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MASK AS AN DEVICE TO ACHIEVE LOVE IN *TWELFTH NIGHT*

A MÁSCARA COMO INSTRUMENTO PARA OBTENÇÃO DO AMOR EM TWELFTH NIGHT

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Abstract

The current article analyzes the importance of clothing and disguise of one of the female characters in order for her to conquer the attention of a man. However the text enforces the consideration of transvestism, at the end the heterosexual marriage plot is seen as a normative ordering device.

Keywords: English literature, masks, comedy, crossdresser

Resumo

O presente artigo analisa a importância da vestimenta e do disfarce de uma das personagens femininas a fim de conquistar a atenção de um homem. Embora o texto reforça considerar o transvestismo, no final o enredo do casamento heterosexual é visto como um artifício de ordem normativa.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Inglesa, máscaras, comédia, crossdresser

This paper aims at analyzing William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night or What You Will* (1601) as a moment of celebration, a Carnival party, in which one the protagonists disguises herself in order to achieve love and pleasure with another character. I intend to argue for the importance of clothing and disguise in the play as an instrument to reach love. The plot is full of love in its many forms. Olivia and the Duke Orsino are respectively the mourning lady and the romantic hero of literary conventions. Their selfish, self-centered love is transformed into genuine love when they meet Viola and her twin brother, Sebastian, at the very end. Viola is the embodiment of true and faithful love. She does whatever is necessary to achieve the Duke's love, even pretending to be a man:

Gender plays a significant role in the understanding of love. Since the society represented in Shakespeare's plays was exclusively patriarchal, the role of women is circumscribed almost by definition. What it means to be a man or a woman is a social and

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historical construction rather than a genetic set of masculine or feminine traits. Playing against assumed and conventional gender roles in the theater are many cross-gender parts, for instance, boys playing women, who then disguise themselves to win their lovers. Shakespeare's female characters, especially the heroines of his plays, always take initiatives. J.M. Gregson, in *Shakespeare: Twelfth Night* (1980), points out that "Viola, from a position of waif-like isolation at the opening of the play, soon moves to a dominance of its important action and its prevailing tone" (Gregson, 53). What Gregson means is that Viola puts the play together, not just as the essence of the action, "but as a controller of its prevailing atmosphere and a director of our emotional reactions" (Gregson, 54).

In Elizabethan times, the twelve days after Christmas up to Twelfth Night on January 5th were traditionally a time of holiday and festival. It is the eve of Epiphany and the beginning of Carnival. It was a time for celebration, sometimes known as Feast of Fools. Normal behavior and conventions could be suspended in this period of high jinks. In Shakespeare' *Twelfth Night* all kinds of folly, pranks, and deceptions are allowed in a disordered world of confusion and masquerades. The characters take part in a different land that was created far from the normal daily world. Viola is seen as the order brought from a distant land to knit the plot together. Pleasure and madness flourish as people are released from their everyday inhibitions. Viola at that beginning of the play dresses up as a young page as a way of entertainment with the intention to reach the Duke (Orsino)'s heart, but ends up entertaining both a man and a woman, as if she were at a Carnival ball. Viola, shipwrecked by fortune, remembers hearing of Orsino when the captain mentions him as the Duke of Illyria. By denying Viola any previous connection with Orsino, Shakespeare had to dramatize her falling in love with the Duke at some point after she impersonates Cesario.

The actions of the play take place in Illyria, which is a mythical kingdom by the sea. This fantasy land is a place where the characters are changed by experience. Illyria is a world of disguise and mistaken identity, but a secure place at the same time. Brother and sister find each other, and lovers will marry in the end. Illusion has a very important role throughout the plot and is a way to find the truth for some of the characters, especially Viola who, disguised as a young man, eventually achieves love.

The word "person" is essential in the play. According to Bruce Smith in *Texts and Contexts* (2001), the term "person" in early Modern English could mean four things: "a physical body, and individual acting in some capacity, a personage to be reckoned with, or an actor in a play" (Smith, 237). In act 5 there is a conglomeration in which almost all the characters are in a way disguised: Olivia in her mourning clothes, Orsino in his casual outfit, Feste in his Fool's garb, Antonio in his captain's clothes, and Viola, of course, dressed as Cesario, or a young man. Her brother Sebastian enters, and Orsino – looking at Cesario looking at Sebastian looking at

Orsino looking at everyone else – speaks for all: "One face, one voice, one habit [clothing], and *two persons*, / A natural perspective, that is and is not!" (5.1.200-1), emphasis added)

Orsino seeing "two persons" before him thinks of the first meaning of the word: a physical body. To everyone but herself, Viola's person has been that of a servant, the page that attracted the attention of Orsino and Olivia. To herself, however, she has been acting as the sister of Sebastian. Through their conditions of being pledged to marry, both Viola and Sebastian become personages or literary characters. And, of course, they along with everyone else on stage are actors in a play. They are individuals who act as people; they are not at a Carnival on Twelfth Night. They disguise themselves in order to feel different emotions and try to find something that might be important to them.

Costume is the key to the comedy's factual confusions. A separation between clothing and "true" identity is at the very heart of playacting, and *Twelfth Night* contributes to this separation. By dressing in clothes like her brother's and pretending to be a servant, Viola puts a difference between sartorial signifier and signified person, and she does so with respect, not only to social class but also to gender. Viola just wants to entertain herself and others, and at the same time conquer Orsino. With the help from the Captain, who also survived the shipwreck, Viola becomes Cesario, which is the Italian form of the Latin *Cesarius*, or belonging to Caesar. In *Impersonations* (1996), Stephen Orgel argues that,

> ...we can also find in it [the name Cesario] what etymologists from Varro onward found in the name Casear itself, the past participle of *caedo*, *caesus*, "cut," alluding in Caesar's case to his Caesarian birth. Cesario's own claim of castration goes no further than this; we hear no more about it (though the play has some fun with the word "cut"), and Viola does not perform as a singer or musician anywhere in the action. (Orgel, 53)

Shakespeare enjoys in playing up the fact, just as he always does when a boy actor playing a girl dresses as a boy. In many chivalric narratives, according to Michael Shapiro, "the disguised heroine serves as faithful page or squire to her lover or husband" (154). Viola's change of costume from female to male has its association with the fact that Orsino has an effeminate pose as a weak lover. She is active in the sense of dedicating herself to get what she wants; Orsino is passive, on the other hand, for he waits for love to knock on his door. He has other people speak for him about love to whom he desires. Viola's purpose, in her new position as Cesario, is to gather information she desires about the Duke; that becomes apparent in her first words as Cesario, the Duke's page. She asks at once about the thing that will most concern her – Orsino's constancy. After that, Viola impersonates Cesario and therefore speaks in riddles to the other characters who never had seen her before – "I am not what I am" (3.1.141), and "I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all my brothers too" (2.4.120-1), and she often turns to the audience for soliloquies and asides.

In modern theater, the audience's knowledge of Cesario's real identity, which gives it the advantage of dramatic irony over Orsino in the duet scenes, is reinforced by the theatrical irony of the presence of a female performer in the role of the disguised heroine. Michael Shapiro makes a comment on the Duke, observing that Orsino found Cesario "semblative [of] a woman's part" (1.4.34), but his failure to perceive Viola's female presence often makes him a more absurd figure than he was originally" (Shapiro, 161). After Orsino is familiar with Cesario, who becomes the Duke's confidant, he is certainly uncomfortable when his page is not around. Orsino has not realized that it is in his new fellow youth that has strongly appealed to him, and never thinks that it is the delicate attention, the unconscious flattery of a woman's understanding that is affecting him. The Duke is really happy when Cesario is near him. When he sends the "boy" to court for him, he says:

> They shall belie thy happy years,
> That say thou art a man; Diana's lip
> Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe
> Is as the maiden's organ, shrill in sound;
> And all is semblative [of] a woman's part. (1.4.29-33)

Orsino describes Cesario as an ideal woman whom he intends to have someday. In fact, the Duke is wooing Viola instead of Olivia without being aware of that, and even Orsino's servants start to notice. Valentine's tells Viola that "if the Duke continues these favours towards you, Cesario, you are likely to be much advanced; he has known you but three days, and already you are no stranger" (1.4.1-3). Shapiro points out that,

> No less than a victim that Olivia of Viola's cross-gender disguise, Orsino may without knowing it be responding to the woman beneath the disguise, but he takes Cesario to be what the audience knows the performer is – a pubescent male, or as Malvolio puts it, "not yet old enough for a man, not young enough for a boy." (1.5.156 – SHAPIRO, p.157)

Viola's first meeting with Olivia is a trying moment for her, but she is witty and very clever at the point of winning her plea to be heard alone, and even seeing her rival's face, since Olivia has a veil on so that no suitor could see her face or her identity. Viola, as Cesario, captivates Olivia for her romantic way of saying words and respectfulness towards women. The countess, hiding behind her veil, eventually becomes more compassionate and the two women, whose names are almost mirror images, meet. Both are in the process of mourning lost brothers, both are in disguise, both are ready to love, whether they know it or not. René Girard cleverly points out, in *A Theater of Envy* (1991), that "Olivia keeps Orsino at bay and humiliates him, until she is humiliated by Viola and compelled to fall in love with her insulter" (Girard, 106).

Olivia's narcissism is reversed by the indifference of another woman in masculine disguise. When Viola is aware that her costume and personage entertain and win Olivia over, she becomes desperate and does not approve of the situation in which she finds herself. Girard observes that "the disguised woman acts as a spokesman for the spurned love" (Girard, 106). By the end of act 2, scene 2, Viola regards "disguise" as "wickedness" and eventually regrets the outcome of the adventure saying that:

> I am the man: if it be so – as 't is, –
> Poor lady, she were better love a dream.
> Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness,
> How easy is it for the proper false
> In woman's waxen hearts to set their forms!
> Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we,
> For such as we are made of, such we be. (2.2.22-9), emphasis added)

Viola is also aware that she is captivated by Orsino and that she is as fragile as Olivia in the aspects of love, since they are both women. Viola knows that her "character," Cesario, has attracted both Olivia and the Duke. Orsino's desire to be with Cesario grows upon him every day, and he persists, despite Olivia's discouragement, in having Viola do his courting for him. Whereas Olivia is attracted by the boldness of one who dared to be "saucy at [his] gates" (1.5.197), Orsino is captivated by the feminine qualities of his page. Shakespeare gives the boy actor a special treatment of the heroine's male disguise by making Cesario appear both as an effeminate boy and a saucy servant.

Viola, in love with the Duke, does not want her mission to be successful. If Olivia knew this, she would not mind Viola's insolence, seeing it as flattery; but she does not understand and thus feels humiliated. She mistakes Viola for a man and so is crushed by her disdain, mainly because she let Cesario see her beautiful face. Unconsciously, the rivals of this play end up being Orsino and Olivia who desire Cesario/Viola. The Duke does not want to listen to Viola's report that Olivia insists she cannot love him:

> Viola: But if she cannot love you, sir?
> Orsino: I cannot be answered
> Viola: Sooth, but you must.
> Say that some lady, as perhaps there is,
> Hath for your love as great a pang of heart
> As you have for Olivia. You cannot love her.
> Orsino: There is no woman's side.
> Can bide the beating of so strong a passion.
> As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart
> So big, to hold so much; Make no compare
> Between that love a woman can bear me,
> And that I owe Olivia. (2.4.84-98)

Viola, disguised as a man, takes advantage of it and having her heart so full she does not waste the opportunity to express herself: “We men say more, swear more: but indeed, / Our shows are more than will; for still we prove / Much in our vows, but little in our love” (2.4.112-4). Viola is bold enough to impersonate a man, although she preserves her innate womanliness. She does that in order to make her point, when she says that men promise the world but show little love towards women. Orsino can promise everything to Olivia but does not try hard to meet her and show that he loves her; he sends people over instead. However, Viola stands firm, modest and loyal to Orsino through it all. The way she speaks to Orsino shows how beautifully feminine she is. Her confession, when it comes is made not to Orsino, but Olivia, a woman: “After him I love / More that I love these eyes, more than my life” (5.1.123-4).

René Girard, discussing the idea of love and desire in *Twelfth Night*, remarks that,

> Somewhere in *Remembrance of Things Past* Proust observes that in matters of desire every *malgre* [in spite of] is a *parce que* [because] in disguise, and this is true in Olivia’s “maugre.” She says explicitly that what seems beautiful to her in Cesario is his “scorn”; what she loves is “the contempt and anger of his lip.” Olivia is falling in love not in spite of Viola’s violence but because of it. This Cesario seems like a sun, so dazzling that it extinguishes her own. (Girard, p.109)

The game of identity hidden behind the masks is played over and over in the play. In act 3, scene 1, Olivia and Viola accuse one another of not being “what you are” (3.1.124). In their first meeting, Cesario had denied being a “comedian” but admitted that “[She is] that [she] play[s]” (1.5.181), alluding both to the female character and metatheatrically to the performer. Here the line is repeated and revised – “I am not what I am” (3.1.126) – and emphasizes both of those layers of identity. Cesario refuses to accept any woman’s love, and the scene ends with one last plaintive appeal from Olivia – “Yet come again” (3.1.147). She wants Cesario to come again to entertain her once more.

In act 4, Sebastian, Viola’s twin brother, did not drown, as his sister had thought, and arrives in Illyria, he finally meets Olivia. The countess thinking that he is Cesario proposes an instant marriage, but promises it will be kept secret until Sebastian is willing to make it public. Then, they will have a grand ceremony, suitable for her social status.

In act 5, or the resolution of the play, Orsino hears that Cesario has married Olivia, and becomes upset and furious. As she enters, he remarks her presence (instead of greeting her) by saying: “Here comes the Countess, now heaven walks on earth” (5.1.97). The Duke’s discovery of Cesario’s supposed betrayal of him awakens an explosion of homicidal vengefulness addressed to Olivia though, in fact, aimed primarily at Cesario: “Why should I not (had I the heart to do it), ... Kill what I love?” (5.2.106-8). He then turns to his page, whom he orders to the slaughter: “Come, boy, with me, my thoughts are ripe in mischief / I’ll sacrifice the lamb

that I do love, / To spite a raven's heart within a dove" (5.2.118-20). Although Orsino does have the heart, in order to spite Olivia, to kill Cesario, especially as a new poison is taking hold of him, his problem was after all his page, who seems able to be in two places at once and have two plans as well. He does say that he loves Viola, and so much does she love him that she responds erotically with a martyr's eagerness: "And I most jocund, apt and willingly, / To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die" (5.2.121-2).

Sebastian finally appears and everyone in Olivia's garden cannot believe that they are seeing "one face, one voice, one habit, and two persons" (5.1.200). Orsino calls it "a natural perspective, that is and is not" (5.1.201), or a distorting mirror that makes one image into two. Then the masquerade is about to end when all is revealed: Sebastian and Viola are reunited. The only thing Sebastian does not know is why she is disguised. For the first time since she was last a woman, Viola takes charge of events and lays out a plan. She tells of her disguise and reveals herself as a woman. Sebastian realizes what else has happened: Olivia meant to marry his sister, and his arrival has saved their skins, allowing the female and the male to curl naturally towards each other. Orsino suddenly switches his love from Olivia to Viola as soon as he finds out that his page is nothing but a woman: "I shall have share in this most happy wreck / Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times / Thou never shouldst love woman like to me" (5.1.250-1). Orsino still cannot see who she is ("let me see thee in thy woman's weeds" [5.2.257]): although he offers her his hand in marriage, she has only recovered her name so far, and her trousers and shirt, hang from her like and old costume.

The masquerade has finished and the real party is about to start. Olivia presents herself to Orsino "as well a sister as a wife," and to Viola as a sister-in-law. It will be all celebrated by a reception. Orsino now talks to her in her female identity, and then offers his own hand ("Here is my hand") to "your master's mistress" (5.2.303-4). It is accepted in silence, and Viola says no more in the play. Shapiro argues that,

> Viola remains in male attire, is still referred to as "boy" by Orsino – either out of habit or with self-conscious irony or possibly both, seriatim. In the absence of an epilogue, the audience's final impression of Viola includes her still contending with disguise as "a wickedness." (Shapiro, 164)

Viola gets what she wants at the end of the "party": Orsino's love. She dressed as a man and acted as a player. At the very end of the play Feste, Olivia's Fool, alone on the stage, sings a song that provides solace for the gloominess of the human condition: "But that's all all one, our play is done / And we'll strive to please you every day" (5.1.384-5). But nothing really matters; the actors will always try to please.

Love discourse in Shakespeare is set against indifference, if not absolute hostility. Significant dramatic conflicts are generated as love seeks to triumph over obstacles and to fulfill

itself, as it does in the happy endings of the comedies. To understand the role of gender in Shakespeare's plays, it is important to apprehend conventional Elizabethan ideas and expectations of what men and women are supposed to be like. Shakespeare plays heterodox ideas of gender against the stereotypes of the audience. *Twelfth Night* is a play full of double-dealing, wordplay, and illusion. A concern with the difference between appearance and reality runs through the entire text, most notably Viola acting the part of a boy thinking about reaching her master's love, and the relationships between the characters are unstable and unsure; nothing is quite what it seems. However, at the end, despite the gender-bender in the story, the conventional prevails.

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