

SHAKESPERIENCE  
IDAHO SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

"That Question's Out of My Part": The Economy of Love, Words, and Gender in  
Twelfth Night

by

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Twelfth Night opens with Orsino's languid discourse on his love-sick life:

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 . . . . (1.1.1-4)

The Duke wants to feast on what he lacks in order to kill his desire, to free himself from love by satiating his appetite for it. But love's appetite has a way of reviving and renewing its force even when it seems to die. Does this mean that love's death, or our satisfaction, are illusory? Does the Renaissance euphemism for sexual intercourse echo faintly here in Shakespeare's insistent repetition of the verb "to die?" If so, how does the appetitive aspect of physical love--the stuff of Sir Toby's puns and jests--relate to its spiritual form? Orsino's wish seems to be granted, for he finds that his musical diet soon cloys: "Tis not so sweet now as it was before" (1.1.8). Yet his desire for Olivia remains, unless his love for her, "Of what validity and pitch soe'er, / . . . [has fallen] into abatement and low price" (1.1.12-13). According to Orsino, whose love for Olivia is unrequited, to enter the "sea" of love is to find oneself devalued. One could blame the beloved (Olivia) for failing to recognize the lover's (Orsino's) worth, the worth of his love. Is this failure a matter of the beloved's criteria, of her values? Or is it a failure of communication? Or does Orsino fail to recognize the image of his own desire, perhaps even his love of his own desire, in his apparent recognition of the way love depends upon the power of the imagination: "So full of shapes is fancy / That it alone is high fantastical" (1.1.14-15). In other words, does Orsino love Olivia, or his unrequited and imagined love for Olivia, for he soon reveals that the "hart"

he hunts is his own, and his "desires, like fell and cruel hounds, / . . . pursue [him]" (1.1.20-21). Though we may begin Twelfth Night somewhat like Viola, supposedly safe on land, we soon find that we have embarked on something of a sea journey, where smooth waters are full of changes and questions that threaten to engulf our identities. What are the forms and shapes of our loves and desires? How are they expressed or recognized? Who or what do we realize or imagine through them? Where does the meaning of love reside?

The play's characters and its audience rely upon the words and images of text and performance to answer such questions. But images and words can be comically and cruelly deceptive. Viola, for instance, trusts that the Captain who saved her from shipwreck has a "mind that suits / With . . . [his] fair and outward character" (1.2.50-51), though she is already planning to disguise her gender to serve Duke Orsino. Words can be even more elusive than appearances, as Sir Andrew Aguecheek demonstrates to our amusement when pondering Sir Toby's advice:

Sir Toby. Accost, Sir Andrew, accost.  
 Sir Andrew. What's that?  
 Sir Toby. My niece's chambermaid.  
 Sir Andrew. Good Mistress Accost, I desire better acquaintance.  
 Maria. My name is Mary, sir.  
 Sir Andrew. Good Mistress Mary Accost--  
 Sir Toby. You mistake, knight. "Accost" is front her, board her, woo her, assail her.  
 Sir Andrew. By my troth, I would not undertake her in this company. Is that the meaning of "accost?"  
 (1.3.48-58)

Despite his perpetual confusion, Sir Andrew still manages to speak to what is at stake in Sir Toby's wordplay:

Sir Toby. Approach, Sir Andrew. Not to be abed after midnight is to be up betimes . . . .  
 Sir Andrew. Nay, by my troth, I know not, but I know to be up late is to be up late. (2.3.1-5)

But Sir Andrew's tautologically constrictive response to language's wayward representation of meaning and desire is no better than Sir Toby's earlier response to Maria's request that he confine himself within the "modest limits of order": "I'll confine myself no finer than I am" (1.3.10). Can we

confine or release our identities so easily? Does who we are--how we evaluate ourselves and are evaluated by others--depend upon what keeps us afloat in the sea of love and language?

Presumably, Viola embraces a male disguise to preserve her "estate" (1.2.43) and to enable her to move more freely in Illyria. But she soon finds herself trapped in a mediating role between Orsino and Olivia, and her disguise simultaneously bars her from disclosing her love for Orsino while prompting Olivia's love for her as Cesario. Have the "languages" of clothes, roles, and words become disabling rather than enabling in the precarious, perhaps dangerously festive world of Twelfth Night? A world where the clown's relative detachment from such sea changes seems purchased at the price of a loss of faith:

Feste. . . 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. (3.1.21-24)

Alexander Leggatt acknowledges that for most characters in Twelfth Night language is "a means of defining the self and confirming its privateness--one more barrier erected against the realities of the world outside" (229); he argues that Feste and Viola, however, share a "special awareness of language" that enables them to "extend their natures by playing roles, while keeping the role and the inner personality distinct: 'I am not that I play' (1.v.173); 'I wear not motley in my brain' (1.v.51-2)" (Leggatt 230). But this essentially comic (as opposed to tragic) faith in one's self, in one's ability to know one's role, place, gender, and desire, presupposes that "nature to her bias" (5.1.260) assigns our identities, our loves, our private, social, and political functions. Can one keep one's "inner personality" distinct, or even know it clearly? If we are reconciled to ourselves, does that mean we no longer desire, or that we simply feel our love and needs will be fulfilled, perhaps even satiated as we have seen Orsino assert?

Viola manages to work within or renew the conventional rhetoric of love that Orsino assigns to her. Despite her disclaimer, "I can say little more than I have studied, and that / question's out of my part" (1.5.174-75), she strays from her text in the "willow cabin" (1.5.263-71) speech, inadvertently winning Olivia's love not for Orsino, but for Cesario-Viola. Leggatt argues that Viola's speech about unrequited love offers a respite from the play's satiric view of love and language, where we "see that through convention love can find its truest expression" (234). Yet those who transgress convention in pursuit of their desire, and eventually this

includes Viola herself, are comically and somewhat rigorously restored to their proper places, as the play metes out its culture's rewards and punishments. Louis Montrose believes the cultural function of Shakespeare's romantic comedies

... accomodate both conservation and change. . . . These plays are explicitly concerned with socializing the sexual energies and assertive egos of youth. . . . The happy endings of Shakespeare's romantic comedies can be viewed as symbolic assimilations of potential disorder by a normative system. But such a view would fail to take account of the ways in which these plays also embody serious and partially successful challenges to the patriarchal order of the family and the polity. They make available to their audiences novel patterns of social and sexual expression and identity, at variance with the austere standards of private and public conduct prescribed in a voluminous homiletic literature on marriage, the family, and sex roles. (67)

Though Montrose does not discuss Twelfth Night, we can begin to conclude our brief analysis by surveying how the play constrains its characters' roles, even as its efforts to "confine" their behavior enable us to question and to glimpse what lies beyond its "modest limits of order."

Though we may receive a good deal of comic pleasure at seeing the self-loving and ridiculously cross-gartered Malvolio trapped by his interpretive presumptions--"If I could make that resemble something in me! (2.5.118-19)--we may also wonder if Olivia's final comment on him deserves some weight: "He hath been most notoriously abused" (5.1.378). Sir Toby predicts that the trick played upon Malvolio has "put him in such a dream that / when the image of it leaves him he must run mad" (2.5.189-90). If Malvolio's maddening solitude is a "striking comic variant on the confinement suffered by Orsino and Olivia, indulging fantasies of love that cannot be gratified" (Leggatt 227), his comeuppance does little to console deep-seated anxieties about our own fantasies. What if we find that Malvolio--or the play's other lovers--resemble something in us, as we proclaim too confidently: "I do not now fool / myself, to let imagination jade me; for every reason / excites to this, that my [beloved] loves me" (2.5.160-62). Has Malvolio been punished for his smug, over-reaching social aspirations, for forgetting that he is, as Sir Toby reminds him, just a "steward" (2.3.113). Or is it simply his obnoxious personality? After all, Olivia is quite willing to encourage Cesario's upwardly mobile courtship: "Fear not, Cesario, take thy fortunes up" (5.1.146), though Orsino seems to



place greater emphasis upon Sebastian's and Viola's status: "Be not amazed; right noble is his blood" (5.1.264).

Just as the rewards and punishments for transgressing social boundaries seem to blur the more closely we try to view them, the consequences for speaking out of one's gender "part" appear even more momentous and complex. Though Olivia observes Viola-Cesario "might do much" (1.5.271), Viola is less sanguine:

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. (2.2.27-32)

Matthew H. Wikander finds the misogyny latent in Viola's representation of women disturbing and revealing:

Viola's identification of her disguised self as Olivia's (and womankind's) "pregnant enemy" suggests a very female fear of the social tragedy of unwed pregnancy and casts maleness as an invading and embossing force that sets and fixes female fluidity. Yet at the same time Viola sees the "waxen hearts" of women as regrettably frail. In her "proper false" disguise she yearns for the fixity that only male power can impose.  
(359)

Marilyn French observes that following the humiliating mock-fight arranged by Sir Toby between Sir Andrew and Viola-Cesario, Viola "is forced to recognize that she is a woman by nature, and therefore by nature loves men, not women" (116-17). But French also calls attention to the blurring of gender attributes, noting that Antonio remains an "outsider because he mixes the gender principles in an unacceptable way. He is or has been a warrior . . . . But he is also giving, nutritive, and subordinate; he loves [Sebastian]" (114). Leggatt finds another character's gender attributes confusing, though he does not explore the cultural implications of Sebastian's doubleness:

Sebastian's pun about his own virginity also suggests a blurring of distinctions, even a blurring of sexes:

You would have been contracted to a maid;  
Nor are you therein, by my life, deceiv'd;

You are betroth'd both to a maid and a man.

(V.1.253-5)

He has, in an earlier scene, admitted something feminine in his own nature: 'My bosom is full of kindness, and I am yet so near the manners of my mother that, upon the least occasion more, mine eyes will tell tales of me' (II.i.35-7). (Leggatt 247)

Finally, both Olivia--"Ourselves we do not owe; / What is decreed must be, and be this so" (1.5.305-06)--and Viola--"O Time, thou must untangle this, not I; / It is too hard a knot for me t'untie" (2.2.40-41)--trust to the revelations of the plot to resolve their problems, though one could argue that Viola takes a more active role in shaping her destiny (see appendix 1). But the play's resolution does not fully accomodate Orsino's affection for Cesario, an affection that developed largely through shared intimacies and opinions about men's and women's love (2.4.93-118), nor does the conclusion provide a significant basis for Olivia's willingness to transfer her love from Cesario to Sebastian, or for Sebastian's alarming readiness to wed Olivia. Twelfth Night's festivities end with some promises of marriage and reconciliation, but we also hear Malvolio vowing revenge, and Feste's somber song tempers the joy we may take in the miraculous incarnation of Orsino's "fancy's queen" (5.1.388), for "the rain it raineth every day" (see appendix 2).

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## Viola: An Active Shaper of Destinies

In Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, Viola, though she boldly takes on the identity of a man near the beginning of the play's action, appears to take a passive role after that point in shaping her destiny and the destinies of Orsino and Olivia. She willingly puts herself at the bidding of both, "Your servant's servant is your servant, madam" (3.1.102), hoping to help mend their relationship. Although she appears passive and even sees herself as not being in control, "O Time, thou must untangle this, not I; / It is too hard a knot for me t' untie" (2.2.40,41), Viola's actions challenge the ideals of both Orsino and Olivia, changing their destinies as well as her own.

Although Viola seems like nothing more than a passive messenger from Orsino to Olivia, she asserts herself by refusing to say only those things Orsino would have her say. Instead of just delivering flowery love messages from Orsino, Viola challenges Olivia's ideals. She points out that abandoning marriage will have its consequences, "Lady, you are the cruel'st she alive / If you will lead these graces to the grave / And leave the world no copy" (1.5.236-238)--by choosing not to marry, Olivia chooses not to perpetuate her beauty. Viola also points out to Olivia that she is too proud and that denying the love of one who so deeply loves her makes no sense. Olivia responds to Viola's sincerity, but instead of turning toward Orsino for love, Olivia falls for Viola. This is no matter for Sebastian later takes Viola's place and marries Olivia. What is important is that Viola's words and actions clearly influence the destiny of Olivia.

Orsino is also affected by the actions of Viola. Almost instantly he trusts and recognizes Viola's sincerity, "Thou know'st no less but all, I have unclasped / To thee the book even of my secret soul" (1.4.13,14). Although Orsino believes Viola to be Cesario, he seems to be in love with her. Viola demonstrates to him the elements of true love--sincerity, friendship, and loyalty, "And I [Viola], most jocund, apt, and willingly, / To do you [Orsino] rest, a thousand deaths would die" (5.1.130,131). When Viola is revealed to be a woman, Orsino does not hesitate to take her for his wife.

Viola's sincerity works to her benefit as well. Although she first sets out to mend what she thought was a broken relationship, she quickly finds herself in love with Orsino. By challenging Olivia and Orsino's ideas about love and marriage, she paves the way for herself to find love and happiness. Through Viola, Shakespeare again reveals the complex, sometimes irrational, nature of love.

Feste's Song: It raineth every day; but not on the twelfth night

Viewed in an atmosphere of carnival and Saturnalian revelry, the characters in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" align themselves in relation to binary oppositions in a world where festivity, material rewards, and love are manipulated in order to efface the diametric constraints of suffering, evil, and death. These moods and motivations, as well as the theme of capturing moments of joviality and happiness as a means of escape from the more common moments of the opposite, are all made quite apparent in Feste's final song in Act 5.1.

The song may be viewed as representative of the typical progression from birth to death in a mundane world where successful transgression from the bleak norm requires passionate action or skeptical joking. In Feste's song the world was brought into existence with the conditions of rain and wind as continually dampening and eroding the human spirit, and it details various attempts (at social standing, drunken escapism, and love) to alleviate these impermeable elements. Parallel to each verse of the song there is action among the characters in their attempts to transcend the boundaries of redundancy through relationships of love, attainment of money and social standing, and relief provided by joking and trickery.

Perhaps through Feste's song, and in a reflexive manner, Shakespeare is alluding to comedy and the power of humor as the most viable outlet from the responsibilities and realities that are present for all people. Thus, the novelty and abandon provided by holidays and events that interrupt the normal progression of time can be reduced to socially acceptable and attainable entities such as humor and comedic posturing. Thus, while we can't have an existence filled with constant revelry and prolonged madness, we can enjoy momentary escapes from the oppression of a world where "for the rain it raineth every day." That is, of course, provided that someone continues to offer- as Feste concludes: "But that's all one, our play is done, and we'll strive to please you every day."