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How Gender Subversion Reveals the Role of Societal Standards in Limiting the Nature of Desire

*Twelfth Night* is a comedy play by William Shakespeare, touching on themes of love, gender, and disguise. By combining these elements, Shakespeare creates a puzzling and entertaining situation in which characters foolishly act out for the sake of their emotions. It is through the character of Viola, more often seen in her disguise as Cesario, who captures these main themes collectively to allow her to stand out against the other characters. In using her disguise to subvert her gender, Shakespeare was able to depict the nature of desire to be based in one’s actions and characteristics, with only social boundaries to limit it.

Viola’s perceived gender did not influence others’ attraction to her, but rather the social implications either facilitated or hindered the already-established attraction. For instance, Olivia was entranced by Cesario almost immediately in their first meeting. After Cesario leaves, Olivia swoons over his different qualities that she fell for, both physical and personal. “‘I am a gentleman.’ I’ll be sworn thou art. / Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit / Do give thee fivefold blazon” (Shakespeare I.v.296-298). She comments on physical features such as his face and limbs, but also to qualities such as his speech and mannerisms. The word “tongue” in this quote is used as metonymy, having that physical feature represent Cesario’s words as he delivers Orsino’s love letters. Olivia, overall, became infatuated with him because of his charisma, the physical beauty was not enough to make her desire him so deeply. Another

indicator of her attraction to his characteristics was her marriage to Sebastian. Although Sebastian and Viola were twins and looked exactly the same, they possessed very different personalities. “But nature to her bias drew in that” (V.i.272). Here, Sebastian is saying that, because of the perceived natural order that man and woman should be together, Olivia was more inclined to choose him in the end. Even so, when Olivia was first introduced to Cesario, there was no apparent social complication. As far as she was aware, Cesario was a man, and therefore their relationship would have been easily accepted and normal.

Unlike Olivia, Orsino was bound by societal standards. We see him, as well, fall for Cesario. “Thou say thou art a man. Diana’s lip / Is not more smooth and rubious, thy small pipe / Is as maiden’s organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative of a woman’s part” (I.iv.34-37). He compares Cesario to the goddess of youth and beauty, holding him in even higher regard. While referencing Cesario’s shrill voice, Orsino uses words such as “pipe” and “organ” to describe his throat. These words are often seen as references with more sexual connotations, possibly referencing genitalia. Orsino views Cesario as everything a woman would be with his extremely feminine qualities, without actually being a woman. The simple fact that Cesario is not a woman prevents Orsino from fully expressing his attraction as it would not be deemed acceptable by society. Even so, he never rejects Cesario as a partner. In Act 5, when Cesario’s true identity is revealed to be Viola, Orsino addresses her in the name of her disguise. “We will not part from hence.– 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” (V.i.408-411). Orsino is telling Cesario that once he changes his “habits,” or clothing, he can become his wife. But the use of the word “habits” is an interesting choice as habits often refers to an action that someone repeats. When

Orsino says “you are seen,” the phrase can be taken in the literal sense that Viola can be seen as woman in her appropriate attire, but can also have a deeper meaning as Orsino wants society to view her as a woman. In calling her Cesario, it shows that Orsino still views them as the same people, with the only difference being this change of gender. He originally fell in love with Cesario, but could not marry him. Now that Cesario is revealed to be a woman, the restricting boundary has been broken and the two can be married.

Viola offers the best insight into this concept as she is uniquely aware of gender dynamics through her two personas’ experiences as a man and a woman. Following Olivia’s attempt to gift Cesario with a ring, we see Viola speak through her own voice to address the conflicts that exist for her male and female sides. “What will become of this? As I am man, / My state is desperate for my master’s love. / As I am woman (now, alas the day!), / What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!” (II.ii.36-39). She is aware that as a man, she cannot have Orsino’s love, making her even more desperate to receive it. As a woman, she knows that it is impossible for her to return Olivia’s love. She clarifies the sides of her masculine and feminine identities by addressing them both, primarily in how they are limiting. Viola even more directly states this issue of her disguise’s effect on her attraction towards Orsino:

If nothing lets to make us happy both, But this my masculine usurped attire,

Do not embrace me till each circumstance Of place, time, fortune, do cohere and jump That I am Viola; (V.i.261-264)

Here, “lets” means to prevent, telling the audience that she sees her disguise as the reason for stopping her happiness and marriage with Orsino. She even warns him to not embrace her until it he is sure that he is Viola, an indicator that some type of consequence could occur if he were to embrace her as Cesario.

Through these characters and their dynamics, the audience is able to view the intertwining of society and its rules with how one can express their desire. Viola shows the complexities and complications that one’s gender can encounter, and how that limits the nature of desire.

Ultimately, whatever gender she was expressing to others, they still loved her for her personal characteristics, words, and actions. The reality of them being with her though, was dependent on her gender as marriage was only allowed between a man and a woman. This clever use of her disguise created a somewhat different reality that desire existed in, restricting it and separating it from what was deemed acceptable.

**Works Cited**

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night.* Folger Shakespeare Library, 1993.