

AA306 Shakespeare

Twelfth Night:

“I am not what I am”

Connotations

Twelfth night

Candlemas – first performance

Festive nature – abuse of hostile spirits

Carnival – “carnem levare”

Lent

Misrule

Connection with comedic principles

“That woman is a woman”

Play is awash with gender confusion

Exacerbated by theatrical practice of Shakespeare's time

Viola (played by a boy) becomes Cesario, inspires love of Olivia (played by a boy) and Orsino (played by a man)

Disguise

Women as boys was a popular device in WS and other dramatists – Shakespeare uses it elsewhere, e.g. Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Imogen in *Cymbeline*

Rich potential for plot complication- and made use of human resources of the company

Extra level of ambiguity

Adds to festive disequilibrium

Challenge to sexual stereotypes

Belsey

“..we are able to glimpse... an image of a mode of being, which is not a-sexual or bisexual, but which disrupts the system of differences on which sexual stereotyping depends.”

In Drakakis, J. (ed) (1985) *Alternative Shakespeares*, p.190

Viola's disguise

- a kind of castration?

“Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him” (1.2)

So, is the assumption of maleness a liberation or not?

Occupying an indeterminate role, in Belsey's terms?

Orsino's view

Chooses Viola as ambassador to Olivia because s/he looks feminine:

“For they shall yet belie thy happy years

That say thou art a man...

All is semblative a woman's part” (1.4)

What does this choice say about Orsino's “masculinity”?

Representatives of masculinity in the play

Continuum

Sir Toby - Captain - Antonio - Feste - Sebastian-
Malvolio - Aguecheek

Different representations of masculinity

Characteristics revealed in set-piece scenes

(e.g. Orsino's melancholy in 1.1; Sir Toby's "cakes and ale" in 2.3; Aguecheek in 3.4)

Versions of femininity

Viola in 2.2

“How easy is it for the proper false
In women’s waxen hearts to set their forms.
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we,
For such as we are made, if such we be.”

Olivia

Mocks her own female form in 1.5

Beauty used as a token – gives her picture to Viola

What value does femininity have vs masculinity in the play?

Orsino suggests Viola's virtue lies in her overcoming her female traits to serve him: "against the mettle of your sex"

5.1

So

How does the saturnalian context add to the gender confusion

What impact does the playing of female roles by boys have on our reception of the play?

Is this comedy darker than it first appears?