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Bisexuality and Transvestitism in William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night

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A contemporary reading of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* suggests that the play is centered on bisexuality, as characters fall in love with one another, of both genders. This is demonstrated through dialogue, behavior and cross-dressing in the play, as would be seen in a late twentieth century scope. Shakespeare's portrayal of Viola implies a sense of sexual ambiguity, as she exhibits bisexual behavior throughout the play. The perceptions of Viola by other characters justify similar behavior, as views of her gender identity seem to define their own sexualities. It can be interpreted that Viola presents herself in either a "masculine" or "feminine" way based on her physical attributes, actions, and speeches in the piece, which influence the sexual behaviors of other characters. Thus, a theme of sexual ambiguity is exhibited among several key persons in the play.

The concept of bisexuality seems to be a fairly unexplored field today but is gaining much attention and acceptance. "In the splintered multiculturalism of the 1990's, an independent bisexual movement is starting its own identity" (Eland 74) and brings with it a new genre of literary criticism. Prior to such contemporary idealism, bisexuality was not looked upon very seriously; there existed a predominant heterosexual community and a feminized homosexual community, struggling to gain its own identity among the masses. In the past, common perceptions of bisexuality have made many people feel uncomfortable, as the term suggests that sexual identity is not static, but subject to change, rendering sexual orientation in a state of ambiguity. However, such concepts are rapidly changing and the acceptance of a bisexual community is becoming interwoven within societal perceptions of sexuality.

Similarly, transvestism is becoming a more accepted phenomenon, if not one of popularity among some groups. Although many people do not accept cross-dressing as "normal" or favorable connotation, it is unclear as to how to express her sexual desires among the masses. She and Sebastian resemble a woman like his sister. The immediacy with which each character perceives Viola to be a man or a woman is essential in the definition of each character's own sexual identity, as well as that of Viola. She and Sebastian are heredity and physiology; rather, perception is immediate. However, such conceptions are rapidly changing and the acceptance of a bisexual community is becoming interwoven within societal perceptions of sexuality.

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**VIOLA AS A BISEXUAL:**

Is it apparent, through Viola's dialogue with Duke Orsino, that she is attracted to him? At the same time, her words with Olivia suggest an attraction to women, as she goes beyond her call of duty in wooing Olivia for the Duke. Her duty to Orsino is to deliver his proclamation of love to Olivia, but Viola seems to voluntarily offer a number of additional compliments to Olivia, aside from her expected duties. Her flourishing remarks and declaration of devotion to him imply a definite sexual attraction. However, she shares the same attitude toward Orsino, suggesting that she would be a better woman fit for him, as she has already devoted her service as an attendant. Viola displays the same tone of love toward both Orsino and Olivia and adsorns each with varying compliments, exhibiting bisexual behavior.

Viola uses transvestism to hide her desires to both Orsino and Olivia, unsure of how to display her true feelings. Torn between societal expectations of heterosexual behavior and her own private feelings, she is unclear as to how to express her sexual desires. While dressed as a man, Viola feels she cannot dodge her love to Orsino. When conversing with Olivia in disguise, she is afraid to speak as if she were a man, yet not confess her true feelings as a woman. "She never told her love, / But let concealment, like a worm i 'th 'buds, / Feed on her damask cheek," said Viola to Orsino (II. iv. 109-11). This speech could be interpreted as Viola talking about herself and her hidden sexual impulses towards women. Because of social constraints, Viola is forced to suppress her sexual desires for her same sex, as such a behavior was seen to be proper.

Other characters' perceptions of Viola can be questioned, with regard to whether they view her as being masculine or feminine:

- **Rayne:** Rarely, if ever, do we pause to wonder if an individual is 'really' a man or a woman; rather, perception is immediate and simple because, although we may not have direct knowledge of a person's genital sex, 'we' know what a man or a woman looks like.

The immediacy with which each character perceives Viola to be a man or a woman is essential in the definition of each character's own sexual identity, as well as that of Viola. She and Sebastian are fraternal twins with very little, if any, physical difference outside of their normal dress—as they are clothed alike, no character in the play is able to differentiate one sibling from the other. By looking at their faces and hearing their voices alone, it is debatable that either Viola facially and physically resembles a man like her brother, or Sebastian resembles a woman like his sister.

Perchance, both twins could be perceived as being masculine, which would explain certain sexual identities among the play's characters. Conversely, if both were perceived as being feminine, this would explain another slate of gender identity for each character. The perceptions of Viola's sexuality are themselves ambiguous, having evolved through dialogue, behavior, and cross-dressing in the play, as would be seen in a late twentieth century scope. Shakespeare's portrayal of Viola implies a sense of sexual ambiguity, as she exhibits bisexual behavior throughout the play. The perceptions of Viola by other characters justify similar behavior, as views of her gender identity seem to define their own sexualities. It can be interpreted that Viola presents herself in either a "masculine" or "feminine" way based on her physical attributes, actions, and speeches in the piece, which influence the sexual behaviors of other characters. Thus, a theme of sexual ambiguity is exhibited among several key persons in the play.

**SUMMARY:**

- Viola displays the same tone of love toward both Orsino and Olivia and adsorns each with varying compliments, exhibiting bisexual behavior.
- The immediacy with which each character perceives Viola to be a man or a woman is essential in the definition of each character's own sexual identity, as well as that of Viola. She and Sebastian are fraternal twins with very little, if any, physical difference outside of their normal dress—as they are clothed alike, no character in the play is able to differentiate one sibling from the other. By looking at their faces and hearing their voices alone, it is debatable that either Viola facially and physically resembles a man like her brother, or Sebastian resembles a woman like his sister.
- Perchance, both twins could be perceived as being masculine, which would explain certain sexual identities among the play's characters. Conversely, if both were perceived as being feminine, this would explain another slate of gender identity for each character. The perceptions of Viola's sexuality are themselves ambiguous, having evolved through dialogue, behavior, and cross-dressing in the play, as would be seen in a late twentieth century scope. Shakespeare's portrayal of Viola implies a sense of sexual ambiguity, as she exhibits bisexual behavior throughout the play. The perceptions of Viola by other characters justify similar behavior, as views of her gender identity seem to define their own sexualities. It can be interpreted that Viola presents herself in either a "masculine" or "feminine" way based on her physical attributes, actions, and speeches in the piece, which influence the sexual behaviors of other characters. Thus, a theme of sexual ambiguity is exhibited among several key persons in the play.
Olivia and Sebastian are married, as it is not socially acceptable for two women to become married. Essentially, Olivia has "the best of both worlds"—she is in love with the female looks of Viola which, as a twin, Sebastian has, and marries that quality with which she fell in love.

**Olivia:**

Olivia sees Viola as attractive as well, because of her fair complexion, though she is dressed as a male. He says to Viola, "Come hither, boy. If ever thou shalt love, / In the sweet range of it remember me; / For such as I am all true lovers are." (II.ii.14-16).

While the bonds of friendship between males in the Renaissance were very strong and difficult to distinguish from love, this is clearly an affectionate dialogue spoken by Orsino. He has only known Viola, as Cesario, for a short while, which would not have provided ample time to develop such a strong friendship as of yet. He says, "remember me" to Viola, and that he is "such... all true lovers are," while speaking to her. This could easily be read as a flirtatious line, where Orsino has the intent of persuading her to be sexually interested in him.

When it is revealed at the end of the play that his servant is a woman, he immediately and openly falls in love with her. As he falls in love with her so quickly, it is apparent that he must have had such feelings for her as the play built its momentum. However, as he would have had such feelings for her, he would have had them for the "male" Cesario during the play. Like Olivia, he noticed the feminine attributes of Viola's physique and fell in love with that aspect of her. As she was conceived to be a male throughout most of the play, he could not express that he had such feelings until it was revealed that she was really a male. The folly of his opinion shows that, no matter the true gender of Viola, he was still in love with the individual—it is this theme which recurs in each relationship which is formed in the play.

**Antonio:**

The strong relationship between Antonio and Sebastian can be substantiated by his perception of the other sibling. As Viola is seen as having a feminine appearance, despite her attire, his twin has the same physical features. Antonio could either be heterosexual and attracted to the feminine side of Sebastian or gay and attracted to his masculine attributes. This can be interpreted as the same type of affection that Orsino has for Viola, who outwardly displays his love were Sebastian not a male. "If you will not

murder me for my love, let me be your servant," he says (II.1.31-2).

In making such a proclamation, he is expressing his sexual desires through the language of Renaissance male friendship. Again, the disguise of feminine characteristics through physically determined gender has persuaded Antonio not to act upon his feelings.

**Sebastian:**

Despite his feminine characteristics, Sebastian is still able to retain his Renaissance sexual integrity by falling in love with Olivia and ignoring any advances made by Antonio if he had, in fact, picked up on them. "If you will not undo what you have done, that is, kill him whom you have recovered, desire it not," he says in response to Antonio's remark (III.3.5-4). Perhaps Sebastian may feel the same way toward Antonio; however, he is reluctant to acknowledge such feelings—pursues only heterosexual desires towards Olivia.

**Viola seen as "masculine" by other characters:**

Olivia:

As Viola introduces herself to Olivia as a male, she may have been perceived as having masculine characteristics—perhaps a face that resembled that of a young man as she intended, or maybe she had a physique which was not as fully curved as most women. These would give Viola physical resemblance to a male, fitting into a masculine description, in conjunction with her attire. If Orsino is in fact heterosexual, her attempt to win Viola's affection (disguised as a woman) would have been an innocent pursuance opposite-sex love. Thus, dialogue between the two characters could be understood in a heterosexual context. As Olivia finds out that Viola is a female, she marries Sebastian; the physical attraction she had for Viola would follow her relationship to Sebastian, as the two were twins. It would also be socially acceptable for such a relationship to exist.

**Orsino:**

Orsino only knew Viola in the role of a man during most of the play, and he fell in love with this character. It is possible that he is homosexual, and fell in love with Viola as a man, but was persistent in concealing his feelings for fear of social ridicule. He says several things to Viola, which fail to equate women with men, stating that they are incapable of achieving the same degree of love as a male:

- There is no woman's sides
- Can hide the beating of so strong a passion
- As love doth give my heart, no woman's heart

So big to hold so much; they lack retention. (II.1.92-5)

Orsino states that women cannot love as men do, and therefore could not fulfill the needs of his heart. He also says, "Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm, more longing, wavering, sooner lost and won, than women's are." (II.1.92-4), which places women's love on a different plane than that of men.

Orsino is also a very narcissistic character, as these lines could also mean that women are not deserving of his love, nor that of all men. By demeaning women in such a way, it seems that Orsino does not have much of an interest in females, just in persons of his own gender. This would also justify his self-abasement, as only loving a male can make him sexually content. Since he could not express this love towards other males, he simply did it as a reflection of himself, setting his own name apart from any other.

**Antonio:**

If Viola is seen as masculine, then her twin brother would be viewed as being of the same manner. Antonio's strong emotions and words towards Sebastian may not only reflect the presence of Renaissance male friendship, but his own feelings of love. It appears that Sebastian is aware of these feelings, and could either be interested in Antonio or ignoring him altogether—it could conceivably be argued either way.

Antonio says to Sebastian, "Only myself stood out; / For which, / I be not so placed in this place, I shall pay dear" (III.3.59-7). He seems to be saying that his sexuality has set him apart from everyone else in this new town. "Do not then walk too open," replies Sebastian (III.3.68), telling Antonio to hide his sexual desires to the public. This appears to be what Shakespeare is doing with every character in the play. As many seem to have a degree of interest in at least one same-sex relationship, these feelings are pushed aside and the play ends by following the norm, establishing several heterosexual couples.

**Sebastian:**

Sebastian does not ridicule Antonio for his homosexual thoughts, nor does he tell him to keep too quiet, except for when in public. Perhaps he is also homosexual and has the same feelings for Antonio, yet is negligent to express those desires because of social pressures. Alternately, Sebastian may be viewed as a heterosexual, because of his interest in Olivia, as they marry before the
end of the play. Shakespeare could have intended Sebastian to also be bisexual, mirroring the actions of his twin sister. Perhaps he is in love with both Olivia and Antonio, yet suppresses his homosexual love and chooses to marry.

The sexuality of each character in *Twelfth Night* is called into question several times throughout the play. Depending upon how Viola is intended to be perceived, this reflects the sexual intentions of each character in the play. As can logically be interpreted, through the text, that each of the characters may have different types of sexual desires; depending on their perceptions of other characters, it becomes unclear as to how Shakespeare intended the work to be read. While Olivia can be seen as being lesbian but falling into the societal standards at the end of the play through marriage, it can also be justified that she was a heterosexual and her marriage to Sebastian simply reaffirmed that belief. Olivia can be seen as having sexual interest in both men and women, depending upon how her relationships are interpreted. Perhaps Shakespeare intended her character to be bisexual as well; perhaps he proposed each character as acting in a bisexual manner, or in a sexually ambiguous way. Either perspective considered, it is evident that Shakespeare carefully wrote the play to intentionally provide a variety of interpretations of sexuality to the reader.

Perhaps Shakespeare intended Viola to be a catalyst to the socially established gender ideals which were established during the Renaissance. Thus, she would be ideally portrayed as a bisexual, in opposition to a heterosexual society. It seems apparent that Shakespeare intended this play to be ambiguous about love and gender, and to leave the interpretation of this issue up to the reader. Due to drama censors during the Renaissance, who prohibited questionable topics from being openly addressed, the full intention of Shakespeare's text is difficult to extract. However, hailed as a genius of drama, Shakespeare's intentional inclusion of controversial themes, such as bisexuality, can be understood through double-meanings of text and actions of his characters.

It is interesting to note that *Twelfth Night* was a play written for all male actors, as most were during the Renaissance, as females were not heavily involved with the theater at the play's original time of production. Thus, we encounter instances of men dressing as women, who dressed as men. Gender roles are exploited, not only in terms of cross-dressing, but also in their sexual intentions. Orsino and Olivia both fall in love with Viola who, in turn, expresses similar feelings of affection for each of the two. The portrayal of people falling in love with one another, regardless of gender, opposes the societal norm of heterosexual relationships and appears to mock the conception of love that is determined solely by gender. It seems that Shakespeare was ahead of his time, writing a play which explored the commonly accepted "love sees no gender" philosophy of today. Yet, he shies away from concluding the play under such pretenses, as homosexual relationships were viewed as pagan by Renaissance society.

As *Twelfth Night* most likely had to be written in the form of a comedy, seemingly poking fun at the issue of sexuality for the sake of the audience and censors, it is evident that the most important themes of this play examine the validity of how sexual identity is socially construed. Shakespeare seemed to have had no choice but to hide or mock the issue of sexuality, as was done with many other "racy" issues of the times. He shies away from the obscure and ends the play with everything following societal norms, with the pairing of strictly heterosexual couples. Through the portrayal of Viola in this play and her significance to the story, Shakespeare paints a picture of life in the Renaissance—one in which such controversial issues are often downplayed for the sake of pursuing the integrity of his work and the theater.

**Works Cited**

