

## Exercise on Dress and Identity

In Twelfth Night, as in Renaissance culture generally, dress is understood to play a major role in the establishment of identity. Not only does Viola's cross-dressing motivate the plot, but Malvolio's sartorial mishaps and Olivia's mourning dress and veil are freighted with social significance. To a great extent, characters in this play are what they wear—at least in the eyes of others. (Indeed, one of the reasons puritan writers of the period wanted to close the theaters was that they believed theatrical costuming upset the natural order of things: lowly actors were appareled like kings, boys wore the clothes of women, and so on.) Today we are somewhat less conscious of the ways in which “the apparel . . . proclaims the man” (Hamlet, I. iii. 72), but arguably self-presentation through dress and hairstyle does still influence not only how we are perceived by others but also how we experience ourselves.

For this exercise, then, you will experiment with a new form of self-presentation and see what effects it produces. This can be done any number of ways: a woman who usually wears flowery skirts might dress like a jock; someone accustomed to looking tough or hip could dress in a deliberately “preppy” way; a man could wear something he would ordinarily regard as too feminine, like a pastel-colored shirt. Whatever you do, the point is not only to wear something you typically wouldn't wear, but to wear something that evokes for you a particular social type, so that you feel yourself to be playing the role of a specific kind of person. You can try out your “costume” in any public arena you choose: at the grocery store, at home with your family, on campus. You want to notice whether people treat you any differently from the way they normally do and whether you yourself feel different. You will then write up a one-page account of the experience to turn in, and we will discuss your discoveries in class.

If for some reason you are extremely averse to doing this, you may forego the practical experiment. But you must in that case provide a two-page, compelling account of your aversion. That is, you must think very seriously about your unwillingness to dress differently from your norm, even for a few hours.