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> *This body is not only a thing in the world, subject to physical gravity, but a thing that carries its own historical gravity and this collected weight bears down on the "sexedness" of the body and the possibilities of experience.*
> —Jacquelyn N. Zita

> *Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures.*
> —Jessamyn West

Empowering Cesario, or The Harbingers of Genderfluidity

William Shakespeare continues to garner attention four centuries later in part because of how his characters exhibit hopes and fears that exist across time and place. His works also imagine less rigid societies compared to that of his own. Such dynamics are present in the c. 1600-1602 romantic comedy, *Twelfth Night*, *or What You Will*. This play opens with a lovesick Orsino, who is Duke of Illyria, and with twins shipwrecked on the coast of Illyria. Both twins, Viola and Sebastian, think the other has perished and set off on quests for survival. The play unfolds through a series of love triangles, jokes, and misunderstandings.

With Captain's assistance, Viola adopts the name "Cesario" and "disguises" herself as a man such that *he* can work in Illyria. Viola does not disguise herself *as* Sebastian or for the purposes of pursuing Orsino romantically, as stated by some scholars (Ryan 516; Scragg 377). Disguises do appear often in Shakespearean plays. However, *Twelfth Night* invites a different and contemporary reading of "disguise" that goes beyond accepting Viola's words about being in disguise at face value. I argue that the character Viola/Cesario is genderfluid. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first documented use of "genderfluid" occurred in 1987 (Dent par. 9). And Sara L. Katz-Wise, of Harvard Medical School, explains, "Genderfluidity refers to

change over time in a person's gender expression or gender identity, or both. That change might be in expression, but not identity, or in identity, but not expression. Or, both expression and identity might change together" (par. 4).

Specifically, by using the extant text alone, by reading in 2021 and using reader response theory, and by using contemporary concepts from critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory—intersectionality, positionality, and performativity—to shed light on the play, I articulate a reading somewhat counter to and further than what is found in existing scholarship. For instance, William C. Carroll recognizes how *Twelfth Night* explores "the artificiality of gender definitions" but nonetheless talks about the play in terms of disguises and mistaken identities and uses scare quotes when talking about Viola/Cesario as two individuals (187-189). Mary Jo Kietzman gives Cesario independent agency but maintains that Viola is acting (263-264). Robert Kimbrough argues that *Twelfth Night* is one of Shakespeare's many plays that make use of androgyny. Without much explanation, he writes, "As a result, she can be Viola and Sebastian, woman and man, at the same time" (21, 27-31).

My reading shows that Cesario is not "Viola in disguise" and recognizes that Viola not a "crossdressing woman" or merely acting. Further, while Kimbrough's argument is greatly appreciated and generally ahead of its time, his argument comes from the early 1980s, before the concepts used in this paper existed. I also find no evidence in the play that Viola and Cesario co-exist. Said directly and simply, my reading is that Viola/Cesario is sometimes a woman and sometimes a man, depending on circumstances and on proximity to power.

"Intersectionality," according to Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, "investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations...as well as individual experiences…. [and] views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age—among

others—as interrelated and mutually shaping one another" (2). In other words, every person has identities that are privileged by society and others that are oppressed: Identities interact to create what is permissible and how a person is treated. Shakespeare's Viola is introduced for the first time and readers almost immediately learn a vital aspect of this character's (assumed) identity from Captain: "This is Illyria, *lady*" (Shakespeare 1.2.2; emphasis added). Viola immediately asks, "And what should I do in Illyria?," suggesting that she has limited resources and has no expectation of rescue (1.2.3). Viola's immediate interest in serving Olivia and then interest in serving Orsino further suggests that Viola is accustomed to such work and not that more in the trajectory of an inventor, leader, or writer. In other words, she is not dependent on a life of leisure, and has not lived with a staff ready to meet her every demand. Her willingness to do physical labor underscores that she is able-bodied enough for said work. Given the conversation between Viola and Captain in Act 1 Scene 2, we also know she is literate and can communicate in the socially-expected, normative way in Illyria. In the same initial scene, Viola begs of Captain: "Conceal me what I am, and be my aid / For such disguise as haply shall become / The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke. / Though shalt present me as an eunuch to him" (1.2.56-59).

Thus, Viola/Cesario is an able-bodied literate Illyrian.[1] "Genderfluid" also needs to be added to this set of intersectional identities. While "gender" and "genderfluid" are both concepts dating back only a few decades and all queer categories of identity such as "genderfluid" are very much in the domain of unsteady knowledge, seeing Viola/Cesario as genderfluid—or as a person with very real, actualized identities and/or behaviors that can fluctuate at any time depending on any number of tangible and intangible reasons—reveals a more powerful and

[1] Given that Viola/Cesario believes her/his brother has died, an unexplored aspect of identity certainly includes depression or anxiety but such would still allow for what I coined as "cripnormativity" (Pegoda).

complex character with a full identify than one who is merely "disguised" as a man or one who merely cross-dresses as Casey Charles suggests (124-127).

Viola freely, immediately, and without hesitation *becomes* Cesario, a man, in order to serve Orsino. No one forces Viola to articulate this new identity. Specifically recognizing that Viola even initiates this change is important. Viola also understands that there are often personal sacrifices made while crafting one's identity: "It may be worth thy pains, for I can sing / And speak to him in many sorts of music" (Shakespeare 1.2.60-61). Throughout *Twelfth Night*, Viola/Cesario never experiences any kind of identity crisis, or at least nothing more than a passing predicament given her "thou art a wickedness" speech (2.2.27). Seemingly, then, Viola (as a woman) has little core investment in womanhood and can just as easily live as Cesario (a man)—culturally, socially, and politically. Viola/Cesario is genderfluid.

Cesario, not Viola, is the character readers interact with the most. Viola only appears in Act 1 Scene 2, the initial scene introducing this character; in Act 1 Scene 4 Lines 45-46 ("Yet a barful strife! / Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife"); in Act 3 Scene 4 Lines 314-316 ("A little thing / would make me tell them how much I lack of a / man"); and in the concluding Act 5 Scene 1 beginning with Lines 261-262 ("If nothing lets to make us happy both / But this my masculine usurped attire"). The only important reference to time comes from Orsino in Act 5, Scene 1: "Three months this youth [i.e., Cesario] hath tended upon me" (5.1.99). Thus, over the course of months, Viola/Cesario adopts and announces ownership of not just masculine clothing but masculine cultural and social behavior and maintains this while engaging in onstage and offstage behaviors such as eating, socializing, and working. Only twice outside of the opening and closing does Cesario shift back to Viola but while still adorned in what she/he (and his/her

society) deems masculine attire. The shifts both come at very brief moments of doubt or of worry but with Cesario determined and hoping to avoid being made to exit genderfluidity.

The feminist concept of "positionality" also sheds light on *Twelfth Night* and genderfluidity. Whereas "intersectionality" looks at how identities interact to create political and social realities, "positionality" looks at what identities mean, at how these meanings vary by time and place, and at how society positions such as privileged and/or oppressed. Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault write, "By positionality we mean…that gender, race, class, and other aspects of our identities are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities" (118). Positionality helps to understand and to theorize Viola's shift to being Cesario for almost the entire play. Only by shifting to a masculine identity can Cesario, not Viola, acquire work in Illyria. As a man, Cesario also has seemingly unfettered access to Illyria and is the only one to interact with almost all the characters, interactions enabled by being genderfluid, enabled by understanding how to navigate power dynamics.

Positionality further helps understand the concluding shift from Cesario back to Viola and the resulting loss of autonomy. As a man, our genderfluid character's relationship with Orsino is that of employee; as a woman, the relationship changes instantly to that of wife: "Your master quits you; and for your / service done him / ….Here is my hand. You shall from this time be / Your master's mistress" (Shakespeare 5.1.337-343). While there is a preexisting crush or perhaps, given the accelerated timeline found in comedies, even love that Viola has toward Orsino, Viola's mechanism for everyday survival changes and her power is taken away—she is not even asked if she wants to get married and from contemporary conceptions, the absolute power differences preclude even the possibility of consent. While Cesario, Oliva sees a persistent

messenger from Orsino with whom she falls in love. When Viola, Olivia's gaze changes. Cesario/Viola instantly becomes an equal. Olivia announces: "A sister! You are she" (5.1.344).

Certainly, Viola does not have much choice but to become Cesario, but that she/he does so without stress and without being threatened, at the very least suggests that switching from Viola to Cesario and back is not a problem. And when the switches occur, Viola/Cesario and Cesario/Viola do so with complete ease. Further, that Olivia, Orsino, Sebastian, and everyone else have almost no reaction to learning that Cesario is also Viola is significant and speaks to a fictional Shakespearian world, a stage where actual fluidity and manifesting different identities is just accepted within prevailing mores or is nothing more than an aberration of folkways.

"Performativity" is the final concept offered in my essay to help articulate how and why Viola/Cesario can be read as a genderfluid character. In particular, "performativity" offers proof that Viola *is* a woman, and Cesario *is* a man. Citing John Austin's and Judith Butler's scholarly innovations, Andrés R. Amado explains that "gender is performative" (par. 8) He continues, "This is not to say that gender isn't real or is inconsequential. On the contrary, gender is real because of persistent performances of gender norms that consolidate personal and social conceptions of gender" (par. 8). From the perspective of performativity, said simply: Behavior creates gender, and behavior and gender are each socially constructed. Through his work as Orsino's messenger and all the resulting interactions with Andrew, Antonio, Fool, Malvolio, Mary,[2] and Toby, Cesario's behaviors and interactions create and reinforce the manhood aspect of this genderfluidity. Others recognize Cesario's appearance (even as it includes aspects of androgyny), mannerisms, and labor as being that of a man and address him as "lad," as "young man," as "sir," as "boy," and/or as "gentleman" dozens of times (Shakespeare 1.4.32, 1.5.101,

[2] In the text, this character is listed as "Maria"; however, here I use "Mary" because that is how she introduces herself to audiences (and to Andrew): "My name is Mary, sir" (Shakespeare 1.3.53).

1.5.175, 2.4.28, 3.3.70). Such pronouncements also create and reinforce gender and that gender is performative: Every attempt to woo Oliva for Orsino, for example, further establishes and perpetuates Cesario's manhood and his compulsory subservience. Every public conversation Cesario has further establishes his manhood. These arguments stand in sharp contrast to Nancy Lindheim: "Viola is male only in attire and in the extroverted confidence of her address….[her] constant asides and speeches remind us that her fears or desires are those conventionally ascribed to women and girls" (682).

Working from ideas of performativity, we can also revisit arguments made by academics, such as Jami Ake, Casey Charles, and Nancy Lindheim. They tend to find homoeroticism between Cesario/Viola and Olivia (Ake 376; Charles 133; Lindheim 696). Such scholars searching for queer useable pasts tend to emphasize that Cesario is "really" a woman, or they focus on how in the original seventeenth-century stage performances Cesario is a man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man and that Olivia is a man pretending to be a woman. Performativity invites a different reading and allows for simply accepting Olivia and Viola as women and Cesario as a man. By allowing for Viola/Cesario to be genderfluid we can better appreciate each aspect of her/his identity. In the interactions that sometimes prompt homoerotic readings, the interaction are between a man (Cesario) and a woman (Olivia). Scholars also argue that queer eroticism occurs in moments such as when Antonio tells Sebastian, "I do adore thee so" (Charles 136-137; Lindheim 686; Shakespeare 2.1.46). But, this depends on seeing language as sexual. As maintained by Micheal Paramo, attraction comes in various forms and need not be sexual or erotic (par. 1-9).

We can now fully visit one of the important, and potentially objectionable, arguments advanced here: a rejection of Viola's/Cesario's words that she/he is using a "disguise." This self-

description warrants more thought. I am not suggesting that Viola/Cesario is dishonest with audiences but that, working from performativity, he/she does not realize how much the "disguise" actually transforms her/him. Viola discusses the "disguise" once, shortly after landing in Illyria. And Cesario discusses the "disguise" once after unwittingly becoming the target of Olivia's affection: "I am the man. If it be so, as 'tis, / Poor lady, she were better love a dream. / Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness" (Shakespeare 2.2.25-27). (And it should be noted that Lindheim's previously cited assertion that such asides and speeches are constant is clearly inaccurate.) Despite this brief self-critique, Cesario maintains and gives further into the "disguise" because of the aforementioned change in positionality that comes with such masculine identities. This suggests that "wickedness" can be negotiated or that Cesario/Viola are admittedly imperfect. And recognizing the struggles contemporary genderfluid people face, this "thou art a wickedness" could be a moment of what could be named proto-internalized queerphobia. While not working from a position of genderfluidity but androgyny, Kimbrough reaches a similar conclusion, writing, "Viola's disguise does not turn out to be a total 'wickedness.' It merely covers those parts of her that too often prevent society from accepting women as human beings" (31).

Ultimately, I reject "disguise" phraseology when thinking about *Twelfth Night*'s Viola/Cesario because it limits possible thinking and ignores that Cesario's actions and social, political roles make him a man within the context of how sex/gender is constructed in the play. Behavior, indeed, creates gender. If Viola is only disguised as Cesario and not genderfluid, *she* would likely make a mistake at some point that would require explanation, but no such mistakes are made. Viola and Cesario are each coherent and effectively distinct characters, so much so that her/his twin brother, Sebastian, does not recognize his sibling: "Of charity, what kin are you

to me? / What countryman? What name? What Parentage?" (Shakespeare 5.1.241-242). It should be further noted that working from ideas of performativity and that when acknowledging the power of society, every character is effectively "disguised" in some way or another. Antonio, Mary, and Olivia, for instance, each 'perform' according to the standards of Illyria. The difference between them and between Viola/Cesario is that she/he realizes such and uses said power to navigate survival. And most importantly, accepting the identity people announce and claim for themselves is vital. Cesario's identity could not be clearer. For example, he tells us "I am a gentleman," "I am the man," "…were I a woman," "We men…" (1.5.283, 2.2.25, 2.4.119, 2.4.128). He also tells Olivia (and readers), "I am not what I am," meaning there is a gap between who Cesario actually is and who Olivia thinks Cesario is (3.1.148). And while Shakespeare almost certainly was not directly thinking about what people currently call genderfluidity, the textual evidence is available for such a reading and is further warranted by prior precedent in literary theory established by Roland Barthes (145). Thus, I embrace interpreting "I am now what I am" as "I am genderfluid, not [just] a man."[3]

While my argument in this essay provides a reading with an alternative way of seeing "disguise," Viola/Cesario, and *Twelfth Night*, I am not suggesting this methodology could (or should) automatically be transposed to the rest of the play or to Shakespeare's other twenty-five works that make use of disguises in some form or another (Kreider 167). In *Twelfth Night*, Feste, the Fool, adorns a disguise that does not signify genderfluidity. While functioning as Sir Topas, Feste participates in Mary's on-going prank by tormenting Malvolio: "Fare thee well. Remain thou still in darkness" (4.2.59). In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica hates her father, Shylock: "But thought I am a daughter to his blood, / I am not to his manners" (Shakespeare

[3] An adaptation with the additional components of a mixed race, passing Cesario would be fascinating, too.

2.3.18-19). She assumes “the lovely garnish of a boy” specifically to steal money before marrying Lorenzo: “I will make fast the doors and gid myself / With some more ducats, and be with you straight” (2.6.47, 2.6.51-52). Jessica deliberately adopts a disguise to manipulate and mislead and to get what she wants. Jessica is not genderfluid. Similarly, when Portia disguises herself a male lawyer, Balthazar, and disguises her maid, Nerissa, as a male lawyer’s assistant, room for a genderfluid-based analysis does not exist. Even though while disguised as a man others believe Portia to be the man Balthazar, Portia performs duties reserved for men, and Portia is addressed as “sir,” a case cannot be made for genderfluidity because the male persona—the disguise—only helps her get what she wants (and serves to further dehumanize Shylock): “I have within my mind / A thousand raw tricks of these bragging jacks / Which I will practice” (3.4.79-81, 4.1.419). As for her maid, Nerissa has no choice but to obey: “I have work in hand / That you yet know not of” thus completely precluding any genderfluidity (3.4.59-60). In some cases, disguises do not even involve sex/gender but class, for example, as in *1 King Henry IV* when looking at Hal’s shifting behavior (McDonald 24).

In closing, *Twelfth Night* offers insights into the intrapersonal and into the interpersonal across the Atlantic and back hundreds of years. We can also use insights from 2021 to appreciate the play in new ways and even to see early harbingers of cultural changes, to see how fiction enables thoughts and truths, expressions and reflections otherwise not often possible. Viola/Cesario is a fascinating person when utilizing a lens of cultural materialism, that is applying contemporary ideas such as intersectionality, positionality, performativity, and genderfluidity to Shakespeare’s creation. I maintain my argument that Viola/Cesario can be seen as genderfluid. There should even be editions of *Twelfth Night* that specifically list “Cesario” as a character alongside the appropriate lines!

The reading articulated in this essay would almost assuredly be wholly unfamiliar to Shakespeare or his original audiences, not to mention readers beyond just several decades ago. "Genderfluidity" is a historical anachronism when uncritically applied to *Twelfth Night*, especially given codified rules surrounding clothing, class and gender, and one's appropriate place (McDonald 10). Further, working from theories such as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, "genderfluidity" and "positionality," along with the other concepts used throughout this essay, would further be unintelligible to most readers in most times and places. My deconstructionist reading creates new and exciting questions, promotes inclusion, and "compounds complacent distinctions between appearance and reality, and suggests that the sexual [and gender] identity of Viola…[is] much more complex…[than] trite dichotomies" (Ryan 515). And thus, my reading of *Twelfth Night* summons us to reconsider our assumptions about Early Modern England. Shakespeare created a work over four hundred years ago that now invites a reading of genderfluidity. He would not recognize this notion but the early, early groundwork for such ideas is present in *Twelfth Night*.

While classified as a comedy, *Twelfth Night*'s "final scene is more moving than funny," as bonds between Viola and Sebastian are reestablished, bonds between Cesario and Orsino are broken, and bonds between Viola and Orsino are established (Potter 14). And thus, I close with thoughts of worry for Viola/Cesario. Cesario had opportunities to meet others, to get in fights, and to move about the world. As a man, Cesario's possible opportunities are certainly shaped by history and by the historical unconsciousness (Zeddies 211-229). But as a woman, marriage to Orsino *is* Viola's option.

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