

WS 10: Gender Roles – Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*

1. Partner or group work: Rephrase the following quotes by Olivia. Read and reread the quotes very closely to be able to unlock the full meaning of Olivia and Viola-Cesario’s dialogue.

OLIVIA

“I bade you never speak again of him; but would you undertake another suit I had rather hear you solicit that, than music from the spheres.” (CSS, III, i, l. 92)

“Give me leave, beseech you. I did send, after my last enchantment you did here, A ring in chase of you. So did I abuse myself, my servant, and, I fear me, you. Under your hard construction must I sit, to force that on you in a shameful cunning Which you knew none of yours. What might you think?” (CSS, III, i, l. 96)

“Stay! I prithee tell me what thou think’st of me.” (CSS, III, i, l. 122)

“Cesario, by the roses of the spring, By maidhood, honour, truth, and everything, I love thee so that, maugre all thy pride, Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide.” (CSS, III, i, l. 134)

Vocabulary

to undertake ... suit: to take up another cause, try another way – **to solicit:** to plead for
enchantment: bewitchment (causing Olivia to love Viola-Cesario) – **in chase of you:** after you
I fear me: I am afraid – **hard construction:** harsh judgement – **shameful cunning:** a trick (that does not present Olivia well) – **maugre:** in spite of

(source for annotations: Shakespeare, William: *Twelfth Night* (Cambridge School Shakespeare, edited by Anthony Partington and Richard Spencer). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.)



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2) Read the text below and underline/highlight important information about the role of women. Examine your present knowledge of Olivia in the light of the information given by the text. List typical and atypical character traits of Olivia in her role of a noble woman. Make use of your rephrased quotes from task 1.

Women in Early Modern English society

Despite having a queen in Elizabethan England, it was a dominantly patriarchal society, limiting women’s rights and actions. Women couldn’t attend educational institutions, preventing them from entering professions like law or medicine. Many guilds, responsible for training artisans such as goldsmiths and carpenters, excluded women. Acting, considered disreputable, was also inaccessible to women. Typically, men were the primary earners while women were homemakers. Women couldn’t vote and while they could inherit property, they weren’t allowed to buy it. Beyond legal limits, societal norms also constrained women, emphasizing distinct roles for both genders. Elizabethan literature and sermons advised women to be submissive to male figures. Women wearing men’s attire were seen as challenging gender norms, whereas men in women’s clothing were seen as diminishing their masculinity. Contrarily, the theatre was an exception where gender roles were playfully challenged, but only by men, as they commonly portrayed female characters.

Gender Expression is how someone outwardly presents their gender to the external world.

Gender Identity is a very personal experience and relies on someone’s internal sense of who they are in terms of their gender.

3) Make use of the info boxes above and form three groups. Each group is expert on either A, B or C. Discuss the provided questions. Take notes to present your findings later:

A. Which expressions of ‘proper’ femininity and masculinity exist (appearance, clothing, how someone moves) in different spaces? Where can such images be found (film, advertising, textbooks, music videos etc.)? Where are there breaks and irritations to concepts of femininity and masculinity?

B. Which norms are conveyed in gender images (key question: how can men and women behave ‘correctly’)? To what extent do these norms limit people’s possibilities (perhaps also: how do these norms empower individuals)?

C. Where can one find processes of change in traditional gender images? What strategies exist to question such structures (for example in a playful/activist way, in theater, in queer interventions, etc.)?

Vocabulary

patriarchal: ruled or controlled by men – **artisan:** *syn.* craftsman – **disreputable** not trusted or respected, thought to have a bad character – **to inherit:** to receive money, a house, etc. from someone after they have died – **sermon:** a talk on a religious or moral subject, esp. one given by a religious leader during a religious ceremony – **cross-dressing:** the act of wearing clothes usually worn by a different gender – **break:** interruption

(annotations adapted from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>; information adapted from: <https://elizabethanenglandlife.com/women-children-in-elizabethan-society.html>, <https://www.talkspace.com/blog/gender-identity-vs-gender-expression/>)