

Twelfth Night: A Modern Perspective

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Who is it that Olivia falls in love with?¹

In Act 1, scene 5 of *Twelfth Night*, the self-imposed seclusion of the Lady Olivia, in mourning for her brother, whose death has left her in control of an aristocratic household, is disrupted by the latest in a succession of messengers pressing the suit of Duke Orsino. This messenger, more insistent than all the others, brooks no denial and demands access to her. Olivia, curious, is equally insistent that Malvolio should describe the messenger: "What kind o' man is he? . . . What manner of man? . . . Of what personage and years is he?" (1.5.149–54). Malvolio's reply points to a certain elusiveness in the messenger's identity, defining Cesario primarily in terms of what he is not:

Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy—as a squash is before 'tis a peascod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple. 'Tis with him in standing water, between boy and man. He is very well-favored, and he speaks very shrewishly. One would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him.
(1.5.155–61)

Orsino's messenger is identifiable by the traces he bears of other identities that are not his own: not quite a man, not exactly a boy; at the same time he evokes something of the feminine by his high-pitched voice, and perhaps a vestige of his mother's milk. There is a certain indeter-

minacy here. The veiled Olivia, traditional Petrarchan lady, aloof and mysterious, herself until now the object of Orsino's and the audience's curiosity, is caught and held by another mystery, the undecidable identity of her suitor's representative.

It is important, of course, for the audience to be reminded that Cesario is a woman in disguise, especially in an all-male theater, where the part was played by a male actor. And it is important too that we should know the disguise is effective. But this is not the first time that the play has dwelt on the elusiveness of Cesario's sexual identity. Orsino tells him:

... they shall yet belie thy happy years
That say thou art a man. Diana's lip
Is not more smooth and rubious, thy small pipe
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman's part.

(1.4.33-37)

Ironically, Orsino too, though he does not yet know it, is in the process of falling in love. Here again Cesario is not, we are to understand, a man. He resembles a woman, but he is not quite that either. His voice is *as* a maiden's. He is *like* Diana, goddess of chastity, perpetual virgin, who passed her time hunting in the forest and was the least stereotypically feminine of the female immortals.

Each time, some quality evades the speakers in these definitions, and the romantic comedy depends on the elusiveness of Viola-Cesario's sexual identity. Olivia falls in love with Cesario, but Viola cannot love Olivia. Orsino apparently fails to fall in love with Cesario, and Viola loves Orsino. From the point of view of the audience, this double dramatic irony, and the uncertainty about how the play will untangle the love knots it has tied, constitutes much of the pleasure of the romantic story.

The shipwrecked Viola, frustrated in her initial desire to seek employment with Olivia, resolves to present herself to Orsino as a eunuch, since she is skilled in music. (Ladies could properly become companions to other ladies, but the household of an unmarried man offered no scope for ladies-in-waiting.) In Terence's Roman comedy, *The Eunuch* (almost certainly familiar to Shakespeare from the grammar-school curriculum²), Chaerea, defined in the English translation of 1598 as a "stripling," disguises himself in the clothes of a eunuch in order to gain entry to a household which includes the woman he loves. His value to the lady of the house is his skill in literature, athletics, and music. Once alone with the object of his desire, however, Chaerea promptly rapes her, and his cover is blown.

Terence's play thus gives very little idea of what eunuchs might usefully do once they took up residence as members of a household. Cesario's role as a eunuch is not referred to again. In practice he is treated as a page, and it is the Fool who does the singing. But something of the indeterminacy of the eunuch invests Viola to the end of the play, where Orsino continues to call her Cesario, and defers beyond the edges of the fiction the moment when she will change back into a woman's dress and become "Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen" (5.1.411).

While the male-female body of Cesario-Viola is repeatedly set before us by the words of the text, its undecidability would have been materially underlined for Shakespeare's audience by the body of the male actor. It is very difficult to reconstruct the experience of an audience accustomed to an all-male theater, where women's parts were always played by men or boys. Probably for much of the time the sex of the actor was irrelevant. No doubt in general the audience simply entered into the illusion created by the fiction, without

forgetting, any more than we do, that it was an illusion. The body of Olivia, for instance, is not in question (though that role, too, was played by a boy), and her body is described as perfectly feminine in the most conventional sense: ". . . beauty truly blent, whose red and white / Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on" (1.5.238-39).

Orsino, meanwhile, is equally conventionally handsome. Even Olivia concedes that he is "in dimension and the shape of nature / A gracious person" (1.5.263-64). These ideal romance protagonists are in direct contrast to the grotesque bodies that surround them: Sir Toby Belch, whose name and perpetual revelry probably indicate a resemblance to the gross allegorical figure of Gluttony; Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Toby's antithesis, a puny "manikin" (3.2.52) whose thin, stringy hair "hangs like flax on a distaff" (1.3.100); and above all, of course, Malvolio, dressed up for Olivia's benefit, absurd in outmoded yellow stockings, cross-gartered, and smiling relentlessly.

Each of these bodies proclaims an identity. Only Viola-Cesario's physical form specifies an enigma. Is it this which constitutes her/him as an object of desire for Olivia? Certainly Cesario's body is not a matter of indifference to Olivia:

"I am a gentleman." I'll be sworn thou art.
Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit
Do give thee fivefold blazon . . .

. . . How now? . . .

Methinks I feel this youth's perfections
With an invisible and subtle stealth
To creep in at mine eyes. (1.5.296-304)

In the event, since marriage is the issue, Viola's body will not do. Sebastian's apparently identical but this

time unequivocally masculine body will prove more adequate, and equally desirable.

And yet Cesario's body is not, for Olivia, the whole story. "Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit . . .": these are the features that both show Cesario to be a gentleman and constitute his seductive perfections. They include his behavior, his "spirit" (something much less material: a disposition, a temperament, an animating principle), and perhaps above all his "tongue," his way of speaking, probably, rather than the organ itself, Cesario's eloquence and his wit. And here too Olivia repeatedly identifies a certain elusiveness, an enigma which she tries—and fails—to resolve. Cesario begins his address to her in the grand style: "Most radiant, exquisite, and unmatchable beauty. . . ." But no sooner has he begun than he draws attention to the absurdity of such rhetoric aimed anonymously:

I pray you, tell me if this be the lady of the house,
for I never saw her. I would be loath to cast away my
speech, for, besides that it is excellently well
penned, I have taken great pains to con it.

(1.5.169-72)

Cesario here speaks initially as if from the place of Orsino, whose representative he is, and then shifts, within the sentence, to the position of the messenger, comically going on to betray that the "message" is of his own making. Who, then, is the "author" of Cesario's words?

Olivia's response can be seen as an indirect attempt to elicit an answer to that question, to locate the *origin* of what Cesario says: "Whence came you, sir?"; and then, since the answer is an evasion, she asks, "Are you a comedian [an actor]?" (175, 180). Cesario denies it, naturally, but then goes on, "And yet . . . I swear I am not that

I play" (181–82). Who is speaking now? Not Cesario, but Viola, of course. But is this simply the Viola who is a woman pretending to be a man? Or is it more specifically the Viola who is a substitute for Orsino, pretending on his behalf to represent him, *re-presenting* his love for Olivia, when she is herself in love with Orsino?

Cesario presses Olivia to declare herself the lady of the house, and Olivia is able to reply with a quibble that only establishes more firmly her identity in the fiction: "If I do not usurp myself, I am" (184). She speaks from a single place. But Viola occupies a whole range of subject positions in rapid succession, and perhaps it is this above all that constitutes her as an enigma, and correspondingly as an object of desire, not only for the characters in the play but also, in a sense, for the audience.

"If I did love you in my master's flame," Viola-Cesario tells Olivia, I would not acknowledge or accept your rejection. "Why," Olivia asks, "what would you?" (1.5.266–70). What does Olivia want to hear? Not about Orsino, of course, but what Cesario would do if *he* loved her. And what does the audience hear as Viola replies non-ironically, lyrically, but conditionally, about love's insistent, repetitive *naming* of the beloved?

Make me a willow cabin at your gate
And call upon my soul within the house,
Write loyal cantons of contemned love
And sing them loud even in the dead of night,
Hallow your name to the reverberate hills
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out "Olivia!" (1.5.271–77)

Who is speaking here? Cesario, loyally affirming Orsino's love? Yes, in a sense. Or Viola declaring her own love for Orsino? Yes and no: the name that Echo repeats is "Olivia," but then Echo can only repeat the speech of

another; its origin is a matter of indifference to her. Or is it a voice beyond either, which is the condition of the possibility of Orsino's love and Viola's, and of our uncertainty about which is in question here, the strangely impersonal, shared because culturally specified, and thus always in one sense *echoed* voice of love "itself"?

A similar indeterminacy informs Viola-Cesario's history of her-his father's daughter, who pined for love like Patience on a monument (2.4.122–30). It is too easy to ascribe this account to Viola herself. As a story of any unrequited love, recounted by a woman who is shown within the fiction to be exceptionally active, busy, and witty, this both is and is not Viola's own story: "I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers, too—and yet I know not" (2.4.132–33).

Viola, who is named only once, very late in the text (5.1.253), has no fixed location in the play. Even when she speaks "in her own person"—and it is not easy to be sure when that is—the play does not always make clear where we are to find "her" identity. In this sense she acts as a figure for the desire that circulates in the play. Though Viola's own desire is constant, the desire of the others keeps moving: from Olivia to Cesario, and on to Sebastian; from Orsino to Olivia, and then on to Viola. If it finds a fixed place in Act 5, perhaps arbitrarily, that may be simply because the play must end, and romantic comedies traditionally end in marriage. The objects of desire, the play implies, are in some senses interchangeable, so that Sebastian can easily take the place of Cesario, Viola of Olivia. Love itself invests the object with value. As a love story *Twelfth Night* is remarkably unsentimental about the romances it depicts with such sympathy.

Viola's counterpart outside the love story is the Fool, who is named Feste only once (2.4.12), and who equally has no fixed place to be. He was Olivia's father's jester,

but he is also to be found at Orsino's court, moving easily between the two; just as Viola does. And he too is emblematic, a figure for the folly that also circulates in the play, since "Foolery . . . does walk about the orb like the sun; it shines everywhere" (3.1.40-41). Folly motivates the world of the comic subplot. It is to be found in the late-night carousing of Sir Toby Belch and his cronies. It is especially evident in the deportment of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, the "foolish knight" who solemnly declares, "Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has. But I am a great eater of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit" (1.3.83-86). (It would be worth counting the number of absurdities in that utterance alone.) And folly is displayed supremely in the narcissistic posturings of Malvolio, who loves for advancement, and who knows how to do so only according to the letter.

But folly also inhabits the world of romance, or so the Fool assures us. Olivia, he argues, "will keep no Fool, sir, till she be married, and Fools are as like husbands as pilchers are to herrings: the husband's the bigger" (3.1.35-37). And yet, he slyly indicates to Cesario, the foolery of love already inhabits Olivia's house as commonly as it accompanies Orsino—and it is Cesario (ironically addressed as "your Wisdom") who provokes it: "I would be sorry, sir, but the Fool should be as oft with your master as with my mistress. I think I saw your Wisdom there" (3.1.41-43).

The Fool works with words. They are his living. He invests their carnivalesque duplicity with materiality and makes money out of them. Folly throws into relief the ways in which language is opaque rather than transparent, an end and not a means. The Fool exploits the anarchic instability of meaning, introducing by a pun, a double entendre, or an equivocation an unexpected sense which obscures what is predictable and

produces unforeseen significances. To Olivia's "Take the Fool away," he replies, "Take away the Lady," and justifies his case (1.5.36-70). Words, his foolery demonstrates, live a life of their own, independent of the intentions of his interlocutors.

But in this respect, too, folly is only the degree zero of courtship, where Malvolio, at the mercy of the letter, closely resembles Sir Andrew, who actively scoops up Cesario's fine phrases in order to put them to work on his own behalf. Love's script is always already written in advance, and the lover can do no more than put together a text and a mode of behavior from the existing repertoire. Both Malvolio and Sir Andrew may be seen as parodies of Orsino in love, aimlessly punning and poetizing in the absence of the object of his desire. "Love," Julia Kristeva proposes, "is something spoken, and it is only that: poets have always known it."³ The play does not go quite that far, but it points to the way the world of love inhabits the world of words—and shares in the process their anarchic, unstable, arbitrary nature.

Paradoxically, it follows that the work of the Fool (like the work of the dramatist?) is highly skilled, since it takes advantage of this anarchic character without submitting to it. Moreover, foolery (like drama?) is a discipline involving a strong awareness of what is appropriate. Folly (like the stage?) is licensed to say what might not be acceptable in another mode (1.5.92-93), but it also confronts quite stringent constraints:

This fellow is wise enough to play the Fool,
And to do that well craves a kind of wit.
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time,
And, like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eye. This is a practice
As full of labor as a wise man's art. . . .

(3.1.61-67)

The Fool, who is independent of the love story, draws the attention of the audience to the absurdity of love, even while the romantic narrative enlists our sympathy. By turns lyrical, sad, and ridiculous, love in *Twelfth Night* shares something of the elusiveness which characterizes the play's cross-dressed protagonist. It never settles in a single place long enough for us to feel that we have resolved its enigmas or eliminated its indeterminacies. And this is perhaps one of the effects of romantic comedy, which constantly shifts the perspective it offers its audience. The spectators of *Twelfth Night* are at one moment detached observers of love's extravagance and its self-indulgence, while at another they are invited to participate in its pains and pleasures, sharing the point of view of the fictional lovers themselves.

The truth about love, beyond its enigmas and its uncertainties, perhaps ultimately constitutes an unattainable object of desire for the audience of *Twelfth Night*. But so too, possibly, does the world of the fiction itself, a world of romance and foolery, of lyric and comedy. And here it is, of course, the Fool who has the last word. As *Twelfth Night*, the culminating party of the festive Christmas season, comes to an end, as the illusory realm of Illyria, constructed primarily out of language's imaginary transparency, recedes, the Fool, alone on the stage, sings a sad song about time and winter. Here in the margins of the fiction, a figure from the world made of words that is already lost to the audience defines an alternative world of wind and rain.

But that world is also made of words. Is it, we might wonder, more, or less, substantial than the realm of desire identified as Illyria?

1. This essay took shape in the course of conversations with Kent Cartwright, Barbara Mowat, Lena

Orlin, and Elihu Pearlman. It owes much to their insights.

2. "I believe we can say that Shakespeare knew *Eunuchus*, and that of Terence's plays it was his favorite," writes T. W. Baldwin, who cites a number of allusions to *The Eunuch* in Shakespeare's work, but does not mention *Twelfth Night*. See *Shakespeare's Five-Act Structure* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1947), pp. 544-78, esp. p. 576.

3. Julja Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 277.