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Gender Fluidity in *Twelfth Night* : Drawing Contemporary Connections from an Elizabethan Protagonist

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This article explores the Shakespeare play *Twelfth Night* and how it addresses themes such as the expression of gender and sexuality in a comedic but patriarchal society. In more than one play, Shakespeare utilized the theme of cross - dressing, specifically with his female main characters, but why? What do the ch aracters and audiences get out of this sudden change of gender, which adds a new complicated dynamic to the story? Specifically, this thesis explores Viola from Twelfth Night, as well as her male disguise, “Cesario.” How Viola interacts with both male and female characters in the story challenges potentially false beliefs of how gender and sexuality were viewed in the Elizabethan era. There is a distinction between the tolerance and acceptance of gender fluidity; it comes down to the space in which it is be ing expressed. The modern debate I will be addressing is this: was Shakespeare truly ahead of his time when he played with gender fluidity in his works, or was he simply perpetuating pre -existing misogynistic stereotypes? The answer won’t be black and whit e, and it will analyze the readings of Shakespeare from both a queer and feminist standpoint. From the seventeenth century until now, there is still much to be discussed about why these plays, Twelfth Night in particular, are still important and socially .

Keywords: Shakespeare, gender, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 17th century, a play by the name of *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* was written by playwright and poet William Shakespeare. The comedy was first performed on stage on February 2nd, 1602, and was officially published in 1623. “Or What You Will” implies “whatever you want [to call the play],” giving a nod to the desires (wan ts) of the characters within the play, or to the audience, who are given the freedom of interpretation. *Twelfth Night* centers around themes such as identity, forbidden love, and facades. The comedy finds its roots in the trope of miscommunication, which leads its characters to fruitlessly chase illogical expectations. A complicated love triangle between the main characte rs of the play adds layers of complexity to the plot, furthering its depth. The main character of *Twelfth Night* is Viola, a woman who assumes a male disguise in the very beginning of the play:

> *Viola:* 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. Thou shall present me as a eunuch to him. It may be worth thy pains, for I can sing and speak to him in many sorts of music that will allow me very worth his service. What else may hap to time I will commit. Only shape thou thy silence to my wit. (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 1.2.49-57)

Viola does this as a means of survival—when she survives a shipwreck, she asks the captain the favor of helping her look like a boy. As a woman, she would face hardships being by herself in an unfamiliar country looking for a job. As a man, she knows she will be able to provide useful services to people in power as a way to forge her own path. I argue the reason for her male disguise opens a conversation that connects to feminism, the patriarchy, and the place of women and queer people in modern day society .

Though *Twelfth Night* was written and published over 400 years ago, it still has a lingering importance in contemporary society, which can find a space in current conflicts. *Twelfth Night* was written and performed in a space where gender fluidity could be accepted as an art in the form of comedy. Outside the theater is where similar themes were not accepted and women themselves were not welcome to perform on stage. The role of cross-dressing—integral in Viola's character—is still an act that makes some people uncomfortable today. Given women were not allowed to perform in theaters and had even more rigid gender roles in the 16th and 17th centuries, we can imagine how boundary-pushing Shakespeare was for his time, as the lines between male and female presentation and identities became blurred. In *Twelfth Night,* Viola is allowed a wider range of characteristics (both internal and external) as she moves between her male and female identities, which is seen as an advantage, rather than a crossing of societal boundaries. The juxtaposition within the genders gives both her and the play additional depth, as her identities and the identities of those around her are offered a unique perspective into self-identity.

Viola is an intelligent, clever character who is a quick problem solver, so naturally she understands that if she presented only as female, she would not have progressed as far as she did dressed as a man. She already had the internal characteristics to make a good man, she just needed to look the part to complete the facade. The male disguise gives her a newfound agency—having the capacity to make her own choices, influence her own life and surroundings, and act independently—that she was not allowed previously, which in turn drives the plot of the play. Ultimately, by having Viola pass as a man successfully, Shakespeare is illustrating that there are truly no major differences between men and women that society assumes, both in Shakespeare's time and now. There is characteristic overlap between genders, but these gender roles have been put into boxes that are expected to perform in certain ways, which uphold patriarchal power. This in turn continues to keep women disenfranchised and forces them into a servitude to men.

While *Twelfth Night* is a dramatization of the struggles of women and queer people, we are able to connect Viola's hurdles and obstacles she overcomes throughout *Twelfth Night* to modern day society. As we watch/read Viola's struggles as an early 17th century woman to navigate society as a woman dressed as a man, in current day society, we are witnessing women and queer people do the same in real time. Viola's story isn't simply fiction or in the past—real people today experience the same barriers in their daily lives. The dramatic or comedic aspects of the play, however, do not make the overarching message of the play (that love is a transformative force that transcends gender norms) less clear—in fact, it must be used effectively to understand our history, our present, and our future as a society. The act and purpose of Viola's masculine disguise provides an outlet to discuss connections from a Shakespearean tale to contemporary ideas of where women and queer people find their place in society and how they are viewed both in the past and present.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 1601 play *Twelfth Night* encapsulates modern day struggles of feminism, the patriarchy, and queerness through a lens of the past. An article published in 2019 by Sawyer Kemp, an assistant English professor at Queens College, titled "In That Dimension Grossly Clad" discusses the transgender rhetoric of *Twelfth Night* and how we can draw connections from the present to understand the past, and vice versa. Kemp emphasizes that drawing these connections is important because "when we bring the language and lens of the present to the people and objects of the past, it is always in the service of the present" (122). Analyzing history with the knowledge we have presently, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in this specific case, can allow us to even further understand current events and the people who are experiencing them.

There is a slight disagreement in the scholarly Shakespeare community about his intentions behind the themes in his plays, especially when it comes to feminist or queer themes. One popular argument is that Shakespeare was ahead of his time, as observed from strong female characters, such as Viola, who takes on a male disguise, or the presentation of queer themes. The counterargument is that while on the surface, Shakespeare may be seen as progressive, but he actually still plays into stereotypes that were prevalent during his time, and even stereotypes that still carry on to the present day. A 1980 article by Carolyn Lenz and Paula Berggren titled "The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's

Plays" addresses these themes. These two authors start by questioning Shakespeare's intentions and deeper thoughts when writing his female characters, suggesting "a positively unwholesome curiosity about the author's erotic predilections springs naturally… from a study of his women…" (17). Why does Shakespeare lean towards themes of independent, assertive, and even sometimes unruly women? These aren't typically considered "female" traits. Lenz and Berggren continue to analyze these characters from a standpoint of the male disguise, claiming, "it would be foolish to see the male disguise merely as an indication of the female's infirmity, clearly derived from the romance tradition" (19). Some may argue that Shakespeare demonstrates that women can only be strong through donning a male disguise, but these women are already capable of having these traits *before* wearing the disguise.

While *Twelfth Night* is the central focus for this piece, it is also crucial to recognize that Shakespeare utilizes similar gender-related themes across his other plays. The play *As You Like It* also features a cross-dressing protagonist who uses her masculine disguise to gain autonomy, but gender dynamics are prevalent in plays such as *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew* as well. In *Macbeth,* Lady Macbeth becomes frustrated with her husband's cowardly nature and takes matters into her own hands to help him become king, which involves "unsexing" herself to obtain masculine traits. A 2002 article by associate professor of English Stephanie Chamberlain titled "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England" explores Lady Macbeth's "attempt to seize a masculine power to further Macbeth's political goals… empowering the achievement of an illegitimate political goal" (72-73). Furthermore, Chamberlain asserts that Lady Macbeth's famous "unsex me here" speech "tends to deconstruct gender categories, unfixing the rigid cultural distinctions as well as attributes which define male and female" (79). Viola must also unsex herself to seize a masculine power, detaching herself from her feminine features. While Viola may not use her masculine agency for violence, she still holds a kind of power over the other characters: being able to be both male and female, or neither at all.

Gender roles are further emphasized in *The Taming of the Shrew,* and while there are no cross-dressing characters, there are power dynamics within the characters of Katherina and Petruchio, outlining what is "desirable" and "undesirable" in a woman. A 1997 article titled "Civilizing Subordination: Domestic Violence and The Taming of the Shrew" by professor of English Emily Detmer explores the taming of *The Taming of the Shrew* protagonist Katherina through a domestic violence lens as a way to view Petrichio's dominance over Katherina as an "unruly" woman. Detmer states, "to enjoy the comedy of the play, readers and viewers must work to see domestic violence from the view of an abuser—that is, they must minimalize the violence, and, at the same time, justify its use" (274). When Viola utilizes her masculine traits, she is using characteristics that would otherwise be seen as "undesirable" in a woman, but acceptable in a man: and she, too, must be tamed by the end of the play by presenting as a woman once more. Clara Claiborne Park suggests Shakespeare invents "a girl with charm and intellect, allow her ego a brief premarital flourishing; make clear that it is soon to subside into voluntarily assumed subordination… mediated by love" (112). With Viola and Katherina, audiences are able to digest this because they are viewing it as a spectacle of comedy, *and* both women are married off to their male counterparts at the end of their plays. Additionally, Detmer points out that Petruchio "presents himself as man enough to take on [Katherina's] 'irksome, brawling scold' without fear" (280), and "isolates Kate, denies her food and sleep, and wears her down until she submits" (279). While Viola is not forced to submit as violently as Katherina is, she still similarly becomes the perfect picture of an obedient woman by the end of the play by submitting to her husband.

The nature of the theatre in which theatre-goers attend/experience is able to manipulate any views of the audience's opinions of sexuality or gender. First, in a patriarchal society that handed men the majority of the power, women were seen as lesser and assertive women were deemed "difficult." In the 1980 article "As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular" written by Carolyn Lenz and Clara Claiborne Park, it is stated that "men find such women hard to handle, and often hard to take. Shakespeare knew how to manage them—at least on stage" (103). Female characters like Viola were given male characteristics, but only within a structure theatre-goers were able to comprehend. Additionally, in Nancy Lindheim's 2007 article, "Rethinking Class and Sexuality in *Twelfth Night,*" the stage is given a "hypothetical reality" which gives the audience a "willingness to suspend disbelief," which allows for audience engagement (695). Furthermore, "spectators accept the surface reality of his actors just as characters onstage accept the surface identity of figures who

are disguised, however flimsy the disguise and however probable that in 'real life' they would not be fooled" (695). Audiences may not be able to admit they would be "fooled" in the real world because of the space the theater gives them to lose control of reality. Viola's disguise and genderfluidity almost becomes a sort of fantasy that seems incomprehensible outside of the theater.

Elizabethan audiences have already grown accustomed to the idea of men playing women, as women were not permitted to be on the stage at the time *Twelfth Night* was first performed. So, within the realm of the theater, audiences were able to comprehend Viola as a protagonist; a woman dressed as a man. Quite often, women were played by younger boys or eunuchs (a castrated male). Viola explicitly states that she wil l be presenting as a eunuch in *Twelfth Night* as an explanation for her feminine qualities. A 2012 article by Richard J. Wassersug, Emma McKenna, and Tucker Lieberman titled "Eunuch as a Gender Identity After Castration" explores eunuchs not only as a medical or physical state of being, but as a gende r identity and presentation as well. Wassersug et al. argue that "the experience of castration grounds an alternative narrative for males through which they can see themselves as belonging to another gender category and may benefit from doing so" (254). To others, Viola may not present as male or fema le, but something else entirely —and she benefits from this. Wassersug et al. outline a descriptive model of what a "normal" male or female should present as, which "suggests that non -normative sexual or gender expressions… should be hidden from view…" (255), which is what Viola has difficulties grappling with. She is both f eminine and masculine; male and female; and she must learn to navigate non - normative worlds and identities.

Queer themes are a delicate but also very prevalent topic. Many scholars have touched on the point that there are a lot of homoerotic undertones and queercoded characters in *Twelfth Night.* Kemp raises the question(s), "So, are these cross-dressing characters 'trans'? Or not? Are trans people important to Shakespeare? Or not?" (122). There was not much understanding of queer or transgender people during Shakespeare's time, but that did not me an they didn't exist, which was evidently reflected in his writing. The theater "already relied on boys acting as women" (Kemp 122), in the sense that women were not allowed to act when Shakespeare's plays were being produced, including *Twelfth Night. Twelfth Night* features a main character named Viola, who, in order to make a life for herself after surviving a shipwreck, must disguise herself as a man. At the time this play was produced, Viola would have been played by a man/boy, who was pretending to be a young wo man pretending to be a man. Mary Jo Kietzman, an associate English professor, suggests in a 2012 article titled "Will Personified: Viola as Actor -Author in Twelfth Night" that "Shakespeare wrote one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the actor's cra ft within the plays" (260) through building the character of Viola the way he did. Viola is acting as the opposite gender, which the actor playing her would have been doing as well. According to Kietzman, both Viola and the actor playing her "transcend gen der" (264).

The fluidity of Viola's gender identity (going from herself—female—to her male disguise—Cesario—then back to herself again) is the driving force of the plot of *Twelfth Night.* Casey Charles, an English professor who specializes in queer studies, states in his 1997 article "Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*" that "the polarized rhetoric of sixteenth - and seventeenth - century Europe nevertheless masks a decided anxiety about what is feared to be the actual fluidity of gender" (124). While Viola's gender fluidity was easily worked into the plot of the play, it was sti ll a topic of discomfort that was molded into comedy. Charles also makes the point that "the representation of homoerotic attraction in Twelfth Night functions rather as a means of dramatizing the socially constructed basis of a sexuality that is determine d by gender identity" (122), illustrating that sexuality and gender are interrelated. When Viola's gender is fluid, sexuality is also, and therefore, the lines begin to be blurred. Many people in today's society still try to draw connections between sexual ity and gender, and while they are both socially constructed, they are their own independent, separate concepts/identities.

Viola's crossdressing "was and is undertaken… for different reasons" (Charles 126). Sawyer Kemp defines the trope of cross-dressing Shakespearean characters (also seen in *As You Like It*) as "The Pants" (123). The Pants completely change the identity of the character (typically female) who wears them, both physically and mentally. According to Kemp, this is "instant and absolute" (123), meaning that the change happens without much further discussion, until things start

to go awry when the identity of the character is questioned. Viola goes further than just physically disguising herself as male- she also tries to suppress any characteristics that may give her away as female and begins to demonstrate more masculine traits. For example, a 2020 article by Sean Murphy titled "Mapping the Links between Gender, Status and Genre in Shakespeare's Plays" points out that Viola begins to ask more questions - making her "more powerful than the silenced female character who was modelled in texts of the period and idealised in the patriarchal society of the time" (Murphy 231-232). Additionally, in Jean Reid Norman's article, "Can She Talk the Talk? What Speech Patterns Say About Viola/Cesario" published in 2007 raised a question about how Viola specifically changes her manner of speaking: "does [Viola] try to disguise feminine speech as part of her effort to fit into a male world?" (66). Norman later follows this question with the statement, "…perhaps Viola changed her speech from female to male just as she changed her clothes" (74). Viola's entire identity changed so she was able to fit into the society she was surrounded by as a man.

Twelfth Night can be observed as a dramatization of the struggles faced by everyday women and queer/transgender people in modern day society. It is inevitable that anyone, whether man or woman, cis or trans, straight or queer, somehow conforms to societal structures that have been conveniently provided to them since birth. Social norms are passed down through the media, parents, peers, etc. Carolyn Lenz and Clara Claiborne Park's article "The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays" reflects on societal structures in relation to gender and conformity: "young females, like young males, create themselves according to the models their society provides for them" (100). People may find non-normative and seemingly "unruly" women difficult to understand, but those traits are what give women and queer folks power and agency. As Clara Claiborne Park says so eloquently, "Shakespeare allows a woman's action to control the outcome" (110). We are able to draw on modern understandings of culture and society to connect ourselves to the past, but we are also able to use the past (in this context, the writings of Shakespeare) to understand ourselves, our identity, and the present and future of our society, and how it treats marginalized communities.

PLOT BACKGROUND

First, let's set the scene. Viola is a young woman who finds herself in an unfamiliar country called Illyria after surviving a shipwreck. She has lost her twin brother, Sebastian, also aboard the ship. Viola is faced with a dilemma: she is a woman alone in a new place, having just survived a nearly fatal accident without the means to continue surviving. Her brother, who has been a source of support for her, has been forcefully stripped from her life. Viola is one to think quickly on her feet—she begins to formulate a plan to dress up as a eunuch (a castrated male, now used in some contexts to describe gender non-conforming individuals), and recruits the captain of the ship to help carry out her ideas, under the name Cesario.

Once Viola is situated upon the shore of Illyria, she learns about the powerful people in the area from the captain, who lived nearby in his youth. He explains to Viola there is a countess named Olivia in Illyria, who has sworn off all men because she has recently lost her brother and is in mourning. Viola is disappointed at the loss of a chance to work for Olivia because she is presenting as a man, but the captain offers her another suggestion—to work for Duke Orsino, a wealthy bachelor who is in love with Olivia. Viola decides to seek employment from Orsino and wastes no time getting to him. The two need each other: Viola desperately needs employment to survive, and Orsino has the overt motive of marrying (Olivia specifically) as soon as he can, which is what he utilizes Viola for.

Upon receiving employment from Orsino, Viola/Cesario is tasked with going to Olivia's house and wooing her on behalf of Orsino. Orsino has already tried to win Olivia over, but all his attempts thus far have been unsuccessful. Olivia has proved to be a stubborn woman, and she stands by her promise to not see any men while in mourning. However, something about "Cesario" draws her in—he is young, witty, and persistent; he refuses to leave without speaking to Olivia. Cesario speaks for Orsino at first, and is following a script, but Olivia is bored of it. She prefers when Viola speaks her mind; even when she calls Olivia beautiful, yet proud:

> *Viola:* I see what you are, you are too proud. But, if you were the devil, you are fair. My lord and master loves you. Oh, such love could be but recompensed though you were crowned the nonpareil of beauty. (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 1.5.225-229)

While presenting as a man, Viola doesn't hold back from telling Olivia exactly what she thinks of her. Viola might have had this assertiveness in her as a woman, and she is now letting it spill out of her while delivering Orsino's message on his behalf. She believes Olivia thinks too highly of herself and tells her so as a means to humble her and convince her to give Orsino another chance.

When Olivia pushes back against Viola's argument, Viola/Cesario tells Olivia that if she were the one in love with her, she would build a cabin next to Olivia's house and call out her name in the middle of the night to make her feel sorry about her rejection:

> *Viola:* Make me a willow cabin at your gate and call upon my soul within the house. Write loyal cantons of contemned love and sing them loud even in the dead of night. Halloo your name to the reverberate hills and make the babbling gossip of the air cry out "Olivi a!" Oh you should not rest, between the elements of air and earth. But you should pity me. (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 1.5.243-251)

Viola uses dramatics to her advantage. A "willow cabin" suggests a very sad place where Viola would pout and wail if she were in Orsino's position. She is pulling from her feminine emotional intelligence and intensity to get under Olivia's skin as a fellow woman as a means of persuasion—and it works, just not in the way Viola expected. After this sentiment, Olivia takes more interest in Cesario and sends a messenger after him with a ring; a token of her affection. Viola realizes she has created a dilemma: she has accidentally made Olivia fall in love with her (Cesario) instead of Orsino. Now, gender divisions are no longer as fixed and separate as originally intended.

As Viola is going back and forth between Orsino and Olivia's residences, she begins to find herself falling for Orsino. Olivia looks forward to Cesario's visits, and she continues to grow madly in love with him, but as Cesario is secretly a woman, "he" tr ies to brush Olivia off without revealing his true identity as Viola. Viola wishes to confess her love to Orsino, but she cannot safely do so unless she surrenders her male disguise, which she cannot do in order to keep her job with Orsino. Additionally, Viola is having a hard time telling Olivia that the reason she cannot love her is because she is a woman, but Olivia is determined to convince Cesario to fall in love with her. Viola begins to try to drop hints to both Olivia and Orsino about how she feels about both of them, but they do not pick up on them. Each character is blinded by their emotions, and Viola is the one who has to sort it out. However, she and Orsino begin to grow closer to each other, but Orsino still sends Viola off to speak with Olivia—though now, perhaps reluctantly.

In the meantime, Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, is alive and also trying to find his way through Illyria. Both twins think the other is dead, and like Viola, Sebastian begins forming relationships with influential people in Illyria. Sebastian befriends the man who saves him from the shipwreck; a pirate named Antonio. However, Antonio is influential in Illyria for the wrong reasons—there are men looking to arrest him, specifically, men in Orsino's court. When Sebastian and Antonio are separated, Sebastian finds himself at Olivia's residence, who mistakes him for Cesario. Sebastian is confused as to why Olivia is instantly in love with him, but he goes along with it, and the two are married. The swap of Viola and Sebastian doesn't stop with Olivia, however: when Antonio arrives looking for Sebastian, he finds Viola instead, thinks she is her brother, and saves her from a precarious situation. Viola doesn't know who Antonio is, which hurts him, and he allows himself to be arrested. Sebastian also finds himself in several fights with members of Olivia's family. Both of the twins have become Cesario.

Eventually, Viola and Orsino make their way to Olivia, where Sebastian has been causing trouble. Orsino is making what will be his final attempt to win Olivia over, but she refuses, because she thinks she has already married Cesario. Viola is reasonably confused and upset and confesses still as Cesario that she is in love with Orsino, which is why she cannot love Olivia. Olivia is angry because Cesario has seemingly betrayed her and their marriage and thinks Cesario is lying about their relationship. Finally, Sebastian conveniently makes an appearance again, and everything is now clarified. Viola and Sebastian are reunited, and Viola is relieved to reveal her true identity. Sebastian and Olivia remain married, and Orsino proposes to Viola instantly, still dressed in her male disguise. The two couples are granted their happy ending, and Viola is able to comfortably return to her femininity.

GENDER EXPRESSION ON THE STAGE

At the time that *Twelfth Night* was published, all the characters would have been played by male actors. Therefore, the character of Viola is a female character pretending to be a man, who is played by a man. The role of the male actor playing a woman is described by Casey Charles as "doubly androgynous," and that "Viola/Cesario must literally perform the role of the male; her success before the aristocratic Orsino and Olivia consequently points to the constructedness and performative character of gender itself" (124). How Viola chooses to present herself within this new identity of hers that has unfolded is crucial to both her success and survival in Illyria.

While gender can be defined as a social construct in some contexts, it is also important to keep in mind that society still does revolve around gender norms and divisions. As much as we may want to erase implicit or explicit gender biases, they still exist in the minds of those around us. The inception-style role of Viola makes audiences continue to guess what they believe is true about gender — "In Viola's cross-dressing role in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare wrote one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the actor's craft within the plays" (Kietzman 260). Viola as a character is a visual representation of a male actor playing a female character, and through this, she pushes gender boundaries and becomes all the more androgynous.

It's important to remember the time period in which *Twelfth Night* was written and first performed to gain a deeper understanding of the roles each character plays. The Elizabethan era was "arguably more patriarchal, more homophobic, and more misogynist than contemporary western culture" (Charles 124). Creative expressionin the theater has little bounds where unique stories can find a home in an otherwise close-minded society. The character of Viola is gender-fluid—she switches between man and woman; her facade is malepresenting, while her internalized fears that she presents only to the audience are female. When Viola realizes the dilemma of Olivia's infatuation with her, she voices her concerns created by the consequences of her disguise to herself:

> *Viola:* 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, wherein the pregnant enemy does much… What will become of this? As I am man, my state is desperate for my master's love. As I am woman (now alas the day!), what thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe? (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 2.2.23-39)

The audience knows Viola's secret—this dramatic irony (the audience knows crucial information to the plot that characters do not) leads the audience to play a role in this gender-fluidity, in a society that normally would condemn anything outside of rigid gender roles. What is it, though, that causes people to fear genderfluidity? Even since Shakespeare's writing of this, we still face this question over and over again.

Even in the last few years, stringent definitions of male and female have been imposed in the United States through legislation to force the issue further. In Shakespeare's time when *Twelfth Night* was first written and performed, "the polarized rhetoric of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe nevertheless masks a decided anxiety about what is feared to be the actual fluidity of gender" (Charles 124). Claiborne Park bears this sentiment out further by asserting,

"Shakespeare never allows a woman a play of her own" (101). Viola could not be an actor in her own play without assuming the male disguise first. Because of her circumstances, she wasn't allowed to be simply a woman, and her actions would not have been tolerated if it was not for her masculine facade. While genderfluidity was feared then, without her masculine disguise, Viola would not have been able to do what she did in the play, and audiences accepted this.

The male disguise of Viola finds roots in transgender identity and theory. Simply because a character is dressing as the opposite gender doesn't necessarily mean that they are trans or identify as trans, but "the convention of cross-dressing might break the illusion in a theater which already relied on boys acting as women, but to read clothing and disguise as hallmarks of a proto-trans identity risks creating a binary between the body—which is 'true' and essential—and the clothing that is 'trans' but also deceptive" (Kemp 122). The gender dynamics within *Twelfth Night* keep the audience guessing and rethinking what they believe they know, because gender roles are being broken down in front of their very eyes. There is always some piece of Viola's identity that is being concealed; whether it is of the actor's own gender or of her fictitious facade. This dynamic adds an element of mystery to the play. Because Viola would have originally been played by a male actor, Nancy Lindheim states "Shakespeare employs this tactic… less because theatregoers had to be diverted from awareness that the *players* were actually boys than because they were watching female *characters* who were dressed as males" (682-683). This accepted the act of viewing men who were performing as women (essentially performing in drag, as we would call it today), which unraveled societal norms.

As illustrated through Viola, Shakespeare does have a knack of molding his female characters into unique protagonists, some of which even have layers to them. He does this without making his audience uncomfortable, as these characters are granted the space to return to their femininity at the end of the story. In *Twelfth Night,* Shakespeare gives Viola power and agency, yet she is still precarious: the intertwining of these characteristics and of drama and comedy was what intrigued his audience. His works are purely fiction and are able to be handled as such. Outside of the realm of theatre, "men find such women hard to handle, and often hard to take. Shakespeare knew how to manage them—at least on stage" (Lenz and Claiborne Park 103). The prime example of this sentiment is the character of Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew.* She is unpleasant and illtempered, but her actions are what drive the plot of the play. However, Katherina is psychologically and physically tormented into submission and becomes obedient and docile once the play comes to an end. Emily Detmer questions critics of *The Taming of the Shrew* who applaud Shakespeare and his character Petruchio for "taming" Katherina in a "nonviolent" sense, though it is "no less oppressive" (Detmer 275) of Katherina and her "unruly" and "unattractive" behaviors. The audience could tolerate an unattractive, disagreeable woman—only if she was ultimately portrayed as manipulatable and was able to fit the model of what a "desirable" woman would look like in the end.

We see this in Viola as well: though not as ill-mannered as Katherina, she is a strong-willed woman with desires and opinions, which is brought to life by her male disguise. When the story comes to an end, Viola is back in her women's clothes having revealed her true identity to those around her and is happily engaged to Duke Orsino. The audience knows that there will be a resolution to these dilemmas: the shrew will be tamed, and the woman pretending to be a man will be a woman again (eventually). Because, of course, why wouldn't it all end like this? Real life is unpredictable, but in the theater, everything must come to a reasonable end, even in tragedy—the audience still is given the opportunity to walk away at the end of the show feeling that the *status quo* had been restored.

Now, it is important to identify the difference between *tolerance* and *acceptance* within the scope of gender-fluidity in *Twelfth Night.* Tolerance of Viola's gender-fluidity would mean that those who were to view the play would not interfere with Viola's identity and allow the occurrence of it, even if they disagreed with the notion of her cross-dressing. On the other hand, those who accepted Viola's crossdressing would come to embrace this concept and welcome it in synchrony with their personal opinions. Viola/Cesario's gender-fluidity is what drives the plot of *Twelfth Night*: it is the agency she claims in order to fulfill her purpose and drive her motives. The audience veers to the side of acceptance in the case of *Twelfth Night,* as they are already familiar (at least in the Elizabethan era) of the concept of a male actor playing a female

character. This juxtaposition transcends gender roles, and while the audience knows female characters are played by men, they are purely focused on the intentions of the characters themselves, distinct from the gender of the actor.

This is also reflective of the art of the theater and acting itself of the period; "In Viola's cross-dressing role in Twelfth Night, Shakespeare wrote one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the actor's craft within the plays" (Kietzman 260). This again emphasizes "particular moments when spectators see the boy beneath the female character, though it promotes exciting or arresting criticism, distorts the audience's dominant experience of the play, which, as is generally agreed, accepts women characters as female" (Lindheim 695). The blurred lines between the juxtaposition of male and female in the scope of theater allows for a greater standard of acceptance in a world that would otherwise create a firm distinction of gender.

In *Twelfth Night,* Viola presented herself to Illyria as a eunuch, which was a word for a castrated man/boy, but has also been used in the context of describing a gender non-conforming person. A study conducted by Wassersug et al. (2012) present eunuch as a gender identity rather as a mutilation and argue that "the experience of castration grounds an alternative narrative for males through which they can see themselves as belonging to another gender category, and may in fact benefit from doing so." The research also shows that "physical and hormonal changes caused by castration make it difficult for castrated males to experience themselves as fully 'male' and challenge binary models of both sex and gender" (Wassersug et al. 254). The researchers suggest that the term "eunuch" be used as a gender identity, both in a scientific and sociological perspective, to help castrated men reinterpret their lives and identity. We see this through Viola as well—she says she is going to present as a eunuch (in this context, a castrated man) as an explanation for her feminine qualities, however, this becomes more of a gender identity, since she is not technically biologically male, therefore, could not be actually castrated. The gender identity of a eunuch is not male, not female, but something entirely out of the gender binary—something Viola encompasses very well.

Viola's character brings a unique dynamic to *Twelfth Night* because she still maintains her original feminine qualities while presenting as male, and the audience is allowed to see both sides of her. Typically, when a male actor plays a female character, the gender of the actor is erased—but in this case, the inner male of Viola is revealed again to the audience, who would otherwise forget. The assignment of the costume to the actor is crucial, as "Male garments immensely broaden the sphere in which female energy can manifest itself" (Claiborne Park 104). Though Viola is presenting as male in her costume and demeanor throughout the play, she is still *her:* the difference is that she is given opportunities she would otherwise not be given if she were presenting as female. Viola's agency allows her to freely "activate the masculine resources within the normal feminine personality without negating her essential femininity" (Berggren 21). Viola finds out that being a man is harder than it seems, but being a woman in a patriarchal society would be even harder. Her disguise is a necessity rather than a liberation, because she "needs to present herself in circumstances where a woman would be rebuffed or, more typically, subjected to injury" (Berggren 19). Her inner turmoil as she is trying to untangle the situation she has accidentally but knowingly caused is a reflection of her true, female self. As a woman, Viola also cannot reveal her romantic interests which causes more internal strain regarding the Viola/Orsino/Olivia love triangle—however, in turn, Orsino (as a man) is required to be relentless in romantic conquest towards the women who are difficult to get because they are not able to outwardly express their thoughts. Women are made to be submissive and sensitive, while men are allowed to be assertive and questioning—Viola portrays both.

Gender-fluidity on the stage is explained from start to finish so audiences don't have to work hard to make assumptions about characters such as Viola, who creates a new kind of reality for herself when utilizing both genders. Shakespeare utilizes the tactic of drawing a parallel between audience members and the characters on-stage: "spectators accept the surface reality of his actors just as characters onstage accept the surface identity of figures who are disguised, however flimsy the disguise and however probable that in 'real life' they would not be fooled" (Lindheim 695). As far as the story-telling goes in *Twelfth Night,* the audience allows themselves to be immersed in the story, relishing in the comedy that is Viola's dilemma of presenting herself as male and falling into a series of miscommunications. In the theatre, they

can accept this false reality and find entertainment in the characters being fooled by Viola, because they are already aware of her truth as a woman presenting as a man. However, in real life, the audience believes the difference between themselves and the characters of *Twelfth Night* is that they would be "able to tell" the difference between a man and a woman, which is a theme reflected in transphobic rhetoric today. The confidence and "willingness to suspend disbelief implies provisional engagement with the stage's hypothetical real ity" (Lindheim 695). In a sense, the audience almost lets themselves go and allows the play to sway their beliefs, for just a moment —it is fictional, after all.

PROGRESSIVE OR NOT? THE SHAKESPEAREAN ARGUMENT

In previous literature by other Shakespearean scholars, there seem to be two main arguments drawn about Shakespeare's approach to his works regarding his female characters. Simply put, "as classics go, Shakespeare isn't bad reading for a girl" (Claiborne P ark 101). On the surface level, some may argue that Shakespeare's writing was very progressive for his time, as he wrote several female characters who were strong -willed, and some even cross -dressed, like Viola or Rosalind from *As You Like It* . Shakespeare also wrote queer - and transcoded characters that have been analyzed many times over. This is illustrated in *Twelfth Night* when Olivia falls in love with a woman, and it can also be interpreted that Orsino falls in love with Viola before she reveals she is a woman. Some even ponder if the bard himself was queer, based on theories surrounding his sonnets written for other men t hat may give some insight into his romantic life. For a man who was writing these characters over 400 years ago, some may assume that nobody was replicating these ideas, and they may have been correct in that assumption. Shakespeare's novelty still hasn'tworn off to this day, as people are still reading his plays and finding new ways to interpret and perform them —contemporary ideas simply give more fuel and context to older works.

However, another theory is that Shakespeare wasn't actually progressive at all, as his female characters actually did reflect period -accurate gender norms. Viola is shown as having an emotionally tumultuous inner monologue, and she returns to her original femininity at the end of the play. This theory is also surface level, though perhaps slightly less so than the progressive theory. In the case of *Twelfth Night,* Viola takes charge and is able to become bold because of how others begin to perceive her, but in the end, she still submits to Orsino. He asks her to wear her female garments again and she complies.

> *Orsino:* Give me thy hand, and let me see thee in thy woman's weeds.
> (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 5.1.217-222)

The return to femininity is ultimately Viola's choice, and there is some sense of relief that she is able to be herself once more, but some may argue her character does change depending on how she is presenting, which is reflective of gender roles.

This presentation of women exhibiting masculine behaviors could also suggest a reflection of Shakespeare's inner thoughts and desires; "A positively unwholesome curiosity about the author's erotic predilections springs naturally… from a study of his women" (Lenz and Berggren 17). There is a possibility Shakespeare had himself in mind when writing these characters, and not so much his audience. However, he did still have to mold his female characters in a certain way so the audience could both enjoy them but still feel satisfied when the characters return to their femininity:

> *Orsino:* Your master quits you, and for your service done him. So much against the mettle of your sex, so far beneath your soft and tender breeding, and since you called me "master" for so long, here is my hand. You shall from this time be your master's mistress.
>
> *Olivia (to Viola):* A sister! You are she. (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 5.1.309-315)

In this scene, Orsino is doing Viola the favor of "freeing" and repaying her for her service by offering his hand in marriage. Orsino points out Viola's service to him went against her nature as a woman as she is supposed to be gentle, especially because she is of noble parentage. Of course, Viola has been smitten with Orsino for the majority of the play, but Orsino does instruct her here to be his wife from now on. After Orsino makes this proclamation, Olivia is able to dismiss her romantic love for Viola, apply it to Sebastian instead, and happily accept Viola as a sister. Viola did her time as a Shakespearean woman: she served a man as an employee; concealing her true identity, accepted his marriage offer, unintentionally set her brother up with Olivia, then returned to her roles as wife to Orsino and sister to Sebastian and Olivia. And everyone lived happily ever after.

If we really want to dig deeper into this rhetoric, we are able to come to the conclusion that these theories can actually be true simultaneously. It is evident that the gender norms presented in the plays aforementioned are reflections of the 16th and 17th culture Shakespeare's plays were being written and performed in, however, Shakespeare did write multi-faceted characters with depth that can still teach lessons in modern-day society. Viola is the prime example of one of these characters. Her character is the well-rounded presentation of both male and female, illustrated by inner thoughts and physical presentation, motives, and behaviors. Additionally, Shakespeare allowed characters in *Twelfth Night* of the same gender to fall in love with each other. The fictional world of Illyria surrounding Viola is a patriarchal reflection of our real world, and as Viola is now presenting as the opposite sex, she has to play the part. Jean Reid Norman questions this notion, asking "does [Viola] try to disguise feminine speech as part of her effort to fit into a male world?" (66). In this difficult scenario, Viola was forced to set aside her feminine qualities that may have been viewed as inferior, and decreased her chance at success in the world she was living in. Viola was bold and strong-willed to begin with: she was the one who came up with the idea to present as male—which was a courageous act—and she was firm enough in her plan to be able to execute it effectively.

Viola was also strategic about cleverly marking the difference between a boy and a man. She knew that she would have a harder time passing as a fullgrown man, which is why she chose to present as a eunuch, a boy who tends to present with feminine qualities: "she is not expected to be one of the guys in every way, and this allows her to straddle the male and female Renaissance worlds" (Norman 74). The identity of a eunuch also provides a gender presentation outside the norms of female or male; it "grounds an alternative narrative for males through which they can see themselves as belonging to another gender category and may benefit from doing so" (Wassersug et al. 254). While Viola creates the expectations for others around her to be perceived as male, she does not create the expectations to be fully seen as masculine, which protects and maintains her inner female identity, benefitting her in the end. She even reveals this to Orsino, saying "I am all the daughters of my father's house, and all the brothers too" (Shakespeare 2.4.117-118).

It is also important to remember that gender is a social construct. From the time we are born, society begins to mold us to these constructs and create the divide between men and women. Viola utilizes the traits she believes compose what society views as male while simultaneously exhibiting feminine qualities she was raised to have. Viola represents the fluidity of gender because she pulls off the strengths of both qualities from what society prescribed as *male* and *female* in her performance. "young females, like young males, create themselves according to the models their society provides for them" (Claiborne Park 100). Even as a woman, Viola exhibits traits that would typically be seen as more masculine than feminine. An example of this is Viola's questioning, outlined in Shakespearean language scholar Sean Murphy as something Viola is "particularly prone to" (231). The accomplishment "that [Viola] is speaking at all makes her more powerful than the silenced female character who was modelled in texts of the period and idealised in the patriarchal society of the time" (Murphy 231-232). Viola is the picture of a modern woman both in and out of the disguise. She is opinionated, bold, and assertive, and the disguise helps highlight these traits: " it would be foolish to see the male disguise merely as an indication of the female's infirmity… the assumption of masculine garb creates no lady knights in Shakespeare's scheme of things, but rather celebrates a flexibility and responsiveness that few men, in comedy or tragedy, can match" (Lenz and Berggren 19). Viola's personality is the best of all worlds. She is bouncing between male and female; an experience that a "just" female or "just" male character would be able to have. So, while consumers of Shakespeare's

works may argue whether or not Shakespeare was progressive in his presentation of gender dynamics, he still contributes to gender constructs either way.

VIOLA'S CROSSDRESSING AND THE MALE DISGUISE

In order to become a convincing man (or eunuch/boy), Viola has to learn how to act the part. The disguise is not enough, she has to adopt masculine mannerisms as well —it's simple enough to change one's appearance, but Viola begins to formulate a new personality as well. She is no longer Viola, she is Cesario. However, the physical appearance of Cesario does help propel Viola into her new identity, which is a tool Shakespeare utilizes in all his plays where crossdressing (female to male) is involved: "in Shakespeare, the magical transvestism of The Pants is instant and absolute" (Kemp 123). The Pants are both a literal and metaphorical representation of Viola's transition. They transform her into a completely different person; a symbol of new identity. Even Viola's twin brother, Sebastian, does not recognize his own sister until she explicitly informs him of her true identity at the end of the play.

> *Sebastian* (looking at *Viola):* Do I stand there? I never had a brother; nor can there be that deity in my nature, of here and everywhere. I had a sister, whom the blind waves and surges have devoured. Of charity, what kin are you to me? What countryman? What name? What parentage? (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 5.1.217-222)

In this scene, Sebastian sees his twin now as male; a reflection of himself. He cannot comprehend how this man standing before him must be related to him, and though he does believe Viola has drowned, she is still the same person, simply dressed as a man. All he sees is another man before him, and even though Viola tells him that she has a father and brother both named Sebastian, the concept of a person wearing pants being his sister continues to have a difficult time registering with Sebastian. The pants give Viola a completely new agency as people begin to perceive her as male instead of female.

Viola is strategic in how she decides to present herself and refers back to compare her feminine and masculine identities she is successful in upholding together. She is provided with a unique power; she is essentially able to double-dip in two different identities, which she uses to her advantage. Male and female characters are assigned different traits and Viola is given both; "Female characters tend to draw on pragmatic markers expressing grief or sorrow…. Male characters' pragmatic markers, in contrast, reveal them to be the architects of events" (Murphy 230). Because of this, she is given more agency and insight than any other character in the play.

Viola also has the advantage of being able to connect to her original gender identity as a way to learn to present as the opposite gender; "Viola, in particular, maintains a feminine frame of reference while adapting her style to her masculine disguise" (Norman 66). She hasn't fully become a man, because she is still internally feminine—and she is aware this gives her greater agency as compared to the characters around her. Viola already has the "masculine" traits inside her, she "simply activates the masculine resources within the normal feminine personality without negating her essential femininity" (Lenz and Berggren 20). Being aware of her gender-fluidity and moving between man and woman without neutralizing one gender or the other is what gives Viola power.

In *Twelfth Night,* Viola's androgyny is what allows her to so effortlessly transition between her interactions with Orsino and Olivia, capturing the hearts of both. Orsino chooses Viola as a confidant because he believes he is discussing delicate matters man-to-man; "[Viola's] disguise is what enables the crucial scene to unfold. The intimacy of their conversation and the ease of their being together would not have occurred were Viola known to be a gentlewoman" (Lindheim 688). This private relationship Orsino and Viola establish with each other while Viola is still presenting as a male is what makes them close: having already sharing personal matters with each other makes Orsino more eager to marry Viola when she reveals herself as a woman, but this relationship would not have been possible without the male disguise. Orsino is excited to be

able to talk to another man who will listen to him, while Viola is charmed by Orsino's personality through spending more and more quality time with him. Orsino begins to see himself as a sort of mentor to Viola/Cesario since he is the older of the two, and provides romantic advice to Viola:

> *Orsino:* Let still the woman take an elder than herself. So wears she to him, so sways she level in her husband's heart. For, boy, however we do praise ourselves, our fancies are more giddy and unfirm, more longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn, than women's are.
>
> *Viola:* I think it well, my lord.
>
> *Orsino:* Then let thy love be younger than thyself, or thy affection cannot hold the bent. For women are roses, whose fair flower being once displayed, doth fall that very hour.
>
> *Viola:* And so they are. Alas, that they are so, to die even when they perfection grow!
> (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 2.4.28-40)

In this scene, Viola has indirectly confessed her love to Orsino, but he is not yet understanding her because he thinks she is a young man. When Viola says the person she is in love with is the same age as Orsino, Orsino imparts the wisdom on Viola that she should marry a woman younger than herself. Orsino then supports his argument by sharing his viewpoint on women; saying a woman who picks an older man will adjust herself to whatever her husband asks of her.

Orsino continues, telling Viola that the desires of men are ever-changing and come and go as compared to women's, which stay firm (according to him). Orsino also compares women to roses, saying that once they reach their full beauty, they begin to decay (grow old), which is why Viola must choose a younger woman who hasn't yet "decayed." Viola agrees at first to maintain her facade as a man who shares the same viewpoint as another man who sees himself as a mentor figure. However, not too much later in the same scene, as Orsino orders Viola back to Olivia's to continue to woo her on Orsino's behalf, Viola breaks, and shows Orsino she might know a bit more about women than he does.

> *Orsino:* There is no woman's sides that can bide the beating of so strong a passion as love doth give my heart. No woman's heart so big, so hold so much. They lack retention.
>
> *Viola:* Ay, but I know— *Orsino:* What dost thou know?
>
> *Viola:* Too well what love women to men may owe. In faith, they are as true of heart as we. My father had a daughter loved a man as it might be, perhaps, were I a woman, I should your lordship.
> (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 2.4.90-106)

Here, we see again Orsino's false perception of women which now includes a perceived stark contrast of men's emotions as compared to women's. Viola pulls from her experiences of being both man and woman by telling Orsino she has a female sibling (referring to herself) who fell in love with a man (Orsino), so she knows firsthand as a witness how strong and passionately women can love. Viola also contributes to queer themes by telling Orsino if she were a woman, she would marry him—as a woman, this is the truth and comes into fruition, but at the current time, Orsino still views her as a man, but is growing fond of Cesario himself… perhaps returning the feelings Viola has for him.

QUEER THEMES

Shakespeare creates a homoerotic play through his queer-coded and transcoded characters, which is mainly observed through the love triangle of Viola, Orsino, and Olivia. While this may draw attention towards the implied sexual

orientations of the characters, it also emphasizes the gender roles each character displays. Olivia is a woman who falls deeply in love with another woman dressed as a man, and Orsino falls for the same woman dressed as a man, before he realizes that the man is in fact, actually a woman. During the resolution of the play, it is portrayed as "silly" that someone as serious as Olivia could accidentally fall in love with someone of the same sex, but this issue is neatly addressed because of Sebastian's entrance into the love triangle.

> *Sebastian* (to *Olivia):* So comes it, lady, you have been mistook. But nature to her bias drew in that. You would have been contracted to a maid; nor are you therein, by my life, deceived. You are betrothed both to a maid and man.
> (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 5.1.250-254)

There is a slight double meaning in this quote, as Sebastian is saying the problem is fixed because he is Viola's twin brother, so Olivia's love for Viola can be extended to him as well. Additionally, Sebastian is implying he is a virgin, also making him a "maid." Here, the connections between gender identity and sexual orientation are established –they are closely intertwined with each other; they both equally affect one another, and "the representation of homoerotic attraction… functions rather as a means of dramatizing the socially constructed basis of a sexuality that is determined by gender identity" (Charles 122). Without the construct of gender, the concept of sexual orientation would be difficult to define. Viola's gender-fluidity in this case creates even more of a gender and sexual dilemma, as Olivia and Orsino fall in love with someone who is both a man and woman. Throughout the play, Olivia flirts with another woman, which the audience is aware of, but this would normally not be considered as common for the time. On top of this, Orsino proposes to Viola at the end of the play, who is still dressed as a man, very shortly after finding out Viola is indeed not a boy.

There is much speculation as to whether or not Viola would be defined as a transgender or gender-fluid character, rather than simply presenting the *idea* of gender-fluidity through her disguise. Sure, she presents as male throughout the play, but does she truly identify as male? The male disguise is a type of transition of identity, but Viola is still reflecting on her female identity as well. Viola is not a character who is confined to a box, which makes her all the more interesting — but, if she were living in modern day society, what label would be attached to her? Well, it's difficult to say. Sawyer Kemp questions this, asking "So, are these cross-dressing characters 'trans'? Or not? Are trans people important to Shakespeare? Or not?" (122) If, in this context, we are defining "trans" as someone who presents as the opposite sex for an extended period of time, then yes, Viola could potentially be considered "trans." As the protagonist of *Twelfth Night,* Viola *is* important to Shakespeare; very much so. He makes her the center of the play, which is heavily influenced by her gender identity/fluidity. However, during this time period, Shakespeare would have not had the terminology to explain Viola's internal gender identity beyond her external presentation of crossdressing/gender-fluidity. Currently, in modern-day society, Viola's identity is purely up to interpretation to the readers of *Twelfth Night.*

TWELFTH NIGHT'S PLOT RESOLUTION: VIOLA RETURNS TO HER FEMININITY

Viola begins the play as a woman, so she must end as a woman as well. Why should this have to be the case? Viola showed off many of her personal strengths as a male, so why does she choose to become female once more and get married? For starters, Viola only became a man out of necessity, not desire. There was a degree of relief when she was able to be her true self again, which is really what everyone wanted; both the characters and audience. However, there may be a deeper reason to this sort of finale. Because Viola's disguise was what caused many miscommunications and

mishaps, the only way to resolve the conflict was to get rid of the disguise. For her twin Sebastian to accept her, she had to present herself as he knew her; "Sebastian's inability to recognize Viola as Viola is rooted in his inability to believe she is not a man" (Kemp 123). If Viola wanted to be with Orsino, she had to fall into a heteronormative state of being, as Orsino is not able to fully accept his love for Viola until she presents as female. At the same time, Viola has created a safe space to express both her masculinity and femininity, as she has won over the hearts of both Olivia and Orsino. They are not upset at her for deceiving them at the end of the play, rather relieved and somewhat amused by her revelation. They both truly love Viola, which is shown through their acceptance of her as both a man and woman.

Viola is depicted as a young woman from the get-go who is confined by the expectations of her gender identity. As women in both Shakespearean comedies and tragedies must be seen as well-behaved, they must shed core "feminine traits" in order to exert increased assertiveness. Berggren asserts, "young women in these plays must be desexualized" (24). In this context, "desexualized" does not necessarily mean to make someone less seductive—it could quite literally mean to remove traits that align with one's assigned gender. In Lady Macbeth's famous monologue from *Macbeth,* she calls on spirits to "unsex" her, meaning to shed any feminine traits that she views as her weaknesses, so she is able to encourage her husband to commit murder so he can become king—"To overcome her husband's feminized reticence, Lady Macbeth assumes a masculinity she will prove unable to support" (Chamberlain 72). While Viola is not involved in any sort of murderous tendencies, she still views her femininity as a weakness because she knows she will be treated differently by society. Lady Macbeth's unsexing is due to internal motivators, while Viola's motivators—other people—are external. We watch women "smooth their assertiveness into acceptability" (Claiborne Park 114) and be desexualized and sexualized over and over. When Viola strips herself of her female traits, she is desexualizing herself, then, when she returns to her femininity, she strips herself of her false masculine traits she has adopted.

Viola's marriage to Orsino also illustrates her return and compliance to femininity. Viola had her time dressed as a man, but that time is up and things must come to a clean end—Shakespeare invents "a girl with charm and intellect, allow her ego a brief premarital flourishing; make clear that it is soon to subside into voluntarily assumed subordination; make sure that this is mediated by love" (Claiborne Park 112). Because marrying the man Viola was in love with brought the play to a close, it was okay for Viola to become a woman again—all in the name of love. As a character, this was her choice, and that is okay—but, in reality, this choice was to satisfy the audience who would otherwise be left wondering if Viola was still presenting as a male at the end of the play. In these plays, when women find their resolutions and submit to men, "...they are content to resume their womanly duties" (Berggren, 19). In Viola's case, returning to her femininity and marrying Orsino was most likely the best possible outcome for her true identity and her desires, but it still reflects the gender expectations of Shakespeare's era.

SO WHAT?

Twelfth Night is a 400-year-old Shakespeare play, but it is also a dramatization of the modern-day struggles of women and queer/trans people. We can use our present-day knowledge of contemporary society to analyze these plays, but also, "when we bring the language and lens of the present to the people and objects of the past, it is always in the service of the present" (Kemp 122). As a society, we need to understand our past to then understand our present and future. Shakespeare is required reading for many high schoolers across the country, which makes these plays (e.g. *Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth,* or *Hamlet*) easy to gloss over if they are presented in a dull manner.

What many fail to understand is that Shakespeare is meant to be performed, not just simply read. When we immerse ourselves in these works, there are so many connections to be made; the themes of Shakespeare's plays are less outdated and unrelatable than they may seem on the surface. We may limit ourselves by trying to apply modern-day concepts and language onto literature of the past, so it could serve us better to apply past knowledge onto current societal values: "perhaps we need not a narrower criterion for identifying and applying trans theory to characterization and identity, but a wider one with the ability to draw on contemporary resonance in robust ways" (Kemp 124). What knowledge can be applied is also knowledge that can be taken from.

There are several reasons why it is important to revisit this display of themes in modern day society. Moves were made in this thesis regarding genderfluidity, feminism, and the role of women and queer individuals in society, both then and now. Gender is an idea constructed by society that may either hold an individual back or propel them further in life, depending on what traits they exhibit. While biological sex also plays a central role in this dynamic, the fluidity of gender presentation is more elastic and palpable, yet harder to digest than the (seemingly) black-and-white science of sex. The rise of conservatism under the current administration is pushing individuals back into these black-and-white boxes out of fear for safety and through observation of others around them. Revisiting the topic of gender-fluidity now in the perspective of Viola's 400+ year-old character in *Twelfth Night* helps us understand that gender-fluidity, especially in a feminist lens, is not something to be afraid of, but something that is powerful and to be celebrated.

CONCLUSION

The aforementioned themes of *Twelfth Night*, specifically Viola as a female protagonist, can be connected to modern day struggles with discrimination and bias. The current political climate of the United States is to be handled in conversation and action with delicacy. Though we are currently in a fragile state of being, this is why it is especially important to discuss potentially sensitive topics. *Twelfth Night* explores First Amendment rights, a hot topic in the United States today. The First Amendment allows people in the USA to think independently and express themselves freely, even if it makes others uncomfortable, which is a crucial right to protect. However, when it comes to LGBTQ+ individuals, these rights are becoming strained. In 2025, 1,022 anti-trans bills were considered to be passed across the country in categories including, but not limited to, education, healthcare, employment, sports, military, and parental rights. One hundred twenty-six of those bills were passed (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2026). This is a staggering 75 more bills than the 51 bills passed in 2024. One bill passed in Utah in 2026 (UT HB0174) denied hormonal gender-affirming care to transgender minors (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2026). Even more alarming, the Supreme Court came down on Colorado's ban on conversion therapy for LGBTQ+ minors, bringing back a practice that actively harms children, physically and emotionally (Jones, 2026). Where is the place for LGBTQ+ people in the world, when all these bills are on the line to decide their futures? How do we lift up the voices of the LGBTQ+ community? Additionally, how can cisgender and heterosexual people be good allies? It's surprising to think that some answers to these questions may be found in literature over 400 years old. These topics have been rehashed for centuries, just in different formats. If you present as male, specifically, a cisgender/heterosexual male, you get to do things—whether it's receiving healthcare, having a job, being in the military, or simply just avoiding gender-based discrimination.

The phrase "my body my choice," shouted by women nationwide, poses the question: who has control over a woman's body? With the overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022, more women are in fear of their bodily autonomy—or lack thereof—than ever. In *Twelfth Night,* Viola took control of her body by making the decision to present as a man. As a

woman, Viola would not have been able to use her words in front of men, at least in a way that was effective. Viola found her place in Illyria because of her male disguise, where she was paid attention to. She became "one of the guys," and had to adhere to this novel facade. Truthfully, Viola would not have been able to be where she was at the end of the play —reunited with her brother and engaged to Orsino —if it weren't for her disguise. She would not have been able to navigate life alone if she still pres ented as a woman. Viola's transition is a reflection of current day struggles of women and trans people who put up a front to simply survive in a society that fights against them. The right to exist in peace for women and trans people is slowly fading away in society today under the current administration, yet they choose to fight back.

It can be difficult to guess what Shakespeare's intentions were behind the writing of *Twelfth Night,* and it can also be difficult to apply present -day rhetoric to works of the past; these are actions we have to be very cautious about. However, that doesn't mean we can't still use our knowledge of the past —both in fiction and in the real world —to understand our place in society today. *Twelfth Night,* though a comedy, is a form of a cautionary tale. It shows the audience the danger of facades and the nuances of gender struggles and divides. To act as if boundary -pushing in the world of gender constructs is a new concept is to be naive; humans have always toyed with gend er expression and roles. Viola as an Elizabethan protagonist is only one example of a character who uses both her femininity and perceived masculinity to her advantage, and the play becomes hers. The plot is driven by her and supporting characters are intr igued by her due to the dynamics of her gender expression and agency. Though Viola's shift between man and woman as a form of comedy provides her with advantages, she is also a clear representation of modern-day struggles of both women and the LGBTQ+ individuals whose lives are influenced daily by the patriarchy and homophobic and transphobic rhetoric. To make these connections is to understand nuances in modern society and the people who inhabit it. This all goes to show that media that may be seen as stuffy or outdated can truly still make an impact on societal issues for centuries.

In *Twelfth Night,* Viola's shift in gender presentation is what allows her to navigate an unsteady world and survive. In the present day, the idea of genderfluidity may cause feelings of discomfort, because it falls outside the realm of theatrica l comedy and forces us to fac e uncomfortable realities. It makes people question where everyone, regardless of gender, may fit into society. We've been exploring these ponderances for centuries, and *Twelfth Night* is a prime example of that. The play allows the lines between male and female to blur and suggests that there may be more overlap of genders than originally thought—and this can be used as an advantage. All it takes is some pushing of boundaries, deeper contemplation of gender presentation, and a little more open -mindedness to form connections from an Elizabethan story to modern day dynamics to understand why this topic has been discussed for hundreds of years. It may be difficult to create space for everyone because of the extremity of opposing views, but it must be done. If everyone followed in Viola's footsteps and dipped into several perspectives at once, we might be able to understand each other a little more. It's a big ask, but based on his works, it' s what Shakespeare would have wanted.

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