

“Is She Really the Man?”: Exploring Performativity in *Twelfth Night*

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As modern women who agree with third-wave feminists, we know that gender is not a binary. Did Shakespeare attempt to portray this very concept through Viola's character in *Twelfth Night*? We argue that Viola is gender fluent and performs gender. Upon research, we discovered that the work of American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler highly resonates with our beliefs. Her argument and ideas around performativity state, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare portrays Viola's gender as a performative construct through which she can interact with the other characters as she finds necessary. To analyze the necessity of Viola's male performance, one must critically understand the sexism prevalent in England in the sixteenth century. Women's subjection to men's authority provides the motive for Viola's disguise (Stjerna). Gender is her costume, and the intentions behind that costume change throughout the play as she performs as a woman, a man, and ultimately a person.

Viola, born and raised female, has developed many feminine traits throughout her life. A prominent feminine trait she depicts is that of emotionality, which can be shown

in each of her relationships. This femininity she possesses is so strong-willed that it can be shown in her performance as a man. Viola's feminine trait of emotion is shown in her performance as Cesario, but other feminine traits she possesses begin to shine through, and they gain the attention of Duke Orsino. These traits are apparent when Orsino describes the characteristics of mouth, throat, and voice that Cesario possesses as “semblative a woman's part[s]” (1.4.34). Not only does Orsino observe and interpret these traits, but he begins to exhibit a sexual attraction towards them as thus defined. This is ironic because both males and females have mouths, throats and voices. It is Orsino who dwells on what he defines as the gendered characteristics of these “parts.”

By herself, Viola is a person. As if in a rehearsal, she still performs on her own as she would when she is out in society. Viola is constantly in a balancing act between male and female. She does not act as if she is a man; she merely hides that she is a woman. The gender fluidity Viola possesses is challenged when she states, “I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too; and yet I know not” (2.4.120-121). Operating tactically as a prevarication, these lines more significantly reveal that gender is not a fixed concept and that one can shift between, successfully.

Today more than ever, people are willing to be vocal about what gender really is. Lies Xhonneux criticizes Butler's idea of gender performativity for what she considers to be its lack of universality. The possibility that Butler did not take into consideration minorities was a concern for Xhonneux when compared to other gender theorists such as Rebecca Brown (Xhonneux 293). Following the critics of Judith Butler as well as our own perceptions of gender, we are observing the special factor of the “spectrum” or audience to which one portrays their chosen gender. Through our research, with reference to the foundational work of Judith Butler and its interpretation by more recent exponents such as Gill Jagger, we see that Shakespeare's portrayal of Viola's gender fluidity shows that one's biological sex does not determine one's identity. Our research is designed to push the boundaries of gender through examples like Viola's in *Twelfth Night*.

Works Cited

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