3 Who is Viola? What is She?

In asking how or by what means a fiction approximates fact, it is necessary to define the real. The art critic, confronting a painting, can bring to bear a number of facts about the nature of the visual world: the law of perspective, the known structure of the human anatomy, the refraction of light through water. In the case of a portrait or a landscape, he may even be able to compare the painting with the place, or with a photograph of the sitter. By such means he can analyse how the image of the painter reflects or distorts known features of the physical world. The literary critic lacks such guidelines. To compare Shakespeare’s Caesar with the Caesar of his sources, or the Caesar of modern historians, does not tell us whether or why the character is dramatically convincing (though it may tell us something about Shakespeare’s interpretation of him). But, even if such comparisons were useful with historical figures, with fictions such as Viola even they are denied us. Where the art critic refers to anatomy, the literary critic, attempting an anatomy of mind, can refer only to the sciences of psychology; however, attempts to make use of psychological models usually, for a variety of reasons, fail. To begin with, psychological ‘models’ are formally distinct from characters in plays in a way that a painter’s or a sculptor’s ‘model’ is not distinct from a painting or a sculpture. In the visual arts both the ‘model’ and the masterpiece are visual objects, which can to that extent be readily compared. By contrast, a psychological model consists of an intellectual construct, described in discursive prose, whereas a character in a play exists by virtue of a series of actions performed by a single persona. (Speeches are, of course, actions.) This disparity exists whether the psychological ‘model’ the dramatist employs is drawn from Freud or Holinshed or a novel; in each case, the
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critic must juxtapose narrative descriptions of a character’s essence with a dramatic presentation of that character’s actions. Of course, that presentation has been designed to lead an audience to infer an essence generating the actions, but the formal problem of ‘creating’ a character nevertheless, and self-evidently, differs from the problem of describing one. Psychology cannot even give the literary critic a law of exclusions. If we could say, with the authority of an anatomist, ‘A and B cannot coexist in the human frame’, we could then definitively establish whether and why Hamlet or Cleopatra or Bertram is an organic unity, or a hodge-podge. Any critique of the unity of Shakespeare’s characters founders on this, the absence of a law of exclusions. Thus, Schücking objects that Cleopatra the whore is incompatible with Cleopatra the noble and transcendent suicide;¹ to which I can only reply that I believe that these incompatibles can and often do coexist. Unfortunately, my assertion is hardly less subjective than Schücking’s own. Neither does much to explain the plausibility of Shakespeare’s characters.

Fortunately, Viola does not stir such perplexities, because she does not yoke polarities as Cleopatra does, being limited to a small range of tones. No one has doubted the reality and unity of her character.² But in fact theorists such as Schücking radically misstate the problem of character. In the theatre, as in life, the reality and (for the most part) the unity of a character can be and are presumed; they do not need to be proven. As an actress is manifestly real, for the theatre the problem is not to convince us Judi Dench is real, but to convince us Judi Dench is Viola, or that Viola is Judi Dench (a problem greatly complicated, of course, if the audience knows actress or text beforehand). The reader must construct a character from speeches and actions alone, and a reader may complain it doesn’t come to life, it doesn’t crystallize. But in the theatre the evident physical reality and unity of the actor all but banish such doubts. For this reason, on the television, in the cinema, at the theatre we are convinced by the flimsiest of characters; for this reason, before judging the excellence of a characterisation, we turn from the theatre to the printed text, thus (so to speak) subtracting the actor.

Unity or consistency is, we are told, an aspect of real persons. Certainly, a reader, trying to infer a character from