



DISGUISE, IDENTITY, AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION: A GENDER PERFORMATIVITY ANALYSIS OF VIOLA IN TWELFTH NIGHT

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Abstract

This study critically examines the interconnected themes of disguise, identity, and gender construction in William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night through the theoretical lens of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Focusing on the character of Viola, who adopts the male disguise of Cesario to survive within the patriarchal society of Illyria, the paper argues that Shakespeare destabilizes conventional understandings of gender as fixed, natural, and biologically determined. Instead, the play presents gender as a performative and socially regulated construct shaped through repeated acts, behaviors, language, and cultural expectations.

Employing a qualitative textual analysis and hermeneutic interpretive approach, the study investigates how Viola's cross-dressing functions not merely as a dramatic or comedic device, but as a powerful critique of rigid gender binaries and patriarchal structures. Through her successful performance as Cesario, Viola gains social mobility, authority, and protection otherwise inaccessible to women, thereby exposing the performative foundations of masculine identity and social power. At the same time, her disguise generates emotional conflict, relational ambiguity, and psychological tension, revealing the instability of identity and the fragile boundaries between appearance and reality. Drawing upon the theoretical contributions of Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Pierre Bourdieu, and other feminist and cultural theorists, the study demonstrates that Twelfth Night anticipates modern debates surrounding gender fluidity, performative identity, and the socially constructed nature of selfhood. Shakespeare's use of disguise, mistaken identity, and theatrical ambiguity challenges dominant assumptions regarding masculinity and femininity while foregrounding the complexity and multiplicity of human identity. Ultimately, this research contends that Twelfth Night transcends the conventions of romantic comedy by functioning as a sophisticated cultural critique of normative gender ideology. The play reveals identity not as an essential or stable truth, but as a dynamic and negotiable performance continuously shaped by social



discourse, power relations, and cultural expectations. In doing so, Shakespeare presents a remarkably modern vision of identity that continues to resonate within contemporary discussions of gender, subjectivity, and performativity.

Keywords: *Disguise, Identity, Gender Construction, Gender Performativity, Twelfth Night, Judith Butler theory, Textual Analysis*

1. Introduction

The topic of gender has been a deal in literary studies. People are really interested in how identities formed and understood in cultural texts. Gender is not about being male or female. It is something that is created by society and can change. This idea has been talked about a lot by Judith Butler. She says that gender is not something that you just are it is something that you do every day through your actions and the roles you play. The Gender topic is very important because it helps us understand characters in literature who do not fit into gender roles.

Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare is an example of this. The main character, Viola dresses up as a man named Cesario. This allows her to move around in a society that is dominated by men. Violas disguise creates a lot of confusion about her identity. Who she really is. The play is a comedy. It also raises some big questions about gender and whether it is fixed or not. The Gender topic is explored in ways in this play. Most studies of Twelfth Night focus on the comedy and romance in the play. They do not really look at how Violas character challenges ideas about gender. They see her disguise as a plot device, not as a way to explore how gender is created and performed. The Gender topic is very important in this play. This is a gap in the research that needs to be filled. We need to look at Violas character in detail and see how it relates to Judith Butlers ideas about gender.

The main goal of this study is to look at Violas character and how she performs gender. We want to see how her disguise helps her survive in a male-dominated society. We also want to see how it challenges ideas about gender. The Gender topic is central to this study. Researchers used Judith Butler's theory to obtain the answers of following research questions.

1. How does Viola act like a man when she is dressed up as Cesario?
2. How does her disguise challenge traditional ideas about female roles?
3. How does Butler's theory help us understand identity in Twelfth Night?

The current study is divided into different sections. The first section looks at what other people have said about gender, disguise and identity in Shakespeare's plays. The next section explains Butler's idea of gender performance. Why it is important, for literary analysis. The Gender topic is explored in detail. Then we will talk about how we did our research. After that we will do an analysis of Violas character. Finally we will summarize what we found out and what it means for our understanding of gender. The Gender topic has been explored in all its complexity.

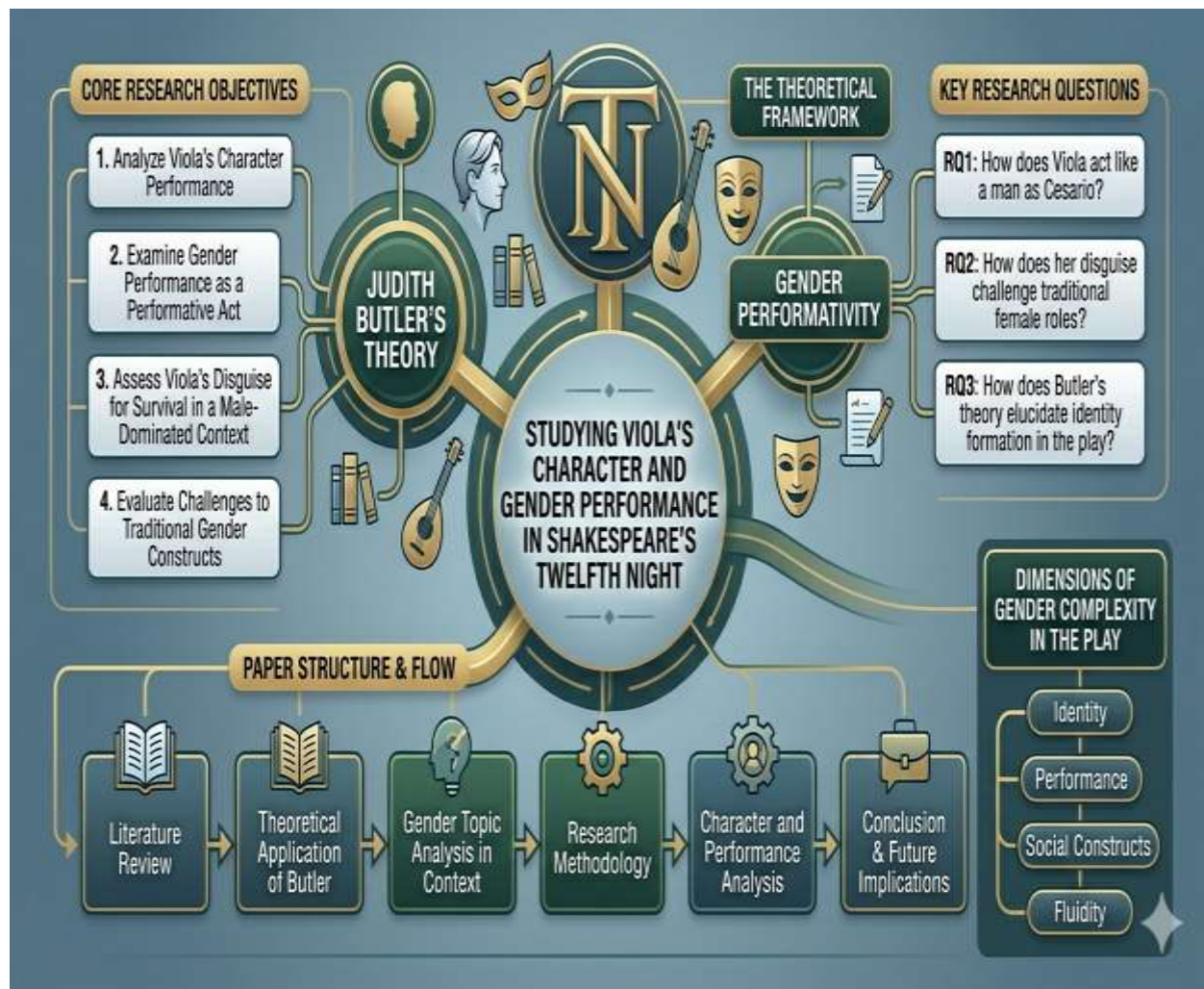


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

2. Review of the Related Literature

The concepts of disguise, identity, and gender construction have been widely discussed in feminist theory, media studies, and cultural studies. Scholars argue that gender is not biologically fixed but socially and culturally produced through repeated performances, representations, and symbolic practices. According to Simone de Beauvoir (1949), “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” was highlighting that gender is socially constructed rather than naturally determined. Expanding this idea, Judith Butler (1988) explains gender identity as a “performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo.” Butler further argues that identity is formed through the “stylized repetition of acts,” meaning that gender is continuously performed through behavior, appearance, and social expectations (Butler, 1990). These theories establish that identity is not stable but constantly reconstructed through cultural practices.

The role of clothing and disguise in identity formation is also significant in gender studies. Virginia Woolf suggests that clothing does not merely reflect identity but actively constitutes it, allowing individuals to recreate themselves through fashion and appearance (Banisalamah, 2017).



Similarly, Denise Riley (2000) argues that self-descriptions and identities function like “costumes” that individuals deliberately wear and perform. In the modern digital era, social media platforms further encourage identity performance and experimentation. Scarcelli, Krijnen, and Nixon (2021) describe identity as a dialogic process in which media consumption and self-representation influence each other. Likewise, Comunello, Parisi, and Ieracitano (2021) explain that users negotiate “gender scripts” through online interactions and social networking platforms. Owens and Steen (2001) also connect virtual identity to “pretend play,” where individuals create virtual personas associated with alternative bodies and identities.

Media discourse and advertising play an important role in constructing social understandings of masculinity and femininity. Cook (2001) defines advertising as a discourse that creates meaning through language, visuals, and context, while Fairclough (1992) views discourse as a social practice that shapes social realities and identities. Foucauldian approaches further suggest that discourse functions as a system of power that constructs individuals and controls social behavior (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). According to Lorber (1994), gender refers to culturally constructed differences associated with femininity and masculinity rather than biological sex. Nixon (1997) similarly defines gender identities as “invented categories” shaped through cultural meanings and representations. Media exposure strongly influences self-identity and public perceptions of gender roles. Worell (2002) argues that media representations shape ideas about appropriate behavior for men and women, while Signorielli (1989) demonstrates that repeated exposure to stereotypes in advertisements reinforces gendered attitudes within society. Jean Kilbourne (1999) further criticizes media portrayals of women as objects of beauty, arguing that such representations pressure women to conform to unrealistic ideals.

The symbolic construction of female identity is closely connected to social labeling and communication practices. Garfinkel’s labeling theory explains how identity is shaped through social expectations and institutional authority. Pearson, West, and Turner (1995) define gender as a set of learned behaviors symbolically constructed through culture, while Wood (2003) argues that gender is neither innate nor stable but acquired through social interaction and communication. In addition, Ott and Walter (2000) discuss the concept of intertextuality, explaining that texts often reproduce or challenge social norms through parody and allusion. Roland Barthes (1988) further emphasizes the active role of readers in constructing meaning, arguing that the interpretation of a text depends on its audience rather than its author.

The metaphor of the “mask” is especially important in discussions of femininity and gender hierarchy. Studies on gender hierarchy describe femininity as a socially imposed mask that women adopt to survive within patriarchal societies. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) explains that social systems naturalize gender divisions through repeated practices, gestures, and habits embedded in everyday life. This process reproduces male dominance and reinforces unequal gender relations. Julia Kristeva (1984) defines femininity as a form of marginality existing outside dominant systems of ideology and language. Her concept of “abjection” describes how certain identities are rejected and treated as “Other” within society. Similarly, Luce Irigaray (1973) critiques phallogocentric discourse, arguing that women are often spoken for rather than allowed independent expression. These theories demonstrate that feminine identity is shaped through systems of power, discourse, and cultural expectations.



Overall, the literature reveals that gender identity is socially constructed, performative, and continuously negotiated through discourse, media representation, clothing, and symbolic practices. Disguise in the form of masks, costumes, fashion, and virtual identities functions as a powerful mechanism through which individuals perform and reconstruct the self. Theoretical contributions from Butler, Bourdieu, Kristeva, Irigaray, and other scholars collectively demonstrate that gender is not a fixed biological reality but a dynamic cultural performance shaped by social institutions, ideology, and representation.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

In the play *Twelfth Night* the main idea is about how people create and show their gender through actions, behaviors and what society expects. The play talks about how characters like Viola, who dresses up as Cesario show that gender is not something you are born with but something you do based on what society says. This idea starts with the theme of disguise, where characters hide who they are and cause confusion. Viola dresses up as a man. This causes misunderstandings among the other characters. It also challenges what people think about men and women. This connects to the theme of identity which is about finding out who you are and what you think is real. As Viola lives as Cesario she learns more about herself. The play also shows how society creates ideas about men and women and how these ideas can be challenged. Shakespeare shows that men and women are expected to behave in ways but these expectations can be changed. These ideas lead to the concept of gender performativity. The characters do things that make people think they are a gender. The characters play roles that are shaped by their family, society and other influences. These actions create the idea that people have identities. Violas cross-dressing show how people can break and question these ideas. The framework also talks about expectations. Society says what men and women should do and be. The play shows how these expectations affect relationships and who people think they are. In the end the play solves the confusion. Let's true love win. It shows that rigid ideas, about gender are limiting and that identity is more flexible than people think. The play exposes how society assumes identity to be and shows it to be more performative. The resolution restores identity. Allows love to triumph.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis and hermeneutic interpretation to investigate the construction and performance of gender identity in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Qualitative literary inquiry is particularly suitable for examining the nuanced processes through which identity, language, and social roles are represented and negotiated within literary texts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study employs an interpretive framework to explore how gender is not represented as biologically fixed, but rather as socially and culturally performed through repetitive acts, behaviors, and discursive practices.

3.1 Research Design

The research is primarily interpretive and analytical in nature, utilizing close reading as the principal method of textual examination. Close reading enables a detailed analysis of linguistic patterns, dramatic dialogues, symbolic representations, and character interactions within the play. This method is especially effective in Shakespearean studies because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of the subtle performative dimensions embedded in dramatic discourse (Greenblatt,



2018). Through hermeneutic interpretation, the study further examines how meaning is produced through contextual, cultural, and performative layers of the text. The theoretical foundation of the study is based on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, particularly articulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Butler argues that gender is not an innate or essential identity but a repeated social performance constituted through acts, gestures, speech, and bodily expressions (Butler, 1990). This theoretical perspective provides a critical lens for analyzing Viola's transformation into Cesario and the instability of binary gender categories represented in the play.

3.2 Data Selection and Sources

The primary source of data for this research is Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, with particular emphasis on scenes involving Viola's disguise, interactions with Orsino and Olivia, and moments that foreground ambiguity in gender identity and desire. Dialogues, monologues, stage actions, and performative exchanges are examined as textual evidence supporting the study's central argument. Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and critical essays related to gender studies, Shakespearean criticism, queer theory, and performativity studies. To maintain contemporary scholarly relevance, the study prioritizes academic publications from the last ten years, while also incorporating seminal theoretical works essential to the conceptual framework. These sources provide critical support for understanding evolving interpretations of gender fluidity, theatricality, and performative identity in Renaissance literature.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeds through a theory-driven textual approach informed by Butlerian gender theory. The study closely examines how Viola's adoption of the male identity "Cesario" destabilizes traditional assumptions regarding masculinity and femininity. Rather than treating disguise merely as a comedic or dramatic convention, the research interprets it as a performative mechanism through which gender identity is constructed, enacted, and negotiated. Specific attention is devoted to repeated performative acts such as speech patterns, gestures, clothing, social interactions, and role-playing strategies that enable Viola to inhabit masculine identity within Illyrian society. The analysis also investigates how other characters respond to Cesario's performed identity, revealing the socially constructed nature of gender recognition and desire. Through this interpretive process, the study demonstrates how Shakespeare anticipates contemporary discussions of gender fluidity and performative identity.






FRAMEWORK: KEY ELEMENTS IN <i>TWELFTH NIGHT</i>				
ELEMENT	CHARACTER(S)	EXPLANATION / EVIDENCE	EXAMPLE / KEY MOMENT	SIGNIFICANCE
 DISGUISE	• Viola (Cesario)	• Viola disguises herself as a man after the shipwreck. Her disguise creates confusion in love and drives the comic action of the play.	• Viola enters Orsino's service as Cesario.	• Disguise creates misunderstandings, comic situations and tests true feelings.
	• Malvolio	• Malvolio symbolically "disguises" himself by behaving according to the fake letter's instructions to impress Olivia.	• Malvolio wears yellow cross-gartered stockings and smiles affectedly to please Olivia.	• Leads to the exposure and humiliation of Malvolio.
 IDENTITY	• Viola & Sebastian • Olivia • Malvolio	• Viola and Sebastian's identical appearance causes mistaken identity. • Olivia mistakes Viola for Cesario and falls in love with the false identity. • Malvolio's pride and ambition show his false understanding of himself and his social position.	• Confusion when Sebastian arrives in Illyria. • Olivia's love declarations to Cesario (Viola). • Malvolio believes Olivia loves him.	• Identity in the play is unstable and deceptive. • Characters must awaken to the truth about themselves and others.
 GENDER CONSTRUCTION	• Viola • Olivia	• Viola's male disguise challenges traditional gender roles; she performs masculine behavior successfully. • Olivia's attraction to Cesario questions fixed ideas about gender and attraction.	• Viola acts as a page in Orsino's court. • Olivia prefers Cesario (Viola) over Orsino.	• The play blurs boundaries of masculinity and femininity. • Challenges societal assumptions about gender and desire.
 BEHAVIOR ROLE	• Viola • Malvolio • Sir Toby & Maria • Olivia	• Viola behaves as a loyal servant to Orsino while hiding her true feelings. • Malvolio acts arrogantly and ambitiously, believing he can rise socially. • Sir Toby and Maria play manipulative comic roles by tricking Malvolio. • Olivia changes from mourning sister to passionate lover.	• Viola carries Orsino's messages to Olivia. • Malvolio's ambition for marriage with Olivia. • The forged letter trick. • Olivia's sudden love for Cesario.	• Roles and behaviors are fluid and often performed. • Comic roles reveal human weaknesses and lead to self-recognition.
 SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS	• Viola • Olivia • Malvolio • Society (overall)	• Viola breaks social expectations by dressing and acting as a man. • Olivia is expected to mourn her brother for years, but she quickly falls in love. • Society punishes Malvolio for trying to rise above his class and role. • The play shows social rules about class, gender, and love are unstable.	• Viola lives freely in Illyria as Cesario. • Olivia abandons seven years of mourning. • Malvolio is mocked and imprisoned. • Final marriages restore social order humorously.	• The play questions rigid social norms. • Through comedy, it reveals how easily social rules can be manipulated or overturned.
<p>Overall: <i>Twelfth Night</i> uses disguise, mistaken identity, and role-play to explore love, self-knowledge, and the flexibility of social norms.</p>				

Figure 1. Elements in *Twelfth Night*

3.4 Justification of Methodology

The chosen methodology is appropriate because qualitative textual analysis allows for a comprehensive exploration of symbolic meanings, ideological structures, and identity formations within literary discourse. A hermeneutic approach enables the researcher to move beyond surface-level narrative interpretation and critically engage with the philosophical implications of gender representation in the play. Moreover, Butler's theory offers a sophisticated conceptual framework for examining how identity is produced through repetition and social performance rather than



biological determinism. This methodological combination of close reading, hermeneutics, and performativity theory provides a rigorous analytical model for understanding the complex intersections of gender, identity, disguise, and theatricality in *Twelfth Night*. It also contributes to contemporary Shakespearean scholarship by situating the play within ongoing critical debates surrounding queer theory, gender instability, and performative subjectivity.

4. Data Analysis

The story of Viola in *Twelfth Night* has stressed the importance of disguise and gender. Shipwrecked Viola disguises herself as a man named Cesario to survive the patriarchal society of Illyria. Shakespeare is able to show that gender is socially constructed, rather than biologically determined: for example, through the use of clothing, speech, and action. Employing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Viola's ability to successfully perform the masculine identity of Cesario, attaining safety, power and social acceptance in the process, also confuses the boundaries of love and identity. This indicates that Shakespeare is challenging and problematizing customary ideas of gender, as well as recognizing the fluidity of identity, rather than presenting immutable gender roles.

Table 1. Element 1: Gender Performativity

Act	Scene	Characters	Lines	Context
2	2	Viola	"I am the man... Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness."	Viola realizes Olivia has fallen in love with Cesario rather than Orsino.
2	4	Viola	"We men may say more, swear more..."	Viola, still disguised as Cesario, speaks to Orsino about men's love and faithfulness.
2	4	Viola	"I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too..."	Viola hints at her true identity while describing herself to Orsino.
3	1	Viola	"I am not what I am."	Viola says this to Olivia when Olivia expresses affection for Cesario.

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare uses Viola's disguise as Cesario to explore themes of gender identity, deception, love, and the difference between appearance and reality. In Act I, Scene ii, when Viola says, "Conceal me what I am," she disguises herself as a man for safety after the shipwreck. This choice starts a series of misunderstandings that shape the play. Her disguise also lets Shakespeare question the clear boundaries between male and female identity. Similarly, Orsino's description of Cesario in Act I, Scene iv—"Diana's lip is not more smooth and rubious"—highlights Cesario's feminine beauty and creates dramatic irony since the audience knows Cesario is actually Viola. Shakespeare intentionally presents Cesario as existing between genders.



Malvolio's remark that Cesario is "not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy" reinforces this idea. This ambiguous appearance confuses other characters and shows how outward appearance can shape identity more than reality.

Viola's statements throughout the play reveal her inner conflict and emotional pain caused by disguise. In Act I, Scene v, she confesses, "I am not that I play," acknowledging the gap between her true self and the role she plays. Her disguise becomes even more complicated when Olivia falls in love with Cesario. In Act II, Scene ii, Viola realizes the consequences of deception and calls disguise "a wickedness." Here, Shakespeare suggests that while disguise may offer safety or opportunities, it can also cause emotional distress and confusion. Viola's hidden identity traps her in a complicated love triangle: she loves Orsino, Orsino loves Olivia, and Olivia loves Cesario. This confusion shows how love can become unstable when appearances overshadow truth. The quotations also reflect Shakespeare's challenge to traditional views on gender and love.

In Act II, Scene IV, Viola comments that men often "say more" and "swear more" in love than they really feel. Disguised as a man, she can critique male behavior while expressing a woman's emotional honesty. Her statement, "I am all the daughters of my father's house, and all the brothers too," symbolically merges masculine and feminine identities, implying that identity isn't entirely fixed. Finally, Viola's line, "I am not what I am," captures the play's central theme: appearances can be misleading. Throughout the drama, Shakespeare illustrates that human identity is fluid, complex, and often hidden beneath social roles and performances.

Table 2. Element 2: Disguise

Act	Scene	Character	Lines	Context
1	2	Viola	"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."	After being shipwrecked in Illyria, Viola believes her brother Sebastian is dead. Since she is alone and vulnerable in a foreign land, she decides to disguise herself as a young man named Cesario in order to serve Duke Orsino safely.
1	5	Viola	"I can say little more than I have studied, and that question's out of my part... I am not that I play."	Viola, disguised as Cesario, visits Olivia on behalf of Orsino to deliver his message of love. During their conversation, Olivia becomes attracted to Cesario, unaware that Cesario is actually Viola.
2	5	Malvolio	"Remember who commended thy yellow stockings, and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered... cast thy humble slough and appear fresh."	Malvolio finds the fake letter written by Maria to trick him into believing Olivia loves him. Following the instructions in the letter, he behaves strangely and dresses ridiculously to impress Olivia.



2	2	Viola	“Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness, / Wherein the pregnant enemy does much. / How easy is it for the proper-false / In women’s waxen hearts to set their forms!”	After Malvolio delivers Olivia’s ring to Viola, Viola realizes that Olivia has fallen in love with Cesario. Viola understands that her disguise has unintentionally created a painful love triangle between herself, Olivia, and Orsino
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Through these lines in Twelfth Night, William Shakespeare builds on the main issues of disguise, appearance and deceit. When Viola "conceals" her true self as a eunuch in Act I this demonstrates how disguise will be her form of protection, which is her only survival from the strange world of Illyria. However, her false image soon leads to emotional distress, especially after Olivia's love for Cesario (Viola's male persona) rather than for Viola herself. Her confusion is expressed in Act I, Scene v when Viola announces "I am not that I play," thus illustrating how someone's true identity can easily be hidden behind the outward show of performance. By Act II, Scene ii Viola identifies the negative implications of disguise in which she calls it "a wickedness," demonstrating that people's emotions can easily be manipulated as a result of false identity and misunderstanding. The play not only focuses on the deceiver deceiving others but also on their own deceit; Malvolio's delusion about the staged letter to Olivia highlights his conceit and avarice and his comical presentation in yellow stockings and cross-garters creates him to be a victim of visual deception. Furthermore, Viola's well known quote "I am not what I am" perfectly summarizes the underlying notion of appearance versus reality present throughout the play. Through these quotations, it can be seen that disguises may allow for freedom and opportunity; however, they can lead to misunderstanding, sorrow and relationships based on false identity.

Table 3. Element 3: Identity

Act	Scene	Character	Lines	Context
1	5	Viola	“I can say little more than I have studied... I am not that I play.”	Viola, disguised as Cesario, speaks to Olivia while delivering Orsino’s message of love. Olivia becomes attracted to Cesario, not realizing he is actually Viola in disguise.
2	1	Sebastian	"You must know of me then, Antonio, my name is Sebastian, which I called Roderigo.”	Sebastian reveals his true identity to Antonio after previously hiding his name for safety following the shipwreck.
5	1	Duke Orsino	— “One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons.”	Orsino sees Viola and Sebastian together for the first time and is astonished by their identical appearance.



2	5	Malvolio	"Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon 'em."	Malvolio reads the fake letter written by Maria to trick him into believing Olivia loves him and wants him to behave ambitiously.

Shakespeare employs disguise, mistaken identity, and the unknown and unseen throughout Twelfth Night in order to address human identity and relationships. Viola's line "I am not what I am" and the admission that she is "all the daughters... And all the brothers too" articulate her internal turmoil as she is living within two lives - one of who she really is and one of being the young boy, Cesario. Shakespeare effectively displays that appearances can deceive and can affect the understanding of gender when analyzing Viola and her new persona. Sebastian's disguise after being separated from his family adds another element to the chaotic plot of Twelfth Night. The confusion is compounded when Olivia falls for the new boy Cesario and Orsino has no awareness of Viola's true feelings. The false letter and subsequent manipulation of Malvolio is an introduction to another level of deception as he deludes himself with the understanding that greatness is his destiny - his "greatness" speech humorously exemplifies both the joke and the human frailties behind the joke. Orsino is stunned with disbelief when faced with the realization that he had been wrong all along and seeing both Viola and Sebastian on stage together: "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons". Sebastian's joyous surprise at realizing that his sister is still alive serves as the perfect catalyst to return love and the truth.

Table 4. Element 4: Gender Construction

Act	Scene	Character	Lines	Context
1	2	Viola	"Conceal me what I am, and be my aid... I'll serve this duke: Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him"	Viola decides to disguise herself as a male page (Cesario) after being shipwrecked. This marks the beginning of the play's central theme of identity and disguise, as she hides her true identity to survive and gain protection under Duke Orsino.
1	4	Duke Orsino	"For they shall yet belie thy happy years... And all is semblative a woman's part"	Orsino praises Cesario (Viola in disguise), mistaking her for an effeminate young man. This highlights the blurred gender boundaries and dramatic irony, as Orsino unknowingly admires Viola's disguised femininity.



1	5	Malvolio	“Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy...”	Malvolio comments on Cesario’s ambiguous appearance and behavior. This reinforces the theme of androgyny and identity confusion, showing how Viola’s disguise unsettles clear gender categories.
1	5	Viola	“I can say little more than I have studied... I am not that I play”	Viola struggles while speaking to Olivia, revealing the tension between her true identity and performed role. It reflects the idea that appearance and reality are different, and she is emotionally trapped by her disguise.

The play's fascination with identity, disguise and survival is established with Viola's plea in Act I, Scene iv: "Conceal me what I am...". By disguising herself as a male page, Viola isn't just hiding her identity: she is changing it in order to survive in a new world. Disguise is not merely a practical consideration but also the source of emotional conflict which propels the plot. Orsino's admiration of Cesario in Act I, Sceneiv: "Of what is that you are so young and not more than a page?", and his subsequent comment that he is as tender as a young maid: "...so over-clerk'd with mode and fashion...", create dramatic irony since he is actually commenting on Viola herself. The unstable sense of gender is enhanced by Malvolio's identification of Cesario as: "...between boy and man..." and the confusion created by the uncertainty and shifting of identity and social categories.

From Viola's own expressions, we begin to see her growing awareness of the emotional ramifications of her disguise. Viola's pronouncement of "I am not that I play" reveals her insight that it is no longer about performance of the self and that her identity is one that has been enacted. This sense of performed identity is thrown into question when Olivia falls in love with Cesario, and Viola realizes that her disguise is not harmless, but "*a wickedness*" because of the pain it causes to others, as well as herself. She criticizes 'men' of loving less than women when they say more, swear more: "We men may say more, swear more..." The crisis reaches its peak when Viola cries: "I am all the daughters of my father's house and all the brothers too." Her identity as a daughter of her father and as her brothers simultaneously demonstrates the loss of her family while confirming her complex, all-embracing female identity and her encompassing male identity, showing that Viola "am not what I am". The fluidity and complexity of Viola's identity is expressed throughout the play and its instability raises questions about what constitutes human identity in terms of appearance versus truth.

5. Findings and Discussions

Kilbourne says that the media puts a lot of pressure on women to look a way, which is not realistic. Pierre Bourdieu thinks that the way society is set up makes us think that there are rules about what men and women should do. Julia Kristeva believes that being a woman is often seen as being outside of what's normal in society. Simone de Beauvoir said that a woman is not born she becomes one. This means that what it is to be a woman is decided by society not by who you're when you are born. Judith Butler thinks that the way we act and look is what makes us who we are, in terms of gender. So gender is not something that is fixed it is something that we create by the way we



behave and the way we present ourselves. Virginia Woolf and Denise Riley believe that what we wear and how we describe ourselves are like costumes that help create our identity. Some scholars, like Worell and Signorielli found out that the way men and women are shown in the media can make people think that certain behaviors are for men or just for women. Viola had to dress up like a man to be safe in the society she lived in. By dressing up like a man Viola showed that what it is to be a man or a woman is not about biology but about how you act and look. Shakespeare shows that identity is not fixed it can change. For example Malvolio describes Cesario as being between a boy and a man, which means he does not fit into the categories. While dressing up like a man helped Viola it also made her feel bad because she had to hide who she really was. When Viola dressed up like a man she was able to say things that men usually do not say. She was able to be honest about her feelings, in a way that women usually are not allowed to be. This means that she was able to combine the male and female identities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Twelfth Night* presents a profound exploration of the fluidity, instability, and performative nature of identity. Shakespeare moves beyond the conventions of romantic comedy to interrogate the rigid social constructions surrounding gender and selfhood. The play suggests that identity is neither fixed nor biologically determined; rather, it is shaped through performance, social expectations, and cultural interaction. Through Viola's transformation into Cesario, Shakespeare demonstrates how gender can be enacted, manipulated, and perceived differently depending on social context. Viola's successful adoption of a masculine identity reveals that gender operates less as an inherent truth and more as a socially recognized performance. The recurring motif expressed through the line "I am not what I am" encapsulates the central tension of the play: the distinction between outward appearance and inner reality. Shakespeare uses disguise not merely as a theatrical device for humor and confusion, but as a philosophical tool to expose the instability of identity itself. Characters continuously misinterpret one another based on appearance, attire, and assumed gender roles, thereby revealing the limitations of binary thinking and societal categorization. The play argues that human identity is inherently layered, adaptable, and resistant to simplistic definitions.

Furthermore, *Twelfth Night* challenges traditional patriarchal assumptions that define masculinity and femininity within rigid boundaries. Viola's ability to navigate both male and female roles destabilizes conventional notions of power, desire, and behavior. Her performance as Cesario exposes how social authority and acceptance are often tied not to biological sex, but to culturally learned acts and performances. In this sense, Shakespeare anticipates modern theories of gender performativity, particularly Judith Butler's argument that gender is constituted through repeated social acts rather than natural essence. At the same time, the play acknowledges the social pressures that compel individuals to conceal or reconstruct their identities in order to survive and belong. Disguise becomes both a strategy of protection and a means of self-discovery. Although the dramatic confusion is ultimately resolved, Shakespeare does not entirely restore stable identity categories. Instead, the resolution subtly preserves the ambiguity and fluidity that characterize the play throughout. Love triumphs not because rigid norms are reaffirmed, but because the characters gradually move beyond superficial assumptions and recognize deeper emotional truths.



Ultimately, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* remains remarkably relevant because it challenges audiences to reconsider fixed definitions of gender, identity, and social reality. The play portrays identity as dynamic, culturally mediated, and continuously negotiated rather than permanent or absolute. By exposing the performative dimensions of human behavior, Shakespeare invites readers to question societal norms and to recognize the complexity that exists beneath external appearances. This enduring interrogation of identity is what makes *Twelfth Night* not only a compelling Shakespearean comedy but also a timeless commentary on the evolving nature of human selfhood.





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