

Cesario, Sebastian, Olivia, Viola, and Illyria in "Twelfth Night"

Norman Nathan

Abstract

Shakespeare chose certain names in *Twelfth Night* with reference to Caesar Augustus. *Sebastos* was Caesar's Greek name; Caesar had lived in Illyria; Caesar married Livia. This naming is effective since Viola and Sebastian look like one and the same person, they are in Illyria, and Sebastian marries Olivia who tried to marry Cesario.

In Barnabe Riche's *Riche His Farewell to Military Profession* and the anonymous *Gl'Ingannati* (the two major possible sources for *Twelfth Night*), Illyria and the names of the noble characters, Orsino, Viola, Cesario, Sebastian, and Olivia, do not appear (Satin 317-380).

While Shakespeare may have taken the names *Viola* and *Olivia* from *Violetta* and *Olivia* in *Parismus* by Emmanuel Forde (Craig 616), it is not unusual for Shakespeare to invent for his characters names not in his sources (e.g. *Bassanio*, *Shylock*, *Jessica*, *Portia*, and *Nerissa* in *The Merchant of Venice*). His inventions, however, frequently have more than casual significance. And such is the case for the names in *Twelfth Night* that are mentioned above.

For *Orsino*, Leslie Hotson has suggested that the name was prompted by the presentation of the play when Duke Virgino Orsino was visiting Queen Elizabeth (Campbell 902). While no more convincing suggestion has been made for the use of this unusual name, one may question whether a visiting duke would have been pleased to see his name used for so lovelorn and fickle a personage as the duke in the play!

However, *Cesario*, *Sebastian*, *Olivia*, and, anagrammatically, *Viola* can be found to have a relationship to each other and to the plot. The placename *Illyria* likewise has a relevance.

Consider first the names *Cesario* and *Sebastian*. Murray J. Levith makes this thin suggestion: "Cesario, from the Latin *cesaries* for 'bushy hair,' an apt designation for a girl disguised as a boy" (92). But "*Caesare*

was fairly common in Italy in the 15th C” (Withycombe 54), and the derivation of *Cesario* from Julius or any of the other Caesars is far more likely than relating Shakespeare’s character to bushy hair. (Were there no Elizabethan young males with bushy hair?) The “*io*” is a suffix Shakespeare sometimes applies to the names of male characters (*Antonio, Bassanio, Mercutio, Mercatio*). The reason for associating *Cesario* with Caesar will be even more apparent after a look at the name *Sebastian*.

Levith writes, “Sebastian is named for the Saint martyred by arrows, whose legend connoted youth and bravery” (92). While Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* is manly enough, certainly bravery is not his hallmark. The use of the name *Sebastian* becomes clearer when it is pointed out that *Cesario* and *Sebastian* could be the Roman and the Greek names with identical meaning: “Augustus...venerable” (Withycombe 37) and “Sebastian...venerable” (Withycombe 264). And both names could be and were applied to the same person. “Sebastos is the Greek translation of Augustus” (Holum 22). Shakespeare had a knowledge of Latin and Greek, even if it was not enough to satisfy Ben Jonson. That knowledge would certainly be shared by many in his audience who would recognize that both names had identical meaning. Also, since Olivia recognizes no apparent difference between brother and sister, the fact that both names could refer to the same person reinforces verbally for some in the audience what their eyes are supposed to see.

Consider *Cesario* (Viola) who is depicted as a twin of Sebastian. Their appearances are mirror images:

An apple, cleft in two, is not more twin
Than these two creatures. Which is Sebastian?
(V.i.223-224)

Thus, when Viola dons male clothing, she not only looks like her brother but also takes his name, though in a different language. This could even be considered as a touching show of affection for the brother she fears drowned. There is an historical connection for these two names and the placename *Illyria*: “Augustus was a student under the orator Apollodorus at Appolonia in Illyricum ...” (Thorne 66). *Illyria* in the play has another connection with the story of Augustus. Herod had dedicated a city in Samaria and its harbor to Caesar Augustus:

The name Caesarea came from the family name of the Caesars; the harbor's special name, is the Greek translation of Augustus. (Holum 22)

And Caesarea: "Because of powerful winds and currents, some ships did not reach the harbor entrance, but ran aground on the breakwaters or on shore and were lost with their cargoes" (Holum 137). Thus, the city named for Augustus was famous for shipwrecks, and Viola and Sebastian reach Illyria because of a shipwreck.

Consider another name, *Olivia*. Of Augustus' wives, the most important historically was Livia. In the play Olivia by her determination succeeds in marrying Cesario/Sebastian. Perhaps Shakespeare changed *Livia* to *Olivia* so that the anagrammatic linkage with Viola could be made. Also, *Olivia* is an Italian form of Olive, and Olive is a frequent enough English name to be among the eighteen female names each given lengthy attention in William Warren's poetic *The Nurserie of Names*.

Olivia consists of an *O* prefixed to Livia. Shouldn't Shakespeare have used *Livia* for his character's name if he wished to show a nominal relationship between his characters and Caesar Augustus? Or, since Sebastian in marrying Olivia is not the famous emperor, did Shakespeare prefer similar rather than identical names? Apparently, the latter. And since Orsino finds little to choose between Olivia and Viola, the anagrammatic quality of their names is dramatically well done.

The reader will recognize in the above that *Twelfth Night* has several names and events that are identical or similar to those in the life of Caesar Augustus. Is this purely a series of coincidences related coincidentally, or did Shakespeare choose these names deliberately? I assume the latter. This interpretation adds an extra, though modest, dimension to the play that deals with twins who look so much alike that Olivia is willing, by appearance alone, to marry either!

Florida Atlantic University
Boca Raton

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