

## **Behind the Speedo: Bisexuality in *Twelfth Night***

*By Camrie Miranda*

Shakespeare was prolific in writing comedies, sonnets, and tragedies. If one thing stands out in several of his plays, it is the contemporary notion of queerness. Similarly, the theme of bisexuality can be seen in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. The dramatic comedy follows the character of Viola as she attempts to survive after a shipwreck. She does this by disguising herself as the faithful Cesario, who gets trapped in a love triangle with Olivia and Orsino. When observing the three, one character stands out: Orsino. As the Duke of Illyria, he begins the play trying to win over the heart of the mourning Olivia but ends the play marrying Viola/Cesario. He can obviously be seen falling for both Olivia and Cesario throughout the play, but the sensation of love is emphasized in Paul Rudd's depiction of Orsino. Rudd starred in the 1998 production of *Twelfth Night* at the Lincoln Center Theater where he portrayed a lovestruck Duke with a flirtatious side for his new messenger, Helen Hunt's Cesario. Through the lens of queer theory, Orsino exhibits signs of bisexuality when one examines the way that he interacts with, converses with, and treats the character of Cesario.

The play begins with Orsino surrounded by musicians and other lords inside a room in his palace. He speaks about the food of love and the meaning of love, stating, "If music be the food of love, play on, give me excess of it; that surfeiting, the appetite may sicken, and so die" (I.i.1-3). He exclaims love as an idea that he is starved of as he plays into the farce with the lords and musicians around him. He pushes this romanticization further as he discusses his love for Olivia and how his desires "have pursued me like fierce and cruel hounds" (I.i.21-22). Once he is told about her rejection, he seems to have to readjust himself to remain in this romantic attitude. He exclaims to be "away before me to sweet beds of flow'rs. Love-thoughts lie rich when canopied with bow'rs" (I.i.39-40). Orsino is stuck in this reality

of romanticized love. At the thought of rejection, he finds himself needing to be surrounded by more flowers and romantic thoughts to keep up this idea of loving Olivia, which already hints at his love for someone else. Outside of the text, we can observe Nicholas Hytner's production and Paul Rudd's depiction of Orsino. He begins laid out on the ground around a pond surrounded by other men (Hytner 1:44). They all lay asleep but awake when he starts monologuing about love. It is important to note that in this opening monologue, Orsino is lost in this romantic facade. Reflecting the literature, Rudd is able to show Orsino's frustration with Olivia, as it takes him out of this idea of loving her. This hints at an idea that he hasn't fallen in love yet, and his attitude and actions change with the entrance of Cesario.

Connecting this glorification of love and Orsino's costuming allows us to observe the Duke's actions. In the Lincoln Center Production, Rudd is first seen in a more scandalous and seductive outfit (Hytner 3:16), fitting into this narrative of the glorification of love. He wears baggy black pants and a purple long sleeve shirt that opens in the center to show off his body. This romanticization is further paired with Orsino's struggle about what love is. Barry Adams explains this idea further in his article, "Orsino and the Spirit of Love: Text, Syntax, and Sense In *Twelfth Night*," writing, "Orsino, I believe, is using the word [fantastical] not to exalt love but to belittle his own imagination, which by a process of undisciplined association has led him from pleasurable romantic reveries to an unexpected confrontation with the harsher realities of love" (58-59). Here, Adams is referencing one of the last confrontations in the play as his words begin to reflect his definition of love. In these lines, Orsino states, "Of what validity and pitch so'er, but falls into abatement and low price even in a minute. So full of shapes is fancy that it alone is highly fantastical" (I.i.12-15). This matched with his frustrations later in the scene, showing his views on love. He believes that love is playing tricks on his mind; in reality he doesn't know the meaning of love until the introduction of

Cesario. This belief influences Rudd's depiction of this frustration during these lines (Hynter 4:35-4:47).

Observing this frustration, we can turn to the entrance of Cesario. A character who once was a shipwrecked girl becomes the messenger of the Duke and Orsino's pursuit for love. It is important to note that Valentine, a close attendant to the Duke, points out the fast promotion of Cesario after "he hath known you but three days, and already you are no stranger" (I.IV.1). Viola, who has taken the name of Cesario, enters in her disguise during Act 1 Scene 4 where she talks about Orsino's blessings. These praises show that Orsino may have other plans for Cesario, in addition to what Orsino says soon after he enters: "Stand you awhile aloof. Cesario, thou know'st no less but all. I have unclasp'd. To thee the book even of my secret soul" (I.IV.7-9). Here he discusses the idea of unclasping himself. To his men it may seem that he is referencing his love for Olivia, but for Cesario it relates to Orsino's identity. Here he is unclasping the idea of his sexuality and allowing Cesario to understand his true self. Paul Rudd enhances this idea further with his entrance. At the timestamp 19:51, Rudd enters with his shirt fully unclasp'd and his focus on Cesario. He stands waiting for the next moment of sexual tension, where Cesario must undress him. Hunt's reactions, which include slow actions of taking off his clothes and vivid facial expressions towards his physique, show an obvious attraction towards Orsino. These actions are purposeful due to the costuming of Paul Rudd, dressed in only a Speedo (Hynter 20:30). Once this undressing occurs, the lines 8 and 9 are delivered, showing an unclasping of a sexual tension towards Cesario.

The importance between the differing costume designs and language are vital in this scene. A character who is more formal and, in Hynter's case, is dressed in white seems to be initially opposing these romantic attempts. Viola being dressed as a man leaves an ambiguity unbeknownst to Orsino but known to the audience, as there is an attempt to win over this new

mysterious stranger. Casey Charles writes in his article “Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*,” “The gender ambiguity of Viola/Cesario in fact sets the stage for the representation of a plethora of desires: homoerotic attraction between Orsino and Cesario, heterosexual attraction between Orsino and Viola, and lesbian attraction between Viola and Olivia” (132-133). With this open attraction between Orsino and Viola along with Orsino and Cesario, we are able to observe the bisexual identity of the Duke throughout the play. He is attracted to both and makes attempts to seduce both versions of his messenger.

Along with this idea of seduction, the topic of cross-dressing itself is significant to this play. The Shakespeare play never describes Cesario’s outward appearance, but in the Lincoln Production of *Twelfth Night*, Cesario is seen in two outfits: a dress that is worn when shipwrecked and a white suit through the rest of the play. This outfit later matches Sebastian’s outfit but also allows Viola to put on a masculine appearance. The pristine outfit of Hunt’s Viola/Cesario is seen in a pure white suit and a low ponytail (Hytner). This outfit is more masculine. It also fits the aesthetic of Orsino as a character, who is seen in his rich white outfit at the end of the play (Hytner 2:16:18), and emphasizes the idea that Viola is truly a man. Judith Butler, in their article “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,” elaborates on this idea of the expression of gender identity, writing, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33). The masculine outfit is able to trick Orsino into thinking that a man stands before him, making certain scenes in the performance significant. In Act 2 Scene 4, we are able to see Cesario and Orsino together discussing Olivia. Orsino calls Cesario a “boy” (II.IV.12) and references him as “speaking masterly” (II.IV.20). These comments show Orsino as being engaged in a conversation with Cesario, and Rudd’s performance enhances that. Not only are the characters sitting around food, but Rudd can also be seen moving around the room. This interaction continues when

Orsino begins to take off Cesario's handkerchief slowly and seductively (Hytner 1:03:48). The two begin to talk about Cesario falling in love with a woman. In both the scene and the production, we are able to note that Cesario describes his "love" as "being of the same complexion" (II.IV.23-24) and "being about his age" (II.IV.25). Clearly describing the Duke, Orsino proceeds to discourage this fictionalized woman as he further explains how women act. The discouragement itself shows that Orsino would rather them be together, and Rudd encourages this as the two remain in an intimate conversation. Rudd even uses a rose to exemplify the symbolism of a woman and her love. Orsino's acts of love and seduction towards Cesario, when paired with the masculine costuming and characteristics, show how Orsino further falls in love with Cesario.

The actions of Orsino allow the viewer to evaluate his intentions. He is an unmarried duke looking for some sort of love, which he assumes he will get from Olivia. Not only will this allow his own success, but it will also cure his obsession with romance. He initially is seen going after a fellow noble, Olivia, which shows the idea of security of power. He also has a sense of loneliness found through scenes that fuels his romantic fascination. Later in Act 2 Scene 4, Feste the clown enters, singing about death under Orsino's orders. The song talks about dying with no flowers and friends at a funeral, emphasizing the loneliness. In the Lincoln Center Production, we can see Orsino react with his head in his hands and crying (Hytner 1:06:57) during the lines, "Not a friend, not a friend greet my poor corpse, where my bones shall be thrown" (II.IV.58-59). The added motion suggests insecurity about dying alone, and this may also be due to his secret life of being in love with both a man and a woman. As mentioned earlier, Barry Adams discusses Orsino's struggle with the meaning of love, as highlighted in this scene. We can tell that the relationship between Cesario and Orsino brings him to a realization of the "harsher realities" of being bisexual. Adams goes on to talk about how this romanticization is "self-defeating" (58), which reflects the character of

Orsino. This reflection on Feste's song and Orsino's loneliness shows how Orsino's glorification of love has affected his livelihood. While he dismisses his men, later in the scene he pulls Cesario aside to emphasize his false love for Olivia. Orsino even goes on to call a woman's love "lacking retention" (II.IV.87-88) as he attempts to keep his grasp on his heterosexual relationship. In the production, this make-believe lust is further debunked by Orsino's actions at the end of the scene, when he embraces Cesario and kisses his head to dismiss him (Hytner 1:11:14). At the beginning of the play, we can tell that he is in love with Olivia, or as Adams would say, in love with the idea of loving Olivia. It is not until later in the play that we can see his true experience of love is with Cesario.

Consequently, all of these interactions and acts of love lead us to the last act of the play. As the characters come together, we are able to finally understand the confusion between Sebastian and the love triangle. Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, survives his shipwreck and is reunited with his sister. Before then, Olivia, Orsino, and Cesario meet as Orsino is faced with heartbreak. Olivia exclaims, "Cesario, you do not keep promise with me," (V.i.77) to which Orsino responds in shock and betrayal. Rudd's Orsino proceeds to pull a sword on Olivia and talk about killing what he loves due to the heartbreak he feels (Hytner 2:20:19). Orsino points his attention to Cesario, talking about an "instrument that screws me [Orsino] for my true place in your favor" (V.i.97), this favor being a forced relationship between the Duke and Olivia instead of his love Cesario. He references a line later stating, "But this is your minion whom I know you [Olivia] love, and whom, by heaven I swear, I tender dearly" (V.i.99-100), showing he still has a fondness for Cesario. Orsino is heartbroken by this promise between Olivia and Cesario, which in reality is a marriage between Sebastian and Olivia. This is met with a call of love from Cesario in lines 109-112, where he discusses running after the Duke to confess his love, which breaks Olivia's heart. A

few moments later, the marriage of Cesario and Olivia is announced, and Orsino's heart breaks more as he exclaims wanting nothing to do with his messenger.

Rudd gives emotion to these lines as he attempts to storm off stage before being pulled on once more. This gives entrance to Sebastian and the revelation of Cesario's identity. Orsino points out this doubling of Cesario before the twins reunite. This is where Cesario is revealed to be a woman by the name of Viola. Despite this revelation, it is important to note that Orsino still references Viola with the nickname "boy" (V.i.223). Orsino is overcome with relief by this revelation and, knowing that he must not reveal his true identity, goes along with his original idea of marrying a woman. The romanticization had made him more selfish and oblivious, which is pointed out by Richard Henze in his article "*Twelfth Night: Free Disposition on the Sea of Love*," "The Duke, finally reawakened to generosity, asks a 'share in this most happy wrack' and gives himself where he is desired, thus finally allowing free disposition" (Henze, 281). Thanks to the entrance of Sebastian at the end of the play, we are able to note that the Duke begins acting generously and is then given the opportunity to go after what he desires. Cesario's true gender proves to play in the Duke's favor but also shows that he will further suppress his sexuality. To Henze's point, he goes where he is desired, to Viola/Cesario, who he had known as a man proving this attraction to Cesario. As the two twins remain in each other's arms, Orsino approaches them. In the production, with a confident movement, Rudd's Orsino raises his hand and accidentally reaches for Sebastian to tell him "your master quits you," which he corrects when moving to Viola (Hytner 2:33:05). They both wear the same dress as their complexion remains similar. This proves the more masculine features that Cesario possessed remained in Orsino's mind, and he reached for Sebastian subconsciously. Sawyer Kemp mentions the intention of the cross-dressing in his piece "Shakespeare in Transition: Pedagogies of Transgender Justice and Performance." He writes, "Unmaking a man is just as simple—after Sebastian and Cesario/Viola embrace,

Orsino continues to call Cesario ‘Boy,’ and requests to see him ‘in thy woman’s weeds’ (V.i.269) The superman-like gender costume is fully dependent on the presence or absence of masculine clothing—which always fits perfectly and always looks good.” (Kemp, 40). Even though he knows she is a woman, the presence of the gendered costume and expression still entrances Orsino. Rudd’s interpretation of the mistake in this comedy further shows the persuasion of the costume and how the idealization of love has blinded Orsino. He continues to compliment Viola’s complexion and thank her for her help before asking for her hand in marriage. Observing the Lincoln Center production once more, we can point out the costuming, as both couples marry but do not change outfits. Instead, there is a small dance between both couples, a zoom out, and a montage of the characters moving about the stage (Hytner 2:39:52). Orsino is seen embracing Viola, who is still dressed as Cesario. This not only continues to mirror Sebastian as a character, but proves that Orsino still has a fascination for Cesario.

Despite Shakespeare’s attempt at a storyline involving heteronormative relationships, we can observe the actions of Duke Orsino. As a character he is not only in love with the character of Olivia, but he soon falls in love with his servant Cesario, who is later revealed to be Viola. The love of both genders shows that he is lost in the idea of bisexuality as he lives his overromanticized life, a lifestyle that has caused him to distance himself from reality and often act selfishly or oblivious to the world around him. This keeps him from expressing his reality and identity and pushes him towards falling in love with both Olivia and Cesario. The portrayal by Paul Rudd further proves this, as he gives a more seductive and flirtatious performance of the Duke while interacting with his fellow actors. He is especially flirtatious towards the character of Viola/Cesario. When observing a depiction that is true to the script along with the script itself, there is no doubt of a clear relationship between Orsino and Cesario. Each of the Duke’s interactions, conversations, and actions toward his new



messenger proves a queer romantic relationship between the two. This, once again, adds to the themes of bisexuality and queerness in the works of William Shakespeare.

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