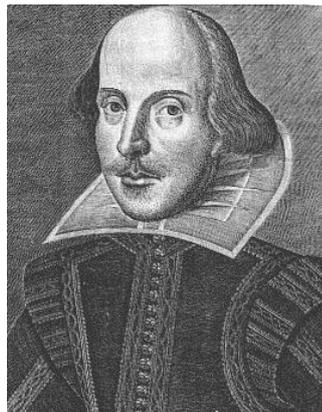


# Twelfth Night

by Peter Cash



English Association Shakespeare Bookmarks

No. 5

## Twelfth Night

by

Peter Cash

### SCOPE OF TOPIC

The aim of this Bookmark is to approach Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* by way of three critical quotations which attempt a definition of the genre:

Shylock is both the embodiment of an irrational hatred and a credible human being; he is neither of these things to the exclusion of the other .... The situation was given; necessarily, therefore, the 'characters' in a certain primitive sense – much the same sense in which we can speak of 'characters' in a nursery-story like Cinderella or Robin Hood or a Punch and Judy show. They are simply the necessary agents for that situation or that story. Shakespeare proceeded to endow them with poetic utterance and with character in a quite different sense: he did what he could to make them credible human beings to himself; he gave them, so far as was possible, humanly plausible motives for their acts and situations, although these were often in fact prior to humane psychology. In a word, the method of Shakespeare's drama consists essentially in the humanisation of melodrama.

John Middleton Murry: *Shakespeare's Method* (1936)

Comedy is designed not to condemn evil, but to ridicule a lack of self-knowledge. It finds the virtues of Malvolio and Angelo as comic as the vices of Shylock.

Northrop Frye: *The Argument of Comedy* (1948)

Thus *Twelfth Night* exhibits in its action one of the fundamental motifs of comedy: the education of a man or woman. For a comedy, as everyone knows, is a play in which the situation holds some threat of disaster but issues in the achievement of happiness; and those comedies may satisfy us most deeply in which danger is averted and happiness is achieved through something that takes place within the characters.

Harold Jenkins: *Shakespeare's Twelfth Night* (1959)

The strategy of this Bookmark is to essay an exegesis of *Twelfth Night* by means of five inter-related character-studies: although they cannot help but appear in a particular order, these studies need not be read in that order. Unwritten are specific studies of the two knights, Sir Toby Belch ('A plague o' these pickled herring') and Sir Andrew Aguecheek ('I was adored once too'); in essential parts, their roles are collected by my sweep of the other characters. From John Middleton Murry's paragraph, it can however be seen that students of Shakespeare must be wary of using 'character' in A. C. Bradley's popular sense of the term: i.e. as a person of the drama endowed with psychological realism. In all Shakespeare's plays, not only in his comedies, the function/the role of such a person comes 'prior to humane psychology'.

From Northrop Frye's reference to Angelo, it can be clearly seen that the play is not 'comic' in the ha-ha-ha sense of the term, but in the richer and wider senses of the term that Frye and Harold Jenkins give us.

## BOOKS TO READ

ed. M. M. Mahood, Shakespeare *Twelfth Night*, New Penguin Shakespeare 1968.

H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearian Comedy*, 1938

Northrop Frye, *The Argument of Comedy*, 1948.

C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 1959.

Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies*, OUP 1960.

ed. Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare: The Comedies, C20 Views*, Prentice-Hall 1965.

J. M. Gregson, *Shakespeare: Twelfth Night*, Studies in EL 72, Edward Arnold 1980.

Patrick Swinden, *An Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedy*, 1973.

Michael Mangan, *A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies*, Longman 1996.

## FESTE

Better a witty fool than a foolish wit.  
Feste Act I Scene 5

This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,  
And to do that well craves a kind of wit.  
Viola Act III Scene 1

O, gentle lady, do not put me to it,  
For I am nothing if not critical."  
Iago Act II Scene 1

Feste is not a 'character' in the conventional sense of that term, for he is not endowed with psychological realism of a kind which enables us to enumerate his personal qualities as if he were a known acquaintance. More than any of the other figures in *Twelfth Night*, of whom something fairly similar can be said, Feste plays a role; his role in the play, his function, is to put in perspective the behaviour of the other 'characters'/figures by whom he is surrounded. Here is a role for which this 'witty fool' is well suited, for – to borrow Iago's phrase – he is 'nothing if not critical'.

'What country, friends, is this?' asks Viola (Act I Scene 2). The answer which the Sea Captain gives her points the way: 'This is' not Elysium [Heaven] but 'Illyria, lady' [Earth]; it is a country in which the condition of existence is both finite and transient. It is upon this perception that Feste's plaintive songs enlarge. They begin the tradition that Robert Herrick (1591-1633) and Andrew Marvell (1621-1681) continue: since our youth is a stuff which will not endure, it is imperative that we 'make much of time': that we 'gather rosebuds while we may' or 'sport us while we may'.

Feste's simple thesis is that man's awareness of death affects his enjoyment of life; man's consciousness of time puts his brighter days into a darker perspective. It is this shadow that casts itself over Sir Toby and Sir Andrew's caterwauling in Act II Scene 3; it is this morbid sensitivity that gives a poignant ring to their drunken voices. The two knights plan to seize both today and tonight, for tomorrow they die ....

Feste's role is to remind us that such harmony – owing to cosmic conditions – can be but fleeting/ that man's merriment is at all times conditioned by his knowledge of his mortality/ that 'pleasure will be paid, one time or another' (Act II Scene 4). The function of his songs is to supply us with this context in which the actions of the other figures can be clearly viewed.

Question: 'What is love?' Answer: "'Tis not hereafter'. It is not something which can be guaranteed into the future: literally, not something likely to last 'after' the 'here' and now/ likely to 'endure'. It is in this temporal context that Feste perceives and comments upon the respective follies of Sir Toby, of Olivia ('She will keep no fool, sir, till she be married') and of Orsino in particular.

In Act II Scene 3, Sir Toby – whose response to the precarious condition of his existence is to eat, drink and be merry – can see no reason why he should confine himself 'within the modest limits of order'. If tomorrow ('cras' in Latin) he dies, then he can see no sense in procrastination:

Let us therefore eat and drink. Marian, I say! a stoup of wine!

Since *tempus fugit, carpe diem* – and, in Sir Toby's case, *carpe noctem* as well. He is resolved to 'take the present time' (*As You Like It*) even if that time is in the middle of the night: 'Not to be abed after midnight is to be up betimes.' Mournful though it is, Feste's lyric endorses Sir Toby's hearty contention that his is an effective way of living:

In delay there lies no plenty,  
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,  
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

Sir Toby (with 'quaffing and drinking') and Sir Andrew (with 'fencing, dancing and bear-baiting') behave as if they can 'always hear/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near' (Marvell). There is no point 'in delay', in dallying; since youth's a stuff which 'will not endure', it seems wiser to them 'to make much of time' (Herrick) and enjoy 'the sweet of it' (Samuel Pepys). For this reason, he has 'no respect of place, persons nor time' in him (Malvolio's accusation); he does not care that he is drunk in a house of mourning at two o'clock in the morning, for he is 'sure' (Act I Scene 3) that such 'care' [= carefulness, cautiousness] is 'an enemy to life'.

By their very names, Feste (who embodies the spirit of the Feast) and Malvolio (in whom the spirit of Ill-Will broods) are opposites: in fact, they represent the two value-systems which remain in conflict with each other throughout the play. It is therefore surprising that a trawl through the text from Act I Scene 5 ('God send you, sir, a speedy infirmity for the better increasing your folly') to Act V Scene 1 ('And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges') can find from Feste no more scathing criticisms of Malvolio than are implied here. J. M. Gregson (1980) remarks that Feste is 'a perceptive commentator upon events in the play and the folly of humanity in general'; this perceptiveness is painfully acute and of 'a kind' that sits uncomfortably alongside cosier and rosier outlooks on the world. In a word, he is a cynic: that is, he dislikes both the world and himself for being part of it: 'I warrant thou art a merry fellow and car'st for nothing' (Viola Act III Scene 1). Such a disposition helps to explain how Feste can be a party to rowdy revelry and at the same time remain a guarded critic of its excessiveness.

Feste's precise criticism of Olivia is that her resolution to mourn her father and brother for 'seven years' is out of proportion to the situation in which she – being 'sweet and twenty' – finds herself. He considers that it is self-indulgent of her to strike such a grief-stricken pose and he sets about showing it with 'a kind of wit':

OLIVIA            I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

FESTE             The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul being  
                         in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen.

Thus it is that Feste (in Act I Scene 5) demonstrates the shallowness of Olivia's grief and thus it is that he prepares us for the unseemly 'haste' with which she forgets her deep sadness and falls – by the end of the same scene – for Cesario's androgynous 'perfections'.

Feste ('I wear not motley in my brain') is in the play to provide sceptical analyses of others' attitudes. The dramatic context for his second song –

ORSINO            For women are as roses, whose fair flower  
                         Being once displayed, doth fall that very hour.

VIOLA             And so they are; alas, that they are so –  
                         To die, even when they to perfection grow

– is doubly ironic in that Orsino (who is engaged in vain procrastination) has just lamented the evanescence of female beauty and Viola (the fragrant beauty languishing beside him) is about to pass up her chance ('A blank, my lord') to tell him that her father's daughter does indeed love a man. This exchange spells out that the flowers of our passion turn 'to poison' even 'while the bee-mouth sips' (Keats). Our lives have no sooner begun than they are over; we live in order to die and are nearer to death now than we have ever been before. As a consequence, there is no earthly point ('no plenty') in pursuing an unrequited love:

Come away, come away, death,  
                         And in sad cypress let me be laid.  
Fie away, fie away, breath!  
                         I am slain by a fair cruel maid.

Man's only reward for a lifetime of chaste devotion will be death: 'slain by a fair cruel maid'. Such a lyric tells a cautionary tale and is responsible for creating the bitter atmosphere in which Olivia's household lives its sweet life [= *la dolce vita*]; it reminds us again that youth, while it may be endearing, is not enduring.

Feste's precise criticism of Orsino – stated explicitly in Act II Scene 4 – is that he is capricious and inconsistent. It is clear that he knows the posturing Orsino of Act I Scene 1 ('Enough, no more!') all too well:

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.

Feste notes that Orsino's air of 'melancholy' lasts only so long; on account of this fickleness, he recommends to him a 'doublet of changeable taffeta'. In his view, Orsino's mind is 'a very opal': that is, it reflects the light at a bewildering variety of different angles. He would have men of 'such constancy' [that is, of no constancy at all] 'put to sea' – where they will be literally in their element because they can then sail here, there and 'everywhere'.

In spite of his name, Feste is not full of the festive spirit: from start to finish, his role is to view his more exuberant companions with an ironic detachment. His final ballad is an elegy for the whole of mankind in which the stages of man's life are described with an appropriate brevity and in which two refrains bear the burden of this truth about our 'brief lives' (Aubrey). Its swift quatrains –

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

– reinforce the sense that he is telling the universal truth; its tempo is ideally suited to showing us how quickly pass away the glories of this world. Moreover, it is carefully placed to remind us that man, even while he is enjoying the happiest moments of his life, is subject to the agents of erosion: in short, that his life takes place 'during wind and rain' (Hardy). Most especially, it serves as a sombre reminder both to the engaged couples who have just left the stage and to the audience which has watched them that such happiness is necessarily short-lived. *Twelfth Night*, then, leaves us with the sober impression that all human joy is transient. Youth's a stuff will not endure because the rain it raineth every day.

## **MALVOLIO**

Malvolio's role/his dramatic function is to test the values of the aristocratic society to which he remains an outsider: first, he supplies a criticism of 'Sir Toby and the lighter people' whose carefree determination to seize both the day and the night conflicts with his puritan sense of propriety; second, he supplies a criticism of Olivia and Orsino whose rancid self-absorption finds in his own vanity an ironic mirror-image of itself.

Feste's songs ('In delay there lies no plenty') and Olivia's self-rebuke ('The clock upbraids me with the waste of time') supply the context in which the action of the play is to be viewed. Since *tempus fugit, carpe diem*. It is in this context that Sir Toby's 'misdemeanours' are to be seen and judged; since his youth is 'a stuff' which 'will not endure', he is resolved to make the most of it – which in his case (both Act I Scene 3 and Act II Scene 3) means staying up all night, 'quaffing and drinking'; in each of his appearances, he is a lager-lout, a man behaving badly – or, if not Martin Clunes, then Oliver Reed. His exact anxiety ('But I shall never die') is that – in an age when the average life-span was 35 – he may do just that tomorrow.

The traditional view of Malvolio ('he is a kind of puritan') is that he is a kill-joy; as a result, most productions of this play conform to the idea that he is a supercilious spoil-sport, 'an affectioned ass' implacably opposed to the 'uncivil rule' of the boisterous and reckless 'pack': Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Maria, Fabian and Feste. Shakespeare's text allows and indeed encourages this interpretation. From Act I Scene 5, Olivia's condemnation of him – 'O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite' – rings throughout the play. What's more, it rings true; but it does not mean that Malvolio in Act II Scene 3 (when he breathes ill-will all over Sir Toby's festivities) is without a point. Even before Malvolio makes his entrance, Maria (who in Act I Scene 3 had told Sir Toby to confine himself 'within the modest limits of order') has told him again to be quiet: 'For the love o' God, peace!' When Malvolio makes his entrance, it is therefore simply to reinforce her perception and to do his own duty as Olivia's chamberlain:

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? Is there no respect of place, persons nor time in you?

In performance, there is something to be gained a] from instructing the Malvolio-actor to ask these questions in a common-sense tone of voice and b] from answering them ourselves one by one. Given that it is two o' clock in the morning in a house of mourning: Have they no 'manners'? No, they haven't. Do they show any 'respect'? No, they don't. Is Malvolio right or is he right? He may be illiberal, intolerant and intractably opposed to 'the good life' which the lighter people lead, but he is not wrong. Typically, Sir Toby –

Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?

– evades the moral issue with a disingenuous understatement of the position which he is struggling to defend. He may be literally entitled to 'cakes and ale', but not to that range of rougher pleasures for which 'cakes and ale' become a convenient and complacent metaphor: 'quaffing and drinking'/'fencing, dancing and bear-baiting'/'wine, women and song. It is not as if Malvolio is objecting to a vicarage tea-party; one does not need to be an abstemious party-pooper to feel that Sir Toby is out of order. Without question, he is an 'idle, shallow thing' (Act III Scene 4) and is not of the responsible 'element' in this or any other society.

The motive for the plot against Malvolio ('the niggardly, rascally sheep-biter') is that he harbours ideas above his station: 'To be Count Malvolio.' He has aspirations to be a Count when he isn't 'any more than a steward'; for this social pretension, this vain belief that he is much better than they are, Sir Toby and Maria plan to make of him 'a common recreation'/'a contemplative idiot'/'a notable contempt'. To think that Olivia would look twice at a man below her in social class, he must be both vain and mad, mustn't he? Well, actually, no! Although he may be deceiving himself about his personal appeal, he is not deluded about his social potential. After all, 'there is example for 't': not only in Lady Strachy's case, but also in Olivia's own household:

Your servant's servant is your servant, madam.

As Viola is at pains to point out, she is no more than Orsino's messenger-boy: a 'servant'. But this discrepancy in social status is not for a moment any bar to Olivia's strong romantic ambitions: 'Cesario, by the roses of the spring .... I love thee so' (Act III Scene 1). What is more, Olivia herself is first to recognise that nobody is more 'tainted in 's wits' than she is:

I am as mad as he  
If sad and merry madness equal be.

It is at this point (Act III Scene 4) that Malvolio's 'midsummer madness' for Olivia becomes an ironic mirror-image of hers for Cesario, *another woman*. For the reductio ad absurdum of Olivia's love for Cesario, we have to wait until Act IV Scene 3 where she unwittingly marries a total stranger; as Sebastian himself (in Act V Scene 1) tells her, she 'would have been contracted to a maid'!

By the same token, no figure in the play is sicker of self-love nor more given to 'practising behaviour to his own shadow' than Orsino. As Rosalind (*As You Like It*) puts it, 'Love is merely a madness and .... deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do; and the reason why they are not so punished and cured is that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love too' (Act III Scene 2). In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia marries Sebastian, Orsino marries Viola and Sir Toby ('in recompense' for her successful 'device' against Malvolio) marries Maria: that is, the whippers are in love too.

For these reasons, then, the treatment of Malvolio requires intense moral scrutiny. For having exhibited hubris ('To be Count Malvolio') Malvolio duly meets his nemesis ('Remember who commended thy yellow stockings') in his humiliation of himself before Olivia in Act III Scene 4. At this point, it still remains possible to feel that the trick played upon him is 'sport royal'. During his degradation by Feste in Act IV Scene 2 –

I tell thee, I am as well in my wits as any man in Illyria

– even Sir Toby ('I would we were well rid of this knavery') ceases to feel that the justice which they have meted out is poetic; it is out proportion to the folly that it seeks to punish. Consequently, Fabian's analysis of the practical joke (Act V Scene 1) is highly contentious:

How with a sportful malice it was followed  
May rather pluck on laughter than revenge,  
If that the injuries be justly weighed  
That have on both sides passed.

Quits? It might sound as if Malvolio and his glib tormentors finish even – until we remember that Fabian is one of these tormentors and that neither Olivia ('He hath been most notoriously abused') nor Malvolio ('I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!') ultimately sees it like that. No matter what Fabian says, there was nothing 'sportful' about the 'malice' with which they treated Malvolio 'within' the dark house; so protracted was the 'revenge' that it ceased to be a laughing matter; 'justly weighed', the 'injuries' sustained 'on both sides' were not equal. As a result, Malvolio – as he storms off in dissent – becomes the one figure in the play for whom we may feel a genuine pity.

### **ORSINO**

O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite.  
Olivia Act I Scene 5

Malvolio's coming down this walk; he has been yonder i' the sun, practising  
behaviour to his own shadow this half hour.

Maria Act II Scene 5

In *Twelfth Night*, Orsino's role is to parade the two human follies that the play sets out to criticise: self-love and self-deception. Far from being a poetic dissertation on the theme of romantic love, the blank verse of his famous first speech –

If music be the food of love, play on.  
Give me excess of it that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken and so die

– has two dramatic functions. First, that self-conscious extension of metaphor ('food'/'excess'/'surfeiting'/'appetite'/'sicken') is designed to illustrate that Orsino is attempting to cultivate for himself the image of a courtly lover who should be pitied; by expressing himself in such florid terms, he is trying on for size the injured attitude of a love-sick poet in order to see how seductive it looks; he is in love not with Olivia, but with the pretentious idea that he is a bulimic lover who cannot help being sick with 'excess' of feeling. Second, that abrupt order to his musicians –

Enough, no more!  
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before

– is designed to illustrate what a capricious/ fickle/ inconsistent figure he is: 'to one thing constant never' (*Much Ado*). Because he lacks self-knowledge, Orsino can only adopt a melodramatic pose and unsurprisingly keeps changing his mind about the impression which it is making. In short, he is 'sick of self-love and tastes with a distempered appetite' – and is to be heard throughout this speech deceiving himself about the quality of his own feelings and 'practising behaviour to his own shadow'. Such analysis – in terms originally used for Malvolio – suggests that the major function of Malvolio is to supply an ironic criticism of Orsino's own self-absorption and self-dramatisation: whereas Malvolio longs by association with Olivia 'to be Count Malvolio', Orsino (already a Count) longs to be 'one self king'.

So inflated is Orsino's ego that he dare not risk the possibility that Olivia might reject him to his face. Because he fears this wound to his pride and because in any case he prefers 'practising behaviour' to taking action, Orsino dallies/tarries. Rather than stride over to Olivia's house himself, he worships her from afar and employs servants to go between them; in this way, he can enjoy his melancholy contemplation of her remote image and savour the rancid/sour 'taste' of rejection. When Valentine (his first emissary) returns with the news that Olivia intends to spend 'seven years' in mourning, Orsino – blindly self-centred, self-regarding – responds to this self-indulgent over-reaction as if it is an index of her capacity in due course to love him: if this is how deeply she can love a mere brother, 'how will she love when' she has a husband: him?

During *Twelfth Night*, the three literal deceptions (the Cesario deception/the Count Malvolio deception and the Sir Topas deception) become metaphors for the self-deceptions of which Orsino and Olivia are guilty; the practical deceptions are emblems of these self-deceptions. In Act I Scene 4, Orsino's blindness to the Cesario deception becomes an emblem of his inability to recognise a true love when it is staring him in the face; because he has eyes only for himself, he does not look at other people and cannot see what is in front of him. He does not stop to wonder why this eunuch is more like a woman ('semblative a woman's part').

In this scene, Orsino continues to dally/to practise behaving as if he has all the time in the world. His precise instruction to Cesario (his second 'nuncio') is that 'he' plant himself on Olivia's doorstep until his foot takes root there: 'there thy fixed foot shall grow/Till thou have audience.' Hyperbole or not, this image is a measure of the extent to which Orsino is not living in the real world where 'women are as roses whose fair flower' is fragile and mortal. He is ready to believe Olivia's romantic publicity that her beauty is 'in grain' and will 'endure wind and weather'; he appears not to have noticed that 'the rain, it raineth every day'.

What is more, he sends 'four or five' other attendants on this mission so that he can continue to affect the sad pose of the unrequited lover: 'for I myself am best/ When least in company.' He wants to be left alone to luxuriate in his love-sickness/to wallow in self-pity. He takes such a self-indulgent delight in his introspections that we are left wondering whether this mental masturbation is not the reason for his short-sightedness!

'Is he inconstant, sir, in his favours?' asked Viola at the start of Act I Scene 4. In Act II Scene 4, Shakespeare organises a dramatic enactment of Orsino's inconstancy. The function of this scene is to show how easily a man who does not know himself can contradict himself. Because he does not know himself, Orsino cannot to his own self be true; as a result, he adopts first one pose and then another without realising that the two are inconsistent with each other.

Orsino likes to think that he is an archetypal lover. To musical accompaniment that suits his pained mood, he embarks upon a self-conscious self-dramatisation:

For such as I am, all true lovers are:  
Unstaid and skittish in all motions else,  
Save in the constant image of the creature  
That is beloved.

For a moment, it sounds as if Orsino ('unstaid and skittish') has attained a measure of self-awareness, for he presents himself as being completely unpredictable and unreliable. But no: he is volatile and not to be trusted except in one important respect: that of keeping before him a true and 'constant image' of his 'beloved' mistress. True lover is not a role that he plays to perfection. Not twelve lines later, he sounds ironically unaware that he has departed from this position: trying on for size another attitude to love, he can be heard explaining to

Cesario that it is his image of the beloved creature (his 'fancy') which keeps altering before his eyes:

Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,  
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,  
Than women's are.

Orsino's behaviour is wildly inconsistent: whereas before that image was 'true' and 'constant', now that fancy is 'giddy' and 'unfirm'; his opinion, even of himself, is unstable. He makes up his mind only to change it back again:

There is no woman's sides  
Can hide the heating of so strong a passion  
A love doth give my heart; no woman's heart  
So big to hold so much, they lack retention.

Feste would have men of such changeable disposition 'put to sea'. Here, that criticism of Orsino's fickle conduct receives further vindication upon his second contradiction of his original position; this speech (which loudly echoes the opening lines of the play) makes a nonsense of his most recent declaration that man's fancies are 'more giddy and unfirm ... than women's are'. What's more, Orsino (whose love is 'more noble than the world'/still 'as hungry as the sea/And can digest as much') continues to exaggerate his feelings in the style of a love-sick poet. He is still putting his finger down his own throat in order to study the effect which it has.

Whether Orsino undergoes an education in the course of the play is a moot point. When he finally marches over to Olivia's house to pay court to her in his own person, she is ready for his self-obsessed approach:

ORSINO            Still so cruel?  
OLIVIA            Still so constant, lord.

All he can think about is how 'cruel' she has been to reject the embassies of a suitor who – by her own admission in Act I Scene 5 – possesses a catalogue of manly virtues: 'noble'/learned, valiant/'A gracious person'. She, however, has for her part been bearing closely in mind his reputation for inconstancy; her accent upon 'constant' means pointedly that she knows a thing or two about constancy which he doesn't. At the end of the play, it is therefore easy to argue that Orsino's sudden switch of affection from Olivia to Viola ('Give me thy hand') is only to be expected. Once he discovers that Olivia is married to Sebastian and that Cesario is really a Viola who is in love with him, Orsino (a man who should be 'put to sea') has no difficulty in changing tack; he'll sail whichever way the wind is blowing.

In Orsino's defence, it may be argued that he has at long last ceased to languish and to dally. If it is not another irony at the expense of his original unworldliness, his rebuke to Cesario –

What wilt thou be  
When time hath sowed a grizzle on thy case?

– may be read as an overdue recognition of the wrinkling effect of time. Perhaps, he too has realised that Olivia's beauty will not 'endure wind and weather' and that 'there lies no plenty' in any longer pretending otherwise. This being so, Orsino – in then having Viola – is doing no more than follow the example of Sebastian who – when a beautiful woman offered herself to him – did not need asking twice: 'Madam, I will.' In seizing his opportunity, Orsino may at last be said to be seizing the day.

## VIOLA

Viola is an embodiment of Renaissance womanhood in whom the Three Graces (of Beauty, Chastity and Passion) are to be imagined in perfect balance/in classical harmony. As such, she is an epitome of female grace: according to Sebastian, she was 'yet of many accounted beautiful' (Act II Scene 1); according to Orsino, 'Diana's lip is not more smooth and rubious' and her voice is 'as the maiden's organ' (Act I Scene 4); and, by her own covert admission, she is capable of loving a man with such passionate intensity ('with such a suffering, such a deadly life') that she is ready to waste her life writing 'loyal cantons of contemnèd love' in a willow cabin at his gate (Act I Scene 5).

Despite her 'masculine usurped attire', she is a paragon of feminine virtue. In Act II Scene 1, her brother Sebastian supplies her character-reference: in particular, he testifies to her exceptional fair-mindedness: 'she bore a mind that envy could not but call fair'. She is portrayed as being generous to a fault; hers is a generosity both of matter and of spirit. Faced (in Act I Scene 4) by Orsino's ardent demand that she press his suit to Olivia, Viola is prepared to act against her own best interests: although she has already conceived her own passion for this rich nobleman, she promises faithfully and selflessly to go between them: 'I'll do my best/ To woo your lady.' Such indeed is her devotion to duty that, even when (in Act III Scene 1) Olivia's infatuation with her offers to open up an escape-route, Viola declines to take it ('You'll nothing, madam, to my lord by me?') and continues to suffer her 'barful strife' in magnanimous silence. Faced (in Act III Scene 4) by Antonio's apparently unreasonable demand for money, she responds to his plight with positive extravagance: 'Hold: there's half my coffer.'

More interestingly, Viola may be regarded also as a model of patience/of patient forbearance. In Act II Scene 4, she forbears to tell Orsino that she is actually a woman in love with him and skilfully encodes a self-description into the third person. Her story of unrequited love is of a 'melancholy' soul who

sat like Patience on a monument  
Smiling at grief.

Whether we should admire her presentation of herself as a long-suffering soul is problematic. Isn't she indulging in the self-pity ('But you should pity me') which mars Orsino and Olivia? Already in this scene Viola has assented to Orsino's proposition (itself ironic in view of his own procrastination) that 'women are as roses whose fair flower/ Being once displayed doth fall that very hour'; given this acute awareness that her youthful 'perfection' is ephemeral, we might have expected from her a more urgent response than 'A blank, my lord.' Where – in the terms of the play – is the precise virtue in that? Rather than let 'concealment' [= her trans-sexual disguise as Cesario] 'like a worm I'the bud/ Feed on her damask cheek', shouldn't she give Orsino an opportunity to gather her rosebud while he may? 'What wilt thou be when time hath sowed a grizzle on thy case?' Orsino even asks her in Act V Scene 1.

Of course, the reason why Viola – for all these personal characteristics – remains immobile is that she is not so much a 'character' [= a figure invested with psychological realism] as a role. As such, her value to the play is her value to the plot; she is essentially a passive figure, one on whom the plot plays, one to whom things happen. In Act I Scene 2, she finds herself ship-wrecked: even though her response to this adversity ('I'll serve this Duke') reveals her resolution and her independence, she is cast as a victim of circumstances. Even though she falls in love with Orsino, she does not actively pursue this passion; instead, she becomes a helpless and static victim of Olivia's adoration ('Cesario, by the roses of the spring ... I love thee so') and in turn becomes a hopeless and comic victim of Sir Andrew's challenge to a duel ('for thy assailant is quick, skilful and deadly'). Cesario, then, is ironically

no seizer either of days or of initiatives; rather, she is Patience personified, relying – as she does in Act II Scene 2 – upon time to ‘untangle’ for her the ‘knot’ by which she is tied.

## OLIVIA

‘Tis in grain, sir, ‘twill endure wind and weather.  
Olivia Act I Scene 5

And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.  
Feste Act V Scene 1

Like Orsino’s, Olivia’s role in *Twelfth Night* is to embody the two human tendencies that the play seeks to criticise: towards self-love and self-deception. With Orsino, she is one of two characters in the play of whom Malvolio (‘sick of self love’) is an ironic mirror-image: if we laugh at him, then we ought at times to guffaw at her.

Olivia – on whom Valentine reports in Act I Scene 1 – is an immature attention-seeker whose decision to mourn her father’s and her brother’s deaths for ‘seven years’ fails to take sensible account of her own transient condition/her fleeting prime. She is a tragedy-queen who gives out the impression that she can think of nothing better to do in this world than weep behind her veil; it is this self-indulgent posture which will be exposed by Feste’s catechism (in Act I Scene 5) for the sham that it is.

Olivia is ‘a virtuous maid’ who ‘hath abjured the sight/And company of men’ (Act I Scene 2). She would have her attendants believe that she is never happier than when she is miserable. Feste – an aloof observer who wears not motley in his brain – is not so easily fooled by this melodramatic pretence. His shrewd catechism –

OLIVIA            I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

FESTE             The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother’s soul  
being in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen

– exposes her grief-stricken pose for a pretentious façade and thus anticipates the speed with which she forgets her ‘sad remembrance’ and falls for Cesario (‘the Count’s servingman’). Because Feste is ‘an allowed fool’, she listens to his criticism: ironically, she – whose show of grief could not be more ostentatious – is immediately to be heard telling off Malvolio for making mountains (‘cannon-bullets’) out of mole-hills (‘bird-bolts’). It is in this ‘free’ spirit that Olivia prepares to hear Cesario’s speech:

VIOLA             Alas, I took great pains to study it, and ‘tis poetical.

OLIVIA            It is the more like to be feigned.

She remains rightly suspicious of Orsino’s ‘poetical’ expressions of emotion (which are indeed ‘feigned’) and initially keeps up her own pretence. Viola’s reminder that female beauty needs constant preservation serves only to illustrate Olivia’s vanity:

VIOLA             Excellently done – if God did all.

OLIVIA            ‘Tis in grain, sir, ‘twill endure wind and weather.

At this point, Olivia exhibits hubris; she is still behaving explicitly as if the rain does **not** rain every day. At this point, she still is haughty (too 'sick of self-love'/too proud) and totally unprepared to face the fact that 'the whirligig of time will bring in his revenges'. But not for much longer. When she ironically asks Cesario what 'he' would do if 'he' were an unrequited lover, Olivia finds herself suddenly moved by a speech which comes not from a 'text' ('with groans that thunder love') but from a bleeding heart: 'Make me a willow cabin at your gate'. Viola knows all about unrequited, 'contemnèd' love and conveys this knowledge eloquently – with the instant result that Olivia ('You might do much') does not want to hear any more from Orsino 'unless, perchance' Cesario comes to her again. 'Even so quickly', Olivia catches 'the plague'/meets her nemesis: promptly, she stops deceiving herself about her deep sense of bereavement and, conscious of herself as a virgin, plans to 'make much of time' (Herrick).

In love with Cesario, Olivia is not slow to appreciate her previous follies: that she has been hypocritically 'sick of self love' and in danger of losing her prime. Her forthright response to the stage-direction – 'The clock upbraids me with the waste of time' – confirms that she is no longer content to tarry: since her youth's a stuff which will **not** 'endure wind and weather', a girl – while she is still 'sweet and twenty' – must make 'plenty' of it. Now aware that 'the whirligig of time' will bring in its revenges, Olivia is a reformed character. The function/role of this character is then to show what fools these mortals be when they fall in love. Olivia's welcome growth in self-awareness –

I am as mad as he  
If sad and merry madness equal be

– enables her to perceive her similarity with Malvolio and to express a sympathy with him; because he too is suffering from a 'midsummer madness', she readily recognises him as her counterpart; because she is trying to marry 'a peevish messenger', she can hardly chastise Malvolio (as Sir Toby and Maria do) for hoping that she might yet prefer a dapper steward. If anything, she is more 'tainted' in her wits than he is: after all, Olivia – in her inadvertent marriage to Cesario/Sebastian – would not only have married beneath herself, but 'would have been contracted to a maid' (Sebastian Act V Scene 1). Not surprisingly, then, Malvolio's claim to Feste in Act IV Scene 2 –

Fool, there was never man so notoriously abused. I am as well in my wits  
as thou art

– is ultimately endorsed by Olivia: 'He hath been most notoriously abused' (Act V Scene 1). After all, even Feste in Act IV Scene 1 ('nor your name is not Master Cesario') has not wit enough to know that Sebastian is not Cesario – nor indeed that even Cesario is not Cesario! Pompous though he may be, Malvolio is no more foolish than the six lovers who rush off madly ('She will keep no fool, sir, till she be married') to make the most of the 'golden time' which 'convents' at the end of the play.

**Peter Cash was Head of English Studies at Newcastle-under-Lyme School in Staffordshire 1985-2009.**

*Twelfth Night* by Peter Cash is Number 5 in the Shakespeare Bookmark series, published by

The English Association  
University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester LE1 7RH  
UK

Tel: 0116 252 3982  
Fax: 0116 252 2301  
Email: [engassoc@le.ac.uk](mailto:engassoc@le.ac.uk)

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

Series Editor  
Ian Brinton

Shakespeare Bookmarks  
Kerri Corcoran-Martin

Primary Bookmarks  
Louise Ellis-Barrett

Secondary Bookmarks  
Ian Brinton