Gender Roles And Expectations In Twelfth Night

Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night is a romantic comedic play that reflects and explores the social conventions and values of its context. Written during the Elizabethan era, it profoundly challenges gender roles with the cross-dressing of Viola and her aptitude in a task that had been unsuccessfully attempted by men. It also demonstrates how unreliable social status can be as a foundation in your identity, and as such is unbecoming for it to build your character.

Through the use of disguise and dramatic irony, Shakespeare satirises gender roles and expectations in Twelfth Night to challenge them. In the misogynistic Elizabethan context, gender roles were reinforced by certain laws and religious practices, along with being part of specified duties for each gender. When Viola comes ashore on Ilyria, she beseeches the captain to “Conceal me what I am….For such disguise as haply shall become”, which highlights how she cannot thrive as a woman. It provokes consideration about the inequity of opportunity between the two genders. The concept of a feeble woman is further reinforced through Orsino’s contrived hunting of the “hart”, with the pun being an analogy comparing Olivia’s affection to a deer: something to be captured. Viola’s cross-dressing would have shocked Shakespeare’s audience, the idea that the genders could undertake each other’s roles went against the predominant attitudes fabricated in their society. As Caesario she outperforms her male predecessors, capturing Olivia’s unrequited affections despite concealing her true gender. This dramatic irony implores the audience to consider the potential ambiguity of gender, and how a mere disguise allows Viola to bridge the gap between male and female. Therefore, Shakespeare employs dramatic irony in Viola’s disguise to undermine the social expectations for men and woman, and elucidate how fluid the two classifications could be.

Social hierarchies in Twelfth Night are reoccurring values that despite being the fundamental parts of how their lifestyles are structured, are depicted as fickle and prone to fluctuation. In a monarchal society, the audience of Shakespeare’s time would understand the divide between the affluent, wealthy people sitting in seats, and those standing. Along with hiding her gender, Viola conceals her social standing, declaring to wait until she “had made mine own occasion mellow”. This personification of time as something that matures with time conveys to the audience how she felt she couldn’t express her identity without fear of persecution until she had assessed her new environment. It also demonstrates how unstable status is if it had can be obscured so easily upon meeting new people, which strongly contradicts his audience’s societal values during the 17th century. Furthermore, this concept is explored through Maria’s saying if Sir Andrew Aguecheek continues his lavish tendencies, he’ll “have but a year in these ducats”. This hyperbolic comment communicates how despite his current wealth, centring your being on your social standing is a precarious option and could change in one transient time frame. It is evident how Shakespeare uses personification and hyperbolizes to demonstrate the unreliable component of your place in the hierarchy as a foundation for your identity.