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Gender Role Reversal in *Twelfth Night* and *The Rover*

The confusion unleashed by disguise in comedy creates a space in which social boundaries are suspended. When identities are obscured, there is an unparalleled freedom for female characters to test the limits of their power in courtship. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare has complicated the gender roles of the relationship between Viola and Olivia by cloaking Viola as male. Her identity almost throughout is double-gendered, and romantic frustrations she feels as Viola in longing for Count Orsino leak into her audiences with Olivia as Cesario. The respect and friendship she feels for Olivia as a woman fuse with the latent desires of her heart to create in Olivia's eyes the irresistible illusion of an admirer. The fact that she plays both a male and a female part allows Shakespeare to test the limits of the female role in courtship. The situation is different in *The Rover*. Hellena is always a woman, but her masks allow her to employ her femininity more assertively. Her actions are a more naked example of the empowered female, because courts a man, not just a woman in disguise. Taken together, the two plays give nuanced illustration of the interaction between the sexes in love.

The situation of their meeting would not at first seem propitious for an intimacy to form between Viola and Olivia. Olivia is mourning the loss of her dear brother; Cesario is an emissary from an unwanted suitor, and is only begrudgingly granted admittance. "Most radiant, exquisite and unmatchable beauty-" (I, v, 170) she begins in solemn attention to her text. This praise is contrived and stilted, unlike the free and conversational tone that usually distinguishes Viola's diction. The break signals an abrupt transition into candor, where she reveals she has "taken great pains to con" praise like that above (I, v, 174). Viola's sharp wit has quickly revealed itself. She attempts to recite

the verses that Orsino has entrusted to her, but her embellishments soon distract Olivia's attention from any thoughts of Orsino. Olivia has had too much of the coolly composed love declarations characteristic of the Duke, and Cesario's own remarks make a lively departure from Orsino's verse. Viola continues to ad-lib, with the consequence of undermining Orsino's suit by mocking its seriousness. "Alas, I took great pains to study it, and/ 'tis poetical," (I, v, 194-5) she says of his text, again associating the reading of it with suffering. Unknowingly she has touched on how Olivia views Orsino's advances as oppressive, and unwittingly presents herself as an alternative.

Cesario is Orsino's opposite to Olivia's eyes. He is youth, energy, to his age, gravity, and pedantry. "Good / beauties, let me sustain no scorn; I am very / comptible, even to the least sinister usage," she jests (I, v, 174-6). Cesario's self-deprecating manner offers a contrast to the proud nature of Orsino's suit. In begging the ladies not to mock her, she acknowledging her place below them, empowering Olivia in a way that Orsino could not, given his high birth and haughty bearing. The experience of Orsino's suit has made Olivia feel strongly the limitations of the female part in courtship. In response to his advances, she may only consent or attempt rebuff; she may not shape the course of the relationship. In Cesario, though, she can perceive something feminine in looks and manner that make her feel that she has the power to dictate the terms of the acquaintance. By feminizing the male suitor, Shakespeare explores the rich implications of a woman dominating the relationship. Olivia's actions in courting Cesario would subvert the traditional gender framework if Cesario were really a man, but because of the female gender backdrop, Olivia's assertiveness is less provocative and more comic.

There are doubtless few examples of female reversal in courtship as vivid as that in *Twelfth Night*. However, a shade of this theme can be found in *The Rover*. Here also disguise has a liberating effect on Hellena's pursuit of Willmore. When the pair first meets, Hellena is dressed as a gipsy. This does not quite give her the social clout of man like Viola's disguise does in *Twelfth Night*, but it does relieve some of the constraints of modesty that she would have as a noblewoman. Gipsies are transient and live outside the conventions of class. Their transgressions are acceptable because they do not threaten the social hierarchy. Thus the gipsy façade allows her flirtations to be more pointed and makes the courtship more of a two-way affair. Hellena is at least Willmore's equal in wooing. This augmentation of female power in courtship, though derived in this case by a subversion of social boundaries rather than those of gender, results in a dynamic of parity similar to the one found in the Viola-Olivia relationship.

“Sister, there's your Englishman, and with him a handsom proper Fellow—I'll to him, and instead of telling him his Fortune, try my own,” Hellena says upon seeing Willmore for the first time (I, ii, 123-5). She is aware of the social license her garb provides her, and she is confidently prepared to use it to pursue him. Willmore acknowledges the greater sexual freedom of the gipsies before the two even meet: “Gipsies, on my life. –Sure these will prattle if a man cross their hands,” (I, ii, 126-7). Hellena indeed does prattle, quickly employing her incisive wit to gain hold of the reins of the conversation. She is not afraid to insult him, noting in him “a certain forward Impudence, which does not displease me at this time” (I, ii, 135-6). This appraisal could just as easily apply to her. If he is forward in accosting her, she is equally forthright in parrying his words with barbs of her own. “Have a care how you venture with me, Sir,

lest I pick your Pocket, which will more vex your *English* Humour, than an *Italian* Fortune will please you,” she replies to his advances (I, ii, 130-2). Such a threat, though playful, is a more aggressive response than what would be expected from a woman. Her directive manner is more akin to the traditionally masculine role in courtship.

From the first, Olivia also seems to assume the more masculine role. Her social role as head of the household creates a position of power over the youth Cesario, even though Olivia is a woman. She sustains this dominant role with strong interrogatives that pepper the discourse. The staccato of her questioning lends the conversation a playful tone, but it is clear that she is leading the way, much like Hellena. Before Viola can begin to recite her message, Olivia interjects, “Now, sir, what is your text?” (I, v, 220). Viola can only respond, and hope to answer satisfactorily. Olivia immediately puts her on the defensive and successfully prevents her from reciting Orsino’s message. She also uses her sexuality to her advantage, unveiling her face with the assured and flirtatious, “Is’t not well done?” (I, v, 235). She knows the power of her beauty over men, and wields it against Cesario.

As their audience comes to a close, the relationship between Olivia and Viola moves to a different level with Cesario’s love declaration to Olivia. Though she is speaking hypothetically, the passion of this speech is without match for much of the play. This cannot be explained simply regarding it as a particularly well-crafted example of what a lover might say. Viola is professing these sentiments as a lover, not of Olivia, but of Orsino. “Make me a willow cabin at your gate, / And call upon my soul within the house;” (I, v, 268-9) she begins, in a poetic form which is a departure from the previous bantering tone in prose. Olivia could take the image of Cesario waiting at her gate as

meaning that Cesario's earlier refusal to be moved from the gates was the act of a stubborn admirer. To Viola, however, it is a bittersweet picture of what she would do were she a man. Frustrated by her inability as a woman to act on her love for Orsino, she longs to be able to express her love as a man could, and finds in her disguise an opportunity to vent her feelings. "Halloo your name to the reverberate hills / And make the babbling gossip of the air / Cry out 'Olivia!' O," (I, v, 272-4) Viola proclaims in the heart of the speech. In these lines concerned with the name of a lover, the vowel sounds always return to the open "O", reflecting an inner preoccupation with that name rich in the vowel, Orsino. The fact that her thoughts tend to the object of her secret love gives her words such passion.

She ends her speech with, "You should not rest / Between the elements of air and earth, / But you should pity me!" (I, v, 274-276). It is as Viola that she should be pitied, in love but unloved; it is as Cesario that she is loved. In pronouncing what, as a woman, she wants most for a lover to be, she imparts to Olivia as a man just what Olivia would want to hear from a suitor. Viola is in no danger of falling for Olivia because of gender boundaries, but the disguise affords Olivia no such protection. She falls in love with Cesario because of Viola's passion and wit. Viola has a unique position in comedy, that of being both the pursuer in love and the pursued, the lover unhappily unrequited and the one undesirably desired. Paradoxically, it is the sisterly bond as women unhappy in love between Viola and Olivia that makes this love possible.

No such dire repercussions of disguise separate Hellena and Willmore. In their case, the removing the disguise is trivial, and only the stubbornness of each keeps them apart. Accordingly, the love declaration between the two is more lighthearted. "I am

parlously afraid of being in love, Child, and you have not forgot how severely you have us'd me," says Willmore (V, i, 414-6), seemingly unable to be serious, even about love. Helena continues the mocking tone by promising "to find out all your haunts, and rail at you to all that love you, till I have made you love me only in your own defense, because nobody else will love" (V, i, 417-420). The two must depend on joking to communicate because they are so equally matched, and each is on the defensive. It is significant that in this final scene Hellena is dressed, not as a gipsy, but as a boy. Because Willmore is aware of Hellena's true gender, the effect of this masking is subtler than in *Twelfth Night*. Hellena is essentially feminine, but her male garments underscore the frank, almost masculine manner in which she asserts her will. She plays the male part by proposing to him: "let but old gaffer Hymen and his priest say amen to't, and I dare lay my mother's daughter by as proper a fellow as your father's son, without fear or blushing." (V, i, 441-4). As a woman, she would only end up poor and used if she took Willmore without getting married, and she consummately defends against this fate. "What shall I get?" she asks, "A cradle full of noise and mischief, with a pack of repentance at my back?" (V, i, 456-7). Aphra Behn's words seem to speak from experience, and her female perspective gives Hellena's struggle an edge. While Shakespeare is playing with gender for comic effect, but for Behn, an empowered female has serious implications.

Olivia's love declaration, in contrast to Willmore's in *The Rover*, is completely sincere. "Cesario, by the roses of the spring, / By maidenhood, honour, truth, and every thing," she begins (III, i, 149-150). Unlike Cesario's declaration in the first act, Olivia's is in rhyming couplets. This lends a sense of formality to the lines and suggests that they may be rehearsed. Cesario obviously has often been in Olivia's thoughts. She first cites

supports her cause with the bastions of her virtue. Because she is being forward in seeking Cesario out, she must assert that her honor is still intact. This is an indication that the submissive behavior of women in courtship is an essential marker of their femininity. She continues, "I love thee so, that maugre all thy pride, / Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide." (III, i, 151-2), recognizing before Viola even speaks that she is to expect a sardonic reply. This is a different Olivia from what has previously been portrayed. Before, she was proud and eager to spar; now she is willing to submit to all of Cesario's pride for the sake of love. She goes further to anticipate Cesario's qualms by directing, "Do not extort thy reasons for this clause, / For that I woo, thou therefore hast no cause," (III, i, 153-4). The self-analysis here is acute: she acknowledges the masculine part she has been playing in the courtship, and even perceives its social implications. She assumes that her usurpation of the wooing role would hurt Cesario's masculinity because the male gender roles of the time depended greatly on the way they treated women, especially in courtship. She has risked Cesario's emasculation by pursuing him, just as she has put her femininity on the line. With so much in the air, she can only fall on rational reflection to make her case: "But rather reason thus with reason fetter, / Love sought is good, but given unsought better." (III, i, 155-6). The emphasis on reason suggests that the gender roles are unreasonable and arbitrary. The concluding adage is a wonderfully pithy assertion of gender relativism. It paints an inclusive vision of love, in which wooing is not constrained to one gender, and one-sided love is happily accepted. As she is saying this, Olivia could have no idea that this is just the kind of world Viola dreams to inhabit, that she could pursue her love of Orsino.

Having a couple composed of two women in *Twelfth Night* tests the audience's comfort with having women in charge, either in male dress or female. The whole system of heterosexual courtship is put under scrutiny when such a major tenet as male dominance is subverted. Shakespeare suggests an alternative to this system in which love is unconstrained by gender roles. Though both Viola and Olivia end up in the role prescribed by their gender as subjects of their husbands in marriage, the implications of female empowerment suggested by their courtship linger. A similar subversion occurs in *The Rover*. Behn has suggested a new type of woman in Hellena. She is not afraid of her sexuality and uses it to take a dominant role in courtship. This untested mode of femininity is let loose in a comic space saturated in disguise and frivolity, to hilarious results. Amid the chaos, a hint of Behn's message can be discerned: a yearning for equality between the sexes in courtship. Both authors ultimately depict gender relationships progressive for their time, but shielded from scrutiny by the giddy freedom of comedy.

Works Cited

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