Queer Readings of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

A Teaching Resource for Heritage One

[Several Heritage instructors have indicated that they would be interested in addressing some of the issues of sexual orientation suggested by *Twelfth Night*, but are unsure of how to proceed. In order to assist you, we present the attached materials.]
Queer Readings of *Twelfth Night*

**Table of Contents**

1. **Reading Guide to Gay Issues in *Twelfth Night*** — ideas on which scene to focus on and how to read them, along with video cues.

2. **Gender-Bending of Yore** — A review of the Hytner production of *Twelfth Night* from the gay/lesbian news magazine, *The Advocate*. This production is available on video.

3. **Selected Bibliography: Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*** — includes several sources on reserve in the Carthage Library.

4. **Writing Activity #1** — Sebastian and Antonio: Interpreting their Relationship.

5. **Writing Activity #2** — Gender Transgression and Normalcy in *Twelfth Night*.

6. **Writing Activity #3** — Gender Difference in *Twelfth Night*. 
To understand the issues surrounding sexuality in *Twelfth Night*, one has to consider not only Shakespeare's words, but what they imply to modern readers. It is not as important that one character believes another is a he or a she. The audience is privy to all of the deceit that is occurring onstage, and this is an important concept to consider when discussing gender roles and sexuality in *Twelfth Night*. To the audience, the lines between "just friends" and "lovers" seem to be repeatedly crossed. What are those boundaries and how have we developed ideas of where they lie? Is this important to our individual ideas of identity?

As we have indicated here, the gay content of the play is largely a result of interpretation. Literary theorist have recognized for years that readers/viewers play an important role in the creation of the meaning of the text and that authorial intent is not necessarily a central issue when reading a text. While some students (and faculty) may be reluctant to raise these issues because, "Shakespeare didn't really mean for it to be understood this way" (a claim that is hard to substantiate), we can point out that if questions of sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation are important in our time (as they certainly are) and if the play raises questions about these issues in the minds of some readers, then they are fair issues to raise and discuss.

The following scenes and comments should serve as a guide for considering some of the gay issues the play raises to some readers. They focus mainly on the apparently "gay" relationships in the text between Orsino and Cessario and between Antonio and Sebastian. Thought some scholars point out the elements of a lesbian relationship between Olivia and Viola, this case is more difficult to make.

The video of the Hytner production of the play (starring Helen Hunt as Viola/Cessario) is particularly helpful in considering how the play can be read as text about issues of homosexuality. The cues given in parentheses here refer to the Hytner video.
**Act II, Scene 1** (00:40:20)
Scene: Sebastian and Antonio at the shore of Illyria

In utilizing this scene it is important to think about the interpretation of the text of *Twelfth Night*. Different editions of the text emphasize different elements of this scene, suggesting an ambiguity that leaves Shakespeare's verse up to individual interpretation.

The footnotes to line 35 "If you will not murder me for my love ..." in different editions indicate the possibility of different readings of this scene. One edition suggests "... be my death in return for my love ..." which is significantly different than the footnote given in the Signet Edition we use for Heritage.

We might also ask if Sebastian's tears at the end of the scene are not over the "death" of his twin sister or because he must take leave from Antonio. The Hytner production suggests the latter interpretation.

**Act II, Scene 4** (1:02:26-1:12:49)
Scene: The Duke and Cesario (Viola) are in the Duke's court, discussing the matter of love.

There are several moments of homo-eroticism depicted in the video in this scene, which gives the text a bit of a different meaning - again, the ambiguity of the lines leaves so much open to interpretation. In a circumstance of a heterosexual relationship, how would their actions be interpreted? Two points of interest that are fairly obvious acts of "attraction" are a lingering kiss initiated by the Duke, and a short scene where the Duke "undresses" Cesario. It is important to note that from a gay perspective the Duke Orsino appears to be testing Cesario's sexuality.

**Act III, Scene 3** (1:49:00)
Scene: Sebastian and Antonio in the city

From a gay perspective, there appears to be some flirtation on Antonio's part, resulting in a negative response from Sebastian. Sebastian backs off a bit, thanking Antonio for his time and care, but drawing a line between the two of them, and trying unsuccessfully to make it clear that he doesn't care for Antonio as Antonio apparently cares for him. Once again, the Hytner video underscores this interpretation.
Queer Readings of *Twelfth Night*

**Gender-Bending of Yore**

Review by Don Shewey

*Twelfth Night* • Lincoln Center Theater's Vivian Beaumont Theater, New York City • Written by William Shakespeare • Directed by Nicholas Hytner • Starring Helen Hunt, Paul Rudd, Kyra Sedgwick, Philip Bosco, and David Patrick Kelly

Director Nicholas Hytner has said in interviews that his production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* continues the theme of unrequited love he explored in his film *The Object of My Affection*. What he was shyer about saying was that the production also investigates the same slipperiness of sexual identity that figured heavily in the film, which was based on Stephen McCauley's comic novel about a gay man and his female roommate. In any case Hytner has mounted a physically ravishing, winningly acted production that makes the case for *Twelfth Night* as Shakespeare's most direct examination of homo love.

The production, which runs through August 30, features Hytner's *Affection*-ate leading man, Paul Rudd, who is practically unrecognizable here. Bearded, hairy-chested, and with a scraggly rock-star mane, Rudd's Duke Orsino is costumed by Catherine Zuber to resemble Prince in his New Power Generation period— all purple pajamas and brocade uniforms. As the audience enters, he and several serving boys are sprawled around an onstage pond passing a pipe and being serenaded by court musicians. He rouses himself to rhapsodize about Olivia (Kyra Sedgwick), the countess who spurns his advances while she mourns her perhaps overbeloved brother. It becomes pretty clear, however, that this Orsino's vision of women is a romantic spasm of compulsory heterosexuality.

He seems quite content hanging with the boys. And when Viola (Helen Hunt) washes ashore from a shipwreck and disguises herself in trousers with just the right amount of gold piping to infiltrate his household as "Cesario," she/he immediately becomes the duke's favorite, handpicked to strip him down to his Prince-ly purple trunks for a morning dip. Meanwhile, Olivia lives in her own parallel universe of gender confusion. Overdoing her grief like a major drama queen and chasing off all male suitors, she perks up at the first sight of "Cesario" and gets just as moony-eyed toward "him" as "he" is toward "his" boss, the duke.

Except for the performance by Hunt, who's too restrained as butch girl-femme boy to be much fun to watch, the acting belies the myth that Americans can't act Shakespeare. Sedgwick and Rudd, in particular, pull off
bold, physically ambitious performances. And the ever-excellent David Patrick Kelly, playing Feste, gets to show off Jeanine Tesori's gorgeous original score. But they're all practically upstaged by the set, another magical environment by Bob Crowley, whose work in Carousel and The Capeman have amazed Broadway in recent years.

The cross-dressing, mistaken identity stuff in Twelfth Night is usually milked for laughs, but Hytner plays it for maximum emotional disorientation. When Orsino starts kissing Cesario/Viola and she starts responding, even though she knows he's coming on to her as if she were a boy ... well, the tension in the theater is thick with the awkwardness, dread, and excitement of illicit sexual awakening. Similarly, the low-comedy subplot involving the humiliation of Olivia's stuffy steward Malvolio by her housemaid Maria, her drunken relative Sir Toby Belch, and the ne'er-do-well Sir Andrew Augecheek takes on darker tones than usual. Philip Bosco's Malvolio may be a prig, but when he's tortured as much as Christopher Walken in The Deer Hunter, it's a little hard to giggle. And Brian Murray's Sir Toby is a kind of Adult Children of Alcoholics nightmare, a stumbling bully who everyone has to pretend is behaving normally.

The play concludes with a round of marriages that is supposed to signify Happy Ending. But Hytner makes you think twice. Maria's hitched to Sir Toby, a prime candidate for detox. Settling down with Viola's twin (Sebastian), Olivia has blithely exchanged her Cesario doll for one with working male parts. And with Viola Orsino faces the prospect of heterosexuality that has never been more than theoretical for him. Knowing everything we know, it's hard to believe all's well that ends well.

Queer Readings of *Twelfth Night*

**Selected Bibliography:**

**Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Gender, and Homosexuality**

[Most of these titles are available in the Carthage Library or on line. A list of local sources of these articles follows each citation.]


Abstract: Discusses the ways that gender roles are assumed by society and assigned to children and questions the validity of such actions.

→ This article is available online.


Abstract: Discusses same-sex attraction in drama, focusing on the play *Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare. Characters who were attracted to others of the same sex; Use of all male drama companies in English theatre; Arguments of critics concerning this topic; Details on some parts of *Twelfth Night*.

→ This article is available in the Carthage Print Collection.

DiGangi, Mario. "Queering the Shakespearean Family." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47.3 (Fall 1996): 269ff.

Abstract: The relation of homosexuality to the family, sex or marriage in Shakespeare's England is examined. *As You Like It* is highlighted because its resonance for a queer critique of the early modern family remains underappreciated.

→ Full text available on-line via Carthage Electronic Library Web page (Proquest Direct) and in the Carthage Print Collection.

→ Included in this resource packet.


→ Available in the Carthage Print Collection. An excerpt of this article, entitled "Crossdressing in *Twelfth Night*," is in the Signet Classic Edition of *Twelfth Night*.

→ A copy is on reserve in the Library under "Heritage."


→ Available in the Carthage Print Collection. An excerpt (pp. 28-32) of this article, entitled "Androgyny in *Twelfth Night*," is in the Signet Classic Edition of *Twelfth Night*.

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Queer Readings of *Twelfth Night*

Writing Activity #1

**Sebastian and Antonio: Interpreting Their Relationship**

**Instructor Preparation:**
Prepare contemporary English translations of Act III, Scene 3 for the students. Leave the names of the characters out of the dialog. You should also not indicate that the dialog comes from *Twelfth Night*.

**In-Class Activity:**
1. Ask students to read the dialog you have prepared then respond in writing to the following cue:

   What can be said about this conversation? Are the indications in the language or the content that the speakers are male or female. What gender roles are depicted? Who is the male/female? Why?

2. After the students have written for about 10 minutes, give them the following cue orally and ask them to continue writing in response to this new cue:

   If you discovered that this dialogue occurred between two men, what would your reaction be?

3. Now reveal the source of the dialog. Ask students to comment now on how this knowledge changes their views of the dialogue? (i.e. Did people just "talk like that" back then, no matter whom they were addressing?)
Queer Readings of *Twelfth Night*

Writing Activity #2

**Gender Transgression and Normalcy in *Twelfth Night***

In one of the most influential critical studies of Shakespeare of the last fifty years, C. L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959), the critic has this to say about gender in *Twelfth Night*:

"The most fundamental distinction the play brings home to us is the difference between men and women. To say this may seem to labor the obvious; for what love story does not emphasize this difference? But the disguising of a girl as a boy in *Twelfth Night* is exploited so as to renew in a special way our sense of the difference. Just as a saturnal reversal of social roles need not threaten the social structure, but can serve instead to consolidate it, so a temporary, playful reversal of sexual roles can renew the meaning of the normal relation. One can add that with sexual as with other relations, it is when the normal is secure that playful aberration is benign. This basic security explains why there is so little that is queasy in all Shakespeare's handing of boy actors playing women, and playing women pretending to be men."

Consider the passage above and your own reading of the text and respond to the following question in a personal response.

What does Barber's claim that the reversal of gender roles in the play is possible because the "normal is secure" mean? Can you find evidence for or against notion that the "normal is secure" in the play?
An essay by Robert Kimbrough, "Androgyny in Twelfth Night," (1982) makes claims about the lessons the play teaches about gender roles. (If you would like to read this short essay in its entirety outside of class, you can find it on pages 152-158 of your Signet edition of the play).

"... [Viola] is also coming to know, as Olivia and Orsino will learn, that many apparent differences between men and women are dissolvable... once sexual differentiation is acknowledged, men and women are essentially very much alike" (156).

Consider the passage above and your own reading of the text and respond to the following question in a personal response.

What evidence do you see in the text, that Viola, Olivia, and Orsino have recognized that the differences between men and women are "dissolvable" as Kimbrough claims?