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Performing Gender Performance: Viola's Turn

In my previous writing, I have been approaching *Twelfth Night* from the perspective of a scholar. I now want to shift to that of a practitioner- as an actor preparing to play the role of Viola. There are a wealth of academic applications of Judith Butler's Gender Theory to *Twelfth Night*, but it is the practical application of them to an acting performance that is the heart of my work. Here I want to investigate how the playing of role of Viola is influenced by this reading of *Twelfth Night*. How am I changed as the actor equipped with this theory, and how is Viola the character changed? How is the performance influenced by the all-female cast? How does all of this translate into performance?

I think we must begin by examining the "gender trouble" the character of Viola experiences during the course of the play. After being shipwrecked, and presumably losing her brother, Viola asks to be disguised:

"I prithee, and I'll pay thee bounteously,  
Conceal me what I am, and by my aid  
For such disguise as haply shall become  
The form of my intent. I'll serve this Duke:  
Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him" (TN 1.2 lines)

However, by the time we see Viola in the company of Orsino, he is dressed as a boy. Orsino calls him “dear lad” (TN 1.4.). We don’t know why the plan was changed from dressing as a eunuch to dressing as a male page, but from this point through the end of the play, Viola is in male attire. In *Crossing Gender in Shakespeare : Feminist Psychoanalysis and the Difference within*, James Stone writes, “Although Viola opts for the disguise of a page, her initial choice of posing as a eunuch reflects more accurately the sexual indecision (and impotence) that her attire cloaks, in that a eunuch is neither a fully equipped male, or a female” (28). I am interested in this interpretation, because it is clear that Viola is never fully comfortable with her male persona. She says “Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness” (TN 2.2.). She doesn’t embrace the opportunities that a male presentation offers like Portia or Rosalind. The character of Cesario solves an immediate problem- that of being a woman alone in a strange land, but it soon creates a new dilemma. She becomes firmly entrenched in a love triangle with Orsino and Olivia. “Her masculine clothing straitjackets her in this intermediate crux, double bound to unsatisfying alternatives whichever way she turns” (Stone 25). The clothing is certainly a component, but it is the entire performance of Cesario that limits Viola’s actions. This is a fascinating reversal of gender expectations. The very presentation that frees Portia to practice law binds Viola to a role beneath her station, and removes even the limited sexual agency she held as a woman. On a personal level, I would argue that Cesario is an unsuccessful gender performance. As a version of her brother Sebastian, Viola is never deluded into thinking she is a man. Cesario is a placeholder- not a fully realized identity.

On the other hand, as difficult as it is for Viola personally, it must be a successful male performance as perceived by the other characters in the play. Stone writes that “she is repeatedly

reminded of the defects in her male interpretation” (30). I disagree with him on that point. Feste notices that something about her is amiss: “Who you are and what you would are out of my welkin” (TN 3.1), but it is the nature of Shakespeare’s wise fools to have that kind of preternatural knowledge. Viola flirts with the reality of her identity to both Orsino and Olivia on various occasions. She can’t help telling Olivia, “I am not what I am” (TN 3.1), but she is not believed. The performance of Cesario must be convincing enough that when the “real” Cesario, i.e. Sebastian, appears, they believe him to be the same person.

As an actor, this presents a fantastic challenge. The performance of masculinity goes from being her objective to her obstacle. She must fight to keep up the act while knowing that it will keep her from being with the man she loves. She doesn’t have an answer for how to solve this paradox. She laments, “O time! Thou must untangle this, not I; / It is too hard a knot for me to untie” (TN 2.2). It is not until Sebastian appears that she has a solution. How then does this remain an active struggle from Act II to Act V? We know from the text that she achieves her objective of presenting as male, but what does that look like when it is a battle costly won? What tactics might she employ to hold up the façade when it is breaking her heart? What does it say that Cesario is a burdensome costume, but it so easily fools others?

I think this dilemma is the matrix where Gender Performance becomes a playable theatrical act. Butler makes it clear in her writing that gender performance is not a one off event, but an ongoing process of semiotics. “My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler 523). By her definition, a gender performance isn’t something that can exist within the two hour timeframe of a play. It is something that is rehearsed in daily life and becomes a subconscious act. I think what

the span of a play can do effectively is to destabilize the idea of the gender binary. If “Cesario” is a begrudging mask, we see that “series of acts” that Butler refers to as performative, rather than as inherent traits. The cracks or slips of the mask that we see in Viola’s soliloquies and asides remind us that it is all a show. It is also important that Viola is performed in a different way than Cesario. That may seem obvious, but the hope is that highlighting the falseness of those “male” signifiers will also call into question the “female” ones. I do not think that Viola is aware of her female gender performance, but that has to be a part of the character creation. Her intention to walk or talk a certain way as she is Viola is not important, but as the actor, I must have an awareness that what she presents as “herself” is as much a culturally and socially determined mask as Cesario. Viola as “female” is easy to perform because she has been doing it her entire life. Cesario as “male” is difficult because it is foreign- it has not been rehearsed in the same way.

What are those performative acts and signals that we classify as “masculine” or “feminine”? We typically think of voice, gesture, and clothing as the main signifiers of gender. Clothing is chief among these in *Twelfth Night*. Viola wears her “masculine usurped attire” for most of the play, and it is the chief part of her disguise (TN 5.1). Unlike Portia, Rosalind, or Julia, Viola is surrounded by strangers when she is in this drag. She does not have to convince anyone that she previously knew as Viola that she is an entirely new (male) person. Viola may take on some physical or vocal changes to cement her male identity, but that is not explicit in the text, and she is not necessarily required to do so. The people of Illyria see a body in male clothing, and assume that body is male. “Two models of sexual transformation operate in *Twelfth Night*: one looks to textured clothing as the locus for reading gender, the other to textual

inscription in the words that conventionally designate and distinguish the sexes” (Stone 25). In *Twelfth Night* in perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare’s cross dressing comedies, the clothes really do make the man. Orsino even comments on the fact that Cesario is a pretty young man with a high voice:

“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” (TN 1.4)

This has to be a moment of terror for Viola that she will be found out- but Orsino is not suspicious, simply glad that such an innocent looking boy will bear his messages of love to Olivia. This further suggests that all Viola has done to take on a male persona is to wear pants. How fragile are our constructs of gender that they shift on the lack of a skirt?

All of this is complicated by surrounding Viola in an all-female cast. In a “traditionally” cast production, it is easy for the audience to clearly see the gender play inherent in the text. My choice to have an all-female cast adds a new layer of confusion. Before I seek to contextualize Viola in this production, I want to spend some time asking “why an all-female cast”? The easy answer is that I am passionate about providing more opportunities for women to speak Shakespeare. Beyond that, I am fascinated by what a woman brings to one of his male characters. Shakespeare is widely heralded for his universal stories and characters, but that “universality” has not been explored by all female casts until relatively recently.

Elizabeth Klett has written extensively about cross-gender casting at The Globe in the past twenty years. In her article, "Re-dressing the Balance: All-Female Shakespeare at the Globe.",

she writes, “particularly in the highly charged performative space of The Globe, these male characters that seem so thoroughly familiar to modern audiences can become defamiliarized through the actresses’ bold portrayals” (168). It’s exciting to me that the voice and body and experiences of a woman can shed new light on characters that men have mined for 400 years. Gender may be a construct, but it is one that has very real implications in the lives of those who identify/present as female. Therefore, a group of women is going to have a unique take on a text that was written by a man, for male performers, for a predominately male audience.

I was also inspired by Orlando Shakespeare Theatre’s “original practices” production of *Twelfth Night* that will be running at the same time. “Original practices” is a widely debated term, meaning something slightly different every place it is used. OST’s notion of “original practices” includes an all-male cast, Elizabethan set and costumes, and Original Pronunciation. When discussing the Globe’s take on “original practices”, Klett writes that “there is no way to justify an all-female cast as an ‘original practice’”, because women did not perform on Shakespeare’s stage (*Cross Gender Shakespeare* 140). That being said, “the productions also mitigated the ahistorical presence of women on the Globe stage by paradoxically emphasizing the significance of the original practices” (*Cross Gender Shakespeare* 140). In these productions it seems that the other “original practices” of music, props, and dress made up for the fact that having women on stage is anachronistic. This is an interesting approach, but I don’t think it achieves what I want. My goal is to bring the spirit of Shakespeare’s original productions to modern audiences. I think contemporary clothing and music are more aligned with how Shakespeare’s audiences experienced his plays, and remove some of the barriers that 21st

century patrons have with classic texts. Along with updating the music and design, it stands to reason that an all-female cast is the modern parallel to 16th century ensembles.

I am, however, inspired by the all-female productions at the Globe in how they address gender within a play. “The original practices helped to erase potentially unsettling concerns about cross-gender casting by encouraging the actresses and their audiences to read the characters, via their costumes, as male” (*Cross Gender Shakspeare* 145). As previously discussed, gendered clothing is key to distinguishing between male and female in the world of *Twelfth Night*. Having the male characters in masculine clothing and female characters in feminine clothing should help to clarify the genders of the characters, even though the cast is comprised of only female bodies. I want to find a balance of highlighting the artifice of gender, while also telling a coherent story. It is important to the plot of *Twelfth Night* that the audience knows who is male, who is female, and who is in disguise- the costumes have to make this clear. I have no illusion that the audience will forget that they are watching a cast of all women, but I want the character’s genders to read as they were written.

If we can come to an agreement with the audience that women will be playing male roles as men, we open up the possibility to discuss gender performance in a different way than we do with Viola. “It is not only in particular moments that the audience is made aware of gender as prosthetic; rather throughout the performance, the spectator is encouraged to fixate variously on the surface and on the imaged body beneath” (“Re-dressing the balance” 169). I would argue it is a less complicated layering of gender than Viola/Cesario, because it is consistent throughout the play. It perhaps makes the idea of gender performance more digestible, as it is more akin to modern drag with heightened interpretations of gender that call attention to both the performed

gender and the gender of the performer. This is the opportunity for more commentary on the male performance of men. Viola's presentation of maleness is limited, but Orsino or Sir Toby Belch are in full body masculine masks. Gesture and voice can feature more prominently in their male performance. I think a healthy dose of satire will benefit the performances of the actresses playing men in this show.

As I circle back to Viola's place in this production, my question shifts to how do I interpret her through this lens of gender performativity without making it the only aspect of the character? I do not think that *Twelfth Night* is a play about gender identity. This production is using Gender Performativity as a filter- a way to color the language, not to overpower it. My theoretical work cannot interfere with what the show is really about. It is a play about loss, love, and discovery. Viola is not trying to make sweeping statements about gender presentation any more than Shakespeare was. Viola is trying to negotiate that "knot" she is tied in- she is unable to see the greater implications of her disguise. Just as I am asking the audience to view the characters with a dual consciousness, I must approach Viola both as an intellectual exercise in gender studies, and as a living, breathing woman facing a great obstacle. In the act of my own performance, I can't be concerned with theory. I trust that the rehearsal process will provide a space to synthesize this transition to practice.



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