

Shakespeare's Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night is compounded of three plots. Central to the play, as Mark Van Doren has well said, is Malvolio, the gull, critical and waspish, an efficiency expert, a busybody. To pay him back for his insults, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria contrive to lead him by the nose until he has disgraced himself with Olivia, been confined as a madman, and put out of his humour publicly in the presence of his mistress and his tormentors. He is a comic protagonist par excellence; his ambition and his vanity are precisely the comic vices by means of which he is plagued. The counterfeited letter is exquisitely designed so that he will put just such a construction on it as will gratify his self-love and lead him to his own destruction. And, once he has been forced to see himself as a gull, in Olivia's pitying line, "Alas poor fool, how have they baffled thee!", Malvolio has nothing to reply but "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" before he rushes off.

This is such a plot as would have delighted Ben Jonson or any writer of classical satirical comedy; Professor Campbell has justly called it "Shakespeare's comedy of humours." Its mainspring is the unmasking of a gull by his own witless conceit; it is enhanced by the parallel action in

which Sir Andrew is persuaded to court Olivia, only to have his head broken by way of reward. The baiting of Malvolio is unrelieved in its comic heartlessness, and is not even superficially moral in its purpose. Others may prate about reforming the gull by putting him out of his humour; there can be no 'doubt, as we watch the undoing of Malvolio, that we are intended to share Sir Toby's sadistic pleasure in the process, and that no one takes the slightest interest in whether all this will make a better man of Malvolio. (Even Molière and Shaw occasionally seem to protest too much about the corrective function of the comic artist. But then every profession from time to time finds it convenient to make a show of public service.) At the risk of labouring the obvious, I should like to recall the essential elements of Malvolio's story: the progress toward self-recognition of a man who is partly self-deceived and partly deceived by others; who assumes a form of disguise in order (as he thinks) to achieve his end, but who must ultimately divest himself of it; who loves, but-as he comes to realize-in vain. He is at length brought to utter confusion, but his downfall produces pain only in himself, a ridiculous figure (in spite of nineteenth- and twentieth-century romanticizing) and therefore worthy of suffering the typical fate of a comic protagonist. The second of the three plots of *Twelfth Night* deals with the frustrated love of Olivia for Viola-Cesario and its happy resolution in the marriage of Olivia and Sebastian. The first interview of Olivia and the disguised Viola

is a brilliantly contrived comic exchange, the end of which is tempered by Olivia's confession of love for the supposed youth. Here are all the elements of a romantic plot of frustrated love in the manner of Beaumont and Fletcher. Shakespeare however, is content to develop the emotional possibilities of this situation for only one additional scene; then, using, precisely such a casual, perfunctory, and mechanical device as he had unblushingly exploited in the farcical Comedy of Errors, he substitutes Sebastian for Viola and packs the lovers off to a priest. Let no one tell us of the profound psychology that Shakespeare here displays in making Viola and Sebastian identical twins in wit and intellect as well as in form and feature. Shakespeare is merely hustling his minor characters off the stage with the least possible trouble, whatever the cost in plausibility. In this respect, at least, Twelfth Night is no less a romance than The Winter's Tale.

Note, however, that the story of Viola, Olivia, and Sebastian, like that of Malvolio, turns on Olivia's awakening from a deception-actually a double deception, produced partly by a disguise and partly by lack of self-knowledge. She first is made to realize, when she becomes infatuated with Viola, that her determination to mourn her brother seven years can overcome in a twinkling:

Even so quickly may one catch the plague?

Methinks I feel this youth's perfections

With an invisible and subtle stealth

To creep in at mine eyes.

Similarly, she must presently abase herself before the young page, beg his hand in marriage, and hale him before a priest, offering no seemlier excuse for her unladylike haste than

Plight me the full assurance of your faith

That my most jealous and too doubtful soul

May live at peace

The most radiant, exquisite, and unmatchable beauty has indeed learned to humble herself. From this point forward, she has little to do in the play but to help complete the confusion of Malvolio. The third plot is, of course, the story of Viola and Orsino. Just as Malvolio is deceived by Maria and Sir Toby, and Olivia by Viola, so Orsino is baffled partly by his infatuation for Olivia (which steeps him in a fashionable melancholy) and by his inability to penetrate the disguise of the unfortunate Viola. This is a comedy of errors in which the only character who is fully aware of the situation is powerless to remedy it, and can only apostrophize her page's garments:

Disguise, I see thou art 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;

Now, whereas we take satisfaction in the untrussing of Malvolio, and we never really fear that the awakening of Olivia will pass beyond the boundaries of comedy (as is made altogether plain by the simple and mechanical contrivance that extricates her from her predicament), the story of Viola and Orsino is some Thing else again. Although unmistakably, comic in outline, in its development this action seizes every opportunity to develop sentimental suggestions and implications. It may be argued that comic decorum does not exclude sentiment. On this point authorities disagree; nevertheless, when Rosalind permits her mind to run on Orlando and her wished-for joys, she almost at once mocks herself for so doing. Viola cannot; not only is her situation beyond her control, but she is temperamentally one with Hero and Celia, not with Rosalind or Beatrice. In other words, she is the kind of heroine whom one does not expect to find playing a leading role in comedy, but rather

serving as a Julia to a Kate Hard castle.

Now the curious thing about Twelfth Night is not only that Viola plays the leading feminine part, but that the patently comic action of Malvolio, central though it be

the structure of the play, is clearly the action that least engages to Shakespeare's attention. In short, here is a play that inverts what we may regard as the normal order of elements in a comedy, with respect to the importance it assigns to each. The sentimental story of Viola and Orsino is in first place; closely connected with it but clearly subordinate to it is the more overtly comic story of Olivia, Viola, and Sebastian; and in last place is the comic gulling of Malvolio. All three plots have fundamentally the same structure: a comic protagonist is gulled by another person, and is at length forced to recognize and take account of the imposition that has been practiced upon him. But it makes a very great difference whether, on the one hand, the gull is Orsino, unwillingly deceived by Viola, or whether, on the other hand, Maria and Sir Toby are joyfully hoodwinking Malvolio. Shakespeare has so harmonized the three actions that they answer one another on different levels and with different effects; but there can be no doubt as to which of these actions seemed to him of paramount interest and importance. He invented the story of Malvolio, and used it with rare skill as the foundation of his play;

but he was concerned first of all with Viola and secondarily with Olivia.

Similar patterns appear in the other comedies of this period of Shakespeare's career. Rosalind's half-willing, half-unwilling deception of Orlando is echoed in her dealings with the shepherdess Phebe; but the gay mockery of the uninhibited heroine, confident of her power, lends the play a unity of comic tone that is beyond *Twelfth Night*. The deception of Beatrice and Benedick offers a comic counterpart to the grim and implausible loves of Hero and Claudio; here the comic underplot usurps the place of the more serious action and imposes its tone on the entire play.

Twelfth Night, together with Shakespeare's other great comedies, leads one to conclude that Dr. Johnson's praise of Shakespeare's comic genius was hardly exaggerated, although one hesitates to affirm with him that the comedies surpass

the tragedies in excellence. One cannot agree with Dr. Johnson, however, that Shakespeare's plays were neither comedies nor tragedies. The early comedies, such as *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, are surely true comedies; and in them Shakespeare employed a comic structure and method that he, like his colleagues, had inherited from the ancients and turned to his own uses. The dark comedies depart from Shakespeare's normal practice in comedy because in them he fails to reconcile

conflicting elements of romance and satire. The great comedies such Twelfth Night as show, on the contrary, Shakespeare working effectively within the tradition of classical comedy and enlarging it to encompass a rich and harmonious development of fundamentally comic matter.

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