

### The vision of Gender Cross-Dressing in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night"

**Abstract:** My topic, 'The vision of gender cross-dressing in Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night' centers on the absence of women in particular and the problem of female impersonation in Shakespeare. Female actresses had not yet appeared on the stage. The parts of female characters were, therefore, played by young boys who appeared on the stage in foppish and gaudy female costumes. Considerably, the large number of female character in Shakespeare's play, it maybe safely inferred that young men must have played the female roles perfectly in the Elizabethan age. Yet in order to compensate for the absence of actresses, Shakespeare often contrived to represent his heroines in comedies disguised as men-Portia playing the part of the judge, Rosalind visiting her as a young shepherd and Viola serving as the boy messenger of Duke Orsino.

**Key Notes:** Material exclusion of female body in Shakespeare, Elizabethan moralist, Puritan polemics, the transvestite actresses, erotic appeal, aesthetic Device

### The vision of Gender Cross-Dressing in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night"

The cross-dressed boy actor offers a starting point, for his figure calls into question the relationship between actor, female character and male disguise within theatrical representation. The Elizabethan moralists could not imagine the boy player "just" as a convention, far he stood at the center of a virulent attack on the theatre as a deceptive practice that contaminated "natural" or god-given identity with counter feats of "true" originals, enticed spectator with devilish shape changing's and unsettled the very fabric of a culture based on stable hierarchies of social class and sex gender. The latter reinforced by biblical prohibitions against cross-dressing.

Attempting to recuperate early modern cultural conditions, new historicists and materialists feminist critics have revitalized this anti theatrical prejudice. Speaking of the theatre as a site of social struggle and of the sexually ambivalent boy player as one sign of a sex gender system in crisis, these critics imagine London's play house as dangerously sexualized sites where English culture's 'intense anxieties' could be stitched and their "transgressive erotic impulses" released. Yet their rehearsal of puritan polemics not only tends to confuse theatrical representation with real life behaviors (much like Viola de lesseps) but to consider the boy player as a site of sexualized discourse rather than as a body in performance.

Exclusion from the stage in my view indeed speaks and accepts of women's secondary social status and is not remedied by those rare instances of female performance, but such recognition of women's oppression does not de – facto render women object, victims of patriarchal culture or deny them agency. Certainly, one of my objective is to challenge the fetishistic insistence on presence in Shakespeare, evident in the notion that there must be women on Shakespeare's stage, at least in every sense that counts because there are representation of women on Shakespeare's stage.

In Twelfth Night i have tried to examine the problem of material exclusion of the female body which is none the less literally, graphically represented in this play in the form of a scandalous 'pun' or female 'genitalia' in the letter to Malvolio. In Shakespeare theatre of gender the most obvious signs were voice and costume troubled by how to match their bodies to roles. Voice becomes increasingly playful register of gender. In the Twelfth- night sound collapses distinction between sexed bodies and social roles, enhancing comic confusion: Cesario/Viola "small pipe" identifies her as both "boy" and "women" neither Olivia nor Antonio hears any difference between her and her brother Sebastian, so does costume, permitting brother to transform into sister, sister into brother. On the early modern stage clothes made man and woman. Malvolio's description of Cesario/Viola-"in standing water between boy and man" (acti,sc-v,l-142)

“Malvolio: not yet old enough for a man,  
Nor young enough for a boy, as quash,  
Is before tis a peascod, or a codling,  
When tis almost an apple, tis with,  
Him in standing water, between boy and man.”

Suggests the indeterminate status of the adolescent male who was neither one nor the other in Valerie Traub's phrase 'a middle term'. When the boy player shared the stage with adult males, their femininity was partially defined by physical difference, but scenes where one or several woman character's appears together relinquish that difference, relying on dialogue or pure performance. Repeatedly, Shakespeare's comedies play on insides and outsides, insisting that sexual disguise conceal a female body beneath a male facade.

Shakespeare's heroine, Viola assumes sexual disguise at the outset of her role, from which all the play's misunderstanding's and plot complication arise. Whereas Portia's disguise give her social power. Viola disguise herself as eunuch- neither woman nor man an identity expressly suited to the boy player's body, to the character's role as a go between, and to a play about young people. Incorporating her brother's identity into her performance as Cesario, she plays Sebastian and herself, moving from shipwrecked sister to Illyrian's world turned upside down, which licenses a "what you will" indifference to fixing gender that punctures any idea of a "true" masculinity or femininity. Unlike Portia, who acts or intervenes in situations, Viola/Cesario remains a figure to whom events happen and who permits "time to untangle" twelfth night knotty plot.

Acting Orsino's part in a proxy wooing explicitly focused on what performing bodies say and might do ('much' according to Olivia) she appears as a girlish youth, prompting Olivia's desire not for Orsino but for a husband unmasculine enough for her to master. To Orsino obsessed with Olivia, she seems a boyish girl citing her "smooth and rubious" lip and "maidens organ" all "semblative a woman's part", he even voices the culture nation that boys begin as girls, only later becoming males

(act i, sc iv, L31-36)

“That say thou art a man's diana's lips  
is not more smooth and rubious,  
thy small pipes  
is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,  
and all is semblative a woman's part”

Later, defending women's truth in loving, she speaks of her own history as "a blank" voicing herself and her brother as one.

Viola: a blank, my lord .she never told her love, but  
let concealment, like a worm i "the bud",  
feed on her damask cheek :she pinned in thought  
and with a green and a yellow melancholy  
she sat like a patience on a monument  
smiling at a grief .(act ii, sciv,L190-20)

Whether with a Olivia or Orsino, she mediates literary and performative fantasies of masculinity and femininity through the tabula rasa a indeterminate gender identity. Most "herself" when mourning her brother Sebastian (act i, sc ii) another example of viola's "herself" can be seen in act ii,sc ii,l-28 a long soliloquy.

“In women's waxen hearts to set their forms.

alas! Our frailty is the cause, not we!  
for such as we are made of, such we be,  
how will this fadge? My master loves her dearly  
(and also when she finally faces Sebastian in act v,sc i,l 236.)

Viola/Cesario is less a coherent Stanislavskian, psychologically based persona than a mercurial performer whose gender remains tenuously constituted, adaptable to circumstances and to “the whirligig of time”.

Although she plays “complete twin” only until she learns that Sebastian may be alive, her disguise further enhances gender ambiguities throughout the play’s finale. When mistaking her for Sebastian, Olivia calls her husband, she confesses her love for Orsino, but only when Sebastian appears, does “one face, one voice, one habit” become “two persons” and it is he who names her as Viola, “outing” her as a woman. All the ensuing reconciliation of self and other are staged around this central image of twinging in which homo erotic desires – Olivia’s for Viola/Cesario: Orsino’s for Cesario/Viola – dissolve toward though not fully “into” heterosexual unions.

Laurie Osborne’s fascinating study of twelfth night’s nineteenth century performance editions reveals is not entirely dissimilar confusion that underscores the problematic status of cross-gender disguise in that periods staging which adopted a double-edged anxiety about role, performer, and performance, on one hand. The most extensive editing aims at defending Viola’s character from the implications of disguise, on the other, production appeared eager both to conceal and exploit the true of “breeches parts”(Osborne: 1990:31-36). Despite to his distaste for what he saw as an unseemly fascination for cross-dressed roles. Leigh hunt’s mid century review of Maria Tree’s Viola praises her legs, not her acting, she appeared as a sexualized spectacle rather than as a performer. In keeping with the century’s finely tuned sensibilities, editor’s down play the potential transgressiveness of Viola’s disguise by eliminating her lines about its devilish “wickedness” (act ii,sc ii L.25-26)

“Disguise, i see, thou art a wickedness where in the pregnant enemy does much” which conflicted with her perceived delicacy of mind. They also mute her exchanges with Olivia, revise her participation in Orsino’s house hold and trim Orsino’s damning of women’s love to focus on Viola’s idealized love, especially her patience on a “monument- speech” (act ii, sc iv, L109.17).

In attempting to secure her ideal femininity, editors also eliminates lines which either call attention to her as an actress playing a part or stress her feminine sexual vulnerability, for both came too close to the nineteenth- century perception that actresses who displayed their bodies publicly in male disguise were sexually tainted. As Osborne writes “the transvestite actresses, with her strong economic draw and her erotic appeal to both sexes, challenged emerging gender hierarchies of public versus private and exceeded the heterosexual opposition of male desire and female submissions.”(Osborne: 1996:72-73)

More contemporary performances not only demonstrate an increasing lack of anxiety about fixing gender (at least in Viola’s case) but also invest more fully in framing her male disguise to suit cultural fashion and trends. Trevor Nunn’s 1990 film of twelfth night invents a prologue that establishes cross-dressing as a fanciful charade: Viola and Sebastian perform for a delighted shipboard audience, revealing themselves as sister and brother (Sebastian plucks off Viola’s moustaches she fails to remove his real one.) Just as the storm threatens. If this performance cues spectators to read sexual disguise as improvisatory dissembling, the ensuing ship wreck and its aftermath in which an anguished Viola tries to drown herself, then hides from Orsino’s soldiers in a cemetery where she watches Olivia visit her brother’s grave and hears of Orsino- over narrates her physical and psychic vulnerability in order to justify her transformation into Cesario. Viola’s gaze at a photograph of herself and her brother then cues a title sequence that constructs her disguise through close ups of body parts and dress: a hand picks up scissors and snippets of hair fall to the floor, hands unlace her corset, button up her shirt all under the approving eye of the captain, who teaches her a manly swagger. Looking once more at her brother’s image, she picks up the false moustache she had

worn in the earlier charade, and the final shot shows her, back to the camera, striding towards a distant castle as twilight falls.

Curiously and appropriately, given the film's Victorian setting- precisely the speech that nineteenth century performance foregrounded as expressing Viola's ideal femininity ensures her body's "truth". that moment also reassures spectators that the "right" bodies will couple in comedy's happy endings where the film asserts its final negotiation between Stubbs' dissembling performer and "Viola" but turning her into an icon of femininity.

In Shakespearean comedy the female body is most obviously a problem at the level of the text fiction, where female characters such as Viola and Rosalind disguise themselves as eunuchs and lackeys. But the female body is also problematized at the primary level of renaissance theatre practice in which boys played "the woman's part" Lisa Jardine argues- "playing the woman's part" – male effeminacy is an act for a male audience's appreciation." She asserts that, "these figures are sexually enticing qua transvestite boys and that the place encourages the audience to view them as such.(Jardine:1983:31,29)

Transvestism is an aspect of misogyny based on the material practice of excluding women from the renaissance stage- the "boy actress" phenomena. Stephen Orgel in a famous contribution to South Atlantic Quarterly's special issue on homosexuality contends, like Jardine, that homosexuality was the dominant form of eroticism in renaissance culture, he also argues that the homo eroticism of the renaissance stage was not inevitably misogynist.(Orgel 1989:17) .

The exclusion of women from the stage and their simultaneous inclusion as customers- the fundamental characteristics of the institution of theatre in early modern England does not exculpate theatre from charges of misogyny. This should not lead us to conclude, of course, that women's appearance on the stage at the Restoration should be read simply as "progress". In those countries where female players were allowed on stage, women were no less oppressed than in England.

In the renaissance the mimicking of social superiors by wearing their clothes was as much a violation of natural order as the assumption of sexual identity other than that dictated by one's anatomical destiny. Cross-dressing is an obvious target for anti-theatricality given the biblical injunction against it:" the lord forbideth men and women to change raiment." Nevertheless, there are two types of transvestism which prevailed:- i)that which violated the boundaries of gender demarcation and that which violated class hierarchy. There is structural identity between gender and class transvestism. Malvolio's obedience to the injunction contained in a forged letter that he wears yellow stockings and cross-garters all but overwhelms the Viola/Sebastian plot from which it singularly diverts the audience's attention. Malvolio's cross-gartering, his "transvestism" structurally and symbolically related to gender inversion and it is no further removed from anatomical inscription than in Viola's disguise. Malvolio adopts attire that might be suitable if worn by a young gentleman, suitor to Olivia but is incongruous and ridiculous when worn by a servant who sees himself as fit to be her husband. Malvolio does not merely upstage the comedy of the main plot: he notoriously disrupts the festive spirit of twelfth night. It is also possible that Malvolio's desire for revenge is directed at women, and at Olivia quite specifically for her "alas poor fool, how they baffled thee!"(act v,sc i,1-368).it seems that class transvestism is more threatening than that of gender which can be resolved rather more readily. In this respect Malvolio's cross gartering is more subversive than any instance of cross-dressing because it is Malvolio who menaces the romantic coupling with which the play concludes.

The dimensions of significant corporeality enacted in both gender and class transvestism and the feminized carnal excess constitutive of the plays bawdy are crucially inter-articulated. Recognizing this inter connectedness, the way the female body is complexly implicated in other social categories, especially class, renders the female body in 'Twelfth Night' not as a merely localized phenomenon but as a pervasive cultural one. Twelfth night is by critical consensus the culmination of Shakespeare's work in the genre, when he "completely masters and exhausts the possibilities of this form of drama" (Rose: 1988:41) and since comedy is inherently corporeal, that range of possibilities necessarily includes the bawdy body. Stephen Greenblatt observes: "Shakespearean comedy constantly appeals to the body and in particular to sexuality as the heart of

its theatrical magic 'great creating nature' – the principle by which the world is and must be peopled". (Greenblatt: 1988:86) such a view while it once again ignores the exclusion of real female corporeality, none the less grates against Granville –Barker's contention that Shakespeare was a celibate stage devoid of physical representation of sexuality, where transvestism functioned as an aesthetic device to foreground theatrical artifice (Granville Barker:1952:15). The very thing that justified women's exclusion from the stage is graphically foregrounded in this play. 'Twelfth Night' thus illustrates the problem of recovering the female body for feminism. We cannot make a female body "materialized" from nowhere, we can only register the complexity of its exclusion.

**References:**

**Lisa Jardine 1983:** Still Harping On Daughters: Women and Drama in the age of Shakespeare (Brighton, 1983)

**Laurie e. Osborne 1990:** 'The Texts of Twelfth Night' (English literary history, 57 1990)

**Stephen Orgel 1988:** 'The Authentic Shakespeare' Representation, 21 (1988)

**Dympha Callaghan,** Shakespeare without women

**Stephen Greenblatt 1988:** Fiction and Friction in Shakespearean negotiation\_(Berkeley,c.a. 1988)

**Shakespeare ,William 1944:** "Twelfth Night " The Arden Shakespeare ,ed.E.A.J Honigman .1944.