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Brother Bird

ENG 373 – Shakespeare

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The Power of Clothing in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*

In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, clothing is used to symbolize gender, class, and position; it is also used as a disguise for characters to transcend their gender, class, or position. Viola, the heroine, must dress as a man—more specifically, as the character *Cesario*—to gain entrance into Duke Orsino’s household, and her disguise brings much confusion surrounding gender orientation. Malvolio, Lady Olivia’s advisor, uses ornate, flouncy clothing to dress above his station because he believes it will entice Olivia, whom he is in love with. Feste, the fool, attires himself in the garb of the fictional clergyman, Sir Topas, to be more convincing in the role of curate.

When Viola lands on the shores of Illyria, she decides that the safest thing for her to do is to dress as a man; as a woman she has no power, no chance at employment, and her virtue is at stake in a foreign land. However, she is with the Duke only three days before she lets the audience know that she is in love with him. Orsino gives Cesario the task of proclaiming his love suit to the fair Olivia. Viola, in the garb of Cesario, replies “I’ll do my best / To woo your lady: / yet, a barful strife! / Whoe’er I woo, myself would be his wife” (1.4). Viola then has the unfortunate luck of touching Olivia’s heart in an inadvertently romantic way. This strange love triangle of Olivia loving Cesario/Viola, Viola/Cesario loving Orsino, and Orsino loving Olivia.

Malvolio does the unthinkable—he attempts to rise above his place among Olivia’s household. He is madly in love with her, even though his personality is, generally, very puritanical, and when given a ‘chance’ to expose his love, he takes it—without considering the consequences. When the fateful letter ‘from Olivia’ is read, he discovers that she supposedly loves certain aspects of his appearance, and exclaims, “She did commend my yellow stockings of / late, she did praise my leg being cross-gartered; / and in this she manifests herself to my love” (2.5).

Feste dresses up as a clergyman at the urging of Maria, Olivia’s maid, when she says “[…] put on this gown and this beard; / make him believe thou art Sir Topas the curate” (4.2); he does so to fool Malvolio into thinking that he is being condemned for acting wildly and dressing inappropriately. Feste belongs to the poor, working class. He bounces around from Olivia’s house to Orsino’s to tell jokes and get work. By dressing as a curate, he acts like a curate, going so far as to change his voice to sound more impressive and unyielding to Malvolio.

Shakespeare understood the power of clothing; it can change preconceived opinions and perceptions. When a man puts on a power suit, he feels like he can rule the workplace. As a woman, I can understand the power a sexy pair of heels have (there are days when nothing goes right and sometimes looking pretty can trick you into feeling good about yourself); slip them on and you feel like you can conquer the world. Additionally, having just passed Halloween, it was interesting to see how differently my peers acted in their different costumes, many of which were costumes of characters or people who have nothing in common with my peer.