



Gender Crossing in the Comedies

In *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, a source of humor is from the reversal of gender roles between men and women. Portia and Olivia successfully assume masculine traits while Bassanio and Orsino take on feminine characteristics.

Women as Men

- While disguised as a male lawyer, Portia resolves the pound of flesh bond better than by the attempts of her male counterparts.

“Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh, / But in cutting it, if thou dost shed / One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods / Are by the laws of Venice confiscate” (4.1.321-324).

Portia is able to save Antonio’s life and dispense justice to Shylock by clever manipulation of the law. In her representation of a traditionally male profession, Portia triumphs in solving the problem even when Bassanio’s attempts failed.

- Olivia assumes a male role when she pursues Cesario and later when she asks Sebastian to marry her.

“I love thee so. . . Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide. . . For that I woo, thou therefore has no cause; . . . Love sought is good, but given unsought is better” (3.1.159-164)

“Now go with me and with this holy man/ Into the chantry by. . . Plight me the full assurances of your faith” (4.3.24-27)

In this plot, it is the maiden who woos the man. She falls in love with Viola’s male identity, Cesario, and pursues him as a love interest. Later, when she meets Sebastian, she

asks him to marry her, thinking he is Cesario. Sebastian accepts and therefore Olivia succeeds in marriage where as Orsino had failed.

Men as Women

- Bassanio has feminine characteristics, because when he is in Venice his focus is on love and wooing.

“In Belmont is a lady richly left / And she is fair, fairer than that word, / Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes / I did receive fair messages / Her name is Portia” (1.1.168-172)

Bassanio is full of poetry and fantasy about a woman he barely knows, yet he is convinced he loves her dearly and is willing to give himself over to that love. Even when he is in Venice, the center of business and the masculine, he is the only male character whose thoughts are on love, not business.

- Orsino has a temperament that would traditionally be stereotyped as female. He is emotional, moody and love sick.

“If music be the food of love, play on. / Give me the excess of it, that, surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken and so die” (1.1.1-3)

Orsino is seen unrealistically pining over Olivia, who he loves without reason. He spends his days listening to melancholy music and rhapsodizing over his unrequited love. Such frivolous and unrealistic ‘crushes’ are usually perceived as girlish and feminine.