



*Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLIJ)*

Vol.4 / NO.1 /Spring 2014

**Electra Complex in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night***

**Muhammad Shoaib**

**Abstract:**

*This paper argues that Viola and Olivia in Shakespeare's comedy Twelfth Night (1623) are driven by their unconscious desire to possess their brothers who serve as father-figures for them. By applying Carl Jung's theory of Electra Complex and a related Freudian theory of penis envy, I will seek to make a study of the phallic and the post-Oedipal stages in the psychosexual development of the two female characters, Viola and Olivia. The triangle of daughter, father (or father-figure) and mother (or mother-figure) will be discussed in the cases of both the girls. The paper will further prove that the two girls are possessed by an acute desire to replace and imitate their mothers by first idealizing the father-figures, and then by replacing the wish for their own fathers (or the father-figures) with the wish to emulate their mothers by possessing an ideal father, and having a child.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Electra complex, psycho-sexual, father, daughter,*

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLIJ) ISSN 2249-4529

Vol.4/ NO.1/Spring 2014

URL of the Journal- <http://pintersociety.com/>

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-4-no-1-spring-2014/>

© [www.pintersociety.com](http://www.pintersociety.com)

Electra complex takes its name from the Greek myth of Electra as dealt with by Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in their plays with some differences. In the Greek myth, Electra plans to avenge herself on her mother and her paramour for the murder of her father, and finally leads her brother Orestes to kill their mother and her lover. Therefore, Electra is the representative of a complex characterized by a love for the father and/or brother (father-figure), and a hatred of the mother.

C.G. Jung, in 1913, coined the term 'Electra Complex' as a female counterpart to Freud's term 'Oedipus Complex'. Jill Scott, in his book *Electra after Freud: Myth and Culture* (2005), points out that Electra Complex “refers to the phenomenon of little girl's attraction to her father and hostility toward her mother, whom she now sees as her rival. The girl's desire to possess her father is linked to her desire to possess the penis, and the Electra complex is often described as penis envy.” (08) According to Scott, the figure of Electra appeals to the modern sensibility as she is able to break the hegemony of the male-dominated Oedipus model.

For Electra Complex, Freud used the term 'female Oedipus Complex'. It is the phallus that is the key to the male progression through the Oedipal process, through fear of castration, to a normal heterosexual role. In his view, every girl is, at first, attracted to her mother because of the physical resemblance. But when the female child discovers her deficiency of not having a penis, she becomes deeply resented toward her mother for denying her the penis, and giving it to her brother. Since the girl cannot be with her father, her desire to possess the father is converted to the desire to mimic the mother, and find an alternative father-figure in order to perform the role of the mother. In *Theories of Personality* (2008), Richard M. Ryckman comments on the Freudian concept of penis envy, “In Freud's view, women's most significant attitudes and wishes derive their energy from penis envy. Thus, happiness during pregnancy results from symbolic possession of the penis (the male child in the womb).” (156)

Nancy Kulish and Deanna Holtzman, in *A Story of Her Own: The Female Oedipus Complex Reexamined and Renamed* (2008), challenge and reject the Freudian concept of 'female Oedipal Complex' as patriarchal and a misnomer. They highlight the problem inherent in the use of the Freudian term:

First, its very construction—the name of a man and the limiting adjective “female”—

## Electra Complex in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

suggests that the essence of the complex is masculine ... Second, practitioners too often project automatically what they have learned about the male Oedipus onto clinical material presented by females. This tendency leads to distortions, blind spots, and expectations that dynamics for males and females in the triangular phase are identical.<sup>(3-4)</sup> Kulish and Holtzman prefer the term 'Persephone complex' as a female counterpart to Oedipus complex. This model is based on the Greek myth of Persephone as described by Ovid in Book V of his *Metamorphoses* (1632). Persephone, the daughter of Demeter and Zeus, is abducted and taken to the underworld by Hades, uncle to Persephone, and thus a father-figure. Demeter goes to the underworld to take her daughter back. But as Persephone has been tricked into eating the seeds of a pomegranate, she must stay in the underworld. Finally, through the intervention of Zeus, it is decided that Persephone will live two parts of every year with her mother and the third part with Hades. Thus, the triangle of daughter, father and mother carries on with Persephone's sexual desires driving her down to the father-figure in the underworld (a symbol of her unconscious), while her moral responsibilities pulling her up to the human world ( a symbol of her conscious self).

Shakespeare's comedies are a ripe field for the application of the psychoanalytical theories. Shakespeare's plays explore the father-daughter relationship to a great deal. Harold Bloom asserts, "In fact, it is Shakespeare who gives us the map of the mind. It is Shakespeare who invents Freudian Psychology. Freud finds ways of translating it into supposedly analytical vocabulary." (69-88) *Twelfth Night* presents the psychosexual love of two girls for their brothers whom they idealize as the father-figures. The psycho-sexual development of Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night* can be divided into three stages: the pre-phallic in which they are centered on their mothers, the phallic where the father-figures are objects of their desire, and the post-Oedipal or genital which is the socially-accepted stage in which they find alternative source of phallus. However, most of the time, Olivia and Viola are shown in the transitional phase between the phallic and the genital stages.

Both Olivia and Viola in *Twelfth Night* have an unconscious desire to possess the father-figures represented by their brothers. In Act I, when Viola reaches Illyria after a shipwreck in which she has lost her brother, her very first words are about her lost brother, Sebastian. The captain tells her that he saw her brother alive escaping the sea-storm. She offers the captain some gold on hearing the news of her brother's survival. She says, "for saying so, there's gold/Mine

own escape unfoldeth to my hope,/Whereto thy speech serves for authority,/ The like of him"(1.2.18-21). This piece of news keeps alive her wish to possess her brother. The ship in which Viola was making journey with her brother symbolizes the womb of the mother for her where she was united with her twin brother. The shipwreck cut both of them from the umbilical cord, and they got disconnected from each other. For Viola, landing in Illyria is equivalent to landing in the unconscious and reaching the phallic stage. By leaving the ship behind, Viola comes out of her fixation with her mother, and enters the second stage where phallus of the father-figure is the desired object. With this realization, the triangle of mother-symbol (the ship), daughter and the father-figure is completed. Here, Viola realizes the absence of penis from her body, and decides to go on a quest for it.

In both *The Comedy of Errors* (1595) and *Twelfth Night*, the twins are in search of their lost halves. In *The Comedy of Errors*, the two pairs of the separated halves are homosexual, but in *Twelfth Night*, they are heterosexual. After Sebastian and Viola are re-united in the last Act of the play, Antonio remarks, "An apple cleft in two is not more twin/ Than these two creatures"(5.1.15-16). But before Viola and Sebastian unite, both of them have already found an alternative and non-fraternal other half: Sebastian is mistakenly married to Olivia, and Viola has got her attention centered on Orsino. Thus, the two siblings cross their phallic stage during the time they are separate from each other.

Disguise, real or symbolic, acts as a transitional device between the phallic stage and the post-Oedipal stage for Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. After her arrival in Illyria, Viola disguises herself as her brother, Sebastian though, at first, she plans to disguise herself as a eunuch in order to go to the court of the Duke of Illyria. The fact that in Act IV Olivia takes Sebastian for Cesario makes it clear that Viola is disguised like her brother, and not as a eunuch. This act of disguising has many psychological implications. It is the superimposition of a male identity over an existing female identity. It is an opportunity to possess the lost penis. By imitating the appearance of her brother, she acquires a dual personality. The male part of her serves to satisfy the quest for penis in the female part of her. To Viola, the disguise is a symbol of the lost phallus, the vitality of which she feels when she meets Olivia in the guise of Cesario. Another type of disguise used by Viola is that of language. Viola, disguised as Cesario, uses the language of the Duke in order to woo Olivia. By using the words of the Duke for Olivia, she satisfies her own penis envy. The moment she hears of Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, and his

## Electra Complex in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

unrequited love for Olivia, her desire to possess an alternative to her brother is awakened. For Viola in *Twelfth Night* (1623), and for Rosalind in *As You Like It* (1623), disguise becomes an alternative phallus with which they assert their authority. Both Rosalind and Viola face a tragedy in which their previous world is shattered through some misfortune: an uncle's usurpation in Rosalind's case, and a sea-storm and shipwreck in Viola's case. Both have already lost their mothers. Disguised as Genymede, Rosalind attracts Phebe, and disguised as Cesario, Viola attracts Olivia. Their sense of pride as, apparently, possessors of phallus is satisfied, but they are focused on the alternative father-figures, Orlando and Orsino who will help them replace their mothers.

Disguise also serves as a device to mask the conscious self, unmask the unconscious world of desires and fears, and brings about a disguised fulfillment of dreams. It provides a free flow between the conscious, sub-conscious and the unconscious as we see that Viola's unconscious desire to have sexual fulfillment merges with her conscious desire of doing her duty as a servant of the Duke. Disguising herself is like going into the dream world for Viola where she can fulfill her hidden desire of imitating her brother, and possessing the phallus. The pleasure does not merely lie in mimicking the father figure, but it goes beyond that. It involves the active sexual role of the father or the brother. Viola not only disguises herself as a male, but the act of wooing, even though on the behalf of Orsino, is an assertion of the regained phallus in her. Through her disguise, Viola regains her lost brother, Sebastian as we see that it is Sebastian in her who is able to attract Olivia. She performs a phallic function as she woos Olivia, unintentionally, not for Orsino but for the male in herself or for her brother Sebastian. Viola is able to sustain both the male and the female selves until the actual arrival of Sebastian. Cesario's relationship with Olivia is developed to such a level that Sebastian can easily replace Cesario without creating any disturbance. Thus, Cesario functions as an alter-ego for Sebastian.

Olivia, a rich countess of Illyria who is the object of the intense love of Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, also uses symbolic mask and disguise though in a different way from Viola. Before her encounter with Cesario, she is mourning the death of her brother. She rejects all the romantic advances of the Duke so indifferently that the Duke loses his peace of mind. She turns masochistic, and imprisons herself in her house. In the first scene of the play, Orsino's unsuccessful messenger to Olivia, Valentine brings a report to the Duke:

The element itself, till seven years' heat,

Shall not behold her face at ample view;  
But, like a cloistress, she will veiled walk  
And water once a day her chamber round  
With eye-offending brine: all this to season  
A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh  
And lasting in her sad remembrance. (1.2.28-34)

The house symbolizes the womb of the mother for Olivia in the triangle of daughter, father and mother. Her self-imposed imprisonment in the house stands for her unconscious desire to return to the womb of the mother. After the death of her father and brother, she is hanging on the liminal space between the pre-phallic stage (association with mother) and the phallic stage (association with the father-figure). The house is also a symbolic mask which enables her to see things more distinctly without revealing her true self. Viola, disguised as Cesario, acts as the father-figure for Olivia and, in a way, causes her second birth. Here, another dimension of the disguise as a phallic symbol can be seen, as this symbolic phallus becomes the reproductive organ in the symbolic rebirth of Olivia. After meeting Cesario, she is completely changed from inside as her quest for an alternative father-figure seems to have borne fruit. Before her servants and her uncle, she is able to maintain her mourning. When Cesario leaves, Olivia asks her servant, Malvolio, to rush after Cesario to return his ring to him.

Run after that same peevish messenger  
The Country's man. He left his ring behind him,  
Would I or not. Tell him I will none of it.  
Desire him not to flatter with his lord  
Nor hold him up with hopes; I am not for him. (1.5.284-288)

But the audience soon knows that Olivia is disguising her true feelings, and that she has fallen in love with Cesario, and that the latter has left no ring behind. The act of giving away the ring symbolizes releasing her body from the womb of the house (the mother-figure), and giving it away to Cesario. It also stands for her vagina meeting the phallus.

The symbols, words and actions interpreted as having association with Electra complex become tools of breaking the circle of the fixation with the father-figures, and finding alternative men in *Twelfth Night*. Discussing Freud's views on the infant's development through the Oedipal stage, in *Literary Criticism from Plato to Present* (2011), M. A. R. Habib says, "Freud's

## **Electra Complex in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night***

continuing observations led him to believe that the Oedipus complex was both the climax of the infantile sexual life and the foundation of all the later developments of sexuality" (236). What Freud says of the male child and the Oedipus complex can equally be true of female child and the Electra complex. Olivia and Viola's desire for their brothers is the foundation of their adult sexuality which culminates in their being able to find an alternative phallus. This development into being satisfied with the non-fraternal phallus is due to the social prohibition of having sexual relations with the brother. Fearing the omnipresent gaze of the society, Olivia and Viola repress their desire to possess their brothers by accepting a socially recognized sexual relationship.

The game of equation becomes significant for the plot of the play to move on. As Viola is disguised as Cesario, the audiences have to equate Cesario with Viola when they see the former on the stage. Viola and Olivia have to equate their new-found husbands, Orsino and Sebastian, with their lost brothers. Nancy Chodorow, analyzing the girls' psychological relationship with their parents in his article titled "Pre-Oedipal Gender Configurations", says, "Finally, they change from wanting a penis from their father to wanting a child from him, through an unconscious symbolic equation of penis and child" (472). In the process of equating penis with child, an alternative male is equated with father. This alternative male can fulfill the need for child in the same way as the father can do. Orsino and Cesario are alternative men who help Viola and Olivia out of their wish for the father. Thus, a realization of the lack of penis on the part of Olivia and Viola motivates their desire to become pregnant in competition with their mothers. Therefore, in the last scene of the play when Cesario is disclosed to be Viola, and the Duke proposes her, Viola promptly accepts the offer. She replies to the Duke's proposal, "And all those sayings will I over swear; / And those swearings keep as true in soul/As doth that orb'd continent the fire / That severs day from night" (5.1.261-264). Olivia has to equate Sebastian with Cesario in order for her marriage to take place because the latter is discovered to be a female at the end. In the same way, Orsino has to equate Viola with Olivia because the latter is already married to Sebastian.

Association with the father and dissociation with the mother are the key elements of Electra complex. Viola always expresses her identity through a reference to her father or brother. Nowhere in the text does she refer to her mother which shows her unconscious hatred for her mother. After Olivia has rejected the love of the Duke, Viola seems to be clearly fallen in love with the Duke. Before the Duke, she expresses her love through a reference to her father's

daughter which is an indirect reference to herself. She says, "My father had a daughter loved a man / As it might be perhaps, were I a woman, / I should your lordship"(2.4.106-108). Again, she tells Orsino, "I am all the daughters of my father's house / And all the brothers too" (2.4.119-120). These words have a double meaning. On the surface level, it means that she is the only child of her father left alive. But on the unconscious level, it is the celebration of the absence of a sister who might have proved a mother-figure and rival to her in her desire for her brother, the only father-figure expected to be alive. By calling herself 'all the brothers', she also refers to the double role she is playing: Viola and Cesario. By disguising herself as Sebastian, she combines both the son and the daughter of her father. Viola becomes a part of the love triangle of Olivia, Orsino and Cesario. The Duke loves Olivia, Olivia falls in love with Cesario (Viola), and Viola loves the Duke. In the end, both selves of Viola are satisfied. Her female self marries Orsino while her male self (Cesario/Sebastian) marries Olivia. It is interesting that Olivia thinks that she has married Cesario but it turns out to be Sebastian, the brother of Viola.

Just like Viola, Olivia makes no mention of her mother either. First, she mourns the loss of her brother who possessed a phallus like her father. After the death of her father, her brother was the only source of fulfilling her unconscious desire for penis. Many characters in the play are struck by the prolonged mourning of Olivia for her brother. Sir Toby's very first lines in the play express his concern for Olivia as he says, "What a plague means my niece, to take the death of/ her brother thus? I am sure care's an enemy to life"(1.3.1-3). Feste makes fun of Olivia for mourning for her brother too long because he takes this relationship on the conscious level. Olivia cannot give any logical reason because her reaction to the loss of her brother is controlled by the unconscious. For her, the loss of the brother is the loss of identity. That's why she insists on remaining in seclusion. When a messenger from the Duke wishes to see her, she asks Malvolio, "Go you, Malvolio: if it be a suit from the count, I/am sick, or not at home; what you will, to dismiss it"(1.5.103-104). She does not respond to the love of Orsino because she sees no adventure in being subdued to the desires of a socially powerful male. But when she sees Cesario, she adopts an adventurous male role in the sense that she tries to woo Cesario. She finds a soft target in Cesario who, as he says, belongs to a lower class. Allan de Mijoula in *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (2005) says, "Penis envy does not consist in wanting to change sex but fits into narcissistic continuity: the girl would like to have the narcissistic and the social advantages linked with the possession of a penis, rather than the organ itself..."(1246).



## Electra Complex in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

The role of the reminders or the mirror-images is important in the shift from father or brother to an alternative figure. Here, Rosalind's words from *As You Like It* are pertinent. Rosalind tells her cousin Celia that she, disguised as Genymede, met her father, Duke Senior in the forest. Then she says, "But what talk we of fathers when there is such a man as Orlando"(3.4.34-35)? The internal conflict caused by Electra complex is resolved when the girls enter a healthy relationship with the reciprocating equals. On arriving in Illyria, Viola asks the Captain about the ruler of Illyria. Her instinct to get an alternative male is awakened the moment she hears of Orsino. She says, "Orsino! I have heard my father name him:/ He was a bachelor then" (I, ii, 28-29). After this reminder, she promptly decides to put on a eunuch's disguise in order to be presented to the Duke. The decision to disguise like a eunuch highlights her split self at the moment. She stands at the liminal space between her desire to be like her father and possess a male. Though later, she is disguised as a male, she is a eunuch in the sense that she carries both male and female identities. Olivia serves as a mirror for Viola as in the former's feminine expression of love and emotions, Viola sees her own true female self. Olivia's sudden discarding of the fraternal love in favor of Cesario shatters Viola's image of her brother as the centre of phallus. In the same way, Olivia sees her true self in her reaction to seeing Cesario. After the death of her brother, she mourns the loss of the phallus which was the centre of her unconscious desires. She vows to lead a secluded life, and see no other man. But Viola, disguised as Cesario, re-awakens her penis envy, motivates her to seek an alternative to her lost brother, and thus leads her out of the phallic or the Oedipal stage. Seeing Cesario is a joyful experience for Olivia's unconscious. The more she meets Cesario, the more acute is her desire to possess the lost penis.

Shedding off the unwanted self plays a key role in the process of moving off the phallic stage. Viola receives the first blow to her male self when she meets Orsino, the Duke because she sees in the Duke an alternative to her lost brother, and an opportunity to regain the phallus. When she sees that the Duke's love for Olivia is unrequited, her quest for the penis is almost complete. In Olivia, she sees an equivalent to mother whom she considers her rival. Through a constant contact with the Duke, Viola gradually sheds off her male self though she is still disguised as a male. She indirectly expresses her love for the Duke. Talking about Olivia's stubbornness, she tells the Duke,

Say that some lady, as perhaps there is,

Hath for your love as great a pang of heart  
As you have for Olivia. You cannot love her;  
You tell her so. Must she not then be answered? (2.4.88-91)

During her second and third encounter with Olivia, she looks less confident as a male, and less forceful as a wooer on the part of Orsino than she was during the first encounter. During their second meeting, Olivia explicitly expresses her love for Cesario. But Viola seems to be fed up with her male role, and tries to slip away. She concludes her meeting with Olivia by giving an indirect reference to her feminine self. She says,

"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.  
And so adieu, good madam; never more  
Will I my master's tears to you deplore." (3.1.155-159)

After Viola's third meeting with Olivia in Act III when Sir Toby Belch challenges Viola, who is disguised as Cesario, to fight a duel with Sir Andrew, Viola is afraid, and tries her best to avoid the conflict. With Olivia's complete rejection of the Duke's love, Viola no longer needs to go on a search for the phallus as she is much sure to win the love of the Duke. The arrival of Viola's lost brother, Sebastian, on the scene makes it much easier for Viola to pull off her male self. Malvalio, the puritanic steward of Olivia, also symbolizes Olivia's unwanted self. Her mind, in the shape of Malvolio, undergoes purgation in the prison, and comes out relieved. His imprisonment at the hands of Sir Toby and Maria alienates Olivia from her more rigid self.

The paper has sought to prove that confrontation between Olivia and Viola, in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, is key to their psycho-sexual growth. They help each other to come out of their phallic stage, and find an alternative penis. Through their psychological journey, both the girls arrive at a stage where they no longer look to their brothers for regaining the lost penis.

### Works Cited

Chodorow, Nancy. "Pre-Oedipal Gender Configurations". Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Print.

## Electra Complex in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

- Habib, M. A. R. *Literary Criticism from Plato to Present*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Print.
- Kulish, Nancy, and Deanna Holtzman. *A Story of Her Own: The Female Oedipus Complex Reexamined and Renamed*. Lanham: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2008. Print.
- Mijoula, Allain de. *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. London: Thomsan Gale, 2005. Print.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Henry T. Riley. Digiread.com Publishing, 2009. Web. Feb. 20, 2014.
- Ryckman, Richard M. *Theories of Personality*. Belmont: Thomsan Wadsworth, 2008. Print.
- Salusinzky, Irme. "An Interview with Harold Bloom". *Scripta* 4 (1986): 69-88. Print.
- Scott, Jill. *Electra after Freud: Myth and Culture*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2005. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Ed. Peter Alexander. *Shakespeare Complete Works*. London: English Language Book Society, 1965. Print.
- . *Comedy of Errors*. Ed. Peter Alexander. *Shakespeare Complete Works*. London: English Language Book Society, 1965. Print.
- . *Twelfth Night*. Ed. Peter Alexander. *Shakespeare Complete Works*. London: English Language Book Society, 1965. Print.

### About the Author:

**Mr. Muhammad Shoaib** is a Lecturer in English at Govt. College for Boys, Gulberg, Lahore, Pakistan.