

Language, Class, and Mobility in *Twelfth Night* 1.5

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In his comedy *Twelfth Night*, William Shakespeare shows how characters in different social stations use language against a rigid social structure. In late sixteenth-century England, social expectations governed one's speech; when one spoke and to whom, what one said, and how one said it, all depended on one's social class. Similarly, the way each character in *Twelfth Night* speaks and is understood corresponds with the expectations for someone of their status. In this quite rigid system, the agility in the use of spoken language shown by one of *Twelfth Night's* central characters is exceptional (and here we differ from depictions of Elizabethan society as lacking cohesion; e.g., Suzuki). Viola, the play's protagonist, changes her manner of speech depending on the person spoken to but also the subject she is addressing, so that her discourse exhibits a fluidity that transcends social class. Through the use of language, Viola effects various radical changes in social perception, and she ultimately ascends the social ladder to a higher status.

Investigating this phenomenon has been carried out through a review of key critical studies as well as direct analysis of the text of the play, with reference to varying forms of discourse, such as blank verse and prose. The motivation behind this study has been our interest in how language reflects one's social status. While love and gender are obviously attractive subjects of study in *Twelfth Night*, the evidence suggests that social class had a greater, more sustained, impact on one's language than did love. This realization helped focus our research question, which was why certain characters in *Twelfth Night* — and pre-eminently Viola — could fluctuate through various levels of class. They

were able to do this through language, as each class operated in and was identified by their own distinctive type of language use. The general supposition tends to be that those Shakespearean characters who are of low class tend to speak in prose (Tootalian), and those of high rank speak blank verse, with more complex sentence structures and a higher incidence of terms of French or Latin origin. If the characters want to alter the way they are socially perceived onstage, they could try to alter their speech patterns according to their situation — but the effort can be socially destabilizing (Tootalian).

In *Twelfth Night*, the successful use of language to create social mobility is highlighted by Viola. Having lost her previous social status in the shipwreck at the play's outset, Viola must find a way to adapt to her new life. By using her ability to speak eloquently and masterfully, Viola can integrate herself into different social statuses in accordance with the person she is conversing with. In effect, Viola plays the role of an actor, constructing different realities of herself depending on who she interacts with (Eagleton). This ability is evident very early in the play, as when Viola is delivering Orsino's message of love to a grief-distracted Olivia. Viola has disguised herself as a man, "Cesario," and in this guise has taken a position as Duke Orsino's servitor. Upon their meeting for the first time, Olivia is in her mourning attire, which hides her identity as a countess; both characters are disguised. Not knowing this person's real identity, Viola assumes that she is speaking to a housemaid; thus, she exchanges words with Olivia in prose. Once Olivia reveals her identity, the dialogue involves increasing wordplay and metaphor, and finally changes into blank verse (McDonald 144–45); as Cesario, Viola gradually makes the proper adjustment in addressing someone who has a higher social status. With this adjustment, Viola conveys Orsino's sentiments in the style in which the message was composed, with a highly noble and romanticized idea of love that can finally only be poetically expressed in blank verse. By using blank verse expertly, Viola presents herself to be more than just a page but rather the image of a young gentleman (and on this topic of language itself being a way to impersonate another class status, see Bolton). Indeed, rather than just reciting the message from memory, Viola complements and surpasses it with her own words that culminate in her bewitching verbal depiction of calling to Olivia from "a willow cabin at your gate" (1.5.257; Edmonson 313–17). Therefore, it comes as no surprise when noble characters esteem Viola as an excellent, eloquent gentleman due to her skilful use of language.

Our larger goal in this study is to refine techniques of critical analysis, as well as addressing the question how Viola's use of language underpins her social success. Our key finding is that Viola uses eloquent language to climb the social hierarchy. She exemplifies fluidity by changing her manner of speech to suit different social situations. No more

than she sits meekly in a pre-ordained gender role, Viola does not fit into any social class but rather has the ability to transcend the rigid social structure of her time and place. We have discovered that language can be used as a means of mobility, allowing this skilled character to break free from their social constraints and alter the way others perceive them.

Works Cited

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