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Where the Will Lies:

Women Wielding Inauthenticity in *Twelfth Night*

One of the primary themes in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is most evident in the play's alternate title, *What You Will.* Each character is greatly motivated by personal ambitions, and Shakespeare's careful orchestration allows each desire to be fulfilled or dashed upon the piece's conclusion. In this essay, I will discuss how each of the three female characters in *Twelfth Night* uses a strategy of inauthenticity as a means to exercise her will in order to assert her own agency and to serve her individual motivations.

The character of Viola presents the most conspicuous example of inauthenticity in *Twelfth Night*. After her initial appearance in Act I, Scene 2, she spends the remainder of the production costumed as a man under the alter-ego Cesario. While some scholars have posited that her motives for doing so are quite unclear (Kusonoki 119), others have offered contextual arguments for her decision. In the essay "'Was My Sister Drowned': Voyaging While Female in *Twelfth Night*", Moore asserts that an audience contemporary to Shakespeare's seventeenth century play would have recognized inherent dangers to a female survivor of a shipwreck. These might have included "[c]aptivity, slavery, enforced religious conversion, and . . . enforced marriage (or worse)" (Moore 161). When these considerations are paired with the text itself, it becomes clearer why Viola rushes to conceal her authentic feminine self.

All that Viola knows about Illyria comes from a male perspective: an unnamed captain explains that Duke Orsino governs the land. She admits, "I have heard my father name him. / He

was a bachelor then" (Shakespeare 1.2.29-30), to which the captain replies that this is still the case. Viola is established early on as quick-thinking and insightful. Her hearing that the duke has long been a bachelor and has more recently been unsuccessful in his courtship may lead her to conclude that his household would be unsafe for a maiden. After lamenting that there is no place for her in Lady Olivia's more secure home – which notably lacks "the company of men" (Shakespeare 1.2.42) - she immediately declares, "Conceal me what I am" (Shakespeare 1.2.56). In doing so, she has swiftly concocted a disguise – a male counterpart, Cesario - which will assure her security in a male realm.

Viola's initial motivations for inauthenticity, then, are various but uncomplicated. Her primary concern is that of security. She is seeking a means to live as she bides her time figuring out her place in Illyria and, perhaps, hoping for news about the fate of her twin. Viola also recognizes the inherent power that masculinity will afford her, and she seeks the range of opportunities otherwise unavailable to her.

These simple motivations quickly become convoluted as she ingratiates herself within Duke Orsino's court. By Act I, Scene 4, Viola-as-Cesario has gained the duke's trust, and she is given a message with which she is meant to court Olivia. However, she woefully admits in an aside, "Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife" (Shakespeare 1.4.46). Undoubtedly, her will is shifting from that of a shipwrecked maiden; from here, it must be considered that the clever, strategizing Viola recognizes that her male identity can help her gain perspective and insight into her beloved's mind until the time has come to reveal her identity. Not only does she probe his thoughts, but she also seeks to influence his way of thinking.

The manipulation of Orsino occurs in Act II, Scene 4, after Viola-as-Cesario has unsuccessfully pursued Olivia on his behalf. Thinking himself secure in the company of his own

gender, Orsino declares that women "lack retention" (Shakespeare 2.4.105). Through her role as Cesario, Viola comes to the defense of women:

> 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 2.4.116-120)

Here, Viola recognizes a chance to utilize the social positioning that her disguise affords her in order to identify her true self. It is also an opportunity for her to exercise influence upon Orsino with no apparent ulterior motive. Her alternate identity as Cesario grants her the ability to speak candidly with Orsino about his infatuation with Olivia, and it also lets Viola subtly propose her own feelings for him. She lays a groundwork for this confession by drawing parallels between her disguised self and a hypothetical woman, telling Orsino that a woman Cesario has fallen for is both "[o]f your complexion" (Shakespeare 2.4.31) and "[a]bout your years, my lord" (2.4.33). Ultimately, this scene allows Viola to claim her own feelings, and she demonstrates a roguish willfulness in her expression of them.

Upon gaining entry in Olivia's court in Act I, Scene 5, Viola-as-Cesario first encounters her adversary in winning Orsino's heart. Viola's inauthentic self allows her a position from which she can observe and influence the courtship of her beloved and his own love interest. Viola engages in playful argumentative free verse with the countess. She bids Olivia to remove her veil, and she comments on her beauty (Shakespeare 1.5.229-235). The audience must recognize that Viola's duplicitous identity here facilitates a complex understanding of the flirtatious architecture in this passage. She has used her male persuasion to convince Olivia to

reveal her face; then, she commands her attention through compliments and begins Orsino's courtship. The ensuing pronouncement is markedly formal in comparison to the former conversation. As her speech turns to prose, Olivia resumes her dispassionate demeanor and tries to revert the conversation to Viola-as-Cesario, interrupting with an unrelated, "What is your parentage?" (Shakespeare 1.5.281) Viola, again, has been proven to be both quick-witted and charismatic through her adaptive role and speech. Her powers of persuasion are strong but subtle. At this point, she must recognize Olivia's disinterest in Orsino's plot. It is reasonable to conclude that Viola could have improvised a more compelling argument on his behalf, but she chose not to in order to leave the duke open to opportunity.

All in all, Viola's inauthenticity serves her well. Through the delicate balancing of her male disguise and her relationships with Orsino and Olivia, the play ultimately bends to Viola's will. The initial motivations for her façade – a secure place to bide time - are fulfilled in tandem with her subsequently developed desire: Orsino. Not only did she gain temporary security in Orsino's court, but the time that she spent in his household allowed for the discovery of her twin brother. This passage of time, too, resulted in the emerging motivation of a romantic pursuit. The wish to win over Orsino is further satisfied as a result of her inauthenticity. Her disguise allowed for an unguarded view into his thoughts and feelings as well as access to his courtship. While Viola rarely comes across as an outright manipulative figure, it is conspicuous that her resourceful inauthenticity culminated in the realization of her greatest aspirations.

Maria, a lady-in-waiting for the countess Olivia, has her own ambitions, though they are more obscured than those of Viola. Her character evolves in the background; we only begin to see her true nature through quick flashes of banter. In her first appearance in Act I, Scene 3, Sir

Toby introduces her to a drunken Sir Andrew. Sir Andrew goes on to make playful but brash remarks, and she engages, firing back with witty defenses.

The next time we see the three together in Act II, Scene 3, Maria is attempting to exercise order upon the intoxicated pair. While doing so, Malvolio enters, and he blames her for their behavior. Her desires – both conscious and unconscious - surface after Malvolio accuses her of allowing Lady Olivia's household to fall into disarray. He shames her, saying, "Mistress Mary, if you prized my lady's favor at anything more than contempt, you would not give means for this civil unruly. She shall know of it, by this hand" (Shakespeare 2.3.120-123). Immediately after this threat to destabilize her household rank as well as her relationship with Lady Olivia, Maria concocts a plan of inauthenticity. She intends to forge a letter in Olivia's hand to convince Malvolio that the countess is harboring secret affections for him. This decision and use of inauthenticity is an assertion of Maria's own agency.

Maria's forged letter plot allows us to draw several conclusions about her character. First, the audience understands that she greatly values her social status. Were her personal honor not something that she took pride in, the affront from the notoriously self-important Malvolio would not have inspired such detailed revenge. Additionally, it establishes Maria as uncommonly clever and inventive. Not only that, but she is able to propound her ingenuity to the gentlemen of the household – Sir Andrew and Sir Toby– and they are impressed by her actions.

Maria is emboldened by the gentlemen's encouragement, which leads to the supposition that one of her internal motivations is that of heightening her own social status. In an exploration of Maria's character and subplot, Marguerite Tassi notes, "Maria's forged letter promises in jest what the characters wish to believe in earnest: 'thou art made, if thou desir'st to be so' (2.5.154-155) . . . Ironically, she seeks to punish Malvolio for a desire she secretly harbors." (36-37).

Maria wishes for a positioning that would allow her to exercise control over Malvolio, and furthermore, she desires the approval of the classes above her own.

In the end, Maria's inauthenticity allows her to satisfy her personal motivations. By forging a letter to make a fool of Malvolio, she raises her status in the eyes of the leisure class. The letter represents both the skills which she deftly employs and her mental prowess. She is extremely perceptive; Maria is able to exact the precise qualities which Lady Olivia finds revolting and apply them to the requests for Malvolio. This act of counterfeiting, then, renders him completely subservient to her.

Through Malvolio's humiliation, Maria is also able to specifically win the favor of Sir Toby. He marries her as a direct result of her role in the revenge. One of Olivia's gentlemen, Fabian, makes this clear: "Maria writ / The letter at Sir Toby's great importance, / In recompense whereof he hath married her" (Shakespeare 5.1.385-387). The audience has no reason to believe that Maria feels love for Sir Toby, whom she handles throughout the play as a somewhat affable nuisance. In an essay examining the gender and class dynamics of *Twelfth Night*, Mihoko Suzuki notes, "[T]he husband Maria gains in marrying above her class is clearly inferior to her in every *other* way" (156). Love, though, has never been a driving force for Maria; ultimate personal agency, however, is afforded to her through her plot of inauthenticity and the resulting marriage into a class above her own.

The character of Lady Olivia introduces an especially complex representation of inauthenticity. Her methods are less overt than Viola's disguise and more subtle than Maria's forgery. Her introduction comes secondhand through the unnamed captain that speaks to Viola in the first act. We are told that Olivia is mourning her father and brother, both of whom died within the last twelve months. As a consequence, she is hesitant to accept the company of any

man (Shakespeare 1.2.37-42). We get further insight into her character from a conversation between her uncle, Sir Toby, and his friend, Sir Andrew, in the next scene. Toby has brought Andrew to the household in the hopes of marrying off Olivia. The following exchange takes place:

> ANDREW. Faith, I'll be home tomorrow, Sir Toby. Your niece will not be seen, or if she be, it's four to one she'll have none of me. The Count himself here hard by woos her.
>
> TOBY. She'll none o' th' Count. She'll not match above her degree, neither in estate, years, nor wit. I have heard her swear 't. (Shakespeare 1.3.103-109)

Evidently, Olivia is not easily won. She has so prolifically dissuaded courtship that Sir Andrew feels discouraged before ever making her acquaintance. Sir Toby further establishes Olivia's determined nature by detailing the specific preferences she requires of a suitor. Notably, each of these traits would render her potential partner inferior to her. This is our first indication of Olivia's internal motivations.

Olivia finally appears at the end of the first act when Viola-as-Cesario has been sent to meet with her. When told that she has a visitor, Olivia's immediate reaction is to respond, "If it be a suit from the Count, I am sick, or not at home; what you will, to dismiss it" (Shakespeare 1.5.107-108). This phrase allows the audience a first glimpse into Olivia's inauthenticity, and it also offers a further look at her personal motivations.

It is vital to Olivia's character to remember her precarious status as both a single woman and as the leader of a household which lacks a male heir. This choice made by Shakespeare was

likely intended to parallel the contemporary real-life monarch, the notoriously and willfully unwed Queen Elizabeth (Weber). It has even been said that the queen considered Shakespeare's device of using a wedding to signal a happy ending to be a veiled admonishment of her rejection of marriage (Suzuki 139). Much like Elizabeth, Olivia recognizes that wedding herself to any man will inherently erode her own authority.

Having recently lost both male relatives to whom she was technically subservient, Olivia finds herself wielding more power and independence than she has ever experienced. Though she is certainly grieving, she is also cognizant and resourceful. She recognizes that the position of power she has found herself in is a rare one, and one she may never again experience. Knowing that she can use her status as a mourning woman to both excuse her disinterest in courting and to alleviate the pressure to find a proper suitor, she throws herself into her role as the grief-stricken countess. This brings us back to her response when Malvolio announces that Olivia has a visitor. Were her grief thoroughly and truly genuine, she would not have provided multiple excuses for not meeting with the gentleman at the gate. It appears to the audience that she has been holding up her tormented façade long enough that it has begun to diffuse in the private company of her household.

That sorrowful appearance is further enabled by her donning of the traditional mourning veil. This garment serves as another layer of inauthenticity through which she is able to command the narrative. Notably, she does not wear it around the company of her household, but she does insist on putting it on to see visitors – more specifically, to see the suitors that come to court her.

The veil is a pretense through which Olivia can accomplish two objectives vital to her communications: it immediately forces her audience to recall her mourning status, and it assists

her in disguising her thoughts and emotions. When Olivia agrees to lift her veil for Cesario, then, we must analyze her reasons for doing so. The image that she has cultivated is a thoughtful but fragile one; why might she risk betraying her motives for this strange gentleman? The decision must be calculated.

Consider that Olivia has no interest in holding an audience with Cesario until Malvolio describes him to her. While enveloped in her role as a grieving countess, she has developed a plan to retain power when she must eventually marry. Recall the qualities which Sir Toby recounted to Sir Andrew; Olivia is seeking an inferior companion. Malvolio assures her that Cesario is "[o]f very ill manner" (Shakespeare 1.5.152), and he goes on to say that he is good-looking but so young that "[o]ne would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him" (1.5.160-161). From this, Olivia is able to conclude that Cesario is an unthreatening presence.

Not only is Cesario innocuous, but he could potentially be of use to Olivia: he is certainly young and perhaps naïve enough to be manipulated. He does not seem to have come from any noble line, and any relationship between the two would likely render him subservient. This colors Olivia's interruption of Cesario's practiced courtship recitation – "What is your parentage?" (Shakespeare 1.5.281) – in a different light. She is prodding Cesario as a potential solution to her rare suitor quest. Mihoko Suzuki notes that Sebastian, Viola's twin and Olivia's eventual husband, "satisfies [Olivia's] requirement that 'she'll not match above her degree, neither in estate, years, nor wit' (1.3.106-107)" (156). As Cesario and Sebastian are nearly one in the same – though perhaps Viola-as-Cesario does match Olivia's wit – we can similarly apply these qualities to Cesario's character, hence the lady's initial interest. Olivia's brief lifting of her veil represents an inclination to discard her inauthenticity once it has served its purpose in retaining her dominion.

This momentary lapse in her concealment causes Olivia to set her sights determinedly on Cesario. Her will then shifts: she intends to pursue the young man. In order to do so, she further uses inauthentic means in an attempt to attain him. Again, Olivia directly commands the narrative by sending Malvolio after Cesario with a ring that she claims he had left. She is able to send a signal to Cesario to indicate her interest while still appearing to Malvolio – and, by proxy, the rest of her household – that she remains staunchly unaffected by her suitors.

In summation, Olivia's inauthenticity is complex and understated. On the surface, she appears fickle. She happily marries Sebastian, unconcerned that he is identical to Cesario only in appearance, and she seems to have abandoned her grief. However, when her tenuous position of power is considered in conjunction with her specific requirements for a partner, Olivia emerges as a calculating figure. Her inauthentic behavior allows her to carefully select a suitor and then use shrewd means to court him. While Cesario, the true object of her 'affection', does not ultimately become her husband, his closest equivalent does instead. Much like Maria, love was never Olivia's true goal. Instead, we see her actual motivation– retaining her authority – fundamentally fulfilled.

The threads of inauthenticity become crossed when Viola and Olivia confront one another's personas. The following exchange takes place in Act III, Scene 1 in lines 145 through 148:

> OLIVIA. Stay. I prithee, tell me what thou think'st of me.
>
> VIOLA/CESARIO. That you do think you are not what you are.
>
> OLIVIA. If I think so, I think the same of you.
>
> VIOLA/CESARIO. Then you think right. I am not what I am. (Shakespeare)

In this moment, Shakespeare has constructed an opportunity for the two characters to recognize deception in each other because they also recognize it in themselves. Neither probes the other's secrets; each understands the complex motivations behind inauthenticity.

When the story arcs of the three women of *Twelfth Night* are viewed in tandem, an underlying commentary on the trials of womanhood emerges. It is evident that personal agency was a rare and powerful concept to be afforded to a woman of Shakespeare's time. Each of these women recognizes this reality, and they additionally understand the limited options available in order for them to obtain, secure, or maintain their will. In the search for circumstances that may allow them power and independence, each woman realizes that those situations will not arise alone. She must, in fact, create those circumstances. Be it through disguise, forgery, or falsity, inauthenticity affords each of the women of *Twelfth Night* precisely what she wills.

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