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Gender Wobbles But It Don't Fall Down: Feste and the Instability of Gender in Twelfth Night

Abstract

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* appears to some readers as a conservative story of gender-bending, in which all is made "right" in the end. The central character, Viola, disguises herself as Cesario in order to survive. In the final scenes of the play, this character reveals herself to have been a woman all along, and immediately enters a cis-heterosexual marriage with the Duke Orsino. To other readers, the play appears to be an early depiction of what we might now call transmasculinity. In this view, the central character is not just dressing up as a man to survive; he really is Cesario. This essay intervenes in that discussion by finding a middle path that refuses to resolve Viola/Cesario's gender trouble. Thurston Wilder refers to the character as "Viola/Cesario" throughout, and uses the slash between their two names as a visual representation of what is here called "gender wobble." Placing Feste the clown's epilogue into conversation with work by Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler, the author argues that the epilogue destabilizes the apparent cis-heterosexual tidiness of the play's ending. Then, the essay reads the play backwards from the epilogue, uncovering Viola/Cesario's gender wobble from the moment they "reveal" themselves to "be" Viola at the end to the first time they step foot in Illyria at the beginning. The framework of the "wobble" embraces the messiness of gender and creates space to locate possible resonances with trans experience in *Twelfth Night* without asserting a definitive reading of Viola/Cesario's gender.

Keywords

Twelfth Night, gender, William Shakespeare, Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler

Cover Page Footnote

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A key generic requirement of a comedy is the tidy ending, in which all disorder is ordered; instability made stable (again). Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* appears to follow this convention—but then it keeps speaking. The play continues for 20 lines after the conventional ending. An epilogue delivered by a clown subverts the apparent tidiness of the ending by suggesting, with a wink and a song, that gender lacks a stable referent. It is traditional to view *Twelfth Night's* central gender cosmonaut as a woman named Viola, who disguises herself as a man named Cesario in order to survive in a strange land. Disguised as Cesario, Viola works as a page for the Duke Orsino. In the most straightforward reading, Viola reveals herself to be a woman at the end of the play, marrying Orsino. However, Feste the clown's epilogue troubles that traditional view, making it impossible to read the character decisively as "Viola disguised as Cesario." Indeed, it is unclear which name is the disguise and which is the character's true identity. In light of Feste's song, it appears more correct to think of the character as "Viola/Cesario." Indeed, Viola/Cesario's gender *wobbles* on the fulcrum of that essential "/" between their names. I use this doubled and "/"ed name, as well as the pronoun "they," to refer to Viola/Cesario in an attempt to honor this gender wobble. Upon listening closely to Feste's final song, I take up the stunning reconsideration of gender it asks of the audience, revisiting Viola/Cesario to recover their wobble.

It is useful to begin at the end. The last lines of *Twelfth Night*, sung by Feste the clown, are "our play is done, / [a]nd we'll strive to please you every day" (Shakespeare 5.1.393-4). "Play" here is multivalent. The most straightforward reading is, of course, that the play—*Twelfth Night*—is done. "Play," however, also evokes "playfulness." It can also mean "rapid, brisk, or light movement, usually quickly changing or intermittent; elusive change or transition of light or colour" ("Play"). All of these potential meanings exist at once in the word, rendering its meaning in Feste's song unstable. This instability is underscored by the fact that the last line contradicts the penultimate; Feste says the play is done, then says the "striving" continues every day even after the play has finished. The play is done, and it is not. This contradiction creates a kind of spatial collapse. It dissolves the borders of where "play" occurs, where performance happens. Performance does not end when the "play is done"; it continues "every day" (Shakespeare 5.1.393, 4). Because *Twelfth Night* is so much about gender—the action of the plot is set in motion and sustained by Viola/Cesario's gender performance(s)—it is impossible to read Feste's declaration that the performance goes on without thinking of gender. The spatial collapse may be read as a refutation of any stable physical site from which gender derives. Just as performance is not limited to the theatre, gender is not limited to the body. Here, Feste—and perhaps Shakespeare himself—seems to anticipate the foundations of queer theory 390 years before Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

Feste and Judith Butler appear to be on the same page when it comes to gender. Butler writes that "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" (Butler 2550). By "gender parody," Butler means drag performance. At the risk of stating the obvious, when *Twelfth Night* was first staged, all the female roles were played by young men. Though this is not the direct ancestor of the drag performance associated with queer communities today, it is reasonable to name the male actors playing female roles as gender parody. This is especially true considering that the actor playing Viola/Cesario would be a gender turducken: a male actor playing an ostensibly female character dressing as a man. Thus, *Twelfth Night* itself is a staging of the same gender parody that, according to Butler, reveals gender's lack of origin. Continuing to move backward from the final lines of the play, Feste sings, "A great while ago the world begun . . . [b]ut that's all one" (Shakespeare 5.1.391, 3). This suggests a temporal collapse that parallels the aforementioned spatial collapse of the final two lines. The beginning of the world collides with the present moment and becomes "one," troubling any sense of historical authority. In light of the play's discussion of gender, this echoes Judith Butler's claim that gender continually imitates itself without origin. In Feste's song, and in *Gender Trouble*, there is no "original gender"

humanity inherited at the beginning of the world. Rather, gender is continually (re)created and self-referential.

Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed writes about this continual process of creation in her book *Living a Feminist Life*. In it, she describes the socially constructed structures of our lives, like gender, as “paths” on which we walk. It is worth quoting her at length: “On the one foot: we walk on the path as it is before us. On the other foot: it is before us as an effect of being walked upon. A paradox of the footprint emerges. A path is created by being followed and is followed by being created” (Ahmed 46). Where Ahmed writes of the path, Feste sings of the rain. His song repeats the line “For the rain it raineth every day” (Shakespeare 5.1.390) four times. Just as a person following a path (re)creates the path, and doing gender (re)creates gender, rain constantly (re)cycles the water. It does not come from on high as if God had a watering can. Rather, it comes from below. There is no rain without the ocean; it evaporates and falls and evaporates and falls. The “every day” in Feste’s rain refrain is repeated in the final words of the play which suggest performance—the performance of a play, the performance of gender—continues “every day.” Gender does not come from a stable site like the body. Gender has no historical original handed down from on high as if from God with a hose. Feste’s song suggests gender falls and rises back into the clouds, is performed and created—every day. Like the rain. It is, in a word, fluid.

Feste’s song destabilizes the apparent gender stability reached in the final act of *Twelfth Night*. It invites the audience to reflect on the play they have just seen and consider places where gender might have wobbled rather than stood firm on a stable referent. To consider Viola/Cesario’s gender wobble, I will continue to read the play backwards from Feste’s epilogue. In the final scene, Viola/Cesario is “unmasked” as Viola. Upon being found out, Viola/Cesario admits to wearing “masculine usurped attire” (5.1.241). They continue, “I am Viola, which to confirm / I’ll bring you to . . . my maiden weeds” (5.1.244-6). “Weeds” here refers to clothing. This appears to contradict Feste’s fluid theory of gender construction, suggesting a “true” Viola who has merely disguised herself as a man, usurping masculinity. However, in light of Feste’s song, it becomes apparent that all it takes for Viola/Cesario to usurp masculinity is to change their clothes, their performance. That masculinity is *available* for them to usurp at all, there for the taking, is a powerful argument against any kind of gender essentialism that would render Viola unambiguously and “truly” female.

Indeed, though Viola/Cesario promises to bring the other characters to their women’s clothing, this does not occur in the text. The play ends with Viola/Cesario in male clothing, promising to *become* a woman in the future. The audience does not see this transformation occur. Any reading of this scene that takes it as proof that Viola/Cesario is “really” Viola rests on an assumption of what happens after the play, outside of the text itself. This is echoed by the Duke Orsino’s last lines. Orsino is engaged to Viola/Cesario, and right after Viola/Cesario promises to show everyone their female clothing, Orsino calls them “Cesario . . . / [f]or so you shall be while you are a man, / [b]ut when in other habits you are seen, / Orsino’s mistress” (5.1.371-4). So, in the end of the play, Viola/Cesario is Viola and Cesario. Man and mistress, and man promising to be mistress sometime in the future. Man/Woman. Viola/Cesario’s gender is left unresolved, unstable, standing on one foot, wobbling.

Continuing to recall the play backwards, earlier in the text, Viola/Cesario explicitly reckons with their gender instability in Act 2, Scene 2. They have just been perceived as unambiguously male by noblewoman Olivia, which sparks an identity crisis. Viola/Cesario says to themselves, “I am the man” (2.2.22). Then, spiraling out of control, they count themselves among women (2.2.28), then call themselves a “poor monster” (2.2.31); then they are conditionally male, “As I am man” (2.2.33), then conditionally female, “As I am woman” (2.2.35). This effects a feeling of whiplash in the audience. It is impossible even to render Viola/Cesario’s rapidly changing gender identification here without breaking the conventions of “good academic writing” which demand clear clauses and one tidy

citation per sentence. Viola/Cesario's gender lands ultimately on confusion. Or, more accurately, it does not land at all. They merely lament that their gender is "too hard a knot for [them] t'untie" (2.2.38) and the scene ends. What is Viola/Cesario doing in this scene but wobbling? Oscillating rapidly from certain manhood to certain womanhood to monsterhood to conditional manhood to conditional womanhood to confusion, gender in this scene does not fall like rain but whorls around Viola/Cesario like a cyclone.

This wobble—coupled with Feste's song, which destabilizes gender itself—invites the audience to reconsider the moment early in the play Viola first dresses in men's clothing. Viola is shipwrecked in a strange land and knows that it is unsafe to be a single woman in an unfamiliar place. When Viola first decides to adopt male habits, she asks the captain of the ship to "[c]onceal me what I am" (1.2.53). This reads on the surface like evidence for an essential female gender tied to Viola's female body. She is not "doing" womanhood, she just "is." However, the next line, Viola—in this moment becoming Viola/Cesario for the first time—says "such disguise as haply shall become / [t]he form of my intent" (1.2.54-5). "Become," of course, can mean "look like." Viola's disguise will make her look like a man. But "become" also means "come to be." Viola/Cesario will *be* the form they intend to take. "Looking like" and "actually being" begin to blur the instant Viola/Cesario considers changing their gender. "Looking like" and "being" exist in the same *word*, two apparently opposite meanings living together in the word "becoming." It is significant that Viola/Cesario embodies this "becoming" upon coming out of the sea after their shipwreck. This is the same sea that later becomes Feste's rain, which becomes the sea, which becomes the rain again. The path is before us and we (re)make it with every step; gender, ouroboros, is created as it is imitated as it is created as it is imitated. Gender is a continual becoming. Viola/Cesario embodies both the "being" and "looking like" aspects of "becoming" from the first moment of their hybrid life. Thus, it is only appropriate that the play ends with their continued instability. Viola/Cesario is still "becoming" in the last moments of the play. This is not a cliffhanger or an oversight; it is a wobble. Their wobble.

Viola/Cesario's gender wobbles, but it does not (forgive me) fall down. This is to say, even though the play ends with them standing on one foot, unstably gendered, they must still exist in the world that genders them at all. Shakespeare does not create a nonbinary transmasculine utopia. Viola/Cesario simply wobbles. Feste's song and Viola/Cesario's continual becoming suggest that gender is unstable, but not that it is fragile. The paths before us are well-worn, and the forest is thick. Sara Ahmed offers a bit of measured hope for gender wobblers like Viola/Cesario in *Living a Feminist Life*. She writes that "when people stop treading, the path might disappear" (Ahmed 46). Sitting in the wobbliness of gender will likely not end gender. But it can interrupt the cycle of doing and recreating; it can destabilize the hegemony of the path. Ahmed reminds her readers that "a little sideways movement [from the path] can open up new worlds" (47). Viola/Cesario would agree with Ahmed here. Viola moves sideways from her path and ends up in Illyria, a new world where it is possible to become.

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