What early-modern actors did when they stood before an audience to present a character was a mystery: contemporary commentators viewed them as anything from inspired rhetors (even magicians or protean figures) to “common players,” second cousins to clowns, who offered either innocuous entertainment or even encouragement to sinful practices. Mary Crane’s work reveals that there was no fixed idea of what performance was; in fact, “the words ‘perform’ and ‘performance’ were not yet available in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to name the complex of things that they name for us.” Instead, there was a spectrum of terms with specific meanings, ranging from the antitheatricalist notion that plays were frivolous and deceitful “shows,” to words like “exercise” and “use,” which suggest that plays involved acting that was imagined in terms of “material practices that could effect real change in the world.”

Although the identity and status of both plays and players was in flux throughout the period, there was a trend toward defining actors (as distinct from players), characterizing them in a positive light, and giving them status as professionals. Robert Weimann describes the gentrification of the theater that took place in the latter years of the sixteenth century; and he suggests that the shift from “body-oriented playing” to “text-oriented acting” was consciously spearheaded by Ben Jonson, who sought to establish a new kind of authority in the world of the Elizabethan playhouse, privileging writing over performance and the rights of the “poet qua dramatist” over those of the players and spectators, whom he treated with condescension.

James Bednarz, in his comprehensive account of the Poets’ War (1599–1602), argues that Jonson’s invention of a new critical drama called “comical satire,” in deliberate opposition to Shakespeare’s popular romantic comedy—an opposition underscored with jibes and insulting innuendo—kicked off a clash of opposing ideologies of drama. “The
Poets’ War,” Bednarz writes, “provides the fullest theatrical context . . . for understanding the interactive development of Shakespeare’s art,” and his study excavates “the first great dramatic criticism in England” from the public dialogue—at once personal and philosophical—among Jonson, Shakespeare, Marston, and Dekker that was carried out in their dramas through techniques they invented for mutual self-reflexivity. Bednarz’s study focuses on the form of comedies, their philosophical underpinnings, and the status of the poet-dramatist; and my work builds on his by suggesting that theories of acting were also debated in the interactive context of this “war.” Certainly Jonson’s new comical satire that sought to reproduce social reality in order to transform it through authorially controlled criticism necessitated a new approach to acting that made actors “ministerial deliver[ers]” of text and imitators of recognizable social types. I will argue that Shakespeare resisted this approach to acting, and that this is seen most clearly in his study of Viola as actor-author whose performances are contrasted to the personations of Malvolio in Twelfth Night (1601).6

**Personation**—a word adopted by some of the dramatists involved in the Poets’ War—takes us to the heart of the debate about acting. Not a new word, *personate* had most often referred to written representation, especially of a satirical, allegorical, or symbolic kind. Not until the late 1590s was it used to denote the process of playing the part of a character in a play—first by John Florio in his Italian–English dictionary *World of Wordes* and, more significantly, by the dramatist John Marston (who wrote primarily for children’s companies) in the induction to *Antonio and Mellida* (1599–1600).7 Andrew Gurr suggests that the term was “called into being “[by] . . . the kinds of parts given actors to play and their own skills in their parts—that made two great tragedians succeed the extemporizing clowns on the pinnacle of theatrical fame.”8 Gurr interprets *personation* generally as the art of creating character, and other critics have applied it to suit their own ideas about early-modern acting. Most recently, Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster suggest that the word denotes a kind of acting in which there is a dual awareness of a real actor and an assumed role—“role playing” that “give[s] body and voice to something scripted.”9 However, Marston, Jonson, and other late Elizabethan dramatists used the term *personation*, to denote a specific mode of creating character by imitating preexisting types. Marston describes the actor molding or casting a character by “fram[ing] his exterior shape” in ways that imitate the characteristics of *types* like “elate Majesty,” the fool, the parasite, the hermaphrodite, the Bragadoch.10 Jonson also uses the word in his second “humours” play and second Globe play, *Every Man*
Out of His Humour (1599), to describe the tavern clown Carlo’s impersonation of two courtiers who are symbolized by their cups. When Thomas Heywood uses personation eight years later in his Apology for Actors, he develops the core idea that actors imitate and suggests that when they do it really well the actor disappears into the character: acting is “an imitation by which the personator is artfully lost in ‘the nature of the person personated’. And rather than seeking to play free with the dramatist’s language and to ‘possess the stage’ against the playtext, ‘Hee addes grace to the Poets labours.’”

Certainly Shakespeare was aware of the concept of personation and the particular imitative acting style it denoted, but he mocks this style when in Troilus and Cressida (1601) he has Ulysses compare Patroclus “imitat[ing]” Agamemnon “with ridiculous and awkward action” to a “strutting player whose conceit / Lies in his hamstring” (1.3.153–54) and when Hamlet speaks of strutting and bellowing players who “imitated humanity so abominably” infrequently; so when he uses it for the first time in Twelfth Night, it signals that he is making a statement about his own acting theory and, quite likely, criticizing the more mimetic acting style advanced by competing dramatists like Jonson and Marston. Malvolio, often recognized as “a Jonsonian humours part,” is susceptible to finding himself “most feelingly personated” in Maria’s letter because he is already imitating an inflated idea of himself as “Count Malvolio” in self-aggrandizing performances in which he “cons state without book and utters it by great swarths” (2.3.125–26). Shakespeare uses Malvolio to expose the limitations of Jonsonian characterization and comical satire and uses Malvolio’s absurd personations in the subplot as a foil for the very different performances of his exemplary actor, Viola.

From the intellectual ferment of the Poets’ War, Shakespeare developed an explicitly nonmimetic theory of acting in the fin de siècle plays Hamlet (1600–1601) and Twelfth Night in which the protagonists become actors who author fictions to explore rather than reproduce reality. In each of the three plays Jonson wrote during the Poets’ War, he represents himself through an authoritative poet-playwright character. Shakespeare, in response, foregrounds actor-author characters who rely on their own “conceit” (of the mind, soul, and imagination rather than the hamstring) to create and embody fictional characters. By choosing the term actor-author, I aim to suggest both the nature of Shakespeare’s own authorship—a collaboration with the talented actors who would “communicate his parts to others” (Troilus and Cressida, 3.3.117)—as well as the measure of agency actors possessed in the interpretation and performance of their
parts in dialogue with the script, the other actors, and the audience. Profoundly respectful of actors, Shakespeare granted them status as independent artists whose practice could have its own unique authority.

In Viola’s cross-dressing role in Twelfth Night, Shakespeare wrote one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the actor’s craft within the plays. While recent performance-centered criticism attends to the interplay of actor-character in cross-dressing roles, no one has studied Twelfth Night, Shakespeare’s last cross-dressing play before 1609, as a kind of parable for the actor-author’s practice of creating character(s) that anticipates the “deep” characterization he presents and explores in the tragedies. Features of the Twelfth Night plot intensify our awareness that the Viola role includes the actions of both a fictional character and an actor—indeed the two become one. When Viola disguises herself as a eunuch (a figure for the genderless actor) who will serve the duke as a kind of court jester, and when Orsino imagines the eunuch, Cesario, as fit to play the “woman’s part” in acting his woes, the actorly character personae heighten audience awareness of the adolescent boy playing these different roles (1.4.33).

Twelfth Night stages the occultation of the fictional Viola in the depths of the eunuch actor who takes the stage from the fictional character to “deliver” her subliminally in the new creation of Viola-Cesario. The believability of the fictional character depends on both actor and audience engagement. The actor uses the Viola-Cesario fiction to sustain and explore connections to Sebastian, Orsino, and her own hidden subjectivity. Her passionate engagement with the fiction inspires love in her audience that, in turn, triggers a necessary two-way or intersubjective process in which the audience is equally involved and invested in creating Viola-Cesario. Due to the dynamic nature of the composite Viola role, I refer to the actor character differently, depending on which character she is projecting and the degree of creative authority she manifests in any given performance; but my references are gendered feminine since the fiction of the occluded Viola remains relatively stable throughout.

Shakespeare presents Viola’s actor persona as the antithesis of the personated and personating Malvolio who, as he says in act 5, relies solely on cues in Olivia’s letter to create “the semblance I put on” (5.1.286). In his performance before Olivia, Malvolio adheres to the letter of the script—“acting . . . in an obedient hope” of obtaining her and increasing his status—but there is nothing original, nothing of his own feeling in his hilarious personation, which is both self-aggrandizing and pathetically servile (5.1.319). Shakespeare uses the new words personate and act only to describe Malvolio’s performance. To represent the actor-Viola’s practice, he invents figures like eunuch and monster and appropriates positive
terms like labour and practice. Significantly, through the use of comedian and fool, Shakespeare connects Viola’s role as actor-author to the roles of clown and fool that he was rethinking at the time he wrote Twelfth Night and, in the process, draws on popular theatrical traditions to “rebuff Jon-son’s neoclassicism” and express his own theory of acting.25

Working collaboratively, Shakespeare and Robert Armin reshaped the clown into a “cynical philosopher-fool character” more in keeping with Armin’s temperament and talents. Although some of Armin’s signature routines began by instigating the audience, he tended to distance himself into the role of witty commentator who prefers to talk with his alter egos.26 There was room, as a result, for the actor-author to assume some of the traditional clown functions; namely, that of establishing a rapport with the audience and exploiting their double awareness of character and actor to the new end of eliciting their engagement in creating a fictional character. As well as subsuming aspects of the clown’s style, Viola as actor-author plays the fool, interacting with characters in riddling speech that attempts to guide them toward new insights. Although Feste does create and present characters, Armin’s gifts for mime and mimicry tended toward satire. Preparing to “dissemble [himself] in’t,” Feste dons the gown and beard of a parson while commenting on the failure of his mimetic efforts: “I am not tall enough to become the function well, nor lean enough to be thought a good student” (4.2.4–6). Essentially a personation of a curate, his character, Sir Topas, lacks the power to awaken Malvolio to his own folly.

Ultimately, Shakespeare shows the actor-author to be the most successful performer—the new star or king (“Cesario” being the Italian form of Caesar) of the stage—because of his ability to create the compelling, even seductive, fictional character of Viola-Cesario, drawing on the combined resources of the clown and fool roles as well as “that within which passes show,” which on the level of the play’s fictional plot is the occluded Viola27 (Hamlet, 1.2.85). Viola-Cesario is not an imitation of anyone or anything. It is a fiction created by the actor’s willingness to explore and express his identity in relation to an other—what Cesario is to him or he to Cesario—and to the audience that receives his performance and whose emotional participation in the enacted scene renders them actors.28

The Poetomachia of 1599–1602 involved Shakespeare in a legitima-
tion crisis, according to James Bednarz, in which his poetic authority was at stake.29 In response to Jonson’s authorial pronouncements and overt literariness, Shakespeare practiced his own occultation, disappearing into fictional actor-authors like Viola’s eunuch and letting them demonstrate (and, to some extent, theorize) his own actor-authorship.30 To get
at Shakespeare’s self-concealing authorship, critics have acknowledged intertextuality as an important “technique and principle of authorship.” Janet Clare discusses the intertextuality of *Twelfth Night* and *Every Man Out* to demonstrate that Shakespeare “quite deliberately and effectively re-appropriated” the romance plot Jonson ridiculed to defend his own brand of romantic comedy; and I believe Shakespeare also faced head-on his antitheatricalist detractors who feared that the player “while he faineth love, imprinteth wounds of love.” The eunuch’s performance of Viola-Cesario inspires passion in Olivia—“How now? / Even so quickly may one catch the plague?” she marvels, linking the infectiousness of plague and the infectiousness of the theater as antitheatricalists commonly did (1.5.249–50). Viola as actor-author acknowledges her own misgivings about the erotic power of the role she has created. However, the play shows that, while potentially dangerous, fictional arousal and the self-dissolving experience it offers are ultimately beneficial.

Cynthia Marshall has shown how such experiences carried a positive valence in the religious discourses of early-modern culture and documents the belief of some antitheatricalist writers like Edward Reynoldes (1579) in a kind of homeopathic cure for a disruptive or dissolving passion through the substitution of the more complex passion of divine love. Shakespeare hints at a similar kind of homeopathic cure for the plague Viola-Cesario spreads not by exchanging human for divine object but by rendering the human object infinitely complex, which he does through the theme of androgyny and the motif of the twin (Viola-Cesario and Viola-Sebastian). Intertextual improvisations on images and themes from Plato, primarily *The Symposium*, contribute to Shakespeare’s elevation of the androgynous actor and his occluded defense of acting (contra Jonson’s Aristotelianism) as a practice that liberates erotic energy, experienced as madness, to shape and transform it in discursive and theatrical transactions.

**Occlusion of the Fictional Viola: Eunuch Takes the Stage**

We see the fictional character Viola (a survivor of shipwreck whose feminine appearance may have suffered a sea change) only in one brief scene on the seacoast of Illyria. From her first appearance, the fictional Viola is presented equivocally: in grief over her brother’s possible death at sea, she quickly shifts into a practical mode, asking “And what should I do in Illyria?” and devising a cross-dressing plot to offer herself to Duke Orsino as a kind of court entertainer. In this first short scene, the audience witnesses and collaborates via the onstage audience of the complicit
captain to occlude the fictional Viola: her clothes are left with the captain (buried in some sea chest?) and her female character “drowned” in the interior of an actorly alter ego, imagined as a “eunuch” (1.2.37). Unknown to any in Illyria, with all social markers of her female identity removed, the fictional character Viola will exist from this point forward only when she is delivered by the boy actor and received by the knowing audience. Stephen Greenblatt tracks Shakespeare’s growing interest in the hidden processes of interiority at the time he wrote *Hamlet*, and identifies soliloquy and excision of clear motivation as two important new strategies for representing inwardness. It seems to me that occlusion of the fictional Viola is a similar kind of strategy designed to engage the knowing audience’s sympathy and imaginative activity.

Since Shakespeare probably wrote *Twelfth Night* immediately after *Hamlet*, it is not surprising that Viola shares Hamlet’s sense of indeterminacy. Just as it’s not entirely clear what motivates Hamlet to put on an “antic disposition,” Viola’s decision to cross-dress is open to interpretation. Although she will later remark that she “imitate[s]” her brother, Sebastian, the emergence of her actor identity seems to be an emulation inspired by the captain’s image of her brother, “Most provident in peril,” who “binds himself / (Courage and hope both teaching him the practice) / To a strong mast that lived upon the sea;” and the comparison of Sebastian to “Arion” who, to escape murderous sailors, leapt into the sea and climbed “on [a] dolphin’s back” to charm the waves with lyre music (1.2.12–13, 15). The captain’s hopeful poetry enables Viola to imagine binding herself in service to a master or mistress, and even conditions the particular kind of service she imagines for herself: “present me as a eunuch to him— / . . . for I can sing, / And Speak to him in many sorts of music” (1.2.56–58). Viola becomes an actor to emulate the practice of Sebastian and Arion, and *practice* was one of the more positively valenced words used by defenders of the theater to describe acting, like other trades, as a way to build skills.

As an actor, Viola is no longer restricted by the fiction of femininity but is freer to create fiction(s) that enable her to sustain and explore her relationships to Sebastian, Orsino, and her own subjectivity: “Conceal me what I am,” she adjures the captain, and asks for a disguise that “shall become / The form of my intent” which is to “not to be delivered to the world / Till I had made mine own occasion mellow” (1.2.53–55). The balanced syntax (passive verb phrase “be delivered” [handed over] against active “made mine own occasion”) coupled with the rich array of meanings for *delivered*, which include “childbirth” and “to enunciate or pronounce” (*OED*), suggest that Viola fantasizes acting as a means of self-creation.
The eunuch is a symbol for the actor who transcends gender and who puts us in mind of the adolescent boy actor playing Viola “whose most important single attribute is his liminality”—on the threshold between youth and maturity, male and female, one identity and another—and who will, during the play, project the fictional characters of both Viola and Cesario, mainly through modulations in his vocal delivery.38

When the eunuch makes her first appearance at Orsino’s court, the gender-neutral being is received and named Cesario; and Orsino, perceiving the youth’s equivocal nature, strategically fashions an actorly identity for the reluctant boy: “It shall become thee well to act my woes”39 (1.4.25). Evidently, the boy has received Orsino’s confessions sympathetically—“Cesario, / Thou know’st no less but all: I have unclasped / To thee the book even of my secret soul”—and it is Cesario’s receiving or understanding capacity that Olivia will later remark on that inspires Orsino to make an actor of him (1.4.11–13; 3.1.105). The closeness of the relationship between Orsino and Cesario as well as Orsino’s offer of acting as a route to autonomy and advancement may allude to the bonds between a master actor and his apprentice, which were strengthened by the custom of their living together.40 The actor identity Orsino fashions for his servant may further allude to early-modern practice in that it consists of a stage persona of defiance and cockiness—“Be clamorous, and leap all civil bounds” (1.4.20)—used to make contact with the audience after which Orsino instructs him to “unfold” his “passion” and “discourse of . . . dear faith” by using physical traits, lovingly blazoned and judged to be “semblative a woman’s part” (1.4.23–24, 33). The complex role Orsino imagines for his servant, playing a man and a woman, refers metatheatrically to the work the boy actor performs in *Twelfth Night*. As if displaying her facility in response to Orsino’s praise, the eunuch actor responds to Orsino as Cesario but projects the occluded Viola in a plaintive aside delivered to the audience:

I’ll do my best
To woo your lady. [Aside.] Yet a barful strife!
Who’er I woo, myself would be his wife.

(1.4.39–41)

It’s crucial to note that the creation of two different characters virtually simultaneously has nothing to do with personation. The dual delivery is possible because the clown’s traditional nonmimetic functions—self-awareness and direct contact with the audience—were gradually being assumed by actors, especially boy actors in cross-dressing parts.
The clown’s traditional role in Shakespearean drama before 1599, when Will Kempe left the company, consisted largely, if not entirely, of performance rather than mimesis—a performance in which the clown improvised and engaged the audience directly, masterfully juggling “layers of reality.” The emergence of the eunuch actor as a new kind of clown is actually prepared for by the manner in which the fictional Viola was introduced and occluded. Lesley Soule has noted a parallel between cross-dressed heroines who begin in a mood of woe with the clown who, as David Wiles writes, “always starts in a mode that is explicitly ‘sad’ or full of ‘woe’ in order to offset the mirth that follows.” Also like the clown who mediated between play/world and audience, the dramatic convention of disguise (which does not facilitate lifelike resemblance) engages the audience in “a kind of complicity with the counterfeiting play of the player.” Viola not only allows the audience to witness her metamorphosis to actor but presents herself as requiring the assistance of audiences. The captain describes himself as being a “mute” to her eunuch, and elsewhere, notably in Hamlet, Shakespeare uses the same word to describe the audience more generally: “You . . . / That are but Mutes or audience to this act” (5.2.334–35).

The personal relationship the actor establishes with the audience derives from the clown role; however, it’s important to see that, in giving aspects of the clown role to the actor, Shakespeare fictionalized the role. Unlike Will Kempe, who always to some extent played himself (common, plain Englishman), when the actor, having subsumed the clown, steps forward to address the audience as herself, she delivers the feelings of Viola. The clown’s practice of direct address shades into the actor’s authorial creation of complex fictional characters. Over several scenes, the actor’s passionate speeches (almost soliloquies) author the complex fictional character Viola-Cesario. However, the roots of the character’s erotic charge (her ability to gesture to an occluded identity) lie in the performative dimension of the role—the equivocal nature of the boy actor and the clown’s actor-character duality.

“Are you a comedian?”—New Comic Actor

The conventions of disguise and cross-dressing plays stage a practice of concealment and disclosure that revitalizes the performative, requiring performance skills of infinite charm and fascination. When the actor-Viola arrives at Olivia’s court with script in hand, the audience is primarily aware of her performative male identities (eunuch and Orsino’s servant, Cesario):
she has predicted that her representation of a male servant, Cesario, delivering his master’s love message will be a “barful strife”—a striving marked by conflict between actor and role. From the start, it’s the actor’s “saucy” and “mad” behavior at Olivia’s gates that wins her admittance; and throughout the scene, the actor’s clowning techniques more than her attempts to recite a poetical speech that she has “taken great pains to con” enable her to emerge as the real author—free, if not freer than the putative author-director, Orsino—because she controls the theatrical event (1.5.162–63, 144). By the end of the scene, the actor will extend her authorial power to create the absolutely compelling fictional character Viola-Cesario by combining clowning with a near soliloquy in which the actor speaks personally in imaginative identification with another.

The first half of the performance before Olivia is marked by the actor’s interplay between speaking as herself and playing Cesario by personating a courtier who recites poetry: “Most radiant, exquisite, and unmatchable beauty—I pray you tell me if this be the lady of the house, for I never saw her . . .” (1.5.141–42). Performance imperatives are primary, and the actor cannot play her role until she’s created a connection to her audience, which she tries to do in a natural line that reveals her personality as it gently mocks the conventions of wooing. The tension created by the performance of the hybrid clown-actor elicits audience involvement and prompts Olivia to ask, “Are you a comedian?” (1.5.151). Shakespeare seems to have been the first to use the word *comedian* in *Twelfth Night* to denote “one who plays in comedies, a comic actor” (*OED*), and he will use it again in *Antony and Cleopatra* when Cleopatra refers to “the quick comedians” who will “[e]xtemporally . . . stage” she and Antony, referring to a professional acting company that includes actors who will “boy [her] greatness” (5.2.216–17). The fact that Shakespeare uses this new word only twice in the canon to refer to the revealing/concealing cross-dressing of boy actors signals his intention for actors to subsume aspects of the clown’s role, containing its possibilities within the orbit of a dramatic fiction. In the scene with Olivia, even the tension between the actor-Viola and the role of Cesario is created by the occluded Viola’s romantic interest and consequent reluctance to commit fully to the role of love messenger. The actor-Viola rejects the professional label, *comedian*, but owns the practice in an erotic and compelling expression of reluctance—“No, my profound heart, and yet, by the very fangs of malice, I swear, I am not that I play”—that gestures to an identity and objective that are “as secret as maidenhead” (1.5.152–53, 177).

Once a connection with Olivia is established, actor-Viola improvises more freely (“No, good swabber, I am to hull here a little longer” [1.5.167])
and uses the link to make requests for a private audience and leave to “negotiate” with the lady’s bare face. However, what is really new about the actor’s performance of the clown’s mediating role is the way she deploys it to involve the audience in the collaborative work necessary to create a believable fictional character: “What are you? What would you?” Olivia finally asks, profoundly receptive to the fiction the actor will author in the willow-cabin speech (1.5.175). Inspired speech flows from this easy give-and-take as the actor begins to speak more personally, and, in doing so, delivers the thoughts and feelings of the occluded Viola: she chastises Olivia for pride, sympathetically speaks of Orsino’s devotion, and finally begins to imagine himself in Orsino’s position—“If I did love you in my master’s flame, . . . in your denial I would find no sense” (1.5.219, 221). The fictional Cesario emerges as a dedicated and sympathetic servant who is also more active, persistent, and passionate than his master; the character is produced when the actor feelingly identifies with the role.47 When Olivia’s question “What would you do?” invites the actor to more fully imagine actions to express feeling, “in a dream of passion” she uses all the interior resources of the Viola character to create a fantastic expression of male/female, heroic/plaintive desire (1.5.223):

Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
And call upon my soul within the house;
Write loyal cantons of contemned love,
And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
Hallow your name to the reverberate hills,
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out “Olivia!” O you should not rest
Between the elements of air and earth
But you should pity me!

(1.5.223–31)

The saucy Cesario who “says he’ll stand at [her] door like a sherriff’s post” mixes with the fictional Viola (delivered in the actor’s heightened emotional lyricism), his reference to the complaint mode (gendered feminine), and to the classical nymph, Echo, whose passion literally dissolves her48 (1.5.122–23). The actor’s success at authoring a fascinatingly real fiction is measured and completed by Olivia’s equally passionate reception of the character: “I’ll be sworn thou art [a gentleman]; / Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit / Do give thee five-fold blazon” (1.5.246–48). As Marjorie Garber writes, “Olivia sees a category crisis, but
assigns it to the wrong category: it is not that Cesario is really a woman but that he is really a gentleman.” Despite what Garber terms her “over-rationalization,” the important thing is that Olivia sees something of the mystery of character—the elusive ambiguity conveyed by the actor’s feeling delivery of “that within,” which is what compels belief in a character fiction and incites the audience to probe further.

When the smitten Olivia sends Malvolio in pursuit of Cesario with a token ring, the actor sees and comes to terms with the unintended effects of her performance in the play’s first and only real soliloquy, in which she analyzes and submits to the actor’s role that makes her paradoxically powerful and powerless and makes relationships both possible and impossible. The soliloquy, which begins with the vulnerable actor having to interpret her audience’s answering show—“I left no ring with her: what means this lady?”—focuses on the agency of the audience: “She made good view of me, . . . her eyes had lost her tongue, . . . she did speak in starts distractedly . . . she loves me sure” (2.2.14–19). The power of the actor’s performance incited Olivia to an equivalent display, and the “cunning” of her “passion” is evident in the ring ruse. The novice actor understands instantly that she can never be fully in control of her role, that acting involves surrender to process (“Fortune,” “time,” and the unknowable agency of experience), and that the fiction or “dream” her “disguise” creates is a collaboration.

In the latter half of the soliloquy, the actor delivers occluded Viola’s anxieties about both her “disguise [being] a wickedness” and “women’s waxen hearts” while she ultimately resigns herself to being a “poor monster” (2.2.24, 27, 31). Shakespeare interpolates the terms of antitheatricalist arguments that theater was an instrument of Satan or Cupid and players unnatural and inhuman monsters into a soliloquy in which the actor worries about her unintended effect on the audience and flatly condemns both disguise and “proper-false” men whose shows deceive weak women (2.2.26). The actor’s sympathy (“Poor lady, she were better love a dream” [2.2.23]), her expressions of conscience, and her submission to a role in which she must work against her own self-interest show that there is more to her practice than simple deception and argue for the possibility of an emergent actorly ethic.

Such an emergent ethic, based on sympathetic identification, is associated with the actor’s use of the word “monster.” When used in and out of scripts, monster not only referred to the alleged unnaturality of the actor but to the actor as “someone whose unnaturality was held up to the common view.” Shakespeare used the word to refer to the comic transformations of earlier clowns (the drunken Sly and metamorphosed
Bottom), but the actor-Viola is the first to use the word in self-reference and in a context that creates an analogy between the excesses of her love for Orsino and the excess of feeling spilled by actors and audiences in collaborating to create a fictional character: “My master loves her dearly, / And I (poor monster) fond as much on him / As she (mistaken) seems to dote on me” (2.2.30–33). In this passage, we see how the feelings of the occluded Viola for Orsino that informed the actor’s performance of Cesario also enable her to identify with the author’s text (Orsino’s love for Olivia) and her audience (Olivia). It is the actor’s display of loving identification along with the self-denial figured by the sustained occlusion of Viola and her own romantic agenda that suggests acting may be a way to control and shape passion so as to transform subjectivity by harmonizing affective and intellectual knowledge. In a similar context when he’s attempting to understand the real affective power of actors, Hamlet uses the word monstrous to describe the confluence of acting with the expression of real human feeling: “is it not monstrous” exclaims Hamlet as he wonders at how much the player’s expense of feeling over a fiction exceeds his own over a murdered father (2.2.551). That ostensible artifice can be used to affect real feeling and lead to moral transformation is the important insight that inspires Hamlet to use a play to catch Claudius’s conscience.

The actor-Viola’s soliloquy does not end with an epiphanic equivalent of Hamlet’s “the play’s the thing” but with a submission to a practice that is ethical in its honest self-exposure and its acceptance of equivocal nature (2.2.604). As the soliloquy moves toward its close and the actor becomes more confessional, explicating for the audience the different strands of her histrionic identity (“As I am a man, / . . . As I am woman”), she acknowledges that her acting has created a knot of unrequitable desires that she will let time “untangle” (2.2.33, 35, 37). To do otherwise would result in the tragedy of Macbeth, who is undone by his interpretive reduction of equivocal nature and his personation of “wither’d Murther.” He ends up comparing his life to “a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more” (5.5.24–26). Macbeth is not a “poor Monster” but frightened by the spectacle of himself as “a rare[r] monster[s] . . . , / Painted upon a pole” (5.8.25–26).

Actor-Author Fooling with Fictions

In Twelfth Night, it is generally agreed, Shakespeare was bringing to fruition in Feste the new “cynical philosophical fool” role he was
coauthoring with Robert Armin, who relied more on cerebral wit than
the physical comedy of his predecessor clown, William Kempe. Feste
is a detached, witty observer who, when he interacts with other char-
acters, engages them in riddling, mock-philosophical, almost Socratic
give-and-take to prompt self-examination. Sebastian even calls him
“foolish Greek” when, mistaken for Cesario, he attempts to shake off
the gadfly (4.1.15). Significantly, it is the actor-author Viola-Cesario
who notices the wisdom, craft—indeed the authorship—involved in
the fool’s part: “This is a practice, / As full of labour as a wise man’s art,” she
remarks at a point in the play when she’s accepted and is beginning to
apprehend the educative possibilities of her own role (3.1.55–56). Hav-
ing to rethink the clown’s part for a differently gifted performer (who
would go on to play more actorly parts like Caliban and Autolycus) also
helped Shakespeare theorize implicitly a kind of authorship and philo-
sophical purpose for the actor. By putting fool and actor together in two
important scenes in the middle of Twelfth Night, Shakespeare draws
parallels between these peripatetic “jesters,” but he also stages a kind
of contest to see which kind of artful fooling proves more effective: the
fool’s detached philosophical raillery or character fictions deployed in
word and deed by actors within relational dyads.

At the top of act 2, scene 4, Orsino addresses Cesario, calling for a
“piece of song” that did “relieve [his] passion much” and seems to want
him to sing (2.4.2, 4). Of course, singing in high/low, feminine/masculine
countertenor was Robert Armin’s singular talent; “Come, but one verse,”
pleads Orsino (2.4.7). In the absence of “Feste, the jester,” Viola-Cesario’s
lyrical speech plays against and comments on the music in a riddling way
that recalls Feste’s wise verbal humor but primarily works to project a
believable fiction. When Orsino asks, “How dost thou like this tune?”
Viola-Cesario’s answer, full of wistfulness and longing—“It gives a very
echo to the seat / Where love is throned”—grabs Orsino’s attention, who
suddenly perceives the mysterious depth of his servant, Cesario, which
he begins to sound with questions about love (2.4.18–20). Orsino’s praise
acknowledges that her “masterly” reply echoes and articulates his own
feeling. As with Olivia, the actor succeeds by attuning herself to Orsino
and involving him in the cocreation of a character:

\begin{quote}
Orsino: What kind of woman is’t?
Viola: Of your complexion.
Orsino: She is not worth thee then. What years, I’faith?
Viola: About your years, my lord.
\end{quote}

(2.4.23–26)
Like the fool, Viola-Cesario’s replies are cryptic and riddling. However, the actor’s primary work is not personating a wise man but creating a character from her own conceit who moves the audience to an equivalent imaginative act. In the foregoing dialogue, the actor Viola playing Viola-Cesario speaks veiled truths, but the opacity of her replies is not the result of “dally[ing] nicely with words”; it is inherent in the actor’s practice of drawing on inner resources to embody a character fiction (3.1.11). It is the actor’s partial self-disclosures (her honesty) that create the riddle, lend depth to the character, and instigate equally revealing disclosures from the audience: Orsino’s “[s]he is not worth thee then” reveals his own profound feelings for Cesario, recognizable to all but he who must first release his self-blinding obsession in order to see56 (2.4.25).

Shakespeare displays the differences in the methods and outcomes of the fool’s and actor’s practice when in the latter half of the scene Feste sings and the actor Viola-Cesario authors a moving tale about a lovesick sister. Feste’s song moves Orsino to a violent reaction, but not to self-reflection. The song lyrics, melodramatic and melancholy—“Come away, come away death . . . I am slain by a fair, cruel maid”—are rife with performance possibilities for mocking Orsino’s evident proclivity to pine away in an obsessive, misguided love (2.4.49, 52). Feste even concludes his song with a valediction that indicts Orsino’s opalescent mind and his lack of a clear desire or direction—“a good voyage of nothing;” and Orsino explodes into angry reaction—“Once more, Cesario / Get thee to yond same sovereign cruelty” (2.4.75–76). Mocking his humor does nothing to cure Orsino’s melancholy and neither will the sport invented to humble Malvolio succeed. In Twelfth Night, Shakespeare is, as Janet Clare illustrates through her analysis of the Malvolio subplot, answering Jonson’s attacks on his preferred form of romantic comedy by showing the limitations of a Jonsonian “satire of exposure,” which he also effects by privileging the actor’s art over that of the wise fool’s.57

Much different is the fiction that the actor-author Viola-Cesario will deploy ostensibly to challenge Orsino’s misconceptions of women’s devotion. The fiction of a lovesick sister, because it touches on “emotions and sensibilities” established as “meaningful” to Orsino (“melancholy, monuments, dying of unrequited love”), shows how the actor—like the fool—fits his fictions to the mood of the audience.58 But fiction because it is more oblique in its potential criticisms and more emotionally engaging is a safer and ultimately a more effective tool of ethical transformation. Caught up in the history of Viola-Cesario’s fictional sister who “pined in thought” and “smil[ed] at grief,” Orsino listens rapt (2.4.108, 111). His relative silence suggests reflection: perhaps he is reconsidering his ideas.
about women, his own commitment to a futile love, or even questioning the reality and strength of that love. When the story ends, Orsino wants to know more: “But died thy sister of her love, my boy?” (2.4.115). His sympathy is elicited by the story itself, Viola-Cesario’s emotional delivery, and Orsino’s identification with the sister through the mediating friendship he shares with the actor. The transforming power of a cocreated character fiction is suggested by Orsino’s self-forgetfulness, signaled when the actor must remind him of his agenda—“Sir, shall I to this lady? [Olivia]”—and he answers in a half-line that sounds depleted and tired of the routine: “Ay, that’s the theme” (2.4.118–19).

The way the actor-author Viola-Cesario deploys the fiction of the sister in stages beginning with “some lady,” making it more specific and intimate—“my father had a daughter”—and finally delivering a sympathetic rendition of the sister’s history underscores the way an actor is an author through imagination but, more powerfully, through imaginative acts of identification with others (2.4.85, 102). On the level of the play’s fiction, having the character Viola very decisively turn actor and occluding the character within the actor gives Shakespeare the ability to explore the usefulness of acting not only for others but for the actor herself. In this scene of authorial acting, Viola-Cesario resurrects the fictional Viola but keeps her at a distance:

My father had a daughter loved a man
As it might be perhaps, were I a woman,
I should your lordship.

(2.4.102–4)

The self-reference is twice denied by both Viola and Cesario: this sister is not Viola and she is not even Cesario’s sister but his father’s daughter. Viola-Cesario seems to be keeping not only the sister’s gender but also her behavior in abeyance as she explores a possible form devoted love might take:

She never told her love,
But let concealment like a worm i’th’bud
Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like Patience on a monument
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?
We men may say more, swear more, but indeed
Our shows are more than will: for still we prove
Much in our vows, but little in our love.

(2.4.106–14)

It’s a fulcrum moment: either the actor-Viola-Cesario resurrects and animates the occluded fictional character in a sympathetic delivery to integrate her into a complex and evolving subjectivity or she lets this possible version of herself die. Is this love indeed? It is an open question whether the sister’s unvoiced love or the actor’s enacted love is more real. When Orsino asks to know the outcome of this fictional story, the actor-author, who has reasserted her complex identity and authority over the fiction by also identifying as a man, responds, “I am all the daughters of my father’s house, / And all the brothers, too—and yet I know not” (2.4.116–17). This cryptic line suggests Viola-Cesario’s preference for the identity of eunuch actor and the freedom it gives her to be both daughter and brother.

As the actor gains prominence and authority by subsuming both clown and fool, the “allowed” fool, Feste, who manifests “the satirist’s predatory instincts,” voices both antitheatricalist and Jonsonian criticisms when he insinuates that there is “nothing” (punning on the female sex) beneath the actor’s shows and queries indirectly whether the actor’s art has any social or moral purpose (3.1.24). “Indeed, words are very rascals, since bonds disgraced them,” quips the fool, threatened perhaps by the upstart actor who, without the clown/fool’s venerable performance, tradition is corrupting words and delivering “wisdom” (3.1.17–18). Feste’s challenge—who are you and what would you?—is not lost on Viola-Cesario, who will later refer to herself as Olivia’s “fool” and who theorizes her own art by reflecting on Feste’s “practice / As full of labour as a wise man’s art” (3.1.48–49, 55–56). By using positive words like “practice” and “labour,” the actor suggests that her acting may effect real change in the world.

Viola-Cesario’s performances in the latter half of the play are marked by laborious effort and unexpected outcomes. Submission to the constraints of her role involves metaphorical and possibly literal self-sacrifice as she is forced to “meddle” with the emotions and aggressions of other characters provoked to action by her performances. The actor’s self-sacrificial nature (a direct response to the self-love Jonson advocates in Cynthia’s Revels [1600]) is evident as Viola-Cesario presses Orsino’s suit, although it obviates her own. She emphatically declares her commitment to Orsino—“Your servant’s servant is your servant, madam” (3.1.86)—and attempts to redirect Olivia’s passion by “whet[ting] [her] gentle thoughts / On his behalf” (3.1.90–91). The actor not only keeps faith with the master/author,
Orsino, but sustains her bond with the audience, as well. When Olivia begins to confess her love, Viola-Cesario is responsibly sympathetic:

Viola: I pity you
Olivia: That’s a degree to love.
Viola: No, not a grise; for ’tis a vulgar proof
That very oft we pity enemies.

(3.1.108–11)

Throughout the scene, the actor is honest about her own complex identity in lines like “I am not what I am” and “I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth, / And that no woman has; nor never none / Shall mistress be of it, save I alone” (3.1.126, 143–45). Even when the passionate Olivia attempts to stay Viola-Cesario and later when she sends a servant in pursuit to call her back, the actor sustains her patient practice.

Although not immediately apparent, the actor’s honest and committed practice of presenting the paradox of Viola-Cesario prepares characters to see and adapt to complex realities, to contemplate if not unravel mysteries; and it also literally brings to light the solution to the riddle of her identity as actor and as twin—“Single nature’s double name.” Although the sword fight is a sport authored by Toby to mock Sir Andrew, Viola-Cesario, constrained by the male disguise, is forced to play a role: “[M]eddle you must, that’s certain, or forswear to wear iron about you,” insists Toby (3.4.213–14). After doing everything in her power to avoid fighting, the actor-Viola-Cesario remains true to her character and her craft; and, despite fear and awkwardness (“Pray God defend me! A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man”), she engages courageously (3.4.255–56). Because she sustains her actor’s bonds, Antonio identifies her as Sebastian. This is only ostensibly a misidentification. Antonio’s naming unwittingly pays tribute to her love-inspired acting and marks her achievement: she has succeeded in embodying her brother, kept him “yet living I my glass” (3.4.331). Glass may denote a mirror, but mirror was often used as a metaphor for the stage or acting. Certainly, it is Viola-Cesario’s emulation of Sebastian in her resourceful practice (for survival in this case) that causes Antonio to identify her as Sebastian and give new cause to hope that “if it prove, / Tempests are kind, and salt waves fresh in love” (3.4.330–35).

As Viola’s patient practice paves the way for the real happy endings of act 5, Feste, whose wisdom is delivered in a more cerebral register, appears to be increasingly less effective at catalyzing transformation in
his interlocutors. His failure to move Orsino beyond obsession is reprised when he assumes the character of “Sir Topas the curate, . . . to visit Malvolio the lunatic” (4.2.19). Feste’s caricature of a parish priest who paradoxically preaches Pythagorean truths sparks no insight in Malvolio, and Shakespeare further underscores Feste’s fallibility when he has him mistake Sebastian for Cesario and misread the mood of the group assembled in act 5 to whom he reads Malvolio’s letter in a mad “vox,” offering mocks to an audience who wants only to appease (5.1.277). Viola’s acting succeeds because it is inspired by love and is, in practice, a craft that calls upon the actor to care for his audience. Viola may gently imply her difference from Feste when she identifies her antagonist in the 3.1 scene as “a merry fellow” that “car’st for nothing” (3.1.22). So it is the actor’s careful, even loving, creation and performance of a real character (infused with her ideas and passions) that releases the power within his audience to reshape themselves.

Actor-Author as Twin: “A natural perspective, that is and is not!”

Act 5 is orchestrated to build toward the epiphanic reunion and recognition of the twins, which does not expose as fraudulent but explicates the actor-author’s complex nature and justifies her affect: by inciting desire, Viola-Cesario has awakened imagination and the capacity for contemplative seeing in her audience, Olivia and Orsino, giving them the necessary flexibility to make erotic reinvestments that facilitate the romantic resolutions. We know that Shakespeare built *Twelfth Night* on Jonson’s mockery. In *Every Man Out of His Humour*, Jonson stereotyped Shakespeare’s plot as involving “a duke . . . in love with a countess, and that countess . . . in love with the duke’s son, and the son to love the lady’s waiting maid: some such cross-wooing, with a clown to their servingman. . . .” Instead of encouraging judgment so as to effect moral transformation, Jonson thought Shakespeare’s improbable comedies enflamed desire; instead of scaling a Platonic ladder of love, Jonson’s Shakespearean plot traces love’s descent into increasingly less noble forms. Shakespeare manipulates the elements (down to the details) of Jonson’s parody in an ironically defensive way: he writes what may superficially appear to be a feast of fools—a silly romantic comedy with cross-gender wooing that seems to adapt Jonson’s view of desire as a “psychological drive linked to error, folly, and madness.” But Shakespeare leaves open the possibility of an inverse reading of desire as Platonic eros (as the pursuit of wholeness), figured in *Twelfth Night* by the actor and her practice of creating fictional characters with
the audience that enables an exploration and potential redirection of desire, if not in a strict ascent to philosophical concepts and abstract forms, then toward the contemplation of “single-nature double-named.”

Embedded intertextual references to Plato’s *Symposium* enable Shakespeare to ironically defend the social usefulness and even philosophical seriousness of erotic desire in response to Jonson’s Aristotelianism. Many commentators note that Antonio’s description of the twins as “an apple cleft in two is not more twin / than these two creatures” echoes Aristophanes’s comic description of the spherical beings sliced in half by Jove who seek reunion with their other half (5.1.207–8). *Eros*, according to Aristophanes, is “a name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness,” and Shakespeare, because he creates an image with a clear Platonic analogue in a climactic recognition scene that satisfies erotic yearnings of all varieties, would seem to accept this characterization.

Eros as the pursuit of wholeness (both image and idea) has implications for Shakespeare’s defense of the actor and his authorial craft. Indeed, Shakespeare characterizes his archetypal actor, Viola, as a being analogous to Plato’s Eros: both are liminal, acting as messengers in the intermediate realm between the gods and men, as well as between human beings, and both are, allegorically, children of “Want” and “Resourcefulness.” But the actor-Viola also behaves like a human lover who seeks to beget (or deliver) herself through the authorship of beautiful speeches and practices “as full of labour as the wise man’s art” (3.1.56). The wise man of Plato’s dialogues is, of course, Socrates, who—when his turn comes to praise Eros at the *Symposium*’s drinking party—virtually acts out his lesson. He assumes a female persona and performs a dialogue in which the fictional character, Diotima, guides his ascent to an understanding of love (which in conventional interpretations moves beyond love of particulars to love of abstractions). When Viola-Cesario attempts a rational response to Olivia’s enflamed passion that wants to interpret pity as “a degree to love,” she says, “No not a grise; for ’tis a vulgar proof that oft we pity enemies” (3.1.108–10). The rare word *grise*, which means degree or step, suggests the Platonic metaphor of the ladder. But while Olivia seems to prefer the lower rungs of Diotima’s ladder, she is not as thoroughly caught in the *Republic*’s cave as Malvolio imprisoned in a dark room. Contact with the actor has moved her beyond the stasis of mourning by putting her in contact with the mystery of a being she cannot control but must learn to see contemplatively—which primes her to submit eagerly to reciprocated passion when she encounters it in the surprisingly willing Sebastian.

Diotima—whose fictional fame and authority, Plato tells us, derived from her benefits to Athens at a time of great plague—offers Socrates
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the ladder of love as a schematized explanation of contemplative practice that cures human beings of the painful yearnings that attend our desires for particular individuals. Shakespeare often presents the antics of boy actors playing women disguised as men (and sometimes women again!) as affecting (or at least attempting) a kind of love cure and does so explicitly in As You Like It (1599) when the disguised Rosalind suggests curing Orlando’s lovesickness with “good counsel” (3.2.364). But Shakespeare is perhaps more witty and ironic in his treatment of this so-called cure than Plato and may, through intertextual hints, issue a corrective response to Socrates “cross-dressed” performance.70

Shakespeare’s cross-dressing plots demonstrate that lovesickness was never cured by substituting a divine love or a staged ascent to philosophical beauty but by seeing the full and real complexity of the actor (Rosalind-Ganymede or Viola-Cesario) who represents the whole human being. The Symposium famously ends with the speech of the drunken, absolutely besotted Alcibiades, who gives a poetic speech about his particular passion for Socrates, who won him with the beauty of arguments and the power of his words: “For when I hear him my heart leaps up . . . and tears flow at his words” (161). Socrates’s philosophical cure was ineffective with this student, who gives the philosopher mixed reviews both praising and blaming his self-possession (a cardinal virtue advocated by Jonson in Cynthia’s Revels). Comparing Socrates to a Silene statue (plain on the outside but full of divine and golden images), he accuses him of duplicitous acting—of seeming to be “erotically disposed” and seeming to pursue his youthful beauty when all along he cared only for philosophy (163). The actor-Viola-Cesario is attacked in similar terms when she unwittingly fails to answer Antonio’s request for his purse: “O how vile an idol proves this god!” exclaims Antonio, who is frustrated in this situation of mistaken identities, but whose desire is frustrated more generally throughout the play, leaving him unsatisfied and alone like the tragic Alcibiades (3.4.316). To be fair, Viola-Cesario did not have much opportunity to work on or with Antonio, and she does respond compassionately when she realizes that withholding causes reactive behavior. Even in her brief interaction with the frustrated Antonio, we see that the actor cannot effect moral transformation through detached philosophizing. To the extent that Viola-Cesario’s acting effects a cure, it is through self-sacrifice (of her own agenda); loving identification with author, audience, and character; honest performance of actorly complexity; and full engagement with the audience as collaborator even to the extent of bearing responsibility for misconstructions. Cocreation of a fiction incites desire, but desire must be expressed in word and action in order to be seen, examined, and plotted in
progressive or revisionary narratives. Shakespeare counters Socratic (and Jonsonian) self-possession with Christian selflessness in a play whose title alludes to the festival of Epiphany, which celebrates God as an actor who authors Jesus, who, in turn, “participates” from the womb, grossly clad in human flesh to be discovered by the folly of “wise” magi. It’s difficult to imagine a wittier authorization for the actor-author’s practice.\textsuperscript{71}

In the final scene of \textit{Twelfth Night}, Shakespeare deploys the topos of acting as resurrection—which had become part of the standard defense of drama—to show that the imaginative cocreation of a character by actor and audience creates the possibilities for new lives.\textsuperscript{72} The actor seems to resurrect both Sebastian and Viola: Antonio believes he “[d]rew to defend [Sebastian] when he was beset” and later Sebastian, looking at Viola-Cesario, imagines he’s looking at his sister “whom the blind waves and surges have devoured” (5.1.74, 212–13). Face to face with her twin (whose similarity is accentuated by her own assumed persona), the actor expresses sensitivity to the resurrective power of acting in a self-reflexive line—“if spirits can assume both form and suit, / You come to fright us”—that reaches toward positing a spiritual purpose for playing (5.1.218–19). The diction of Viola-Cesario’s line seems to imply that an actor is like a spirit in giving material embodied form to something—the idea of character—that isn’t itself embodied. There are other plays in which the word \textit{spirit} may refer to actors as well as to literal spirits: Oberon’s “we are spirits of another sort” (\textit{Midsummer}, 3.2.388) reassures Puck that fairies are different from ghosts, and Prospero yokes actor and spirit together when he describes the dramatis personae of his masque as “our actors [that] were all spirits” (\textit{The Tempest}, 4.1.148–49). Anthony Gash, sensing Platonic influence in Shakespeare’s frequent use of the word \textit{shadows} to denote both actors and spirits, suggests that while actors may \textit{represent} (personate or imitate existing empirical reality), they may also “bod[y] forth / The forms of things unknown,” existing as symbolic suggestions of a spiritual order\textsuperscript{73} (\textit{Midsummer}, 5.1.14–15). The syntax of Sebastian’s response to Viola-Cesario holds open both natural and supernatural possibilities while broadening the acting metaphor to include all human action of the world’s stage: “A spirit I am indeed, / But am in that dimension grossly clad / Which from the womb I did participate” (5.1.220–22).

Shakespeare descants on the theme that the actor’s art has magical or spiritual efficacy, but he shows that the real power of acting is not in its illusory ability to raise the dead but in its use of fiction to awaken desire and imagination in the living. To this end, he structures the recognition scene in stages that track the audience’s progress in authoring and editing what they will. Olivia and Orsino collaborated with the actor to
create Viola-Cesario, and, through the process, they experienced love in its full range from friendship to eros. Stirred by imagination, each divines in Viola-Cesario something elusive, wished for but beyond the reach of ordinary language and concepts to grasp. The collaborative authorship of Viola-Cesario is emphasized in act 5 when, before Sebastian’s entrance, the actor is scrutinized and claimed as beloved by Antonio, Orsino, and Olivia; and all three rely on figurative language to word his inexpressible personal power and value. Antonio calls the boy “a witchcraft”; Orsino, refers to Viola-Cesario as Olivia’s “minion” whom she has “crowned” but makes his own claim for him as the “lamb that I do love;” and Olivia titles him “husband” (5.1.65, 114, 117, 119, 133). The activity of creating a character has made Antonio, Orsino, and Olivia conscious of what they value, and each attempts to appropriate this valuable object as part of themselves: Antonio exposes himself “pure for his love / Into the danger of this adverse town”; the rejected Orsino, contemplating his own death, is ready to “kill what I love” for company; and Olivia seeks to join two in one flesh through marriage (5.1.72–73, 108).

It’s crucial to see that the audience wills its own endings: before Sebastian appears to resolve the apparent love triangle, Olivia has chosen reciprocated love and marriage and Orsino has, contrary to taboo, expressed deep love for his boy. The reunion fulfills the expectations of both onstage and offstage audiences, rewarding the choices Olivia and Orsino have already made and underscoring the importance of contemplation to spectating. Anthony Gash notes the way Shakespeare slows down and stretches out the recognition scene, conferring on it a “ceremonious” quality—“It is as if the moment, freed from its place within a causal chain of events (the plot), expands toward infinity.” In performance, physical activity is reduced to stillness, while words slow down: Orsino’s—“One face, one voice, one habit and two persons— / A natural perspective, that is and is not!”—provides a tentative accompaniment to visual contemplation that moves toward a simultaneous understanding of the twins and of his beloved servant-actor. Olivia’s—“Most wonderful!”—emphatically reiterates the contemplative theme (5.1.200–201, 209).

The twins are a physical emblem that wordlessly explicates the mystery of the actor-author—a double creature in more than one respect, as she must identify with and subject himself to the demands of both character and audience. The pinnacle of the Platonic ladder is, according to Socrates-Diotima, contemplation of “the Beautiful itself,” after which initiates “are ready to gaze on those [they] love and dwell with them forever.” Dubious commentators dislike what they interpret as a “flat uniform landscape of value” in which one beauty may be replaced easily by
another. But Shakespeare, responding deeply in an echo to Plato’s open question, presents Olivia’s acceptance of Sebastian, who introduces himself as “maid and man,” either as a convenient substitution or as a flexible adjustment of value—a willingness to treat a related object as intimately comparable, which it literally is. Orsino’s reinvestment has predated the revelation that merely authorizes and naturalizes his expressed desire for his boy.

Shakespeare authenticates the actor-author instead of exposing her as a fraud: when the occluded Viola could be resurrected, she is always and forever kept at a distance from the actor-Viola-Cesario, whose identity and activity are sustained throughout the recognition and betrothal scenes. Because she is named for the first time in the play by Sebastian, it can seem as if Viola is resurrected in the reunion with her twin; however, her women’s weeds (symbolic of an identity that predates the shipwreck) are never recovered. “[Her] nature [is] subdued / To what it works in, like the dyer’s hand”—the actor is changed by her own acting, and it is Viola-Cesario’s actorly identity that is affirmed in the final scene (sonnet 111, lines 6–7). Significantly, she does not answer directly when Sebastian calls her by name—“Thrice welcome, drowned Viola”—but refers to herself in third person as a distant memory or a character she must play again to revive: “My father had a mole upon his brow. . . . And died that day when Viola from her birth / Had numbered thirteen years” (5.1.226–29). When Viola decides to speak in first person, it is to account for her cast-off “maiden weeds” and to define herself in terms of her activity: “I am Viola,” “I was preserved—to serve,” “All the occurrence of my fortune since / Hath been between this lady and this lord” (5.1.251, 236–42). The romantic resolution affirms her actor identity even more explicitly: Orsino addresses her as “Boy” and, although he makes his initial betrothal contingent on seeing Viola dressed as a woman, he later revokes that condition and gives his hand to an actor “for . . . service. . . . / So much against the mettle of your sex” (5.1.251, 299–301).

What’s particularly wonderful about the ending of Twelfth Night is the way the credibility of romantic feelings and the resolution of the fiction depend on the materiality of performance. When Viola-Cesario and Orsino need to reassure each other that their professions of love are more than word games, they refer to a shared performance history as a touchstone of real sayings and feelings:

**Orsino:** Boy, thou has said to me a thousand times
Thou never shouldst love woman like to me.
**Viola:** And all those sayings will I overswear,
And all those swearings keep as true in soul
As doth that orbed continent the fire
That severs day from night.

(5.1.251–56)

The actor-Viola, who has already sworn that her love for Orsino is “unfeigned,” authenticates her “sayings” by gesturing to an interior that she names the soul, punning on sol (sun), when in simile she describes her soul as contained fire—the source of her passionate words. The image resonates with the twin emblem in suggesting that the actor’s single nature manifests itself in dialectical fluidity or in a double name (Viola-Cesario, Viola-Sebastian, day-night). But Viola-Cesario also suggestively describes her sun/sol as “sever[ing] day from night,” implying that the actor’s sayings have power to recreate light and life. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare counters Jonson’s representation of a self-loving playwright with his own self-abnegating actor-author who pours herself out by submitting to experience, the audience, and the constraints of performing a particular character. But Shakespeare also suggests that this same actor-author possesses a stable soul that contains and regulates passionate expression, making her a model mechanism of transformation and a vehicle of quotidian resurrections.

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NOTES

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5. Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster set out to show how Shakespearean performance stages the gap between two different cultural modes of production—scripted representation in a burgeoning print culture and the actor’s traditional preliterary playing techniques. However, they assert with qualifications that the dramatist’s text is finally sovereign because it “assimilated the player’s gestus, speech rhythms, and kinetic thrust prior to subsequent embodiment” (*Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in Elizabethan Theatre* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 9).

6. Bednarz (*Shakespeare and the Poets’ War*) argues that the three plays Shakespeare wrote in direct response to Jonson are *As You Like It* (1599), *Twelfth Night* (1601), and *Troilus and Cressida* (1601). He also notes that Shakespeare alludes to the Poets’ War in *Hamlet*, which he assumes was written in 1600 and revised in 1601, after *Twelfth Night*.


9. Weimann and Bruster derive the term *role playing* from a later source, Thomas Heywood’s *Apology for Actors* (1607; see note 12), and use it to refer to the “secretly open exposure of the actor behind the dramatic role,” which supports their claims for the actor’s “bifold authority” in the gap between speech and writing (*Shakespeare and the Power* [see note 5], 5–6, 145).


14. Shakespeare uses *personate* in the late plays *Timon of Athens* (1607–8) and *Cymbeline* (1609–10) to refer to a style of imitating real persons in print (poetry, a letter, an oracle) and elevating them in a heightened or allegorical mode with the aim of flattering and ingratiating the artist or performer with his patron or audience.


16. My work on Shakespeare’s “acting theory” agrees with the more general “theory of drama” Pauline Kiernan suggests is embedded in Shakespeare’s work, based on a “repudiation of the mimesis concept of art” (*Shakespeare’s Theory of Drama* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 8). Although she does not write about Viola’s symbolic acting or about acting theory, per se, her discussion of Shakespeare’s preference for “dramatic illusion” in which the actor calls attention to the fictitiousness of what is being presented over “mimetic illusion” has influenced my thinking significantly (91–126).

17. Muriel Bradbrook notes the importance of the actor’s conceit in her discussion of Richard Burbage acting Shakespeare in contrast to Edward Alleyn’s acting of Marlovian roles in a style that “imposed . . . by grand, obliterating majesty” (*The Rise of the Common Player: A Study of Actor and Society in Shakespeare’s England* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1962], 136–37). Although Thomas Heywood’s celebration of theatrical realism differs from Shakespeare’s implicit ideas about acting, Heywood does stress that actors should be “scholars, that though they cannot speak well, know how to speak” (Heywood, *Apology for Actors*, 233).

18. My sense of authorship is influenced by Michael D. Bristol, who theorizes it as a dialogic relationship and not a proprietary relationship to specific utterances (*Big-Time Shakespeare* [New York: Routledge, 1996], 58).

19. My approach to the Viola role as a study of the actor’s craft dovetails with the progression Nancy K. Hayles notices in the comedies of sexual disguise that are interested in sexual role-playing but become, in the later plays, concerned with the metaphysical implications of the disguise, using it as a means to investigate and, eventually resolve, the disparity between appearance and essence (“Sexual Disguise in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 32 [1979]: 63–72, quotation on 63).


22. My work on the creation of fictional character in *Twelfth Night* coincides with recent early-modern work on the concept of character. Leanore Lieblein, using Heywood's *Apology* as her primary source, proposes a notion of character as “the product of a physically informed communication that results from the actor’s embodiment and the spectators’ experience” (“Embodied Intersubjectivity and the Creation of Early Modern Character,” in Yachnin and Slights, *Shakespeare and Character* [see note 20], 117–35, quotation on 117).

23. My reading of the play as staging the occlusion of the fictional character within the performer explains why readers like Jean Howard read Viola as having “interiorized” the feminine role and view her cross-dressing as a “psychological haven or holding place.” Unlike Howard, I believe the emergence and dominance of the actor in the Viola role effects the “interior being of the gendered subject,” who changes as she is delivered in the act of creating the new character, Viola-Cesario (*The Stage*, esp. 112–16). See also Judith Rose’s essay on the 2002 Globe production of an all-male *Twelfth Night* in which she concentrates on the constructedness or the artifice of Shakespearean female subjectivity, which, ironically, “might manifest itself more forcefully when a man plays a woman” (“Performing Gender at the Globe: The Technologies of the Cross-Dressed Actor,” in *Shakespeare Re-Dressed* [see note 20], 210–30, quotation on 224).

24. Shakespeare’s first use of the word *actor* was in *Richard II* (1597), and he uses it frequently in *Hamlet* (1600–1601).


26. See Wiles’s discussion (*Shakespeare’s Clown*, 155–74). He suggests that the clown is an important figure because the clown stands at the heart of the Elizabethan debate about acting. The replacement of William Kempe (who abruptly left the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1599) by Robert Armin was

> part of a broad drift toward a new type of theatre . . . characterization had to be based on careful observation. The actor had to be responsible to the author, and to realize a character possessing an anterior existence in the author’s imagination. (x)

I don’t agree with these general comments that Wiles makes in the preface to his study. I believe Shakespeare grants actors considerably more freedom to interpret and perform characters and that he illustrates this freedom in Viola’s actor-author role.

27. I seek a mean between the extreme positions of reading Shakespeare as antagonistic to potentially unruly performance practices of clowns and reading him as clown-friendly. I appreciate Nora Johnson’s idea that Shakespeare saw authorial potential in comic performance and sought to harness it for his professional actors (*The Actor as Playwright in Early Modern Drama* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 155).

28. While I agree with the critical consensus that we should not mistake Hamlet’s ideas about drama and acting for Shakespeare’s, in both plays Shakespeare takes pains to gesture toward or represent the interior of his characters, and it is this interior (expressed
by means of character occlusion) that authorizes and informs outward behavior—the "actions that a man might play" (1.2.84).

29. Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poets' War*, 155–74. Bednarz discusses Jonson’s both *Every Man Out* and *Cynthia's Revels, Or the Fountayne of Self-love* as the two plays Shakespeare was responding to in *Twelfth Night*. In *Cynthia’s Revels*, Jonson unmasks the narcissism of courtiers and counters it with an image of allowed self-love figured by a self-referential playwright character, Criticus. Shakespeare, as Christina Malcolmson writes, pokes fun at the notion of allowed self-love with the character Malvolio. Instead of creating a character that represents any kind of self-love, Shakespeare gives us the actor-author whose nature is to sacrifice or donate herself to the characters she creates (“‘What You Will’: Social Mobility and Gender in *Twelfth Night*,” in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne [New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991], 29–57, esp. 48). Robert Weimann discusses more generally the way Shakespeare used his scripts to intervene in the culture wars of his time between “polite and popular pursuits” (*Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, 122).

30. Nora Johnson argues that the power of playing constructed relational forms of authorship that cannot be explained by later notions of literary property or essentialist self-expression (*The Actor as Playwright*). Patrick Cheney, in a slightly less causal argument, views Shakespeare’s concerns as dual (theatrical and literary) throughout his career. Cheney argues that Shakespeare practices a self-concealing mode of authorship that is deliberately counterlaureate, disappearing into “character” within the collaborative work of the theater (*Shakespeare’s Literary Authorship* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008]). Both critics view the models of actor-author as countering the dominant model established by Edmund Spenser and elaborated by Ben Jonson.


32. Janet Clare, “The ‘Complexion,’” 202; and John Rainoldes, William Gager, and Alberico Gentili, *The Overthrow of Stage-Plays*, ed. A. Freeman (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1972), 18 (originally published 1599). Nancy Hayles argues that *Twelfth Night* responds directly to specific concerns about the morality of cross-dressing, articulated in *The Overthrow of Stage Plays*. I agree with her assessment that Shakespeare shows how the fluid ambiguity of the boy actress (that Rainoldes feared would lead the spectator into abomination and moral chaos) “releases the characters in *Twelfth Night* from frustration . . . leading to fruition and fulfillment” (Hayles, “Sexual Disguise,” 70).


34. Anthony Gash, writing about Neoplatonism in Shakespeare, sees in *Twelfth Night* “a serious expression of Platonic views of perception.” He focuses on the different “madnesses” of Malvolio and Sebastian, linking them to the parable of the cave from *The Republic* and the love-inspired madness defended by Socrates in *The Phaedrus* (“Shakespeare’s Comedies of Shadow and Substance: Word and Image in *Henry IV* and *Twelfth Night*, *Word and Image* 4, nos. 3–4 (1998): 626–62, quotation on 627). Not only would classical references strengthen Shakespeare’s rebuttal of Jonson’s aesthetics, which were thoroughly informed by classical philosophy and literature, but a classical pedigree was deemed essential when Thomas Heywood sought to defend acting and the theater in his *Apology*, published in 1612.

35. Lesley Anne Soule discusses the way the fictional Rosalind is banished early in *As You Like It* and is replaced by the actor who interrogates the fictional Rosalind and ideologies of romantic love and marriage in her conversations with Orlando in the forest. The situation in *Twelfth Night* is rather different. Since Viola is unknown, and goes unnamed until act 5, her fictional character is not the object of critical scrutiny in the same way


38. See Lesley Soule’s description of the stage personae of the adolescents who played women’s parts (“Subverting Rosalind,” 131).

39. According to Edward Burns, “Character is a two-way process . . . [.] a transaction between two human subjects. Conceived of in this way, character is a creative perception, which constructs both observer and observed as its subjects” (Acting and Being on the Premodern Stage [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990], 2).


41. See Wiles, Shakespeare’s Clown, 2.

42. Soule, 132; and Wiles, Shakespeare’s Clown, 52.

43. Weimann and Bruster, Shakespeare and the Power, 119.

44. Weimann and Bruster note that “Shakespeare’s clowns and fools never insinuate themselves into the locus of love and friendship in comedy, nor that of heroic action in tragedy” (ibid, 78). When the actor subsumes the clown role, a hybrid is produced. Wiles notes that this also happens with Hamlet, who assumes from the clown/Vice the function of mediating between play and audience (Wiles, Shakespeare’s Clown, 60).

45. Weimann and Bruster, Shakespeare and the Power, 126.

46. To the limited extent that Christina Malcolmson discusses Viola as a performer, she discusses her “capable representation of the attributes of an upper-class young man” (“What You Will,” 33). Of course, I believe that the power of Viola’s performance extends beyond her attempts to personate a male courtier.

47. B[ertram] L[eon] Joseph suggests that Elizabethan acting had its roots in humanist pedagogical practice of teaching boys Latin through recitation of dialogue. Speakers were encouraged to imagine themselves “with ‘occasion’ to speak the words, [and] with a need to express what is said by them.” This is exactly what the actor-Viola-Cesario does in this scene: she imagines herself in Orsino’s position (Elizabethan Acting [1951; repr., New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979], 27).


50. Meredith Anne Skura, Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 155. See also David Schalkwyk’s discussion of the vulnerability of “loving service declared and staged in the public gaze” (Shakespeare, Love and Service [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 116).
Christina Malcolmson cites “a loving commitment to others” as the basis of *Twelfth Night*’s “new model of marriage.” My reading of the actor-Viola’s commitment to a practice, based on loving identification with others, suggests that acting may be the basis for this new ideology (“What You Will,” 31).

Shakespeare’s interest in such a synthesis is clear from Theseus’s speech in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1590–96) in which he contrasts “cool Reason” and “strong Imagination.” Plato was interested in a similar synthesis, and Gash explains that connections between Shakespeare and Plato are often overlooked because Plato’s idealism (as opposed to all forms of materialism, including theater) is taken as axiomatic (“Shakespeare’s Comedies,” 628).

James Bednarz thinks that Viola’s acting turns into the form of Viola’s detachment. While I agree that Viola submits to experience, specifically the experience of being an actor, it is her engaged submission to the actor’s practice that creates ostensibly impossible (unrealizable passions) (*Shakespeare and the Poets’ War*, 187).

Many commentators have discussed the differences between the styles of William Kemp and Robert Armin. The ongoing debate about Armin’s fool involves the extent to which the fool’s role was controlled by the dramatist’s script. Wiles argues this interpretation (*Shakespeare’s Clown*). Although Feste’s part (with its sophisticated dialogue and jokes written in complicated wordplay) is so closely interwoven with the main action that it does suggest a dramatist’s controlling hand, recent commentators cite the influence of Armin’s solo acts and his own writings on the construction of the fool role to argue for a coauthorship model (see Johnson, *The Actor as Playwright*, 16–53).


David Schalkwyk suggests that *Twelfth Night* explores the “qualitative difference between Orsino’s desire for Olivia and his love for Cesario,” and he also believes that the script makes this evident to the audience despite the character’s blindness (*Shakespeare, Love and Service*, 125).

See Clare, “The ‘Complexion,’” 206.

See Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, 520.

See Bednarz’s discussion of the way Shakespeare uses Feste to counter Jonson’s authoritarian dramaturgy: “Feste illustrates the failure of reason to account for life’s complexities and the danger of believing absolutes, especially about oneself.” However, to the extent that Feste’s wit has a satirical edge, he also expresses Jonson’s criticisms of Shakespeare’s art (*Shakespeare and the Poets’ War*, 190–91).

Bednarz identifies this as Viola’s “most touching quality” (ibid., 188). Jonson defines the personal qualities of an ideal self in *Cynthia’s Revels* (1600) through the playwright character, Criticus. However, in later plays like *The Alchemist* (1610), he seems to have become less didactic and moved closer to the position Shakespeare suggests in *Twelfth Night*—that the actual practice of performance can “involve movement toward perfection” (see Mary Crane’s discussion of *The Alchemist* (“What Was Performance?” 183)).

62. Anthony Gash notes the way Feste’s performance here calls attention to the machinery of theatrical illusion (“Shakespeare’s Comedies,” 646).

63. Clare, “The ‘Complexion,’” 201.


65. Ibid., 193.

66. Shakespeare, “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” 39. Barbara Everett argues that analyses of love in the early-modern period cannot be separated from Renaissance Neoplatonism, which descended from Plato’s *Symposium*, which she claims was one of two texts by Plato “most loved by Elizabethan poets (“Good and Bad Loves: Shakespeare, Plato and the Plotting of the Sonnets,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 July 2002, 13–15, quotation on 13). Several scholars have discussed the availability of comparatively easy Latin translations that Shakespeare would have likely encountered (see A. B. Taylor, “Plato’s *Symposium* and Titania’s Speech on the Universal Effect of Her Quarrel with Oberon,” *Notes and Queries* 51, no. 3 [2004]: 276–78). Taylor along with Stephen Medcalf also suggests that Ben Jonson may have been a source of texts, since Shakespeare was collaborating with him on a volume called *Love’s Martyr* (1601) in which the poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle” appeared, and Shakespeare also performed in 1598 in Jonson’s play *Every Man in His Humour* (see Stephen Medcalf, “Shakespeare on Beauty, Truth, and Transcendence,” in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 117–25).

67. The important theme of madness (experienced in different ways by Sebastian and Malvolio) also echoes Plato’s late dialogue *The Phaedrus*, in which the intellect is guided to insight by personal love and “by a complex passion-engendered ferment of the entire personality.” Significantly, in *The Phaedrus* Socrates fuses philosophical argument with role playing and poetry (see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 200–233, quotation on 201).


69. Shakespeare uses *grise* only three times in his entire body of work. *Twelfth Night* is the first play in which it is used. In *Othello*, the duke uses it when trying to counsel Brabantio to accept the marriage of Desdemona to Othello. Its meaning as a “step” is made explicit: “Let me speak . . . and lay a sentence, / Which, as a grise or step, may help these lovers / [Into your favor]” (1.3.199–201). The cross-dressed Rosalind also uses the metaphor of a ladder or “stairs” in *As You Like It* to describe the process of Celia and Oliver’s love:

   For your brother and my sister no sooner met but they look’d; no sooner look’d but they lov’d; no sooner lov’d but they sigh’d; no sooner sigh’d but they ask’d one another the reason; no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy—and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage, which they will climb incontinent, or else be incontinent before marriage. (5.2.30–36)

70. Martha Nussbaum reads *The Symposium* as equivocal in its undermining of ostensible truth with Alcibiades’s closing praise speech, in which he tells the story of his particular love for Socrates (*Fragility of Goodness*, 165–99).

72. See Meredith Skura’s discussion of the “resurrection topos” (Shakespeare the Actor, 91).
   The actor-author’s double nature, itself, makes possible the unconventional combination of eros and philia (see Schalkwyk, Shakespeare, Love and Service, 126).


74. Ibid., 649.

75. Plato, The Symposium, 156.


77. Anthony Gash reads in Sebastian’s delayed naming of Viola and his greeting “thrice welcome” a “celebration of poetry as creation rather than imitation,” as Viola is a creative fusion of poet, male actor, and female role (“Shakespeare’s Comedies,” 651).