

A study of homoeroticism in twelfth night

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Twelfth Night is a major site for homoerotic discourse in queer studies. However, the play is largely concerned with the idea of love, like many of Shakespeare's comedies. In order to investigate his subject further, Shakespeare periodically uses homoeroticism in order to represent various forms of relationships. The pairings of Olivia and Cesario/Viola, Antonio and Sebastian, and Orsino and Cesario/Viola, demonstrate that same-sex erotic attraction is a major theme in the play. Viola's secretive cross-dressing causes Olivia to believe that both of them are participating in normal, heterosexual interactions, while in reality they interact in a homoerotic fashion. These complex, homoerotic representations serve to dramatize the socially constructed basis for determination of sexuality according to one's gender identity. I intend to establish that in this play Shakespeare dramatically criticises the idealized norms of heterosexuality (required by his society) through focussing his narrative on representations of homoerotic pairings and deconstructing dominant gender categories.

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Viola's transvestism spurs various relationships that fall within the bounds of homoeroticism. Through the secret of her disguise, her actions illustrate the flaws of socially constructed gender identities, defined by the socially perceived opposites of aggressive, "macho" masculinity, and silent, yet coquettish, femininity, checked by behaviour of males. Viola's success in perpetrating her secret transvestism indicates that the construction and performance of gender is not dependent on one's physical characteristics but on one's behaviour, as well as upon a set of observed and internalised mannerisms. Viola's representation of homoerotic interaction in Olivia's love

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for her, and in her own love in Orsino as Cesario, disrupts the traditional, feminist "us vs. them" principle, and demonstrates that constructed, socially acceptable gender identities of the feminine and masculine are attributes that can be found in either male or female.

In the final scene of the play, when Viola's act is exposed - "If nothing lets to make us happy both / But this my masculine usurped attire, [...] That I am Viola" (V. i. 249-253), Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, easily steps into the vacuum left by the revelation of Cesario's identity marrying Olivia as he states, "So comes it, lady, you have been mistook. / [...] You would have been contracted to a maid, / Nor are you therein, by my life, deceived. You are betrothed both to a maid and man" (V. i. 259-63). The twins' interchangeable nature demonstrates to us that even the natural perspective of the world is not a gendered duality. The differently-gendered identical twins show a collapse of sexual difference as a natural process, indicating that nature never intended man to be constrained by gender binaries. Orsino proclaims "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not!" (V. i. 215-6), stating that nature is able to create two identical beings despite the natural sex difference between brother and sister, male and female.

The same concept that allows a female Viola to be a male Cesario also allows male actors portraying female characters to seem authentic, despite their natural gender. Upon mistaking Sebastian for Cesario/Viola, Feste remarks: "Nothing that is so is so," (IV. i. 8), indicating that gender is not dependent solely on physical attributes. Feste later adds, "That that is, is" (IV. ii. 15),

commenting on his own dressing as a Parson while Feste is really a fool. This same phrase extends to comment on the fact that Viola is male so long as she portrays a male, that gender is dependant on society's perception and not on one's private parts. When Olivia queries Cesario for his identity, "What are you? What would you?" (I. v. 207-208) and Cesario/Viola cryptically replies that what he is and would be is "as secret as maidenhead" (I. v. 211)), Viola alludes to her true gender.

However, in addition, she also hints at Sebastian's virginity that the latter admits to in the final act of the play, stating Olivia is "betrothed both to a maid and man" (V. i. 263). When the effects of these statements at combined, it is interesting to observe that Cesario's response to Olivia's query refers to the maidenheads of Cesario, Viola, as well as the boy actor playing her! As Viola states later on: "I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too" (II. iv. 120-1).

Twelfth Night interrogates the exclusive nature of constructed gender categories and challenges the heterosexual hegemony by constructing representations of same-sex love. Viola's imitation of the male gender demonstrates to us that erotic attraction is neither inherently based in gender, nor a solely-heterosexual phenomenon - since Olivia becomes attracted to Viola (as Cesario), and Orsino to Cesario. In the play, homoeroticism does not follow gender stereotypes of the effeminate male or the masculine female, as in the case of Antonio's affection for Sebastian - despite Antonio's stereotypically-masculine identity, that Shakespeare shows to us when Antonio "took [... Sebastian] from the breach of the sea."

Antonio's love for Sebastian is portrayed, when Antonio states, " If you will not murder me for my love, let me by your servant" (II. i. 33-4) and, later:

I have many enemies in Orsino's court, [...]

But come what may, I do adore thee so

That danger shall seem sport, and I will go. (II. i. 51-4)

Both Antonio and Sebastian are swordsmen, possessors of a very "masculine" skill, and yet both engage in homoerotic relations. It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that Sebastian is more resistant and feminine in comparison to Antonio - as he wishes to avoid causing harm, utilizing only his dagger's hilt, despite Sir Andrew striking him and paying the pestering Feste to leave Sebastian alone, instead of striking him, in the first scene of act four (lines 17-25) - Sebastian is the one who succumbs to the social constructions of masculinity and heterosexuality when he marries Olivia in the final act of the play. Meanwhile, the "macho" Antonio remains homosexual, as seen in his silence at Sebastian's wedding, which speaks louder than any vocal protest.

Such relationship dynamics in the play disrupt the social notion, prevalent in Shakespeare's (and even current) time - that the heterosexual man is supposed to be a "macho" figure and homosexual man is meant to be effeminate. Similarly, Viola's feminine quality in playing Cesario inspires love in Olivia rather than the aggressive "male" traits of Orsino. Viola becomes a "better" man when she deviates from the behavioural script set out in Orsino's Petrarchan sonnet - a male form that silences the woman as an

unattainable distanced goddess. The Petrarchan sonnet form, although addressed to females, was commonly read by males, used to solidify elite homosocial bonds (Marotti 396-428) as well as to promote a social discourse designed by and for men (Vickers 96). Viola's deviation from this male form creates a new female (perhaps lesbian) poetic within the pastoral setting that she constructs in her response to Olivia's refusal to love 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;

Hallow your name to the reverberate hills,

And make the babbling gossip of the air

Cry out " Olivia!" (I. v. 263-8)

Thus, Viola (as Cesario) creates a space for Olivia's reply, whereas Orsino's script (" Lady, you are the cruel'st she alive / If you will lead these graces to the grave / And leave the world no copy" (I. v. 236-8) prevents response, thus portraying Olivia as an object incapable of response. Olivia anticipates her own objectification, interjecting to say:

Oh, sir, I will not be so hardhearted. I will give

out divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried,

and every particle and utensil labelled to my will:

as, item, two lips, indifferent red; item, two grey

eyes with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and

so forth. (I. v. 239-44)

She understands the ways in which she is reducible to an item, whose qualities consist of a checklist of characteristics, which, in turn, identify her as an unattainable, silent object of beauty. In contrast to such a mode of communication, Viola's encouragement for response causes Olivia to present her ring to Cesario/Viola.

While attempting to win Olivia's heart, Cesario deviates from socially constructed male behaviour; ironically, this results in Olivia pursuing Cesario - in a masculine action. This scenario undermines the construction of categorical sex via the success of Cesario by acting as a female. Similarly, the portrayal of a supposedly heterosexual relationship, that puts the female in the place of power, counters the social norm that places the male at the helm of a relationship. One finds a similar situation in the fourth scene of the second act, where Orsino remarks that in love, a woman does not suffer so much as a man (93-118), to which Viola (as Cesario) vehemently responds, telling Orsino of her love for him indirectly:

In faith, they are as true of heart as we.

My father had a daughter loved a man [...]

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 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. (II. iv. 105-118).

Viola aggressively and passionately describes her patience through a story, taking on the role of the man: she controls the discourse as she impersonates herself, and objectifies herself as allegorical "Patience on a monument" (II. iv. 14), in a verbal tour de force. Paradoxically, Viola affirms her patience and feminine character by means of being masculine (according to the gender paradigms Orsino proposes). Viola strongly explains the patience and gentility of a woman, as a disguised woman, thus deconstructing the categories of sex in general, and those of femininity as "patience" and masculinity as "aggression," in specific.

As well, Viola challenges the patriarchal social order of her society by demonstrating how she, a transvestite, is capable of deconstructing gender

categories. Further, the very fact that the action in the plot - the wooing of Olivia, unbeknownst to Sebastian, and the wooing of Orsino - is mostly attributed to Viola through her planning and action demonstrates the female in power instead of a male. This fact, combined with the inaction of the male characters in the play, destabilizes another traditional notion of gender identity: the female as the prized possession and the male as its conqueror.

The final act of the play exposes the failure of the dominant, heterosexual regime to fully regulate its own narrative ideals, since, in order to achieve a "happy," heterosexual ending, which befits a traditional comedy, a series of improbable plot turns must take place. This structural necessity indicates to us that Shakespeare is ambivalently invested in the heterosexual standards that he imposes upon his play. The unlikelihood of various irrational plot turns, and easily interchangeable affections, necessary to end the play with these successful, formed relationships shows the failure of imposing heterosexual ideals in society.

Despite the absurd twists in the play, there remains some untouched deconstruction of gender as well as some latent homoeroticism in the play. In line 263 of the first scene of act five, Sebastian says that he is both man and maid, in reference to his virginity, but also in reference to his character traits being both male and female. This admission destabilizes the configuration of gender by attributing Sebastian with both male and female physical attributes, albeit figuratively. This also maintains a measure of homoeroticism in Sebastian's character. Further, Orsino comments that Viola

is both man and maid as well - in that Olivia will remain a man so long as she dresses in man's garb:

Cesario, come--

For so you shall be, while you are man;

But when in other habits you are seen,

Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen. (V. i. 385-388)

This remark concludes that identity, gender, and its foundations are simply as interchangeable as clothing, and gender depends on the character's actions and not their physical attributes.

Ultimately, the ending of *Twelfth Night* is not entirely ideal, since many characters - Viola, Sebastian and Olivia - are not completely happy, having succumbed to the pressures of heterosexual conformity. The true homosexual union of male and female character pairs challenges the heterosexual dominance over homosexual interaction. Viola may have won Orsino; she may even marry Orsino, but she is not completely happy since Orsino mere moments ago was willing to destroy their friendship for Olivia's sake ("Farewell, and take her, but direct thy feet / Where thou and I henceforth may never meet" (V. i. 166-7)).

Likewise, Sebastian, although happy with Olivia, seems happier when he sees Antonio once again at the end of the play, and exclaims in a romantic manner upon seeing him, saying, "Antonio, O my dear Antonio! / How have the hours racked and tortured me / Since I have lost thee!" Finally, while

Olivia is set to wed Sebastian, she seems more jubilant with regard to having Viola as a sister, " A sister! You are she" (V. i. 327), thus expressing her deeper interest in Viola rather than Sebastian.

Since Shakespeare's society chose to regulate the sexual and gendered expression of its people, Shakespeare comments on the " ideal" norms of heterosexuality in Twelfth Night, demonstrating, through carefully constructed contradictions, that gender is a mere social construction. That in actuality there are no boundaries to behaviour and that there is no such thing as " homoeroticism" or " hetero-eroticism" but only Eros, regulated by attraction, love and relationship. True homosexual union of male and female character pairs in this play (as both actors are male), challenges the heterosexual dominance over homosexual interaction. Having done so, Shakespeare, due to societal prejudice, reverts to heterosexual discourse, acknowledging that despite the truth of sex and gender, one must abide, for practical reasons, by the demands of social majority.