

'Twelfth Night' and 'What You Will'

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I

Although the exact chronology of Shakespeare's plays is still in dispute, on the available evidence most commentators think *Twelfth Night* to be the last of the Romantic Comedies, close in time to *Hamlet*. The piquancy of this association has not gone unnoticed, and there is occasionally an anachronistic ring to critical judgements on *Twelfth Night*, caught best by the one that thrusts Hamlet's greatness upon Malvolio. Yet the dilemma which confounds the tragic protagonist appears also to disturb the equanimity of those in the comedy who, like him, balk at what seem to them excessively difficult situations, and who, like him also, are unable to end their troubles simply by opposing them. Even in indulgent Illyria, retreat into langour or knock-about-comedy does not muffle entirely the clamorous demands from the real world for decisions to be made and actions taken. Over the play hangs Sir Toby's great question, 'Is it a world to hide virtues in?' (I.3.117-118).¹

In many ways, of course, Illyria, unlike Hamlet's Denmark, offers its aristocratic inhabitants a life freed from the obligation to exercise their virtues. The kind of licence that the play's main title conveys can be enjoyed at its most untrammelled in the simple indulgences of the sub-plot. Although Sir Toby has as much contempt for his drinking companion, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, as he has for his puritan enemy, Malvolio, Sir Andrew's naive conception of the good life lies at the heart of their activity: 'it rather consists of eating and drinking' (II.3.10-11). If it were not for Maria, who hatches the plot against Malvolio, the sub-plot would have little to offer other than the spectacle of aimless roistering. Despite Sir Toby's noisy contempt for 'the modest limits of order' (I.3.8), or his lack of respect for place, persons and time (to echo Malvolio's accusation), his belligerent claim to the hedonistic life does not amount to very much. The festive spirit, given free reign on *Twelfth Night*, depends here, as elsewhere in the play, upon an essential passivity on the part of its adherents.

Passivity in the guise of a carefree enjoyment of the good things of life may be more tolerable than in the form it takes with Orsino, whose contribution to a *Twelfth Night* philosophy has nothing to recommend it. Of all Shakespeare's romantic heroes his role must surely be the most difficult for any actor to make attractive. Supine in his passion, Orsino conducts his love-affair with Olivia through emissaries, Valentine initially, and then Viola as Cesario. This leaves him free to contemplate the tyrant sway of his 'love-thoughts' from which in fact he longs to escape, or says he does: 'And my desires,

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like fell and cruel hounds/E'er since pursue me' (I.1.23–24). Unable to act, he cannot take responsibility for his own feelings, as his figure indicates, divorcing himself from them as though they were external agents sent to plague him. He seems no more able to translate words into deeds than Olivia's other suitor, Sir Andrew, whom he also resembles, though on a more highly poetic plane, in his vacillation and instability of opinion. In the space of some ninety lines in Act II, Orsino moves from a conception of himself as devoted to the 'constant image of the creature/That is beloved' (II.4.18–19) through an attack on the inconstancy of men's affections when compared with women's (II.4.32–34) to an attack on women's inconstancy in love when compared with men:

Alas, their love may be called appetite,
No motion of the liver but the palate,
That suffers surfeit, cloyment, and revolt. (II.4.96-98)

Orsino's patronizing regret, here, for the crudity of women's love for men not only contradicts his recent opinion as to 'giddy and unfirm' masculine fancies, but does so in language which cannot but remind us of the play's opening lines, where he appeals on his own behalf for a medicinal 'surfeiting' in order that his 'appetite may sicken and so die' (I.1.3). 'Surfeit, cloyment, and revolt', in fact, constitute the cycle from whose paralyzing influence Orsino escapes only in his marriage to Viola.

Subject to every fleeting whim, what can someone like Orsino *do*? He cannot do much more than talk about what he might do, or, at best, demand that others do urgently for him what he can only urgently demand them to do. 'Be clamorous and leap all civil bounds' (I.4.20) he urges Viola, for (in a prophetic line) 'It shall become thee well to act my woes' (I.4.25). 'What shall I do?' (V.1.109) he asks Olivia, whose reply nicely balances courtesy and contempt: 'Even what it please my lord, that shall become him' (V.1.110). Although his question may not be so inane as Sir Andrew's 'What is "pour-quoi"? Do, or not do?' (I.3.83), between them they voice in comic fashion the alternative which faces Hamlet: do, or not do. In both their cases (unlike his), any attempt to take decisive action is doomed to be comically ineffectual. When Orsino discovers that Olivia believes herself to be in love with Cesario he indulges his fury in self-dramatization and empty threats:

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.1.111-113)²

Such bombast circumstance gives way to a recognition of impotence

(though still phrased bombastically): 'Live you the marble-breasted tyrant still' (V.1.118).

Indolence, passivity and impotence are constitutive of a Twelfth Night philosophy: care must be, indeed, the enemy of this life. With Viola's entry onto *Twelfth Night's* stage, the emphasis shifts temporarily (to return each time she returns) to a meaning of the play's sub-title 'What You Will' which offers itself as a genuine alternative to the main title. She supplies what those idling through an Illyrian Twelfth Night lack: direction, willed purpose, persistence and decisiveness. 'I'll serve this duke' (I.2.55) she says when we meet her first, indicating how much more than simply an Orsinian lament was her original question: 'And what should I do in Illyria?' (I.2.3). In her disguise as Cesario, she obeys Orsino's instructions to the letter, much to Malvolio's discomfiture. 'He's fortified against any denial' (I.5.138-139) Malvolio complains to an intrigued Olivia, 'He'll speak with you, will you or no' (I.5.147-148). How much her purposefulness becomes her is indicated, of course, in Olivia's admiring, 'You might do much' (I.5.263). In these circumstances, Viola's perplexity over Olivia's continued rejection of Orsino's suit does not extend beyond herself. We can see quite clearly why her active involvement in Illyrian affairs should in a trice break down Olivia's self-denying and artificial barriers against natural feeling. 'Even so quickly may one catch the plague?' (I.5.281) wonders Olivia. In these circumstances, even so.

Having caught it Olivia does not retire into sweet beds of flowers, even though she suffers the same treatment from Viola that she has been according Orsino. Her resilience here does not come as a total surprise to us, for she has displayed, from the outset, her own brand of willed purpose. In her misplaced determination to mourn her brother's death for seven years, we acknowledge a strength of will, however perverse. Valentine's caustic account to Orsino of her decision grasps its comic impropriety:

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. (1.1.29-33)

Valentine reduces Olivia's daily expression of devotion to an unthinking exercise in the art of sad remembrance, as mechanical as watering flowers, except that the salt in Olivia's tears hurts her eyes. His metaphor from preserving meat, the ambiguity in 'eye-offending' and his pointed use of the transferred epithet ('a brother's dead love') tell us why Olivia might well have to strain hard for her tears. Her persistence is unnatural and foolish, a stubborn exertion of the mis-directed will.

A determination to pursue a course of action, no matter how fatuous, obviously provides no real alternative to an indulgence of inertia. Olivia's activity in memory of her dead brother resembles Orsino's languor in behalf of love: each a retreat from reality. In Shakespeare's presentation of Malvolio (whose name means 'bad will'), his conviction that reality can be transformed by an exercise of the will overwhelms all his notions of social decorum and subdues his common-sense. Malvolio has no intention of hiding *his* virtues, for he is, in Maria's words, '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' (II.3.136-139). Maria's trick against him exploits this supreme conceit, relying on Malvolio's strength of will to pursue inanity to excess and surfeit. Her letter cleverly appeals to his 'blood' and 'spirit', asking him to inure himself 'to what thou art like to be, cast thy humble slough and appear fresh' (II.5.135-137). Unlike Orsino, Malvolio finds nothing difficult nor distasteful in the activities demanded of him, despite their demeaning tricks of singularity:

Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants.
Let thy tongue tang arguments of state; put thyself
into the trick of singularity . . . Remember
who commended thy yellow stockings and wished to
see thee ever cross-gartered. (II.5.137-141)

Malvolio's performance exceeds expectation. Only a man blindly convinced of his own worth, assured that in no circumstances can he possibly appear ridiculous, could parade himself in this manner. Arrogantly self-willed, Malvolio, more extremely than Olivia, brings the notion of self-assertion in the play's sub-title into greater disrepute than Sir Toby the license implicit in 'Twelfth Night'. The letter speaks to his deepest convictions about himself, especially in one of its last injunctions: 'Go to, thou art made, *if thou desir'st to be so*' (II.5.142-143) [my italics], releasing in him a flood of 'wills':

I will be proud, I will read politic authors, I
will baffle Sir Toby, I will wash off gross
acquaintance, I will be point-devise, the very
man. (II.5.148-150)

Such a rhapsody, despite his insistence on Jove's benign intervention, places Malvolio squarely in the second and third of the three categories of greatness the letter describes: 'Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em' (II.5.132-134).

II

I have been concerned up to this point to show how *Twelfth Night*'s titles point in different directions: one towards an acceptance, in either indolent or festive spirit, of a passive, or at most opportunist, role in the shaping of events; the other towards a reliance on purposeful activity in order to help bring about a desired state of affairs. But *Twelfth Night* is no different from Shakespeare's other romantic comedies in its expression of the integrating, conciliatory function of comedy. Olivia's marriage to Sebastian and Orsino's to Viola celebrate not only the re-animation of their good sense as individuals, but also the invigoration of Illyrian society itself. In this, as in other ways, *Twelfth Night*, particularly resembles *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. In the terminology of Sherman Hawkins, all four are 'comedies of the closed world' which offer themselves in an 'alternate pattern' to the one discerned by Northrop Frye. Into this closed world intruders force their way to 'draw . . . thwarted or random emotional forces to themselves'.³ Sebastian, Viola and Antonio in some measure act as vivifying agents in Illyria, reminding its inhabitants of half-forgotten occasions of action and hazard, when on the 'rude sea's enraged and foamy mouth' (V.1.72) in the 'smoke of war' (V.1.47) they once made 'scathful grapple' (V.1.50). Marrying Illyrians to these resourceful and energetic outsiders performs the same function that Polixenes describes in *The Winter's Tale*, where 'gentler scions' married to the 'wildest stock' ensure the propagation of a hardy species.

A further tendency to integration and assimilation in *Twelfth Night* enables us also to see at work a kind of 'solemn combination' (V.1.372) of the apparently contradictory implications in the play's titles. For neither Sebastian nor Viola thinks that, because they are virtuous, there should be no more cakes and ale. Nor does either flaunt his strength of will in the manner of a Malvolio or an Olivia, in her initial perversity. On the contrary, both recognize that 'what you will' must at times defer to a larger shaping pattern in which individual desire and will have finally only a limited authority. Truly decorous, Viola, for example, steps back from fruitless involvement with a refractory problem:

O Time, thou must untangle this, not I;
It is too hard a knot for me t'untie. (II.2.39-40)

Earlier, she had acknowledged that the strong mind can be at best only partially successful: 'What else may hap, to time I will commit' (I.2.60). Her awareness, in these instances, of her human limitation resembles the general Illyrian tendency, in *Twelfth Night* abandon,

to leave events to the caprice of fortune. The resemblance is, however, only superficial. In an important article, J. S. Lawry⁴ notices that Viola's dependence on providential time constitutes a **transmuting of Olivia's reliance on mere fate**, 'Fate, show thy force; ourselves we do not owe. / What is decreed must be—and be this so!' (I.5.296–297). And even in the theatre, we might ourselves notice **the difference in the women's mode of expression: Viola's slightly rueful, but sensibly restrained, admission of her incapacity, contrasting with Olivia's imperious, despairing self-abasement.**

In fact, from the beginning, Shakespeare has alerted us to the way in which Sebastian and Viola firmly 'owe' themselves, and yet owe their very lives to the workings of providence. The sheer good fortune of the Captain's 'driving boat' (I.2.11) which picks up Viola matches Sebastian's providential encounter with the 'strong mast that lived upon the sea' (I.2.14), to which he can only 'bind himself' because he is 'Most provident in peril . . . (Courage and hope both teaching him the practice)' (I.2.12–13). ('Provident' here punningly suggests not only 'providing for [himself]' but also 'provided with'.) And when Sebastian can no longer cling to his mast, providence in the nick of time provides him with Antonio to pull him from the 'breach of the sea' (II.1.21). To use the Captain's words, brother and sister are each comforted with chance (I.2.8); for them, 'Tempests are kind, and salt waves fresh in love' (III.4.363–364). As Orsino remarks of Viola: 'I know thy constellation is right apt / For this affair' (I.4.34–35). But we should note (especially in Viola's case) that even the manner in which they surrender themselves to their benevolent destinies captures the spirit of their independence and self sufficiency. Viola's acknowledgement, for example, of time's sway sounds more like a deputizing of authority than an admission of inadequacy; 'What else may hap, to time *I will commit*' (I.2.60). At times, the strong sense she has of her own authority causes her to make pronouncements comic in their attempt to manipulate reality, as when she virtually wills the goodness of the Captain's mind: 'I will believe thou has a mind that suits / With this thy fair and outward character' (I.2.50–51). Such a happy combination of the self-reliant and the providentially designed invests Sebastian's coupling of 'determinate' with 'mere extravagancy', in his description of his life's voyage to Antonio, with more than a suggestion of the paradoxical: 'My determinate voyage is mere extravagancy' (II.1.9–10).⁵

Naturally enough, the most intriguingly 'determinate' aspect of Sebastian's voyage is his inevitable encounter with Olivia, for in this play 'Journeys end in lovers meeting' (II.3.40). When they do meet, the way in which she conducts herself amounts to a comic re-assertion of her powerful personality. What she wills, here, sweeps aside any objections that Sebastian might conceivably make, though,

in fact, he seems to be too bemused (or perhaps too suddenly in love) to put up any serious resistance, 'Or I am mad, or else this is a dream' (IV.1.57). In any event, Sebastian 'shalt not choose but go' [to Olivia's house] (IV.1.53). 'Do not deny' (IV.1.54) Olivia commands. Deny her he will not—or cannot—so that, unlike Viola, he is more than willing to accede to her 'willing love' (III.3.11). To Viola, Olivia had said, 'I would you were as I would have you be' (III.1.139)—for which, according to Olivia, she had in return received a 'deal of scorn' (III.1.142). To Sebastian, Olivia says, 'Would thou'dst be ruled by me!' (IV.1.60), hardly suspecting, one imagines, his immediate surrender, 'Madam, I will' (IV.1.61). The more he gives himself over to what he describes as 'this accident and flood of fortune' (IV.3.11), the more dominant her role as headlong wooer becomes. When next they meet, Olivia, accompanied by a Priest, insists on Sebastian's plighting the 'full assurances of your faith' (IV.3.26), so that 'my most jealous and too doubtful soul / May live at peace' (IV.3.27–28). 'Blame not this haste of mine' (IV.3.22) she peremptorily urges him, and the scene ends on a truly triumphant, self-gratulatory note:

Then lead the way, good father, and heavens so shine
That they may fairly note this act of mine. (IV.3.34-35)

'This haste of mine', 'this act of mine' suggest how subsidiary (and posterior) Olivia considers the role of the heavens. She has to endure one final snub from Cesario, and the intrusions of Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, to realize the extent to which events have always been beyond her control. Perhaps not surprisingly, Shakespeare does not dwell on her joyful discomfiture: 'most wonderful' (V.1.217) is her only contribution to the denouement, until, with her customary 'smooth, discreet, and stable bearing' (V.1.19), she attends to the unblinking of Malvolio.

III

The play proper ends with a speech from Orsino—newly arrived at discretion and stability—anticipating the 'golden time' (V.1.371) when 'A solemn combination shall be made / Of our dear souls' (V.1.372–373). The principals then depart, leaving Feste, as Epilogue, to sing a sourer version of Orsino's golden time, incorporating rain, thieves, knaves and tosspots with drunken heads. And it seems only proper that this play should close finally on yet another reminder of what must 'Taint the condition of this present hour' (V.1.347), for the golden time would never have arrived had not conditions constantly been tainted, notably the Illyrian by the non-Illyrian. Even

here, as we have seen, *Twelfth Night* resists a rigidly schematic description. Olivia's decisiveness itself taints the condition of Illyrian helplessness, while, among the non-Illyrians, Antonio's excesses in his 'willing love' resemble those examples of emotional authoritarianism in Olivia and Malvolio.

There has, to my knowledge, been little comment on the odd plaintiveness in Shakespeare's presentation of Antonio. In Antonio's inability to allow Sebastian freedom of movement in Illyria and Sebastian's unwillingness to prevail on their friendship to Antonio's extent, we perceive a more perversely comic version of Olivia's pursuit of Viola. When we first meet the two friends, at the opening of Act II, their colloquy seems at first sight no more than a somewhat stilted variant on the twin themes of devotion and courtesy in friendship—slightly reminiscent of the elaborate exchange of civilities between Archidamus and Camillo which opens *The Winters' Tale*. Closer inspection reveals the degree to which the language of elaborate civility, in this case, highlights a morbid oppressiveness in the relationship, as though Antonio were one of Orsino's 'fell and cruel hounds' in remorseless pursuit of the beloved object. Even Antonio's providential rescue of Sebastian from the sea's breach can be seen (especially by Sebastian) as merely an enforced absence from felicity:

He left behind him myself and a sister both born
in an hour. If the heavens had been pleased,
would we had so ended! But you, sir, altered
that, for some hour before you took me from the
breach of the sea was my sister drowned. (II.1.16-20)

Sebastian's sorrow for Viola's drowning, here, seems more like an accusation against Antonio's interference in the natural flow of things. And the murderous language of love between them grows keener as the scene develops, from Sebastian's 'you will not extort from me what I am willing to keep in' (II.1.11-12) to the following competition between them in the rhetoric of self-punishment:

Antonio. Pardon me, sir, your bad entertainment.

Sebastian. O good Antonio, forgive me your trouble.

Antonio. If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant.

Sebastian. If you will not undo what you have done, that is, kill him whom you have recovered, desire it not. (II.1.29-35)

Speaking here in Olivia's vein, each wishes the other were as he would have him be, each claiming the most extreme punishment for himself should his will be thwarted.

Antonio persists, whatever Sebastian wills. Despite the fact that

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he has 'many enemies in Orsino's court' (II.1.40), he determines to follow Sebastian there: 'But come what may, I do adore thee so / That danger shall seem sport, and I will go' (II.1.42-43). When they meet again in Illyria (III.3), Sebastian surrenders to Antonio's importunity, not without a glance first at the strong suggestion of masochism in so intense an attachment:

I would not by my will have troubled you;
But since you make your pleasure of your pains,
I will no further chide you. (III.3.1-3)

The notion that Antonio gets pleasure from the pain in serving Sebastian is re-inforced by the manner in which he describes his love, to all those who will listen. In this same scene, he represents himself to his friend as a horse afflicted with the spur, 'My desire / (More sharp than filed steel) did spur me forth' (III.3.4-5), and later he talks of his love for Sebastian to the Officers in terms of a religious prostration:

Relieved him with such sanctity of love,
And to his image, which methought did promise
Most venerable worth, did I devotion. (III.4.341-343)

In the last act, he tells Orsino how he had dedicated his love to Sebastian 'without retention or restraint' (V.1.75), prizing his own life at little worth:

For his sake
Did I expose myself (pure for his love)
Into the danger of this adverse town. (V.1.76-78)

What we learn of his previous encounter with Orsino emphasises his stubbornness. Only he 'stood out' (III.3.35) in his city's repayment of what they took from the Illyrians. Once committed to a course of action, Antonio's aggressive will cannot be swayed, but in the triumphant declaration of permanent relationships in the fifth act, Antonio is neglected. His last words in the play immediately before the denouement—almost two hundred lines before the final curtain—could perhaps, anticipating Malvolio, be spoken in a tone of querulous bafflement:

How have you made division of yourself?
An apple cleft in two is not more twin
Than these two creatures. Which is Sebastian?
(V.1.214-216)

Antonio's and Malvolio's brief careers illuminate the dangers incidental to an unswervable belief in the authority of the determined will. Sir Toby's, Sir Andrew's and Orsino's activities, on the other hand, pre-suppose a world where virtues should remain hidden, and justify Malvolio's severe criticism of Sir Toby: 'you waste the treasure of your time' (II.5.71). Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* advocates the proper spending of time's treasure, for 'In delay there lies no plenty' (II.3.47), especially as 'Youth's a stuff will not endure' (II.3.49). It is Viola more than anyone else, however, who, despite her powerful sense of her self-sufficiency, recognizes that 'What's to come is still unsure' (II.3.46). The way therefore in which she spends her time's treasure, most effectively combines that freedom from worry and responsibility heralded by the play's main title with the resolute independence advertised by 'What You Will'.

Footnotes

1. Quotations from Shakespeare are from *William Shakespeare The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore, 1969).
2. We should notice the force of his opening negatively, 'Why should I not . . .', and the immediately qualifying, 'had I the heart to do it'. As both Kittredge and Dover Wilson point out, in their respective editions of *Twelfth Night*, the Egyptian thief is Thyamis from Heliodorus' story of Theagenes and Chariclea in the *Aethiopica*. Both editors give a précis of the story without further comment. Thyamis, in love with his captive, Chariclea, attempts to kill her, fearing she may be taken from him. He kills a Grecian woman by mistake. Appropriately enough, Orsino refers to somebody who failed to kill the one he loved.
3. 'The Two Worlds of Shakespearean Comedy', *Shakespeare Studies*, III (1967), p. 69. Frye's position was first promulgated in 'The Argument of Comedy' in *English Institute Essays for 1948* and extended and supported through the *Anatomy to A Natural Perspective* (New York, 1965).
4. '*Twelfth Night* and "Salt Waves Fresh in Love"', *Shakespeare Studies*, VI (1970), 89-108.
5. That this is so much bluster, anyway, is indicated some thirty lines later when he says simply, 'I am bound to the Count Orsino's court' (II.1.37-38).