

## Twelfth Night (Spring 2015)

*Twelfth Night* is great fun, both on the page and in performance; nevertheless, and despite the play's esteemed position in the canon, I have relatively little to say about its characters. *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It* give me less pleasure, yet Portia and Rosalind interest me more than anyone in Illyria, even Viola, whose power Shakespeare diffuses amongst a host of zanies. Orlando is superior to Orsino, Jaques is funnier than Maria, Shylock more twisted than pitiful Malvolio (whom I adore). For me only Feste benefits from comparison—beside him Lancelot Gobbo and Touchstone seem like afterthoughts—yet even this wonderful clown can do little but shrug as bigger fools clamor for attention.

Critics are quick to note the madness that has infected Illyria: indeed, writes Harold Goddard, “with an exception or two [*Twelfth Night*] is little more than an anthology of madneses, sad and merry” [299–300]. The problem of madness, excess—call it what you will—is it leaves less space for the unresolvable ambiguities that make Shakespeare's best characters, at least for me, so compelling. With an exception or two, the men and women, gentles and commons, of *Twelfth Night* are best considered not as individuals but as contrasting pairs and trios. Thus we begin atop the social order:

### **Orsino, Olivia, Viola**

Given the centrality of this love triangle, it is striking that we actually see only one side falling in love. When Orsino opens the play with his giddy disquisition, he is already head over heels:

If music be the food of love, play on,  
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die.  
That strain again, it had a dying fall;

O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound  
 That breathes upon a bank of violets,  
 Stealing and giving odor. Enough, no more;  
 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

[I.i.1–8]

The purported object of his love—for it is difficult to believe he sees anything but his own reflection—is Olivia, a wealthy countess who has semi-recently lost both father and brother,<sup>1</sup> and who, to mourn their deaths, has vowed to live “like a cloistress,” veiled and shut away, for seven years [I.i.27–33]. “O,” Orsino groans,

... How will she love when the rich golden shaft  
 Hath killed the flock of all affections else  
 That live in her; when liver, brain, and heart,  
 These sovereign thrones, are all supplied and filled,  
 Her sweet perfections, with one self king.

[I.i.34–40]

“Self king” is an apter phrase than the duke realizes. Along with his eating metaphor, it anticipates Olivia’s ironic criticism of Malvolio: “O, you are sick of self-love ... and taste with a distempered appetite” [I.v.86–7]; in (correctly) diagnosing her steward, Olivia unwittingly diagnoses herself, Orsino, and the other lunatics and lovers in Illyria.

Such excessive passion, Orsino insists, is both immediate and enduring. Again he groans:<sup>2</sup>

O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first,  
 Methought she purged the air of pestilence.  
 That instant was I turned into a hart,  
 And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,  
 E'er since pursue me.

[I.i.20–4]

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<sup>1</sup> According to the sea captain who rescues Viola, Olivia’s father died “some twelvemonth since,” and her brother died “shortly” thereafter [I.ii.36–9].

<sup>2</sup> Some dedicated scholar may refute me, but *Twelfth Night* must set a record for lines that begin with “O”—in the opening scene alone, Orsino exhibits this tic four times. Considering as well the vowel’s prominence in character names, the play begins to sound like one big orgasm.

We might pass uncritically over these lines, yet consider: Orsino is Duke of Illyria, and Olivia is a countess. Their respective homes are sufficiently close that between scenes characters traverse the distance; Feste, Olivia's fool, occasionally visits Orsino's court. It seems reasonable to infer that Orsino and Olivia have known each other for years, perhaps since childhood, yet I doubt he has been pining so long for her. (If so, I would expect to hear complaints—an exasperated aside, at least—from his servants, as again and again they trudge back to Olivia's gates to press their lord's useless suit.) The fact that Olivia's excuse is grief suggests that Orsino began to woo her only after the deaths of her father and brother, whose burials the duke would surely have attended. There he would have seen, as though anew, his eligible—and, we might add, fully propertied—neighbor, a vision of heaven in black gown and veil. How perfect to imagine Orsino swooning as Olivia scatters dirt on fresh graves! The rest is music. . . .

As for Olivia, she has my complete sympathy as both Orsino and, on his behalf, Viola accuse her of impossible, fickle selfishness for daring to say *no* to an entitled man. “Still so cruel?” the duke charges Olivia, when after four acts he finally speaks to her face. “Still so constant, lord,” she replies, and he explodes:

*Orsino:* What, to perverseness? You uncivil lady,  
 To whose ingrate and unauspicious altars  
 My soul the faithfull'st off'rings have breathed out  
 That e'er devotion tendered. What shall I do?  
*Olivia:* Even what it please my lord, that shall become him.  
*Orsino:* Why should I not, had I the heart to do it,  
 Like to th' Egyptian thief at point of death  
 Kill what I love?

[V.i.107–16]

How fortunate the duke is more lover than fighter.

Of course, by Act Five Olivia has made herself another fool in love. When Viola—disguised as Cesario and wooing for Orsino—first meets Olivia, she asks the countess to remove her veil. Olivia wittily complies—“we will draw the curtain and show you the picture” [I.v.223]—and her beauty moves Viola from the insipid prose of Orsino’s love-suit to verse. The words are grand, yet the argument still galls me—perhaps the idea (which Viola seems to have cribbed from certain sonnets) that beautiful people owe it to the world to reproduce was compelling in Shakespeare’s day, but to me it sounds like something for Christopher Durang to deconstruct:

*Viola:* ’Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white  
Nature’s own sweet and cunning hand laid on.  
Lady, you are the cruel’st she alive  
If you will lead these graces to the grave,  
And leave the world no copy.

*Olivia:* O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted. I will give out divers  
schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried, and every particle  
and utensil labeled to my will: as, item, two lips, indifferent red;  
item, two gray eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin,  
and so forth. Were you sent hither to praise me?

[I.v.228–38]

Olivia continues to dry her wit—even when flustered, she is as funny as any Shakespearean lady—yet I quote her here to demonstrate that nearly 100 lines into her first scene with “Cesario,” Olivia remains unflustered and in control. Critics seem to take for granted that she loves “at first sight,”<sup>3</sup> yet I find no evidence to support this claim. Here is Olivia upon first seeing Viol-ario:

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<sup>3</sup> To quote but a few examples:

- Mark Van Doren: “... three cases of love at first sight (Viola and Orsino, Olivia and Viola, Sebastian and Olivia) are being dove-tailed into a pattern of romance” [143].
- Harold Bloom: “Her mournfulness disappears when she meets Cesario and loves at first sight” [235].

*Viola:* The honorable lady of the house, which is she?

*Olivia:* Speak to me; I shall answer for her. Your will?

*Viola:* Most radiant, exquisite, and unmatchable beauty—I pray you tell me if this be the lady of the house, for I never saw her—I would be loath to cast away my speech; for, besides that it is excellently well penned, I have taken great pains to con it. Good beauties, let me sustain no scorn. I am very comptible, even to the least sinister usage.

*Olivia:* Whence came you, sir?

*Viola:* I can say little more than I have studied, and that question's out of my part. Good gentle one, give me modest assurance if you be the lady of the house, that I may proceed in my speech.

*Olivia:* Are you a comedian?

[I.v.161–75]

The persistence of this strange messenger does not improve Olivia's mood:

*Viola:* I will on with my speech in your praise and then show you the heart of my message.

*Olivia:* Come to what is important in't. I forgive you the praise.

*Viola:* Alas, I took great pains to study it; and 'tis poetical.

*Olivia:* It is the more like to be feigned; I pray you keep it in. I heard you were saucy at my gates; and allowed your approach rather to wonder at you than to hear you. If you be not mad, be gone; if you have reason, be brief. 'Tis not that time of moon with me to make one in so skipping a dialogue.

[I.v.182–94]

At last Viola begs—and Olivia grants—a private audience. Yet her “well penned” words are no more welcome:

*Olivia:* Now, sir, what is your text?

*Viola:* Most sweet lady—

*Olivia:* A comfortable doctrine, and much may be said of it. Where lies your text?

*Viola:* In Orsino's bosom.

*Olivia:* In his bosom? In what chapter of his bosom?

*Viola:* To answer by the method, in the first of his heart.

*Olivia:* O, I have read it; it is heresy. Have you no more to say?

*Viola:* Good madam, let me see your face.

[I.v.211–20]

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- Marjorie Garber: “And Olivia, of course, falls instantly for ‘Cesario’ when he comes to present Orsino’s suit” [516].

Which returns us to where we began. Unveiled, Olivia eventually follows Viola to verse, and the change further softens the countess—her words cease to mock, though her focus stays on Orsino:

*Olivia:* Your lord does know my mind; I cannot love him.  
 Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble,  
 Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth;  
 In voices well divulged, free, learned, and valiant,  
 And in dimension and the shape of nature  
 A gracious person. But yet I cannot love him.  
 He might have took his answer long ago.

*Viola:* If I did love you in my master's flame,  
 With such a suff'ring, such a deadly life,  
 In your denial I would find no sense;  
 I would not understand it.

*Olivia:* Why, what would you?

[I.v.246–56]

To modern ears, Viola's reply may sound irrelevant—or worse. How many stalkers, rapists, murderers have used similar protests to justify their obsessions? In the world of the play, however, Olivia finally notices the attractive youth as someone other than Orsino's proxy: *If you loved me as your master, what would you do?* Viola seizes the opportunity to project herself in Orsino's "flame":

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;  
 Hallo 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.

[I.v.257–65]

To which Olivia replies, "You might do much." *Now* she is smitten, perhaps precisely because she does not pity this forthright, "saucy" youth. Or perhaps there is no explanation; love is crazy that way.

One of many ironies is that Viola is simultaneously forthright and evasive: she tells the truth about everyone but herself. I say this not to criticize; her disguise is her only shield in a strange land. Yet in less-scrupulous hands it could be a devastating weapon. Other than Feste, Viola is the smartest, most self-aware person in Illyria; all that keeps her from wrecking havoc is her essential goodness, as she seems to realize upon finding Olivia “loves me sure”:

Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness  
 Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.  
 How easy is it for the proper false  
 In women’s waxen hearts to set their forms!  
 Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we,  
 For such as we are made of, such we be.  
 How will this fadge? My master loves her dearly;  
 And I (poor monster) fond as much on him;  
 And she (mistaken) seems to dote on me.  
 What will become of this?

[II.ii.22–36]

One shudders to think how true monsters like Richard III or Iago might answer this question. Viola simply trusts in fortune—not a bad idea in a comedy: “O Time, thou must untangle this, not I; / It is too hard a knot for me t’ untie” [II.ii.40–1].

For all her spirit, Viola is quite passive. She may chastise Olivia, but she never seriously contemplates making a willow cabin at Orsino’s gate or hallooing his name. Such a course would be dangerous, reckless—yet stifled passion has its own risks, as Viola too well knows. While visiting Orsino’s court, Feste sings a sentimental song about a man “slain by a fair cruel maid” [II.iv.54]. Suitably moved, Orsino dismisses everyone but the reliable Cesario, whom he orders back to Olivia’s. Viola does her best to cut through the duke’s bluster:

*Viola:* But if she cannot love you, sir?  
*Orsino:* I cannot be so answered.





*Viola:* A blank, my lord. 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.

*Orsino:* But died thy sister of her love, my boy?

*Viola:* I am all the daughters of my father's house,  
 And all the brothers too, and yet I know not.

[II.iv.110–21]

Perhaps they nearly kiss. In any event, Viola breathes and returns to business:

*Viola:* Sir, shall I to this lady?

*Orsino:* Ay, that's the theme.  
 To her in haste. Give her this jewel. Say  
 My love can give no place, bide no deny.

[II.iv.122–4]

We do not see Orsino again until Act Five, by which time he has inferred that Cesario is “the instrument” taking his place in Olivia’s heart [V.i.119–20]. As we have heard already, he threatens Olivia with death. He also threatens Cesario. Rather more surprisingly, Cesario approves!

*Orsino:* But this your minion, whom I know you love,  
 And whom, by heaven I swear, I tender dearly,  
 Him will I tear out of that cruel eye  
 Where he sits crowned in his master's spite.  
 Come, boy, with me. My thoughts are ripe in mischief.  
 I'll sacrifice the lamb that I do love  
 To spite a raven's heart within a dove.

*Viola:* And I, most jocund, apt, and willingly,  
 To do you rest a thousand deaths will die.

[V.i.122–30]

If we take these lines seriously—and why should we not?—Shakespeare has pushed comedy to its breaking point.<sup>5</sup> He will not return to the possibility of healthy romance until his final plays, when miracles and magic save the day.

In *Twelfth Night*, the savior looks just like Viola. And *his* love triangle is similarly twisted:

### Sebastian and Antonio

We hear about Sebastian long before we meet him. The sea captain who rescues Viola describes her twin brother in heroic terms:

Assure yourself, after our ship did split,  
When you, and those poor number saved with you,  
Hung on our driving boat, I saw your brother,  
Most provident in peril, bind himself  
(Courage and hope both teaching him the practice)  
To a strong mast that lived upon the sea;  
Where, like Arion on the dolphin's back,  
I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves  
So long as I could see.

[I.ii.9–17]

Like his twin, Sebastian is saved by a sea captain who follows him to Illyria (where, to extend the parallels, both men are arrested<sup>6</sup>). Yet Sebastian and his rescuer, Antonio, have a more interesting relationship. Though Shakespeare never explicitly confirms that Antonio is homosexual, we must strain to avoid this conclusion. He and Sebastian first enter at the beginning of Act Two, having already spent several months

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<sup>5</sup> Bloom is perceptive here: see *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p. 234.

<sup>6</sup> Of Viola's captain, we learn only that, while safeguarding Viola's clothing, he somehow offends Malvolio—apparently so that Shakespeare can indefinitely delay the moment when Viola removes her disguise and steps back into her “maid's garments” [V.i.269–72].

together.<sup>7</sup> Whatever has happened between them, Sebastian is moving on, “that I may bear my evils alone” [II.i.6]. Antonio pleads for Sebastian either to stay or to allow him to follow; the men speak tenderly, and Sebastian finally reveals his destination: he too is seeking Orsino. Antonio is undeterred:

The gentleness of all the gods go with thee.  
I have many enemies in Orsino’s court,  
Else would I very shortly see thee there.  
But come what may, I do adore thee so  
That danger shall seem sport, and I will go.

[II.i.40–4]

In Shakespeare’s plays, even casual acquaintances may speak of their love for each other, but *adore* has a different quality. We sense this difference again at their next entrance: having caught up to Sebastian, Antonio has guided him to Illyria’s capital:

*Sebastian:* I would not by my will have troubled you;  
But since you make your pleasure of your pains,  
I will no further chide you.  
*Antonio:* I could not stay behind you. My desire  
(More sharp than filed steel) did spur me forth;  
And not all love to see you (though so much  
As might have drawn one to a longer voyage)  
But jealousy what might befall your travel,  
Being skill-less in these parts; which to a stranger,  
Unguided and unfriended, often prove  
Rough and unhospitable. My willing love,  
The rather by these arguments of fear,  
Set forth in your pursuit.

[III.iii.1–13]

Antonio has good reason to fear—as he explains, Orsino wants him for piracy (and for refusing to repay what he stole) [III.iii.25–37]—but the city has invigorated Sebastian. Antonio lends his friend money—“Haply your eye shall light upon some toy / You have desire to purchase” [III.iii.44–5]—and Sebastian wanders off to sightsee.

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<sup>7</sup> In the play’s final scene, Antonio reveals that “for three months before, / No int’rim, not a minute’s vacancy, / Both day and night did we keep company” [V.i.91–3].

Naturally, Antonio soon encounters Viola (still disguised) and rescues *her* from danger, thus exposing himself to capture by the duke's officers. When he asks Viola to return his money, he misinterprets her bewilderment for perfidy; if we still doubted the nature of Antonio's love for Sebastian, his outrage all but proves it:

Let me speak a little. This youth that you see here  
 I snatched one half out of the jaws of death;  
 Relieved him with sanctity of love,  
 And to his image, which methought did promise  
 Most venerable worth, did I devotion. . . .  
 But, O, how vile an idol proves this god!  
 Thou hast, Sebastian, done good feature shame.  
 In nature there's no blemish but the mind;  
 None can be called deformed but the unkind.  
 Virtue is beauty; but the beauteous evil  
 Are empty trunks, o'erflourished by the devil.

[III.iv.344–55]

More doubtful is what Sebastian feels for Antonio. Though he displays courage on the sea, and ably defends himself against Sir Toby's drunken challenges, Sebastian—like his sister—is a strangely passive character. He follows Olivia immediately upon meeting her, though she has plainly misidentified him. (“Be not offended, dear Cesario” [IV.i.47].) This in itself is no great mystery—a beautiful woman invites him home, where surely they do more than discuss her parasitic uncle. Yet the aftermath of their encounter disturbs Sebastian:

This is the air; that is the glorious sun;  
 This pearl she gave me, I do feel't and see't;  
 And though 'tis wonder that enwraps me thus,  
 Yet 'tis not madness. . . .  
 For though my soul disputes well with my sense  
 That this may be some error, but no madness,  
 Yet doth this accident and flood of fortune  
 So far exceed all instance, all discourse,  
 That I am ready to distrust mine eyes  
 And wrangle with my reason that persuades me  
 To any other trust but that I am mad,

Or else the lady's mad. Yet, if 'twere so,  
 She could not sway her house, command her followers,  
 Take and give back affairs and their dispatch  
 With such a smooth, discreet, and stable bearing  
 As I perceive she does. There's something in't  
 That is deceivable. But here the lady comes.

[IV.iii.1–21]

One needn't look far for deception—Olivia has brought a priest to conduct a secret marriage, “That my most jealous and too doubtful soul / May live at peace” [IV.iii.27–8]. Sebastian forgets his unease: “I'll follow this good man and go with you / And having sworn truth, ever will be true” [IV.iii.32–3]. Yet he has no apparent plans to tell his future wife his name. Antonio—who learned this information only after begging [II.i.1–16]—first identifies Sebastian, followed by Viola during their roundabout reunion:

*Sebastian:* Do I stand there? I never had a brother;  
 Nor can there be that deity in my nature  
 Of here and everywhere. I had a sister,  
 Whom the blind waves and surges have devoured.  
 Of charity, what kin are you to me?  
 What countryman? What name? What parentage?

*Viola:* Of Messaline; Sebastian was my father;  
 Such a Sebastian was my brother too;  
 So went he suited to his watery tomb.  
 If spirits can assume both form and suit,  
 You come to fright us.

*Sebastian:* A spirit I am indeed,  
 But am in that dimension grossly clad  
 Which from the womb I did participate.  
 Were you a woman, as the rest goes even,  
 I should my tears let fall upon your cheek  
 And say, “Thrice welcome, drowned Viola!”

*Viola:* My father had a mole upon his brow.

*Sebastian:* And so had mine.

*Viola:* And died that day when Viola from her birth  
 Had numbered thirteen years.

*Sebastian:* O, that record is lively in my soul!  
 He finished indeed his mortal act  
 That day that made my sister thirteen years.

[V.i.221–43]

Separation seems only to have strengthened their bond; I cannot imagine either twin so in tune with Orsino or Olivia (or Antonio, who has no place in the happy ending—after he names Sebastian, he is not mentioned again). Sebastian’s joy is not quite infectious, however, for Viola abruptly withdraws:

If nothing lets to make us happy both  
 But this my masculine usurped attire,  
 Do not embrace me till each circumstance  
 Of place, time, fortune do cohere and jump  
 That I am Viola; which to confirm,  
 I’ll bring you to a captain in this town,  
 Where lie my maiden weeds . . .

[V.i.244–50]

This—even in the context of Elizabethan stage conventions—is nonsense: *Dear brother, let’s not celebrate till I’m back in a dress*. Yet Sebastian likewise cools; his final lines, to Olivia—who finds the twinning of her new husband “most wonderful” [V.i.220]—might be describing an amusing play:

So comes it, lady, you have been mistook.  
 But nature to her bias drew in that.  
 You would have been contracted to a maid;  
 Nor are you therein, by my life, deceived:  
 You are betrothed both to a maid and man.

[V.i.254–8]

If Olivia has only just learned Sebastian’s name, it remains unclear whether Sebastian ever learns hers. He also calls her “madam” [V.i.204] and “sweet one” [V.i.209], but never “Olivia.”

The rest of *Twelfth Night* attempts to resolve the subplot of Malvolio, whose lawsuit against the sea captain, recall, is the reason Viola cannot promptly change her clothes. More depends on these “maiden weeds” than a family reunion; Orsino, in his

final lines, refuses even to call Viola by name—let alone marry her—until she has properly feminized herself:

Cesario, come—  
For so you shall be while you are a man,  
But when in other habits you are seen,  
Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen.

[V.i.378–81]

Perhaps Orsino—more adolescent than adult—is in no real hurry to get married. The same cannot be said of most of his cast-mates—not only Olivia and Sebastian but also the coarser characters who drive the subplot, including the unlikely pair we shall consider next:

### **Maria and Malvolio**

Far more than love or romance, the desire for marriage motivates—and unites, against their will—Olivia's waiting-gentlewoman and steward. Each is tasked with keeping order in an extravagant house, though only Malvolio defines himself through the contrast. Stomping onstage to silence the carousing Sirs Toby and Andrew, he speaks the language of repression in the play's most idiosyncratic voice:

*Malvolio:* My masters, are you mad? Or what are you? Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady's house, that ye squeak out your coziers' catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?

*Toby:* We did keep time, sir, in our catches. Sneck up.

*Malvolio:* Sir Toby, I must be round with you. My lady bade me tell you that, though she harbors you as her kinsman, she's nothing allied to your disorders. If you can separate yourself and your misdemeanors, you are welcome to the house. If not, and it would please you to take leave of her, she is very willing to bid you farewell.

[II.iii.81–93]

The drunken knights—aided by Feste—respond predictably, and Malvolio rounds on the other, sober member of the party: “Mistress Mary, if you prized my lady’s favor at anything more than contempt, you would not give means for this uncivil rule. She shall know of it, by this hand” [II.iii.112–15]. This is unfair, for Maria had likewise entered to scold the revelers: “What a caterwauling do you keep here? If my lady have not called up her steward Malvolio and bid him turn you out of doors, never trust me” [II.iii.67–9].

This last sentence makes the difference, for Maria casts herself, not as the agent of propriety, but as the forewarner of his approach. Privately, however, she is willing to play a sterner role. The first words we hear her speak are aimed at Sir Toby’s excesses:

*Maria:* By my troth, Sir Toby, you must come in earlier o’ nights. Your cousin, my lady, takes great exceptions to your ill hours.

*Toby:* Why, let her except before excepted.

*Maria:* Ay, but you must confine yourself within the modest limits of order.

*Toby:* Confine? I’ll confine myself no finer than I am. These clothes are good enough to drink in, and so be these boots too. An they be not, let them hang themselves in their own straps.

*Maria:* That quaffing and drinking will undo you.

[I.iii.3–13]

Two scenes later she is chiding Feste, who has just returned from an unexplained absence:

*Maria:* Yet you will be hanged for being so long absent. Or to be turned away: is not that as good as a hanging to you?

*Feste:* Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage, and for turning away, let summer bear it out.

*Maria:* You are resolute then?

*Feste:* Not so, neither; but I am resolved on two points.

*Maria:* That if one break, the other will hold; or if both break, your gaskins fall.

*Feste:* Apt, in good faith; very apt.

[I.v.15–25]



Contrast this with Malvolio's first lines, also to Feste—or rather, *about* Feste, as if the clown were not present to hear each insult:

*Olivia:* What think you of this fool, Malvolio? Doth he not mend?

*Malvolio:* Yes, and shall do till the pangs of death shake him. Infirmity, that decays the wise, doth ever make the better fool.

*Feste:* God send you, sir, a speedy infirmity, for the better increasing your folly. Sir Toby will be sworn that I am no fox, but he will not pass his word for twopence that you are no fool.

*Olivia:* How say you to that, Malvolio?

*Malvolio:* I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal. I saw him put down the other day with an ordinary fool that has no more brain than a stone. Look you now, he's out of his guard already. Unless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged. I protest I take these wise men that crow so at these set kind of fools no better than the fools' zanies.

[I.v.69–85]

Maria seasons her limited authority with wit; as a result, Feste respects and Sir Toby tolerates her (though neither enough to change his behavior). Malvolio is so humorless that others reflexively call him “a kind of Puritan” [II.iii.130], though Maria acknowledges the label doesn't quite fit:

The devil a Puritan that he is, or anything constantly but a time-pleaser; an affectioned ass, that cons state without book and utters it by great swarths; the best persuaded of himself; so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him; and on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work.

[II.iii.136–42]

Thus follows the play's great practical joke, wherein Maria—for the viewing pleasure of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and some guy named Fabian<sup>8</sup>—drops in Malvolio's path a forged letter that causes the steward to believe his mistress loves him. More accurately, the letter confirms what Malvolio already believes—apparently Maria has

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<sup>8</sup> Another of Olivia's servants, he resents Malvolio for having “brought me out o' favor with my lady about a bearbaiting here” [II.v.6–7].

been laying the groundwork for some time:

'Tis but fortune; all is fortune. Maria once told me [Olivia] did affect me; and I have heard herself come thus near, that, should she fancy, it should be one of my complexion. Besides, she uses me with a more exalted respect than any one else that follows her. What should I think on't?

[II.v.21–6]

Malvolio speaks these lines *before* he finds the letter, and he spins the idea of Olivia's "fancy" into a most revealing daydream: "To be Count Malvolio" [II.v.32]. After reassuring himself "[t]here is example" for this brand of social climbing—"The Lady of the Strachy married the yeoman of the wardrobe" [II.v.36–7]—he comes to the heart of his desire. (Below, in quoting Malvolio's lines, I shall omit Toby's, Andrew's, and Fabian's, for they add nothing but comic noise.)

Having been three months married to her, sitting in my state ...  
 Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown; having  
 come from a daybed, where I have left Olivia sleeping ...  
 And then to have the humor of state; and after a demure travel of  
 regard, telling them I know my place, as I would they should do  
 theirs, to ask for my kinsman Toby ... Seven of my people, with an  
 obedient start, make out for him. I frown the while, and perchance  
 wind up my watch, or play with my—some rich jewel. Toby  
 approaches; curtsies there to me ... I extend my hand to him thus,  
 quenching my familiar smile with an austere regard of control ...

[II.v.41–63]

It is hilariously clear what turns on Malvolio—not sleeping with Olivia (he does not even bother to imagine what might happen in that daybed), but "sitting in my state," his hands moving down, down, to wind his watch and play with his ... jewel. For the ambitious steward, status—and the authority that comes with it—is sex. Indeed, one of the dirtiest jokes Shakespeare wrote depends on Malvolio's total obliviousness to female anatomy; at last finding Maria's letter, he instantly proclaims the handwriting Olivia's:

“These be her very C’s, her U’s, and her T’s; and thus makes she her great P’s” [II.v.83–5].

The key to such a fantasy is marriage, and here is where Malvolio’s ambition meets Maria’s. The difference is her mark is aware—and eager. “She’s a beagle true-bred, and one that adores me,” Sir Toby boasts [II.iii.167], after Maria reveals her plot to dupe Malvolio; when she succeeds he exclaims, “I could marry this wench for this device” [II.v.173]. We might dismiss this as the narcissism of an aging debauchee ... only, as Fabian reports in the final scene, the marriage actually happens: “Maria writ / The letter, at Sir Toby’s great importance, / In recompense whereof he hath married her” [V.i.356–8].

For years this detail baffled me: what possesses Maria to marry such a brute? Sir Toby, for all his gourmandizing, is no Falstaff but an entitled bully. Only recently did I realize—the title is what counts. At play’s end, Maria is no longer Olivia’s chambermaid but her step-aunt. More likely sooner than later, Toby shall drink or brawl himself into the ground, and Maria shall be the widow turning heads; making a convincing show of grief; thinking, “The house will be the quieter” [III.iv.128].

Malvolio can only plot revenge [V.i.371]. Yet I do not wish to leave him in so low a state, for despite his ample capacity for self-delusion, he is capable of genuine dignity as well. Thrust into a dark prison and interrogated by Feste (posing as a curate, Sir Topas), Malvolio refuses to grovel before his tormentors or accept their judgments:

*Malvolio:* Sir Topas, never was man thus wronged. Good Sir Topas, do not think I am mad. They have laid me here in hideous darkness.

*Feste:* Fie, thou dishonest Satan! I call thee by the most modest terms, for I am one of those gentle ones that will use the devil himself with courtesy. Say’st thou that house is dark?

*Malvolio:* As hell, Sir Topas.

*Feste:* Why, it hath bay windows transparent as barricadoes, and the clerestories toward the south north are as lustrous as ebony; and yet complainest thou of obstruction?

*Malvolio:* I am not mad, Sir Topas. I say to you this house is dark.

*Feste:* Madman, thou errest. I say there is no darkness but ignorance, in which thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in their fog.

*Malvolio:* I say this house is as dark as ignorance, though ignorance were as dark as hell; and I say there was never man thus abused. I am no more mad than you are.

[IV.ii.28–48]

Illyrians may not be the best models of sanity, but the point is made; in a land governed by Orsino, we can hardly begrudge Malvolio his desires. Yet the chasm remains, not just between steward and duke but between Malvolio and everyone else. Like the outsider-villains in contemporaneous comedies—Don John in *Much Ado about Nothing* and especially Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*<sup>9</sup>—Malvolio will not be absorbed into the festive energies that conclude the play. Banished from the charmed circle, he lives on to unsettle social order, if not through class jumping than through vengeance. How could he do otherwise when his “betters” are so poor?

### **Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek**

I have little to say about Olivia’s roistering uncle and his feeble friend. We mustn’t allow Sir Toby’s greatest line—“Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” [II.iii.106–7]—to unduly shape our estimation of the man. Here is a more representative sampling:

- “He’s a coward and a coistrel that will not drink to my niece till his brains turn o’ th’ toe like a parish top.” [I.iii.38–40]
- “A plague o’ these pickle-herring!” [I.v.116–17]
- “Wouldst thou not be glad to have the niggardly, rascally sheep-biter come by some notable shame?” [II.v.4–5]
- “I have been dear to him, lad, some two thousand strong or so.” [III.ii.50–1]

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<sup>9</sup> As well as the more-benign Jaques in *As You Like It*.

- “We may carry it thus, for our pleasure and his penance, till our very pastime, tired out of breath, prompt us to have mercy on him; at which time we will bring the device to the bar and crown thee for a finder of madmen.” [III.iv.130–4]
- “Nay then, I must have an ounce or two of this malapert blood from you.” [IV.i.40–1]
- “Will you help? An ass-head and a coxcomb and a knave, a thin-faced knave, a gull?” [V.i.201–2]

The first few lines make an amusing sketch—wit striving with indigestion—but as the play progresses Toby grows drunker and nastier. Dangerously bored, he contributes to the plot mainly by finding new ways to gull Sir Andrew: into funding his appetites, wooing his niece, and challenging the equally reluctant “Cesario” to a duel. When this last joke backfires—first Antonio and then Sebastian interferes—Toby flings himself into the fight, gets the beating he deserves, and exits cursing.

Andrew is more welcome company, as harmless in his empty-headed way as Toby is vicious. Give him but food, drink, and a sprightly tune and he’s content, despite the occasional flashes of self-insight:

*Andrew:* Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has. But I am a great eater of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit.

*Toby:* No question.

*Andrew:* An I thought that, I’d forswear it. I’ll ride home tomorrow, Sir Toby.

*Toby:* *Pourquoi*, my dear knight?

*Andrew:* What is “*pourquoi*”? Do, or not do? I would I had bestowed that time in the tongues that I have in fencing, dancing, and bearbaiting. O, had I but followed the arts!

[I.iii.79–90]

A dozen lines later, his mind has been changed and his confidence renewed:

*Andrew:* I’ll stay a month longer. I am a fellow o’ th’ strangest mind i’ th’ world. I delight in masques and revels sometimes altogether.

*Toby:* Art thou good at these kickshawses, knight?

*Andrew:* As any man in Illyria, whatsoever he be, under the degree of my betters, and yet I will not compare with an old man.

*Toby:* What is thy excellence in a galliard, knight?

*Andrew:* Faith, I can cut a caper.

*Toby:* And I can cut a mutton to't.

*Andrew:* And I think I have the back-trick simply as strong as any man in Illyria.

[I.iii.105–16]

His other scenes are variations on such foolishness, yet I cannot dismiss him as easily as Sir Toby, nor do I doubt him when he claims, pitifully, “I was adored once too” [II.iii.169]. If Orsino shows us the folly of unrequited love, and Malvolio that of unwarranted ambition, Sir Andrew Aguecheek exemplifies undeserved privilege. He thus makes another easy foil to the play’s nominal fool,

### **Feste**

As previously noted, the first thing we learn about Feste is that he has been truant. Though he never says why, it is not difficult to guess the reason: what place does a jester have in Olivia’s house? He has an answer, of course:

*Feste:* Good madonna, give me leave to prove you a fool.

*Olivia:* Can you do it?

*Feste:* Dexteriously, good madonna.

*Olivia:* Make your proof.

*Feste:* I must catechize you for it, madonna. Good my mouse of virtue, answer me.

*Olivia:* Well, sir, for want of other idleness, I’ll bide your proof.

*Feste:* Good madonna, why mourn’st thou?

*Olivia:* Good fool, for my brother’s death.

*Feste:* I think his soul is in hell, madonna.

*Olivia:* I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

*Feste:* The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother’s soul, being in heaven.

[I.v.53–67]

Olivia indulges this humor—“There is no slander in an allowed fool,” she declares [I.v.89–90]—but she prefers the show of gravity and so is likelier to call for Malvolio, whose “sad and civil” aspect “suits well for a servant with my fortunes” [III.iv.4–5]. Wisely, Feste moonlights at Orsino’s court, where music fills each scene and

good singers are well compensated—though the duke requests songs as lugubrious as anything Olivia might desire:

Come away, come away, death,  
 And in sad cypress let me be laid.  
 Fly away, fly away, breath;  
 I am slain by a fair cruel maid.  
 My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,  
 O, prepare it.  
 My part of death, no one so true  
 Did share it.

[II.iv.51–8]

Like Olivia—like nearly everyone in *Twelfth Night*—Orsino is an easy target for satire. Feste takes his measure in a few tart lines:

Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal. I would have men of such constancy put to sea, that their business might be everything, and their intent everywhere; for that's it that always makes a good voyage of nothing. Farewell.

[II.iv.73–8]

The weariness is evident: he might say simply, *Begone*. Even with Viola—the one character whose intelligence matches Feste's—the fool seems irritated by his profession:

*Viola:* Save thee, friend, and thy music. Dost thou live by thy tabor?

*Feste:* No, sir, I live by the church.

*Viola:* Art thou a churchman?

*Feste:* No such matter, sir. I do live by the church; for I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church.

*Viola:* So thou mayst say, the king lies by a begger, if a beggar dwell near him; or, the church stands by thy tabor, if thy tabor stand by the church.

*Feste:* You have said, sir. To see this age! A sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may be turned outward! . . . But indeed words are very rascals since bonds disgraced them.

*Viola:* Thy reason, man?

*Feste:* Troth, sir, I can yield you none without words, and words are grown so false I am loath to prove reason with them.

[III.i.1–25]

The word “sir” sticks like a poisoned dart—the forced politeness of a society that leaves its truth-telling to “allowed fools”:

*Viola:* I warrant thou art a merry fellow and car’st for nothing.

*Feste:* Not so, sir; I do care for something; but in my conscience, sir, I do not care for you. If that be to care for nothing, sir, I would it would make you invisible.

*Viola:* Art not thou the Lady Olivia’s fool?

*Feste:* No, indeed, sir. The Lady Olivia has no folly. She will keep no fool, sir, till she be married; and fools are as like husbands as pilchers are to herrings, the husband’s the bigger. I am indeed not her fool, but her corrupter of words.

*Viola:* I saw thee late at the Count Orsino’s.

*Feste:* Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun; it shines everywhere.

[III.i.26–39]

Playing the fool for true fools is hard work, as Viola realizes: “This is a practice / As full of labor as a wise man’s art; / For folly that he wisely shows, is fit; / But wise men, folly-fall’n, quite taint their wit” [III.i.64–7]. In a darker universe, Feste might have been Thersites, the scurrilous slave from *Troilus and Cressida*: viciously, bootlessly cursing oblivious masters. In pleasant Illyria, Feste retains his empathy. Though he participates, as Sir Topas, in the gulling of Malvolio, he is conspicuously *not* present for the discovery of the fake letter. (“I will plant you two, and let the fool make a third,” Maria tells Toby and Andrew [II.iii.161–2], but the extra mocker turns out to be Fabian.) Later, Feste brings the “light and paper and ink” [IV.ii.116] that help to free the imprisoned steward.

Empathy has limits, of course. Feste does not immediately deliver Malvolio’s plea for help. (“But as a madman’s epistles are no gospels,” he shrugs, “so it skills not much when they are delivered” [V.i.282–3]). And his parting shot to Malvolio—delivered with what relish the actor will—suggests that Feste is one of the better grudge-holders in



Shakespeare: “But do you remember, ‘Madam, why laugh you at such a barren rascal? An you smile not, he’s gagged’? And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges” [V.i.367–70].

This is perhaps a willful misreading of history—Maria and Toby were not thinking of Feste’s hurt feelings when they conspired to humiliate Malvolio. Yet Feste, in the tradition of Shakespeare’s best comedians, recognizes that time is a greater force than any mortal, and its whirligig shall upend us all. Meantime, the wise live as equanimously as they can. The wonderful song that ends the play suggests as much, and Feste, quite rightly, sings it:

When that I was and a little tiny boy,  
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
 A foolish thing was but a toy,  
 For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man’s estate,  
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
 ’Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,  
 For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came, alas, to wive,  
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
 By swaggering could I never thrive,  
 For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came unto my beds,  
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
 With tosspots still had drunken heads,  
 For the rain it raineth every day.

A great while ago the world begun,  
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain;  
 But that’s all one, our play is done,  
 And we’ll strive to please you every day.

[V.i.382–401]

Unifying these simple episodes, as in life, are several constants: time's passage, human folly, and the power of nature to overwhelm us. Rain ends every verse but the last, when—if we honor Feste's humble request—it gives way to applause.

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