

Gender in "twelfth night"

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



In Shakespeare's play Twelfth Night, we are introduced to romantic comedy and romantic play as one of the main focuses. Even though this play has a happy ending resulting in the various lovers finding one another and getting married. Shakespeare shows us that this play is also a story of homoeroticism.

In this analytical essay I will be focusing on the gender roles in this play and how gender causes a sexual mess between characters. It is argued that William Shakespeare was bisexual himself (an analysis of his sonnet 18) which could possibly tie into the reasoning for this theme in Twelfth Night. More than any other Shakespearean play, the characters in Twelfth Night display a remarkable degree of gender and sexual ambiguity.

Twelfth Night self-consciously creates humor and enjoyment for the audience out of the possibility of same sex attraction. In Twelfth Night we see how Viola dresses as the male Cesario to try and get into Orsino's court. During the Elizabethan period women were not allowed to act professionally, and female parts were often performed by men, So Viola would have actually been a male actor dressing as a woman who was dressing as a man. The casting for this would have been a younger male who had feminine like features due to the fact that Cesario had very feminine features

Gender is one of the most obvious and much-discussed topics in the play. This could be argued by people that Twelfth Night is one of Shakespeare's so-called transvestite comedy plays because a female is disguising herself as a man. Which as a result causes a very very rough sexual mess between the characters. We see Viola falling in love with Orsino, but she can't say

anything about it because she is supposed to be a man. Orsino is in love with Olivia, which turns to Olivia falling for Viola who is disguised as Cesario.

Which over the course of reading this play opens up the homoerotic subtext in the play, which is you didn't guess is Olivia falling in love with a woman (even if she thinks that Viola is a man). Something else that is brought to our attention is the fact that Orsino is constantly talking about Cesario's beauty which suggests to the reader that he could be attracted to Viola even before her male disguise is taken off. This homoeroticism is also echoed in the minor character Antonio who is very, very clearly in love with Sebastien.

Even at the end of the play we are left in a fog of confusion especially focusing in the relationship of Orsino and Viola. I believe that when Orsino declares his love for Viola it suggests that he likes to prolong the pretense of Viola's masculinity. This is even after the fact that he knows about Viola being a woman he says to her Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times / Thou never should'st love woman like me (V. i. 260-261) He also then says in his last few lines Orsino declares 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. 372-375) . This shows us that even when everything is out in the open, Orsino continues to address Viola by her male name of Cesario. We can only wonder if Orsino is really in love with Viola it is he is more interested in her male persona.

Viola was able to shed the societal expectations by disguising herself as a man. In the article written by Casey Charles it states that this theme of same sex is neither a complicated promotion of a modern category of sexual

orientation nor, from a more traditional perspective, as an ultimately contained representation of the licensed misrule of saturnalia. In *Twelfth Night* the representation of homoerotic attractions functions rather as a means of dramatizing the socially constructed basis of a sexuality that is determined by gender identity. Within the context of early modern theatrical culture, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* functions as a dramatic critique of the ideal norm of imperative heterosexuality in three interrelated ways. First, the effects of Viola's cross-dressing point to the socially constructed nature of gender in Shakespeare's play. Secondly, Shakespeare's drama interrogates the exclusionary nature of the constructed categories of sex and challenges the symbolic hegemony of heterosexuality by producing representations or "citations" of same-sex love between Viola and Olivia as well as Antonio and Sebastian. Lastly, I will argue that the final act, through a series of improbable turns of plot and phrase, exposes the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals."

The homoerotic element of the play, while troubling and disruptive in its dramatic development, may not have the power in this final scene to overcome fully the symbolic dictates of compulsory heterosexuality, at least from a perspective of formal kinship relations. Yet even if homoeroticism triumphed in *Twelfth Night* and Viola walked off stage arm-in-arm with Olivia and Sebastian with Antonio, the problems of the irrationality of desire and the instability of identity would not vanish. Desire is not erased by the successful disruption of gender boundaries; it continues to haunt the subject despite the performance of the most fantastic of love's imaginings. Yet the interminable nature of desire and the fantasies of love that are desire's

dialectical counterpart serve as important catalysts for the subversion and displacement "" of those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power"" through strategies of gender trouble. The play stresses that gender is something that can be influenced or that one can influence based on how you act, rather than something you are based on the genitalia you are born with.

In conclusion the theme of gender relations in Twelfth Night is seen because even in culture today men and women are treated differently based on their genders no matter the type of person they are inside or attitude wise. The theme of gender in Twelfth Night allows the readers to see that nothing can stop how a person feels for someone else. This taboo idea of same sex relationships have been frowned upon from the beginning of time and it is only till recently that they are beginning to be accepted even a little bit. Shakespeare is opening that can of demons that are still affecting many people in the LGBT community today, only difference is today we are making the change, people are dressing freely the same as they are loving freely and nothing will stop that. Shakespeare's legacy continues to influence the modern culture because his plays were based on themes that any person reading them can easily relate to, and continue to relate to even till this day. Shakespeare's universal themes will always be talked about in every generation for many years to come.

Charles, Casey. Gender Trouble in ' Twelfth Night.' Theatre Journal, vol. 49, no. 2, 1997, pp. 121" 141. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3208678.

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