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Source: *CLA Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (JUNE 1989), pp. 484-493
Published by: College Language Association
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44322052
Accessed: 23-03-2020 06:20 UTC



# LOVE, DISGUISE, AND KNOWLEDGE IN *TWELFTH NIGHT*

By Maurice Hunt

Even a cursory reading of sixteenth-century literature reveals the Renaissance writer's belief that love on occasion enlarges the lover's understanding. For the dramatist Shakespeare, character disguise often makes possible love's expansion of knowledge. For example, Perdita's costuming herself as the Roman goddess Flora highlights her beauty, increasing Florizel's love for her to the degree that he gains a new understanding of the royalty of gracious deeds (*WI*, IV.iv.135-46).[1] Nonetheless, love and disguise in Shakespearean drama do not always cooperate to yield the kind of insights found in the pastoral scene of *The Winter's Tale*. As might be supposed, they can also interact so as to mislead characters concerning the nature of reality, including the composition of their innermost desires. Such is the case in *Twelfth Night*. In this romantic comedy, Shakespeare illustrates a relationship among love, disguise, and knowledge so unique that criticism has only recently developed the aesthetic for clarifying it.

That aesthetic is most clearly defined within the context of its origin—art history. In *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, E. H. Gombrich popularized what might be termed "gestalt aesthetics."[2] According to Gombrich, the differences between the portrayals of the same scene, or topic, by craftsmen from dissimilar societies generally do not derive from the technical "maturity" or the cultural "sophistication" of one or the other artist. In this art critic's view, they instead originate

[1] All references from Shakespeare's plays are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton, 1974).

[2] Bollingen Series 25, No. 51 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960).

in the respective mental frames of reference created by social conditioning, through which the two craftsmen perceive the identical model. Cultural values peculiar to a community come into play, structuring (or "blocking out") a scene in the artist's mind. He or she is blind to some features of a subject and highly sensitive to others conforming to a culture's worldview. Ancient Egyptian portraiture, for example, is not necessarily two-dimensional because the creators of it failed to master a lifelike plastic manner for which classical painting is the standard for judgment. Rather, a religious idea of essential man may account for the stark lines that Egyptian artists first isolated and magnified in their models and then reproduced in their portraits.[3] Gombrich asserts that any artist sees only what he or she culturally wills to see in any given object. The model itself always remains an ambiguous gestaltlike configuration which the artist imaginatively distorts and finally animates.

Not surprisingly, gestalt principles play no part in those treaties—such as Sir John Davies' *Nosce Teipsum* (1599)—which represent the faculty psychology of Shakespeare's age. Nonetheless, Shakespeare dramatizes a grasp of gestalt aesthetics in the manner by which Viola's disguise as Cesario focuses Olivia's and Orsino's love and alters their understanding. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola's stated reason for disguising herself involves self-protection. Once she learns that the melancholy Olivia is inhospitable, the shipwrecked heroine has no recourse in Illyria but to trust Orsino's charity. Anna Jameson's explanation of Viola's need for a disguise is still convincing, despite the Victorian notion of propriety underlying it:

> In this perplexity, Viola remembers to have heard her father speak with praise and admiration of Orsino, the duke of the country; and having ascertained that he is not married, and that therefore his court is not a proper asylum for her in her feminine character, she attires herself in the disguise of a page, as the best protection against uncivil comments, till she can gain

[3] *Art and Illusion*, "Psychology and the Riddle of Style," pp. 3-30.

some tidings of her brother.[4]

The originality of Shakespeare's conception of Viola's masking involves the phenomenon of seeing projected values—what Orsino and Olivia "will" (in the light of the play's subtitle). Concerning Viola's masking, an initial distinction must be made. A viewer familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphosis* would not fully accept the notion that Viola's costume simply "conceals" her, or that Cesario's garb "covers" her. M. C. Bradbrook believes that Renaissance disguise was often "the substitution, overlapping or metamorphosis of dramatic identity, whereby one character sustains two roles. . . . [I]t may be better translated for the modern age by such terms as 'alternating personality.' "[5] Viola becomes "Viola-Cesario" rather than "Cesario."[6] Once the viewer thinks of the fluid Viola-Cesario as a whole character, the various images of boy, woman, man, and girl appear in multiple combinations. (The compound name "Viola-Cesario" will henceforth be used in this essay to designate the hybrid creation totally visible.) From Viola-Cesario's expansive nature, an admirer can select, crystallize, and see precisely those qualities in the amalgam that he or she would love. Personified, they then make up "Cesario" for that viewer, and Viola's other traits are ignored. Such a gestalt is the objective correlative for the admirer's inner idea of love—a mirror in which it can be accurately read.

Orsino, for example, at first responds to the feminine qualities of Viola-Cesario. Formulating Cesario's attributes, the Duke fondly says,

For they shall yet belie thy happy years,

[4] *Characteristics of Women* (London: George Bell, 1889), p. 149.

[5] Shakespeare and the Use of Disguise in Elizabethan Drama," *Essays in Criticism*, 2 (1952), 160. For an example of the metamorphosis of character made possible by disguise, see Sidney's *Arcadia*, I, 12, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), I, 74-79.

[6] D. J. Palmer, in "Art and Nature in *Twelfth Night*," *Critical Quarterly*, also argues that Viola's disguise metamorphoses her, in this case into "an order of existence beyond the flux of nature" (p. 211).

That say thou art a man. Diana's lip
Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman's part.
I know thy constellation is right apt
For this affair.

(I.iv.30-36)

Orsino states his belief that a boy with womanly features will appeal to the female Olivia better than a rougher messenger would. He thus indirectly reveals his opinion that Olivia suffers from self-love: in his view, the image of Olivia's beauty in "boyish" Viola will vainly attract Olivia, moving her perhaps to grant Orsino's suit. Irrationally, Orsino would love a woman who he knows loves herself. But whereas he shrewdly guesses the true condition of his lady's affection, he is blind to the similar makeup of his own passion. He does not consciously apprehend the strange mixture of male-female qualities in Viola-Cesario that tantalize him.

While Orsino, in the speech quoted above, responds intuitively to Viola's womanhood, he does so because her femininity joins with a masculinity that unconsciously absorbs some of his attention and feeling. Orsino is caught at a transitional moment in love's metamorphosis.[7] He secretly enjoys Viola's feminine beauty while the page identity—"Cesario"—gives him an excuse for not recognizing the threatening natural opposite to himself—an opposite that in truth complements him. His widely noted immersion in the sugared ideas of Petrarchan love expresses his emotional impasse; stale conceits reflect a conflicted, unvirile attitude.[8] Two remarks by the father of psychoanaly-

[7] "The metamorphosis of sex" becomes the focus of the play, according to Helene Moglen in "Disguise and Development: The Self and Society in *Twelfth Night*," *Literature and Psychology*, 23 (1973), 13-20.

[8] Self-love in *Twelfth Night* has been discussed by Jon S. Lawry, *"Twelfth Night* and 'Salt Waves Fresh in Love,'" *Shakespeare Studies*, 6 (1970), 89, 91, 94, 98. For the association of Orsino with Narcissus, see D. J. Palmer, *"Twelfth Night* and the Myth of Echo and Narcissus," *Shakespeare Studies*, 32 (1979), 73-74.

sis clarify this aspect of Orsino's character. In his essay "On Narcissism," Sigmund Freud remarked that certain individuals "in their later choice of love objects . . . have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves." The psychologist concludes that "they are plainly seeking *themselves* as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed 'narcissistic.' "[9] Critics sometimes argue that while Olivia clearly suffers from vain self-love, Orsino is in love with the self-indulgent idea of being in love.[10] Primarily, however, he loves the opposite sex only on the condition of being able to love himself, reflected in the same-sex features of Viola-Cesario. By loving the woman in Viola-Cesario only in visual relation to the male features of the disguise, Orsino insists upon Malvolio's narcissus-like pastime of crushing another's nature until it yields his name. In other words, loving the Cesario aspect of the Diana-like Viola represents Orsino's fixation upon himself and consequent hoarding of desire. Thus narcissism, which is marked by partial or complete withdrawal of the libido from persons to the self, applies to the retiring Orsino.

Like Orsino, Olivia regards Viola-Cesario as a hybrid creature. Aptly, Malvolio provides her with a perspective for understanding the nature of the Duke's messenger. In Malvolio's view, Cesario is

> Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy; as a squash is before 'tis a peas-cod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple. 'Tis with him in standing water, between boy and man. He is very well-favor'd, and he speaks very shrewishly. One would his mother's milk were scarce out of him.
>
> (I.v.156-62)

Malvolio himself is emotionally near the vague transition from boyhood to manhood that he depicts, although the comic autoerotic allusions in his speech elsewhere suggest

[9] *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), XIV, 88.

[10] See, for example, Harold Jenkins, "Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*," *Rice Institute Pamphlet*, 45 (1959), 25-30.

that he still lives within the adolescent realm (see, for example, II.v.60). Considering his maturity (or lack of it), his reference to mother's milk and weaning is hardly accidental; the figure that Malvolio draws forth from the rich gestalt before him is predictably a narcissistic image of his own partially developed manhood. Olivia finds that Malvolio's version of Viola-Cesario can also be hers; Malvolio draws attention to Viola-Cesario's "well-favor'd" face and shrewish (womanish) voice (I.v.159). As Malvolio's words create "him," Cesario is at that phase of pubescent growth during which he will impose no true love-demands upon the life-denying Olivia. Like her counterpart, Orsino, she can enjoy the teasing image of the opposite sex, muted by the mixture of Viola's identity. She can do without having to give up the vision of the beloved that makes for a comforting reflection of the self.

Thus the negative effects of Viola's disguise appear to outweigh its benefits. "Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness, / Wherein the pregnant enemy does much" (II.ii.27-28). This is Viola's judgment once she realizes that Olivia has fallen in love with her outside. She is a "poor monster" in her own sad opinion. "For the Elizabethans," Bradbrook concludes, " 'disguise' still retained its primary sense of strange apparel. . . . But it also carried the senses of 'concealment' and of 'deformity' " (p. 160).[11] In keeping with this sixteenth-century viewpoint, the "deformed" Viola condenses Olivia's and Orsino's "monstrous" loves. In Orsino's and Olivia's unpromising reactions to the androgynous image of Viola-Cesario, Shakespeare denies a classic claim for the salutary relationship between androgyny and understanding. From Aristophanes' comic account in *The Symposium* of a marvelous "ur-man" with four arms and legs, who was later divided into the sexes, to Renaissance ver-

[11] In "Sexual Disguise in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*," *Shakespeare Studies*, 32 (1979), 68-69, Nancy K. Hayles documents the association of Viola's masking and the diabolical in *Twelfth Night*.

sions of androgynous parents in Eden, an argument existed which suggests that the androgynous condition enlarges the capacities for love and knowledge.[12] Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*, however, rejects this claim. Admittedly, masking at times in this comedy frees characters from narrow ideas and fosters self-knowledge. Orsino, for instance, accepts Cesario's belief that, in love, women "are as true of heart" as men because a "young man" presents it—apparently in an open-minded way (II.iv.87-121). In this respect, Viola's disguise allows her frankly to educate her beloved without threatening him. Yet the unhealthy aspects of Viola's masking counterbalance the benefits of her disguise. Her mask may kindle an outgoing love within Olivia and Orsino, yet the self-love also evoked almost smothers that affection. Only Sebastian can unlock the Illyrians' oppressed feelings.

Sebastian's miraculous epiphany releases Olivia and Orsino (as well as Viola) from their burdens, making possible the giving up of deceit and dissembling even as the original showing forth of Christ did.[13] More importantly, for all the dark constraints of Antonio's love, Sebastian's return of the former's intense but wholesome affection implies that a same-sex friendship need not be a questionable expression of self-love. Sebastian guiltlessly enjoys the feeling that Orsino and Olivia pervert by self-love, while he concurrently repays freely the love of Olivia that appears without reason to him. "Guiltlessly" is a key word in the above claim. When Olivia shamelessly tells Viola-Cesario that she passionately loves "him," it is not accidental that her love and murderous guilt are disturbingly linked in her first words of

[12] For Aristophanes' account, see *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), I, 520-25. For the tradition of an androgynous Adam in Eden, see Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Knopf, 1973), pp. 16-17, and Mark Rose, "Sidney's Womanish Man," *Review of English Studies*, 15 (1964), 354.

[13] The importance of the Epiphany for *Twelfth Night* has been demonstrated by Barbara K. Lewalski, "Thematic Patterns in *Twelfth Night*," *Shakespeare Studies*, 1 (1965), 168-69, 176-79.

revelation:

> O, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful
> In the contempt and anger of his lip!
> A murd'rous guilt shows not itself more soon
> Than love that would see hid. . . .
>
> (III.i.145-48)

The destructive guilt of which Olivia speaks is unconsciously her own, generated by her fruitless feelings of loving the woman whom she recognizes in Viola-Cesario. Sebastian, by contrast, provides the spectator with the redemptive standard in his liking for Antonio; Viola's brother is, after all, the epiphanic character suggested by the play's title.

The epiphany of Sebastian resolves the dilemma caused by Orsino's and Olivia's self-love, freeing them from a confused knowledge of themselves and other characters. When a replica of Cesario walks onstage in the last act, Orsino casts his surprise into an optical image: "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not!" (V.i.216-17). In one sense, Viola's and Sebastian's spectacular joint entry simply dissolves the double vision of self-love. If Olivia in fact has been partly loving a boyish man and partly loving a woman like herself under the cloak of manliness (Viola's name can be crushed to become Olivia's), then the climactic scene involves a comic punishment for her duplistic way of seeing. Still, in the traditional spirit of comedy, the episode is not, at basis, destructive. Even though she thought that she was loving the effeminate boy who suits her fancy, Olivia unknowingly has been worshipping the virile Sebastian for some time. The epiphany of *Twelfth Night* elicits the outgoing love which Olivia has been trying to practice. When Sebastian stands distinct from Cesario, Olivia can clearly know the slight but crucial differences between her two ideas of manliness, reject the one diluted by her own conceits, and credit her natural passion for her self-fulfilling opposite.

Sebastian's presence should also nullify Orsino's idea of

Viola-Cesario. In Sebastian, the Duke can easily see abstracted the manliness that has troubled his view of disguised Viola. Consequently, he is finally able to grasp the wonderful qualify of Viola's love for him (V.i.265-68). Orsino's summary words—

> 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.385-88)

—can be heard as his pledge that nothing can cause him to violate his idea of Viola, not even her continuing to stand before him disguised as a male. Because that costume taints his purer idea, he will honor Viola by not crediting any features of her associated with her mask. So she remains Cesario until he can see the feminine Viola.

Moreover, by calling Viola "his fancy's queen," Orsino implies that his disordered love will henceforth be regulated. Viola will royally govern his formerly inner-directed thoughts. If any element of projection remains in Orsino's affection, it involves his thinking the best of others. Such knowledge, springing from selfless love, is preeminently Viola's, focused in her opinion that her savior Captain's face must declare an honest mind (I.ii.47-51). At one point in the play, Sebastian says that Viola bears a mind that envy could not help but call fair. Possessed of a "fair" mind, Viola judges that fair exteriors proclaim inner virtues. Her intellectual act reflects the philosophy that Nature, including human beings, on occasion may be disguised but that one must, for his or her spiritual health, assume that disguises are not worn. Only by faithfully assuming so can one keep one's understanding untainted, avoiding self-destructive cynicism.

Nonetheless, because Nature, including mankind, often disguises ill will (or remains neutral concerning virtue), the imagination is inclined to acts of regenerative willing. Such imagination causes the desired virtue to crystallize where it

perhaps did not exist. If the Captain were not a kind man, he becomes one in light of Viola's generous projection of his character. Viola understands that she has within herself the power to marry Beauty and Truth. In a court of shifting masks, such knowledge constitutes the liberating wisdom that helps Viola eventually win Orsino. Such wisdom gives greatest meaning to Shakespeare's complex exploration in *Twelfth Night* of the psychological dimension of Renaissance stage conventions of disguise.[14]

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[14] The conventions have been discussed by V. O. Freeburg, *Disguise Plots in Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1915); by Bradbrook, pp. 159-68; by Clifford Leech, "Masking and Unmasking in the Last Plays," in *Shakespeare's Romances Reconsidered*, ed. Carol McGinnis Kay and Henry E. Jacobs (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1978), p. 51; and by Peter Hyland, "Shakespeare's Heroines: Disguise in the Romantic Comedies," *Ariel*, 9 (1978), 23-29.