!
A murderous guilt shows not itself more soon
Than love that would seem hid. Love's night is noon.-

Cesario, by the roses of the spring
By maidenhood, honor, truth, and everything,
I love thee so, that, maugre all thy pride,
Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide.
Do not extort thy reasons from this clause,
For that I woo, though therefor hast no cause;
But rather reason thus with reason fetter:
Love sought is good, but given unsought is better.(3.1, 143-153)

The moment of complication for Viola has come when Olivia declares her love for her as Cesario and tries to convince her that love given unsought is better than love that is sought, like Orsino's love for her that remains unrequited. Viola of course is confounded by this as she loves of course Orsino rather than Olivia as she is a woman.

What relish is this? How runs the stream?
Or am I mad, or else this is a dream.
Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep;
If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep! (4.1,58-61)

Sebastian in the above quote is confused by Olivia's interest in him but at the same time elated by his new found love. Olivia has of course mistaken Sebastian for Cesario or Viola, and it will indeed be requited love this time as Sebastian is attracted to Olivia while Viola as a female is not as her maleness is a mere disguise.

But when in other habits you are seen,
Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen(5.1, 376-379)

Orsino thus realizes that he loves Viola as a female rather than Olivia as he had been



subliminally attracted to his effeminate eunuch in the play throughout and now that it is disclosed that she is indeed the beautiful Viola it is Viola in her female dress that she loves instead. *Twelfth Night* thus discloses, with the ready falling in love of Olivia with Sebastian and Orsino with Viola at the end of the play that gender is incidental to love as it is the person and character of Viola that Orsino has come to love and that indeed Olivia had fallen in love with Viola as Cesario.

Reference:

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.