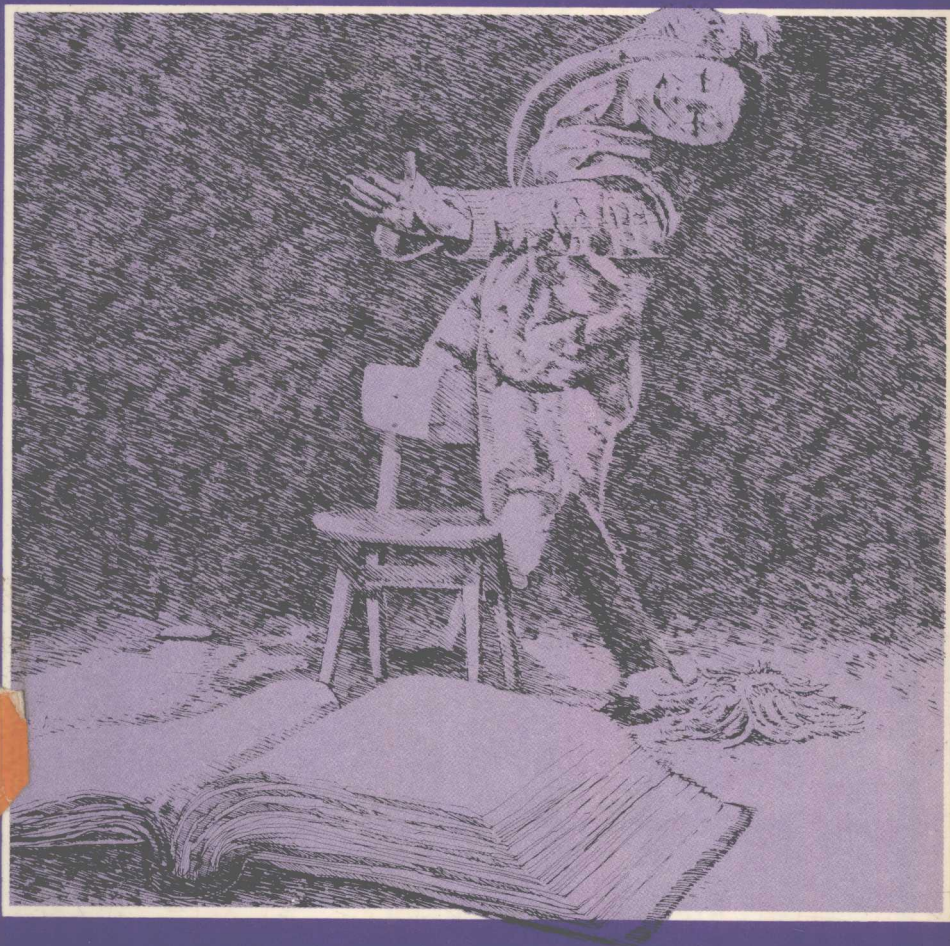


TEXT &
PERFORMANCE

Twelfth Night

Lois Potter



TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

General Editor: Michael Scott

The series is designed to introduce sixth-form and undergraduate students to the themes, continuing vitality and performance of major dramatic works. The attention given to production aspects is an element of special importance, responding to the invigoration given to literary study by the work of leading contemporary critics.

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TWELFTH NIGHT

Text and Performance

LOIS POTTER

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Source details for the illustrations are given with the relevant captions to the plates.

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

For many years a mutual suspicion existed between the theatre director and the literary critic of drama. Although in the first half of the century there were important exceptions, such was the rule. A radical change of attitude, however, has taken place over the last thirty years. Critics and directors now increasingly recognise the significance of each other's work and acknowledge their growing awareness of interdependence. Both interpret the same text, but do so according to their different situations and functions. Without the director, the designer and the actor, a play's existence is only partial. They revitalise the text with action, enabling the drama to live fully at each performance. The academic critic investigates the script to elucidate its textual problems, understand its conventions and discover how it operates. He may also propose his view of the work, expounding what he considers to be its significance.

Dramatic texts belong therefore to theatre and to literature. The aim of the 'Text and Performance' series is to achieve a fuller recognition of how both enhance our enjoyment of the play. Each volume follows the same basic pattern. Part One provides a critical introduction to the play under discussion, using the techniques and criteria of the literary critic in examining the manner in which the work operates through language, imagery and action. Part Two takes the enquiry further into the play's theatricality by focusing on selected productions of recent times so as to illustrate points of contrast and comparison in the interpretation of different directors and actors, and to demonstrate how the drama has worked on the modern stage. In this way the series seeks to provide a lively and informative introduction to major plays in their text and performance.

MICHAEL SCOTT

PLOT SYNOPSIS AND SOURCES

Orsino, Duke of Illyria, is in love with the Countess Olivia, but she has vowed to spend seven years in seclusion, mourning her brother's recent death. Viola arrives on the coast of Illyria after a shipwreck in which she has lost her twin brother Sebastian. She disguises herself as a page named Cesario and takes service with the Duke. He sends her to Olivia's house. Unlike his other messengers, she succeeds in entering, but her efforts on Orsino's behalf result in Olivia's falling in love with the supposed page. Meanwhile, Viola herself has fallen in love with Orsino. Unknown to the other characters, Sebastian – in the company of Antonio, who saved him from drowning – has also come to Illyria.

Olivia's strict and humourless steward, Malvolio, has antagonised the rest of the household: her cousin Sir Toby Belch, the clown Feste, and her waiting woman Maria. In revenge, Maria forges a riddling love-letter to him, in Olivia's handwriting, inviting him to show that he returns her love by dressing and behaving in an absurd way. When he carries out these instructions, Olivia naturally thinks him a lunatic, which gives the conspirators an excuse for treating him like one.

Olivia's passion for Cesario has become obvious even to the foolish Sir Andrew Aguecheek, another of her suitors. Sir Toby eggs him on to challenge Cesario to a duel which neither of them wants. It is interrupted by Antonio, who thinks he is rescuing Sebastian again. When Antonio is arrested by Orsino's officers, Cesario denies all knowledge of him. The two knights pursue the page, but the person they meet is Sebastian, who gives as good as he gets. Olivia also meets Sebastian, and, for the first time, finds 'Cesario' responsive to her love.

Confusion is at its height – with Cesario accused of duplicity towards everyone – when Sebastian arrives and is reunited with his sister. Orsino recognises, and responds to, the love that Viola has shown him in her disguise; Olivia is happy to transfer her love to Sebastian. Malvolio learns of the trick that has been played on him and leaves, threatening revenge. Feste sings a farewell to the audience.

SOURCES

The ultimate source for *Twelfth Night* is Plautus's *Menaechmi*, already used by Shakespeare for *The Comedy of Errors*. The play inspired many Renaissance adaptations, including *Gl'Ingannati* (discussed in Section 2), which was translated into French and thence into a Latin version performed at Cambridge in 1595. The story is also told in prose romances. Barnaby

Riche's *Farewell to Militarie Profession* (1581) includes the tale of 'Apolonius and Silla', adapted from a French version by Belleforest, which is itself based on an Italian original by Bandello. There is no known source for the Malvolio plot, though it is sometimes suggested that the feuds and rivalries of the Elizabethan court may have borne some relation to those in Olivia's household.

PART ONE: TEXT

1 INTRODUCTION

Most of the early criticism of *Twelfth Night* is in fact theatrical criticism: that is, it comes from spectators rather than readers of the play. The first reference to it occurs in the diary of a young man, John Manningham, who was studying law at the Middle Temple, one of the London Inns of Court. He saw the play there, on 2 February 1602, at a special performance for the students and lawyers. It was Candlemas Day, the last day of their season of revels. He noted that the plot of the play reminded him of several earlier ones about twins: Plautus's *Menaechmi*, Shakespeare's own *Comedy of Errors*, and an Italian comedy called *Gl'Inganni* (*The Deceptions*). He went on to praise the 'good practice', or practical joke, which was played on Malvolio. This part of the story, presumably, was new to him.

The play seems to have been equally successful elsewhere. Verses published in 1640 declare that the public theatre was 'full To hear Malvolio, that cross-gartered gull'. We also know that the play was performed at Court in 1623 under the title *Malvolio*, and that Charles I, who owned a copy of the Shakespeare Folio, wrote this name opposite *Twelfth Night* in the list of contents. When the play was revived after the Civil War, another diarist, Samuel Pepys, recorded that he saw it three times, once on 6 January, *Twelfth Night* itself. But he found it 'silly' and 'not related at all to the name or day'.

This early evidence, skimpy as it is, suggests two conclusions. One is that the most memorable part of *Twelfth Night* was its intrigue, particularly the trick played on Malvolio. The other is that nobody really understood what the title meant, except perhaps that the play would be an appropriate choice for the holiday season. Much subsequent criticism has done little more than refine on, or disagree with, these two assumptions. *Is*

Malvolio the centre of the play? Does the title indicate that it is only a holiday romp, or does it hide some profound significance? What about the sub-title, *What You Will*? Is Shakespeare saying that he doesn't care what the play is called (or, for that matter, about anything else: note the repetition of 'that's all one' in the final scene and Feste's song)? Does he mean that he is writing for the audience's taste rather than his own, or that the play is about the effects of *will* (desire, or specifically sexual desire)? What about the fact that his name was Will – he had already punned on it in the sonnets – and that he was the father of twins, a boy and a girl?

My concern in this book will be only with questions which theatrical performance can attempt to answer. In the first part I shall consider some of the factors which make *Twelfth Night* such a complex piece of work: its thematic and literary context, the verbal and visual patterns which make up its structure. Then, because it seems to me a play whose theatrical history is often more illuminating than its criticism, I shall look at some of the interpretations reflected in productions of the past. This will form a prologue to the study of more recent productions which makes up Part Two.

2 INTERPRETING THE TITLE

The simplest way to look at *Twelfth Night* is in the context that Manningham's diary provides: one of several plays about twins and mistaken identity, where confusion rises to such a height that the characters wonder whether they, or others, have gone mad. The very names – *Errors*, *Deceptions* – are significant. They imply that the audience's pleasure will come from watching the characters make fools of themselves. In Plautus, as in Shakespeare's imitation, *The Comedy of Errors*, the confusion involves twins of the same sex, but in several Italian comedies, of which the earliest is *Gl'Ingannati* (*The Dupes*, 1538,

by members of the Academy of the Intronati in Siena), the joke acquires another dimension when a girl dresses as a boy and is mistaken for her brother.

In the Latin and Italian comedies, the twin who becomes the object of the mistake takes advantage of it to exploit the other characters, both financially and sexually. *The Comedy of Errors* is different in that the heroes, though they are accused of such exploitation, are in fact innocent. In *Twelfth Night*, too, neither Viola nor Sebastian knowingly takes advantage of anyone. But a great deal of deception does go on in the play. Sir Toby gets money, and even a horse, out of Sir Andrew by flattering his hopes of winning the rich heiress Olivia. Maria gets a husband (Sir Toby) by playing the same trick on Malvolio. There is also a busy interchange of money and jewels, much of it carried by Viola. It reaches a climax when she is accused by Antonio of swindling him out of his purse, and Sir Toby, of all people, expresses righteous indignation.

But there is something clearly wrong with an account of the plot which sees nothing but a series of interlocking swindles. It is important to recognise that not all the deceptions are caused by human actions. The initial shipwreck which brings Viola and Sebastian separately to Illyria belongs to a category of events which can be found not only in Roman comedy but also in romance. The sea was so strongly associated with the idea of fate that in the Italian theatre a backdrop representing a stormy sea was called a *fortuna*. What the sea and Fortune have in common is randomness; this is why the goddess Fortune is depicted as blind, or blindfolded, and why Sebastian speaks of 'the blind waves and surges' which have 'devoured' his sister [v i 226]. The opposite of Fortune is Divine Providence (the word means *foreseeing*). When Sebastian realises that his sister is alive, he realises also that Olivia has been mistaking him for her. But he now sees events in a new light:

So comes it, lady, you have been mistook.
But nature to her bias drew in that.
You would have been contracted to a maid.
Nor are you therefore, by my life, deceived:
You are betrothed both to a maid and man.

[v i 256-60]

Olivia may have been mistaken, but she was not deceived; there was a purpose in what happened, after all.

The characters are often confused as to whether they are the victims of human trickery or cosmic purpose. Malvolio in soliloquy says that 'All is fortune', and later, in an attempt at humility, thanks 'Jove', not his own merit, for the happiness offered him in the forged letter. In fact, he is the victim of purely human deception. On the other hand, Antonio thinks himself the victim of Sebastian's trickery, when it is mere chance that has led him to address himself to the wrong twin. Fears of witchcraft, demonic possession, and ghosts turn out in the end to have a rational explanation. But there remains a sense of something irrational, and mostly beneficent, behind the workings of the plot.

It is also important to remember that the plot is a love story. All the named characters except the enigmatic Fabian experience some form of love – at least, assuming that Sir Andrew knows what he is talking about when he offers Feste money for his 'leman'. Yet this love is taken for granted rather than explored. The play contains no straightforward love scenes. Though four men are suitors to Olivia, none of them woos her directly; two of them (Orsino and Sir Andrew) never speak to her at all until the final scene. Most of the characters, apart from Olivia and Sebastian, fall in love offstage, which is where the whole of Sir Toby's courtship of Maria takes place. The closest thing to a simple expression of feeling is Antonio's affection for Sebastian. Because of Viola's disguise, her scenes with Orsino and Olivia must necessarily consist of indirect, or misdirected, statements about love. This style is taken to its absurd extreme in Maria's letter to Malvolio and his wooing of Olivia. The fact that both are expressed in riddles prolongs the misunderstanding – and the joke.

If we look only at what is *said* in the play, then, the characters' relationships seem to develop and alter at break-neck speed, in accordance with Feste's image of 'the whirligig of time' [v i 374]. Insofar as the play is a play of intrigue, it requires this speed. One reason why Latin and Italian comedies normally take place within a single day is that most of