Twelfth Night: A Critical Analysis

Twelfth Night is the climax of Shakespeare’s early achievement in comedy. The effects and values of the earlier comedies are here subtly embodied in the most complex structure which Shakespeare had yet created. But the play also looks forward: the pressure to dis-solve the comedy, to realize and finally abandon the burden of laughter, is an intrinsic part of its “perfection.” Viola’s clear-eyed and affirmative vision of her own and the world’s rationality is a triumph and we desire it; yet we realize its vulnerability, and we come to realize that virtue in disguise is only totally triumphant when evil is not in disguise—is not truly present at all. Having solved magnificently the problems of this particular form of comedy, Shakespeare was evidently not tempted to repeat his triumph. After Twelfth Night the so-called comedies required for their happy resolutions more radical characters and devices—omniscient and omnipresent Dukes, magic, and resurrection. More obvious miracles are needed for comedy to exist in a world in which evil also exists, not merely incipiently but with power.

—Joseph H. Summers, “The Masks of Twelfth Night”
William Shakespeare was in his mid-30s and at the height of his dramatic powers when he wrote *Twelfth Night*, his culminating masterpiece of romantic comedy. There is perhaps no more rousing, amusing, or lyrical celebration of the transforming wonderment of love nor a more knowing depiction of its follies or the forces allied against it. *Twelfth Night* is the ninth in a series of comedies Shakespeare wrote during the 1590s that includes *The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merchant of Venice, and As You Like It* and is a masterful synthesis of them all, unsurpassed in the artistry of its execution. In recognizing the barriers to love it also anticipates some of the preoccupations of the three dark comedies that followed—*Troilus and Cressida, All’s Well That Ends Well, and Measure for Measure*—the great tragedies that would dominate the next decade of Shakespeare’s work, as well as the tragicomic romances—Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest—that conclude Shakespeare’s dramatic career. Given the arc of that career, *Twelfth Night* stands at the summit of his comic vision, the last and greatest of Shakespeare’s pure romantic comedies, but with the clouds that would darken the subsequent plays already gathering. Shakespeare never again returned to the exultant, triumphant tone of sunny celebration that suffuses the play. Yet what makes *Twelfth Night* so satisfying and impressive, as well as entertaining, is its clear-eyed acknowledgment of the challenge to its merriment in the counterforces of grief, melancholy, and sterile self-enclosure that stand in the way of the play’s joyous affirmation. The comedy of *Twelfth Night* is earned by demonstrating all that must be surmounted for desire to reach fulfillment.

*Twelfth Night, or What You Will* was written between 1600 and 1602. The earliest reference to a performance appears in the diary of barrister John Manningham who in February 1602 recorded that the play was acted in the Middle Temple “at our feast.” He found it “much like the Commedy of Errores or Menechmi in Plautus, but most like an neere to that in Italian called Inganni.” Manningham provides a useful summary of Shakespeare’s sources and plot devices in which a story of identical twins and mistaken identities is derived both from his earlier comedy and its ancient Roman inspiration, Plautus’s *The Twin Menaechmi*. This is joined with an intrigue plot of gender disguise borrowed from popular 16th-century Italian comedies, particularly *Gl’Ingannati (The Deceived Ones)*, in which a disguised young woman serves as a page to the man she loves. Shakespeare also employs elements of the new comedy of humours, popularized by Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour* in 1598, for his own invention of the duping of the choleric Malvolio. Mistaken identities, comic misadventures in
love, and the overthrow of repression, pretense, and selfishness are all united under the festive tone of the play’s title, which suggests the exuberant saturnalian celebration of the twelfth day after Christ-mas, the Feast of the Epiphany. For the Elizabethans, *Twelfth Night* was the culminating holiday of the traditional Christmas revels in which gifts were exchanged, rigid proprieties suspended, and good fellowship affirmed. Scholars have speculated that *Twelfth Night* may have been first acted at court on January 6, 1601, as part of the entertainment provided for a Tuscan duke, Don Virginio Orsino, Queen Elizabeth’s guest of honor. Whether it was actually performed on *Twelfth Night*, the play is, like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a “festive comedy,” in C. L. Barber’s phrase, that captures the spirit of a holiday in which social rules and conventions are subverted for a liberating spell of topsy-turviness and revelry.

As in all of Shakespeare’s comedies, *Twelfth Night* treats the obstacles faced by lovers in fulfilling their desires. In an influential essay, “The Two Worlds of Shakespearean Comedy,” Sherman Hawkins has detected two basic structural patterns in Shakespeare’s comedies. One is marked by escape, in which young lovers, facing opposition in the form of parental or civil authority, depart the jurisdiction of both into a green world where they are freed from external constraints and liberated to resolve all the impediments to their passions. This is the pattern of *Two Gentlemen of Verona, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merchant of Venice, The Winter’s Tale*, and Cymbeline. The other dominant pattern in Shakespeare’s comedies, as employed in *The Comedy of Errors, Love’s Labour’s Lost, Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night*, is not escape but invasion. In these plays the arrival of outsiders serves as a catalyst to upset stalemated relationships and to revivify a stagnating community. “The obstacles to love in comedies of this alternate pattern,” Hawkins argues, “are not external—social convention, favored rivals, disapproving parents. Resistance comes from the lovers themselves.” The intrusion of new characters and the new relationships they stimulate serve to break the emotional deadlock and allow true love to flourish.

As *Twelfth Night* opens, Orsino, the duke of Illyria, is stalled in his desire for the countess Olivia, who, in mourning for her brother, has “abjured the company and sight of men” to live like a “cloistress” for seven years to protract an excessive, melancholy love of grief. As Orsino makes clear in the play’s famous opening speech, lacking a focus for his affection due to Olivia’s resistance, he indulges in the torment of unrequited love:
If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die.
That strain again, it had a dying fall.
O, it came o’er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour. Enough, no more,
’Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

Both have withdrawn into self-centered, sentimental melancholy, and the agents to break through the narcissistic impediments to true love and the stasis in Illyria are the shipwrecked twins Viola and Sebastian. Viola, believing her brother drowned, dresses as a man to seek protection as a page in the household of Orsino. As the young man Cesario, she is commissioned by Orsino, with whom she has fallen in love, as his envoy to Olivia. Viola, one of Shakespeare’s greatest heroines in her wit, understanding, and resourcefulness, is, like Olivia, mourning a brother, but her grief neither isolates nor paralyzes her; neither is her love for Orsino an indulgence in an abstract, sentimental longing. It is precisely her superiority in affection and humanity that offers an implied lesson to both duke and countess in the proper working of the heart. Both Olivia and Orsino will be instructed through the agency of Viola’s arrival that true love is not greedy and self-consuming but unselfish and generous. Initially Viola plays her part as persistent ambassador of love too well. In a scene that masterfully exploits Viola’s gender-bending disguise (as performed in Shakespeare’s time, a boy plays a young woman playing a boy) and her ambivalent mission to win a lady for the man she loves, Viola succeeds in penetrating Olivia’s various physical and emotional defenses by her witty mockery of the established language and conventions of courtship. Accused of being “the cruellest she alive / If you will lead these graces to the grave / And leave the world no copy,” Olivia finally yields, but it is Cesario, not Orsino who captures her affection. In summarizing the romantic complications produced by her persuasiveness, Viola observes:

... As I am man,
My state is desperate for my master’s love;
As I am woman (now alas the day!),
What thriftless sights shall poor Olivia breathe!
O time, thou must untangle this, not I,
It is too hard a knot for me t’untie.
Not too hard, however, for the playwright, as Shakespeare sets in motion some of his funniest and ingenious scenes leading up to the untangling.

The romantic comedy of Orsino, Olivia, and Viola/Cesario is balanced and contrasted by a second plot involving Olivia’s carousing cousin, Sir Toby Belch; his gull, the fatuous Sir Andrew Aguecheek, whom Toby encourages in a hopeless courtship of Olivia for the sake of extracting his money; the maid Maria; Olivia’s jester, Feste; and Olivia’s steward, Malvolio. Maria describes the dutiful, restrained, judgmental Malvolio as “a kind of puritan,” who condemns the late-night carousing of Sir Toby and his companions and urges his mistress to dismiss her jester. As the sour opponent of revelry, Malvolio prompts Sir Toby to utter one of the plays most famous lines: “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?” Virtues, Toby suggests, must acknowledge and accommodate the human necessity for the pleasures of life. All need a holiday. Malvolio as the adversary of the forces of festival that the play celebrates will be exposed as, in Olivia’s words, “sick of self-love” who tastes “with a distemper’d appetite.” Malvolio is, therefore, linked with both Orsino and Olivia in their self-centeredness. By connecting Malvolio’s particular brand of self-enclosure in opposition to the spirit of merriment represented by Sir Toby and his company of revelers, Shakespeare expands his critique of the impediments to love into a wider social context that recognizes the efficacy of misrule to break down the barriers isolating individuals. The carousers conspire to convince Malvolio that Olivia has fallen in love with him, revealing his ambition for power and dominance that stands behind his holier-than-thou veneer. Malvolio aspires to become Count Malvolio, gaining Olivia to command others and securing the deference his egotism considers his due. Convinced by a forged love letter from Olivia to be surly with the servants, to smile constantly in Olivia’s presence, and to wear yellow stockings cross-gartered (all of which Olivia abhors), the capering Malvolio prompts Olivia to conclude that he has lost his wits and orders his confinement in a dark cell. Symbolically, Malvolio’s punishment is fitted to his crime of self-obsession, of misappropriating love for self-gain.

With the play’s killjoy bated, chastened, and contained, the magic of love and reconciliation flourishes, and Twelfth Night builds to its triumphant, astounding climax. First Sebastian surfaces in Illyria and, mistaken for Cesario, finds himself dueling with Sir Andrew and claimed by Olivia as her groom in a hastily arranged wedding. Next Viola, as Cesario, is mistaken for Sebastian by Antonio, her brother’s rescuer, and is saluted by Olivia as her recently married husband, prompting Orsino’s wrath at being betrayed by his envoy. Chaos and
confusion give way to wonderment, reunion, and affection with the appearance of Sebastian on stage to the astonishment of Olivia and Orsino, who see Cesario’s double, and to the joy of Viola who is reunited with her lost brother. Olivia’s shock at having married a perfect stranger, that the man she had loved as Cesario is a woman, and Orsino’s loss of Olivia are happily resolved in a crescendo of wish fulfillment and poetic justice. Olivia fell in love with a woman but gains her male replica; Orsino learns that the page he has grown so fond of was actually a woman. Viola gains the man she loves, and the formerly lovesick Orsino now has an object of his affection worthy of his passion.

The one discordant note in the festivities is Malvolio. He is released from his confinement, and Olivia learns of the “sportful malice” of his deception. Invited to share the joke and acknowledge its justification, Malvolio exits with a curse on the guilty and the innocent alike: “I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you.” Shakespeare allows Malvolio’s dissent to the comic climax of love and laughter to stand. Malvolio, as Olivia acknowledges, has “been most notoriously abused.” Much of the laughter of Twelfth Night has come at his expense, and if the play breaks through the selfish privacy of Orsino and Olivia into love, companionship, and harmony, Malvolio remains implacable and unresolved. He is an embodiment of the dark counterforce of hatred and evil that will begin to dominate Shakespeare’s imagination and claim mastery in the tragedies and the dark comedies. Twelfth Night ends in the joyful fulfillment of love’s triumph, but the sense of this being the exception not the rule is sounded by Feste’s concluding song in which rain, not sunshine, is the norm, and Twelfth Night comes only once a year:

When that I was and a little tiny boy,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
A foolish thing was but a toy,
For the rain it raineth every day.
But when I came to man’s estate,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
’Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,
For the rain it raineth every day.
But when I came, alas, to wive,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
By swaggering could I never thrive,
For the rain it raineth every day.
But when I came unto my beds,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
With tossspots still had drunken heads,
For the rain it raineth every day.
A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
But that’s all one, our play is done,
And we’ll strive to please you every day.

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