

## Gender in *Twelfth Night*

At the heart of *Twelfth Night* lies an exploration of gender that suggests that it is performative and fluid, rather than preordained and fixed. The audience only hears Viola's name on stage in Act 5 when her twin brother, Sebastian, uses evidence other than her clothes (she is dressed identically to him) to know her. Before this moment, she is called Cesario (her adopted male name) and is taken by everyone to be a young man. The early modern audience would have been expecting such reversals and inversions of role and status from the title of the play. *Twelfth Night*, a feast celebrated on 6 January, was a wild anarchy in which unpredictability reigned: masters became servants and servants ruled the proceedings. Into this chaotic social mix Shakespeare threw gender, allowing men to be as terrified as women when faced with a fight (Viola/Cesario and Sir Andrew in 3.4) and women to have more command of their households than men (compare the languid Orsino in 1.1 with the efficient Olivia in 1.5). Emma Smith argues that Shakespeare uses his plays 'to comment on, rather than merely to occupy generic expectations'. Perhaps the ending of *Twelfth Night* can be seen as one such commentary, leading us to question the apparent given of marriages (of men to women) being the necessary conclusion of a comedy.

Adopting the clothes of another gender, being gender-fluid or trans might seem very twenty-first century, but *Twelfth Night* is full of such gender experimentation. Viola's immediate decision on arrival in Illyria to dress as a man seems arbitrary, yet the rest of the action depends on it. In some ways she seems to keep Sebastian alive by imitating him. She says to the sea captain 'Conceal me what I am' suggesting that clothes alone will do it and soon afterwards we hear Orsino exclaiming over Cesario's youthful face: 'Diana's lip/ Is not more smooth and rubious [...] /And all is semblative a woman's part.' (1.5.30–31, 33). Her femininity is commented on throughout the play, as Sophie Duncan has noted, as a sign of unformed manhood. Her characterisation therefore 'troubles gender boundaries' as she is not straightforwardly either male or female. Of course, there would have been a double pleasure when the play was first performed, as the early modern audience were watching a young man playing the part of a young woman playing a feminine young man; the 'master-mistress' of Shakespeare's sonnets (the name the older speaker gives to his younger male lover, for example, in sonnet 20) is here given dramatic expression. The use of boy actors makes the exploration of what it is to be male and female much more experimental. Watching three male actors playing the dominant roles of Maria, Viola and Olivia in the Globe 2012 all-male production of *Twelfth Night* gives us a sense of the frisson such a performance might have had. Interestingly, the costumes that women commonly wore in the early modern period flattened breasts and concealed hips, so in a sense the audience would have found the exploration of 'how things might be different' perfectly familiar as boys could convincingly impersonate girls on stage.

Cesario's gender is fluid and performative as we see her adopt her male role confidently when with her master and also with Olivia, although we are simultaneously given access to her thoughts and fears as she falls for her master and becomes the object of Olivia's (unknowing) same-sex desire. Her asides and ambiguous phrases offer us this double commentary on gender:

Olivia: Are you a comedian?

Viola: No, my profound heart; and yet by the very fangs of malice, I swear, I am not that I play.  
(1.5.151–153).

In these ways we rarely see gender as binary in *Twelfth Night*. The scene in which she indirectly talks about her female identity to Orsino is painful, as she acknowledges that her sister's history is 'A blank, my lord. She never told her love, / But let concealment like a worm i'th'bud / Feed on her damask cheek.' (2.4.106–108); the natural imagery of decay expresses all too sharply her sense of the inevitability of her death. Being beyond binary might be seen as comic play acting and a chance to voice her hidden desire for Orsino indirectly in the Olivia messenger scenes, but Shakespeare also makes us face the potential loss of identity when trapped in a disguise that is not fully one's own.

Other characters in the play are shown as being both male and female and, as Sophie Duncan notes, it isn't only in visual display (as in Viola's clothes as Cesario) but in verbal commentaries. Sebastian weeps when confiding in Antonio his grief at the loss of his sister, explaining: 'I am yet so near the manners of my mother, that [...] mine eyes will tell tales of me.' (2.1.29–31). Antonio, proclaimed as a pirate by Orsino, rescues Sebastian from the shipwreck and is shown looking out for him on their arrival in Illyria. His devotion is passionate: 'If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant.' (2.2.25) He risks his life in pursuing Sebastian. Maria, in engineering the plot to bring down Malvolio, assumes mastery of writing, stage-directing and 'male' authority, while her accomplices (Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Fabian) admire her cleverness, trailing in her assertive wake:

Maria: If you will see it, follow me.

Sir Toby: To the gates of Tartar, thou most excellent devil of wit! (2.5.169–170)

Her position at the top of this hierarchy within the household is doubly interesting, as her social and gender roles are flipped.

The many doubles and two-handed alliances in *Twelfth Night* reveal how flimsy gender divisions are. The brief verbal jousting between Feste and Viola/Cesario in 3.1 shows us how equally they are matched. Feste teases Cesario for his lack of a beard and Cesario comments on Feste's role as a fool, which is not far from her own balancing act in playing a male part. They understand each other; gender is irrelevant. Sir Andrew is in many ways a parody of an abused woman (see 1.3 and 2.4) where Sir Toby keeps him hanging on with false promises, appears to admire his dancing and other 'talents' and tricks him into parting with money for his own ends. Maria, like a male accomplice, is part of this charade; the final scene in which she gains marriage to Sir Toby as 'recompense' whereas Sir Andrew gets a vicious and scornful attack, exposes their abuse of power. We become adept at seeing how gender isn't exclusive in Feste's songs, where a male voice laments that he is 'slain by a fair cruel maid' (2.4.52). This is a song that Orsino has asked for and instructs Cesario to listen to, but it expresses Viola's real fears of dying without telling her love as much as his own imaginary loss at being rejected by Olivia. Orsino's claims that women cannot feel as deeply as men is challenged by Feste's barbed comments and by Cesario's interjections, such as 'Ay, but I know — [...] Too well what owe women to men may owe' (2.4.99, 101). This counterpoint undermines Orsino's misunderstanding of gender. The openly expressed suffering of both male and female characters in the play, plus this kind of ironic commentary, give the lie to such simplifications of gender division.

Critical views change over time so that in the 1950s comedy was seen as a secure genre that, especially in its final moments, reasserts the 'normal' in the celebration of heterosexual marriage. We now question C. L. Barber's judgement that festive comedy 'renews the meaning of normal relations'. The whole point of the play, Emma Smith argues, is to challenge normal. The final

moments of Trevor Nunn's 1996 film demonstrate the earlier view as Cesario is transformed back into Viola and, dancing in a reassuringly voluminous dress, she and Orsino kiss to seal their union, like a collective sigh of relief that gender stability has been restored. But on the Elizabethan stage such relief would not be apparent as her part would have been played by a man; it would have been a queer moment instead. It is interesting that binary models and identities post-date the Renaissance period, so Barber's reading of comedy perhaps tells us more about male anxiety at women doing traditionally male jobs in the post-war period than about early modern gender identities. The expectation of resolution in heterosexual marriage is questioned by Cesario's continued presence as a boy on stage: '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.' (5.1.362–365) The sense of certainty is finally questioned by Feste's melancholy song, which expresses the isolation of the speaker, giving us an embittered view of marriage. Surviving in a masculine identity, it suggests, is a lonely and hopeless business: 'By swaggering could I never thrive, / For the rain it raineth every day' (5.1.376–377). The subtitle of *Twelfth Night* (What you Will) pulls the audience into reflecting on our own 'will' or desire. How do we respond to the questions the play asks about the nature of gender when, as Feste notes, 'Nothing that is so is so.' (4.1.6–7)?