

**LINGUISTIC MASKING IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S "TWELFTH NIGHT":  
VIOLA'S DISGUISE AS A REINCARNATION STRATEGY**



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**A**bstract. This essay explores linguistic artifice motivated by a specific teleology inscribed in the social context of William Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night". In this play the main character, Viola, employs language to secure the presence of her supposedly drowned twin brother Sebastian. Instead of accepting this loss, Viola devises a disguise plan: she decides to reincarnate Sebastian by becoming his copy. Masking also implies presenting a new image of identity, necessary to achieve specific goals in the course of the play. To construct an identity convincing enough to interact with the others, Viola recreates an image of the language associated with a certain social role. The pursuit of Sebastian's image leads to the emergence of a diglossic character.

**K**ey words: Shakespeare, "Twelfth Night", Early Modern Studies, linguistic masking, diglossia, Mikhail Bakhtin, Judith Butler, gender, Doppelgänger, cross-dressing, Viola and Cesario.

“Language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind. No glasse renders a man’s forme, or likenesse, so true as his speech” (Ben Jonson, “Timber”: 625).

**B**en Jonson’s succinct formula expressively summarizes Early Modern views on language as a major source of information about the speaker, his state of mind and qualities of character. To Shakespeare’s contemporaries it was clear that the manner of speaking reveals the person, even though the idea of individual speaking style had not yet become commonly shared knowledge [de Grazia: 375-376]. Language was one and the same for everyone – Adam’s heritage to all mankind. Language in all its lexical and syntactical variety was at one’s total disposal, the only thing that differed from one speaker to the next was his or her capacity to adapt the wide range of those means to the speaker’s communicative goals. Such adaptation of language portrayed the user’s personality [Friedrich & Redfield: 264]. Language revealed the self similarly to the way a painting technique conveys the artist. As Jonathan Hope notes in his extensive study, “the self was fully demonstrated in verbal performance, not by generating something new, but by making familiar material your own” [Hope: 31].

Linguistic artifice could also be motivated by a specific teleology inscribed in the social context

of a play. In William Shakespeare’s comedies we are confronted with the use of stylistic masks, a device to disguise the identities of characters. Masking also implies presenting a new image of identity, necessary to achieve specific goals in the course of the play. To construct an identity convincing enough to interact with the others, major characters recreate an image of the language associated with a certain social role.

#### **“For him I imitate”**

In Shakespeare, language as an object of imitation may be used to incarnate someone who is not present. This is particularly the case in “Twelfth Night”. In this play the main character, Viola, employs language to secure Sebastian’s presence. Shipwrecked, Viola is mourning her drowned brother. Though no evidence of either his survival or death is provided by the crew, she prefers the pessimistic perspective. Instead of accepting this loss and announcing her arrival to Orsino, Viola, in the list of characters identified as “lady”, devises a disguise plan: she decides to reincarnate Sebastian by becoming his copy. The task appears plausible as masking has a potential for bringing things to life. However, the plan of pretence is presented as a forced decision. First, Viola wants to serve Olivia who has also lost both her father and brother [1.2.32-37]. Viola is thus attracted to their similar destiny, which provides her with a better understanding of loss. “O that I served this lady, / And might not be delivered to the world”, she exclaims, driven by

her sorrow. But the Captain dissuades her from this idea in a categorical manner: “She will admit no kind of suit” [1.2.43]. Only then does Viola invent the masking scheme, for which she needs the Captain’s assistance:

I pray thee – and I’ll pay thee bounteously –  
 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 shalt present me as an eunuch to him  
 [1.2.49-54].

In terms of plotting, Shakespeare employs the same pattern he used in “Measure for Measure”: the Duke reveals his scheme to Friar Thomas who also performs the function of a style instructor. The Captain’s role in Viola’s linguistic artifice, however, is much less pronounced. He is needed merely to introduce her to the court and then to keep the secret of her identity. The reason for this plan is articulated in the middle of Act 3: “I my brother know / Yet living in my glass. Even such and so / In favour was my brother, and he went / Still in this fashion, colour, ornament, / For him I imitate” [Twelfth Night: 3.4.376-380]. At this point, love relations between Olivia, Orsino and Viola are tangled up to such a degree of complication that the disguise causes even greater pain to the disguiser, who is torn between her wishes and her position. The revelation on the side of Viola, however, justifies why she meticulously imitates her brother in all aspects,

language included. Samuel Johnson’s famous praise of Viola is often quoted by critics: “Viola is an excellent schemer, never at a loss; if she cannot serve the lady, she will serve the Duke” [Johnson & Steevens: 149]. The strategy that in the beginning appears effective, for Viola easily becomes Orsino’s favourite, becomes gradually shakier as the plot develops. Viola’s capacities for stylistic masking lack consistency, threatened by her ambiguous position as an object of desire for Olivia and, unexpectedly, for Orsino.

To succeed with her “resurrection plan,” Viola attempts to reproduce the language of her supposedly dead brother. Orsino and Olivia duly refer to Cesario’s manner of expression as to one that is appropriate for a young educated man [Twelfth Night: 1.4.30-31; 1.5.283-285]. This form of disguise, Keir Elam claims, can, in a way, keep Sebastian alive, at least in Viola’s imagination [7, 14]. Renate Lachmann links this scheme to a carnival act, in which the person disappears behind a mask of language, appearing instead as a *doppelgänger* [Lachmann: 145].

The diglossiac structure of the disguised Viola is directly affiliated with gender implications. The evasive Viola combines two voices: male and female. The project of mirroring Sebastian does not demand insuperable obligations in terms of physical resemblance. Effective linguistic disguise, however, also requires that the character conceives of a mask, which justifies his / her physicality. By contrast, this is not the case in “Twelfth Night”. Viola knows that her frail constitution

and high voice may draw suspicion. Therefore, she invents a justification: she will be presented to the court as eunuch. The following lines said to the captain signal that the inventive Viola easily justifies the high pitch of her voice and at the same time claims linguistic mastery: “It may be worth thy pains, for I can sing / And speak to him in many sorts of music” [1.2.54-55]. “There is a double meaning in that”: apart from her singing talents Viola indicates firm confidence in her command of different modes of expression<sup>1</sup>. These vocal characteristics suit a eunuch, hence, no one is to doubt her sex. But the project is not sustained throughout the play: the castrato disguise is forgotten almost immediately after it has been conceived. Although there is no further reference to it in the play, other characters see in Viola simultaneously the traces of femininity and masculinity.

The pursuit of Sebastian’s image leads to the emergence of a character in which male and female characteristics fuse. Furthermore, it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of diglossia, for Viola’s voice gradually transforms into a new entity. Besides, the device that has a sobering effect both on the audience and the character, makes it more difficult to distinguish between the masked identity and the mask. Viola’s

confused thoughts and feelings in the middle of Act II reveal an apparent concern about the dubious nature of her identity. She knows that Olivia’s passion for Cesario must be fulfilled, and the logic of the disguise strategy supports such prospects. “I am the man. If it be so, as ’tis, / Poor lady, she were better love a dream”, says Viola empathizing with Olivia [2.2.25-26]. Her words also point to a strange acceptance of fate. Valerie Traub interprets this instance as an indication of homoerotic love charged with “lesbian overtones” [Traub: 131]. She also points out that the exchanges between Olivia and Cesario carry “multiple erotic investments” and the source of those “investments” is Cesario’s femininity [Traub: 141]. It should be noticed that homoerotic hints derive mostly from Olivia’s speech, while Viola in disguise reduces her speeches to the minimum. From a stylistic point of view, Cesario is a successful creation, as Olivia’s acceptance of his identity proves. She recognizes in his manner of speaking and moving the characteristics of a gentleman: “Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions and spirit / Do give thee five-fold blazon” [1.5.284-285]. Her further observations, however, suggest that she notices more than his appearance. As William Slights points out, Olivia’s erotic desire towards Viola-as-Cesario is also

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<sup>1</sup> Another character that is reported as having similar capacities is Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Sir Toby Belch ironically tells Maria about him: “He plays o’th’ viol-de-gamboys, and speaks three or four languages” [1.3.23-24]. Later in the same scene, Sir Andrew proves incapable of understanding French, and with his poor command of English, is the subject of constant jokes from Sir Toby. Linguistic impotence puts Sir Andrew in a contrasting position to other members of the aristocracy, whose speech performance is much more effective and diverse.

driven by his frail constitution and distinct feminine features [Slights: 329]. It is even more surprising, then, that Olivia does not react to Viola's direct confession: "I am not what I am" [3.1.139]. The elusive Viola negates her pretended identity but does not reveal her first self. The line alludes to the biblical "I am who I am", God's response to Moses [Exodus: 3.14]. Theological interpretations of this often quoted phrase vary in different traditions. Nevertheless, it is undeniable to most theologians that God establishes himself through a positive affirmation. By contrast, Viola-as-Cesario's reply to Olivia signals what she is not, rather than what she is. Furthermore, Viola attempts to convey to Olivia her true gender, the constitutive element of her identity that prevents her from reciprocating Olivia's passion.

Identity, like gender, is a matter of social and language construction. Judith Butler was among the first to highlight the genesis of this approach. She examines extensive material from various Early Modern texts and focuses on "Twelfth Night" as well. In "Gender Trouble", she argues that gender is to be understood as "the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction", whose main vehicle is language [Butler 1990: 7]. In a narrower sense, it is the manner of expression that influences the perception of Viola in the social universe of the play. Butler sees gender as a discursive zone, a mode and content of ver-

bal discourse. Although she does not mention Bakhtin, her ideas echo the heteroglossiac approach to the character. Gender, Butler continues, could be "materialized" and "constructed" via consistent use of a particular language (style). Viola, then, can be seen as the one who engages in such a project but fails<sup>2</sup> by creating "an imaginary contestation" [Butler 1993: 23].

The duality of voices not only complicates and transforms Viola's identity. The disguise plot conceived by Viola was not intended as a stratagem of substitution aimed at a specific social or political aim. However, in the course of events it becomes necessary for Viola to sustain her role as Cesario. Bound by obligation to her master and appearing desirable to Olivia, the masked character is unable to draw the line between artifice and reality. "Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness, / Wherein the pregnant enemy does much", meditates the puzzled Olivia [2.2.27-28]. Viola is aware of the influence the mask has on her. "I, the poor monster", she defines herself, noting both the features of a man and of woman within herself. The edgy interplay between genders alludes to monsters from antiquity that were represented as a combination of two beings. The complexity of Viola's newly constructed identity tightens the knot of interpersonal exposure and attraction towards other characters. She admits: "It is too hard a knot for me t'untie" [2.3.41].

<sup>1</sup> A successful example of gender construction, however, can be found among other Shakespearean characters. Beatrice, whose case I will analyze further, effectively employs male types of expression and is treated as an equal by other men.

The mutability of Viola's perception is deeply rooted in her manner of speaking, loaded with polysemy and consequent semantic ambiguity. "My father had a daughter loved a man", Viola-as-Cesario tells Orsino [2.4.107]. Intrigued, he asks: "And what's her story?" [2.4.109]. The reply plays with two contextual meanings: "A blank, my lord" [2.4.110]<sup>1</sup>. Viola wants to say that there is nothing to tell and reveals that a lot depends on the future development of the events. It is problematic to say whether this second meaning is there only for the benefit of the audience, or if the message is also accessible to Orsino<sup>2</sup>. The full title of the play "Twelfth Night, or What You Will" suggests that this ambiguity depends on the perspective. Indeed, disguised Viola's speech reminds us of the "changeable taffeta", mentioned by Feste [2.4.74]. The expensive piece of cloth changing its colour in different light metaphorically indicates the ambiguity of any discourse<sup>3</sup>. Viola, a central figure in the play, condenses this statement by fusing the two voices within her. As a result, diglossia leads to a polymorphic creation.

Barber links this ambiguity to Early Modern

festive traditions and argues for the contrary:

The most fundamental distinction the play brings home to us is the difference between men and women... The disguising of a girl as a boy in "Twelfth Night" is exploited so as to renew in a special way our sense of the difference. Just as a saturnalian reversal of social roles need not threaten the social structure, but can serve to consolidate it, so a temporary, playful reversal of sexual roles can renew the meaning of the normal relation [Barber: 245].

The logic of renewal is relevant when the relations are not effective, and when gender distinctions are blurred and social contracts lose their binding power. But what is a "norm" in a fictional carnivalesque world where every type of relation is made possible?<sup>4</sup> Viola's example is the most vivid example, for her effective use of language, both as Cesario and Viola, leads her to success, both among men and women. The above mentioned dialogue between Viola and the Captain occurs in Act 1 Scene 1. She reappears one scene later as Cesario, and it is clear that a certain lapse of time separates these two episodes divided only

<sup>1</sup> The instance echoes the appearance of the Duke-as-Friar who had to construct his identity from nothing to justify his commands.

<sup>2</sup> The performative potential of these scenes suggests that variants are possible. A lot depends on a particular production and director's approach.

<sup>3</sup> Taffeta, the piece of cloth made of silk, is also mentioned in Lyly's "Euphues" which relates it to the changes of humour and mood: "You have given unto me a true love's knotte wrought of chaungeable silke" [Winny: 42].

<sup>4</sup> Butler points out that the very idea of normality is hardly relevant in "Twelfth Night" [Butler 1990: 237-241].

by a short exchange between Sir Toby, Maria and Sir Aguecheek. In the dialogue with her master Orsino, Viola-as-Cesario maintains a wavering position. Her initial replies to all of Orsino's contemplations and commands do not exceed two lines. Pronounced reverence is present in all of them. While Orsino addresses her using the second person pronoun "thou", she consistently reaffirms her inferior status and does not use the same form of address. On the contrary, she addresses him as "my lord" five times<sup>1</sup>. At this point it is not difficult to distinguish between the mask and the voice hidden beneath: when Orsino sends her to woo Olivia, Viola reveals herself to the audience in an aside. "I'll do my best / To woo your lady. (aside) Yet a barful strife: / Who'er I woo, myself would be his wife", says Viola pointing to the possible complications of the task [1.4.40-42]. Paronomasia linking "woo" and "would" may escape the reader's attention, but when made audible it becomes distinct to the audience. However, Viola's vision of her own self is shadowed by Orsino's remark: "For they shall yet belie thy happy years / That say thou art a man" [1.4.30-31]. The youth of his new servant ("thy happy years") does not provide enough evidence of Cesario's masculinity and allows Orsino to describe him as a possessor of "smooth and rubious" lips, of a "small pipe". Moreover, Cesa-

rio's features are seen as all "semblative a woman's part" [1.4.34].

Two voices embodied by one character correspond to the duality of purposes. Cesario, a mirror image of Sebastian, devotes himself to service, while Viola is more devoted to love. David Schalkwyk invokes historical evidence to point out that, by choosing to be Cesario, Viola does not move to a lower position in the hierarchy: "Given the common practice of placing the sons of gentlemen and even the nobility in service with other noble families, Viola's decision to serve the duke of Illyria does not imply any decline in social status" [Schalkwyk: 87]. Furthermore, the service at a duke's court, according to Schalkwyk, was a distinct possibility and a possibility of distinction for a young unmarried man. But Viola's pretense becomes unstable under the influence of her growing undercurrent affection for Orsino. Service and affection intertwine. Viola's position is parallel to that of Malvolio's, whom Schalkwyk defines as a "servant of roughly similar social standing" [ibid.: 89]. Both wish to transform service into love relations. But their destinies, triggered by the use of a linguistic mask, take a turn in the opposite direction. Malvolio's attempts to gain Olivia's attention and affection fail. His persistence and haughtiness<sup>2</sup> in relation to other characters precipitates a decep-

<sup>1</sup> Orsino addresses his servant as "dear lad", "good youth", or "boy" indicating Cesario's age. Orsino implies that his servant is at the stage of transition, and his maleness has not developed yet.

<sup>2</sup> Maria names one more reason: "The devil a Puritan that he is, or anything constantly but a time pleaser" [2.3.142-143].



tion plan designed by Maria and realized with the help of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew. The only example of written stylization is the letter that Maria forges, imitating Olivia's handwriting and style [2.5.140-155]<sup>1</sup>. Seeing the letter, Malvolio goes through two stages of recognition. First, he identifies the handwriting: "By my life, this is my lady's hand" [2.5.85-86]. Then, in a self-deluding excitement he thinks that he recognizes the mode of expression: "Her very phrases!" [2.5.91]<sup>2</sup>. After that he does not question the content of the epistle and follows its commands to the word. The produced effect of ridicule is reinforced by Malvolio's firm conviction that the letter is genuine. Dramatic irony and linguistic delusion cooperate: the comic effect of Malvolio's position is juxtaposed to Viola's sympathetic appeal to the audience. Although both are victims of stylistic masks, and both aspire for love, the outcome is different. The practical joke played on Malvolio, the "poor fool", shows how effective stylization can cause humiliation to those who are persistent in their ignorance [5.1.363]. Viola-as-Cesario, a creation of artifice, imitates the speech of a young male courtier. Unable to reveal her true identity, Viola turns her love into service.

The vicinity of the two voices facilitates their fusion. The bifurcation between Viola and Cesario present in the beginning of the play gradually disappears. In the end, Viola leaves her disguise behind, for she learns that Sebastian is alive, and therefore the very project of making him "live in her glass" is no longer necessary. However, Orsino continues to address her as "boy" [5.1.263]. The disguise enterprise has had its influence not only on its creator but also on other characters. This example challenges Barber's argument concerning the effect of renewal that the masking plot has in the play. Up to the end, borders between male and female characteristics in Viola remain ambiguous and opaque<sup>3</sup>.

Viola's masking strategy, conceived as an unpremeditated reaction to Sebastian's death and as the possibility of staying at Orsino's court, also leads to the transformation of the character. Cesario is, to a great extent, a replica of Viola's twin brother. Though the genesis of the mask does not clarify the reincarnation potential, Viola admits later in the play that the disguise enterprise secures Sebastian's presence. Physical resemblance poses no problem, hence, Viola needs only to imitate his language. Cesario is an amalgamation

<sup>1</sup> The four major characters I analyze in my thesis employ oral forms of language disguise, preferring speech to writing.

<sup>2</sup> His delusion can be supported by his prior experience. Malvolio is most likely to have already had access to Olivia's correspondence. Thus, his quick judgment is based on a distinct resemblance of the letter to Olivia's style of epistolary expression. This fact also indicates that Maria is as good a disguiser as Viola.

<sup>3</sup> Barber's argument could also be interpreted as an indication of the contrary. Fictional experimentation with gender and identity could not endanger the "norm" in the world where the hierarchy is stable and one's social status is not in question. However, "Twelfth Night" demonstrates that no social role is unshakeable.

of identities, and Viola is explicitly powerless in untangling the two voices – her voice and the voice of the mask. The situation is resolved by the appearance of the actual Sebastian who takes his place and fills in the gap, thus liberating Viola from her self-imposed task.

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