



CROSS-DRESSING IN TWELFTH NIGHT

What strikes most modern audiences as unusual about *Twelfth Night* is the fact that its chief female character is dressed like a boy for most of the play. The play then raises questions about gender, identity and sexuality and how all of these things can be performed. Of course, in Shakespeare's time, boy actors played the female roles in the London theatres, so in a play like *Twelfth Night*, we have a disorientating scenario in which a boy actor plays the part of a young woman, who plays the part of a young-ish boy; this gender confusion provides a productive route for thinking about the elasticity of identity and how selves are performed in everyday life, topics Shakespeare was deeply interested in.

It is useful to understand that in Shakespeare's day, people relied upon outward appearance to determine one's social background and their gender. The Tudor sumptuary laws (laws that dictated what materials, colours fabrics could be worn by each social class) were, in most instances, adhered to very carefully. Wearing clothes that were not suited to one's class and gender would have been viewed as a fairly significant transgression of social boundaries. Some writers even felt that religious boundaries might be crossed if men and women started wearing each other's clothes. In the Bible, Deuteronomy 22:5, for example, forbids male cross-dressing, so it could be interpreted as a sin to wear clothes belonging to a different sex/gender. There seemed to be quite a bit of opposition to cross-dressing: sermons preached in church cried out against it from time to time, and in the early seventeenth century two pamphlets were published which spoke out furiously and anxiously against male and female cross-dressing: *Haec-Vir* and *Hic Mulier*, both published anonymously in 1615. The writers of these pamphlets argued that cross-dressing was 'monstrous', unnatural and made one look like they didn't belong to any one gender.

But while there was an opposition, it didn't stop the practice of wearing clothes that were deemed inappropriate to one's sex. A very bold woman, known famously as Moll Cutpurse, used to dress as a man, sometimes referring to herself as Tom (though her real name was Mary Frith), may have been a thief (hence the name 'cutpurse') but what she was most well known for was her tendency to wear a man's doublet and hose, smoke pipes in public, drink and swear. She was so famous and interesting to people, that Thomas Dekker (a fellow playwright) wrote a play about her called *The Roaring Girl*.

The most visible examples of cross-dressing were those that took place on the commercial stages of London. Boy actors, aged between 12 and 21, played all the female roles in the plays performed between 1567 and 1642. Women did not start acting publicly in England until the 1660s. The audiences that attended plays in this period - numbering in the tens of thousands- would have grown accustomed to seeing boys play the parts of women, therefore. These performances were apparently very convincing. Henry Jackson, a scholar at Oxford University, saw a performance of *Othello* at his college and remarked how moved the audience was by Desdemona's (or rather, the boy actor's) performance. We might wonder how did boy actors perform the parts of women so convincingly? Well, femininity is defined by gesture, height, gait (how one stands and walks), clothes, hair, make up or complexion and voice. Preadolescent and some adolescent boys that hadn't grown facial hair and whose voices hadn't broken yet or still 'piped' like a woman's could easily play female parts by simply putting on skirts and gowns, elaborate wigs and make up. This kind of 'transvestism' as many scholars now refer to it, upset the anti-theatrical writers, like the Puritans, who worried that the parade or 'pageant' of young boys dressed as women on stage would corrupt the hearts and minds of the spectators. It was seen as immoral, sinful and potentially harmful to their own masculine development for boys to dress as and impersonate women.

Cross-dressing also took place in rural as well as urban communities in Shakespeare's England. The early modern calendar was marked by religious occasions when people would celebrate through festive rituals and entertainments. On holidays such as Easter, Whitsuntide, Midsummer, Christmas, Twelfth Night and Candlemas, communities would gather for games, feasting, drinking, pageants, amateur plays, revels, disguising, mummers plays, morris dances and more. The idea behind such festive occasions was social release: a time to forget every day troubles and routines, a time to live for a day as a lord or to play the fool; these holidays provided an excuse to be or live for a day as the opposite of what you are in real life. Cross-dressing was quite common during such festivities.

In such a social context, cross-dressing may not seem quite as odd when we encounter it in *Twelfth Night*. Viola dresses as a boy because she arrives alone (apart from the Captain) in a strange or foreign land. Some women dress as boys in Shakespeare for protection, like Rosalind in *As You Like It*. By dressing as a boy, Viola is able to serve the Duke in his courtship of Olivia, while getting close to him. She realises how much she loves Orsino and beneath the disguise finds the freedom to share her feelings as if she/he is talking about his/her sister. When Sebastian- her twin brother- arrives on the scene, Shakespeare is able to exploit the comical effects of such identity confusion.

Only when Sebastian returns can Viola/Cesario return to her female self. Significantly, the reunion of the twins enables the play's love matches to take place within 'appropriate' social boundaries (well, appropriate to Shakespeare's conservative society), that is, a match between a man and a woman. While this is the case in the fiction, we may do well to remember that the actors who played the parts of Olivia, Viola and perhaps Maria (who might have been played by an older actor) were young adolescent boys, reminding us that gender is a fluid category and, with the right clothes, wigs and makeup, can be performed with style and eloquence.

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