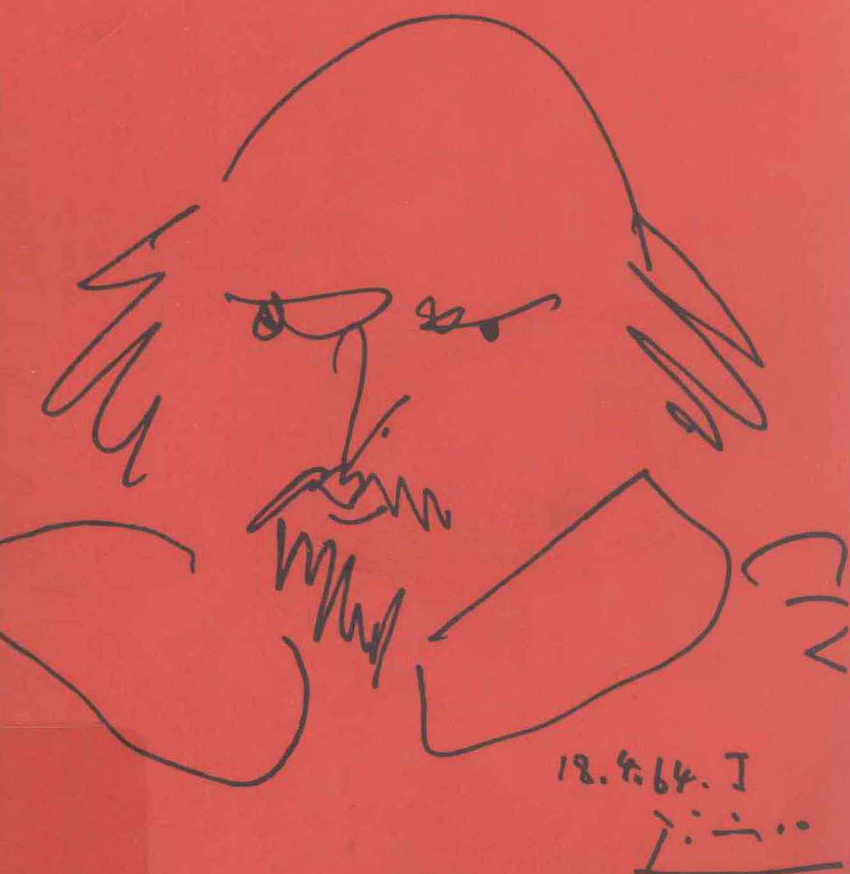


THE NEW SHAKESPEARE

Twelfth Night



RIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

5s.net 95cents
IN U.K. IN U.S.A.

TWELFTH NIGHT
OR
WHAT YOU WILL



CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1968

PUBLISHED BY
THE SYNDICS OF THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bentley House, P.O. Box 92, 200 Euston Road, London, N.W. 1
American Branch: 32 East 57th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022

First edition 1930
**Second edition* 1949
Reprinted 1959
1964
First paperback
edition 1968
Reprinted as
Pocket edition 1958

* Places where slight editorial changes or additions introduce variants from the first edition are, when possible, marked by a date [1949] in square brackets.

Standard Book Number: 521 09504 2

First printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge
Reprinted in Great Britain by Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd,
Aylesbury, Bucks

THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

EDITED FOR THE SYNDICS OF THE
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BY

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH
AND JOHN DOVER WILSON

TWELFTH NIGHT

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TWELFTH NIGHT

I

Questions concerning the text of this play and the date of its first production will be treated in their proper place. It is enough to say here of the text that none is discoverable earlier than the 1623 Folio, and indeed this was probably its first appearance in print, if we may guess so much from the fact that the licence granted to the printer specifies 'soe manie of the said copyes as are not formerly entred to other men,' and *Twelfth Night* is one of these. For the date: It is not mentioned in Meres' list, of 1598: but it *is* mentioned in a diary discovered either by Collier or by Hunter among the Harleian MSS in the British Museum. Collier first published it in 1831, but it was Hunter who identified the diarist as one John Manningham, barrister of the Middle Temple. The entries extend, with gaps, from Christmas 1601 to April 14, 1603, and under 'Febr. 1601' occurs the following:

Feb. 2.—At our feast wee had a play called Twelue night or what you will. much like the commedy of errores or Menechmi in Plautus, but most like and neere to that in Italian called Inganni a good practise in it to make the steward beleue his Lady widdowe was in Loue with him by counterfayting a lettre, as from his Lady, in generall termes, telling him what shee liked best in him, and prescribing his gesture in smiling his apparraile etc. And then when he came to practise making him beleue they tooke him to be mad.

Manningham's 'our feast' was Candlemas (Purification of the Blessed Virgin), Feb. 2, 1601-2. He does not say or hint that he was witnessing a first performance: but he gives the impression that the play was a new one: and if we take *Twelfth Night* to be something more

definite than a mere fancy-title, it seems a reasonable guess that Shakespeare had written it for presentation on the preceding Twelfth Night (Epiphany), 1602. For what stage he intended it, whether public or private—or, if for a private entertainment, at what patron's command—we know not. But it carries throughout the atmosphere of a happy Twelfth Night revel, written for a polite audience, and with just so much of irresponsible extravagant fooling—of What You Will—as would amuse such an audience without scandalising. Be it remembered too, that such an audience would include a number of children, to whose delight tradition consecrated this innocent *Saturnalia*, this *Fête des Rois*. For the legend came out of St Matthew's Gospel: and it ran that the Fairy Befana (or Epifania) found herself too busy with household affairs to look after the Three Kings as she ought when they set forth for Bethlehem following the Star, but promised to await their return. And so she did: but they, after presenting their gifts, 'being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, departed into their own country another way.' Wherefore (the tale is) every Twelfth Night Befana watches for them; and when they do not return, in penance and in sorrow for the Innocents slain in Rama, she walks the night-nurseries before morning and fills the children's stockings with toys. No doubt in course of time the *Fête des Rois* would become sophisticated, as has happened to Pantomime in these later years. Yet it remained, down almost to our own day, a children's *Saturnalia*, a frolic of 'dressing up' and mimicking the absurdities of their elders, under presidency of a 'Lord of Misrule'; and obscenities such as we pardon, however unwillingly, in the ordinary 'musical' farces of to-day, and a Shakespearian audience accepted as a kind of fun proper to Comedy, would offend us yet in Pantomime even as they would have offended in a Twelfth Night show: *Maxima debetur pueris reverentia*. We shall have more to say on

this point, but for the moment content ourselves with noting that the play, with all its laughing tolerance of ginger and cakes and ale (ancient concomitants of Twelfth Night), never strays into lewdness: that, in particular, the Clown Feste (i.q. *Festus*, master of the feast and its Lord of Misrule) is remarkable among Shakespeare's Fools not only by eminence of wit and satiric philosophy, but by keeping them both clean of bawdry.

Allusions in the text of the play tend to confirm rather than to cast doubt upon the date generally assigned to it: and on the whole, for our critical purpose here, we may assume that date to be 1601-2 or near-about.

And this just accords with the date which any sensitive critic (without, perhaps, being able to cite better evidence than an inner certainty slowly acquired by study, not producible in Court) must feel to be the right date for *Twelfth Night*; a play which is a summary on the edge of a pause:

a box where sweets compacted lie:

—a summary of all the old happy comedies, an immediate successor to *As You Like It*. Years later, under the placard of 'A Comedy' Shakespeare was to attempt dramas of reconciliation—*The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*—to end happily but on a deeper note. It is always dangerous to generalise upon Shakespeare's notion of a comedy and its quiddity. But we may agree that after *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* a gulf opens, to be crossed on the terrible footholds of the great Tragedies; and that, beyond them, a different Shakespeare emerges into so much of the sunny side of life as experience allows him to accept as real and to enjoy; which, when one comes to examine it, mainly consists in hope and a sort of faith that, if *he* had the re-making of this world, the sins of the fathers should *not* be visited on the children but rather redeemed by them, and the promise of this world renewed by force of youth and

innocent love. An ageing man's fond illusion, perhaps!
But what better trust has any one of us?

II

But we are (say) at 1601, and are dealing with a Shakespeare thirty-seven years old; with a playwright who has mastered the dramatic trick and can play with it at will; with an artist on the verge of using his skill to conquer the new kingdom of Tragedy: with a man who (however we speculate on the cause of it) had somehow acquired, or was in process of acquiring, a distrust of men's loyalty and a suspicion alive to smell the fitch in woman's purity; a man who could have said with Ruskin:

The fashion of the time renders whatever is forward, coarse, or senseless in feminine nature too palpable to all men . . . and the chance of later life gave me opportunities of watching women in states of degradation and vindictiveness which opened to me the gloomiest secrets of Greek and Syrian tragedy. I have seen them betray their household charities to lust, their pledged love to devotion. I have seen mothers dutiful to their children as Medea; and children dutiful to their parents as the daughter of Herodias . . .

'but my trust is still unmoved,' he continues, 'in the precious—of the natures that are so fatal in their error.' And so it remained with Shakespeare who, knowing all about Goneril, could invent an Imogen, deal charitably with Doll Tearsheet, interpret Cleopatra.

III

In 1601, then, we see Shakespeare, a man of thirty-seven, with a record of Comedy prosperously attempted, standing on the brink of that dark kingdom of Tragedy which he has yet to explore and to conquer if he can—

Pondering his voyage; for no narrow frith
He has to cross.

Nor (as we hope to show) is it fanciful to see him, so poised for flight, in *Twelfth Night* casting a backward comprehensive glance upon his old playmates and leaving them in this play (with its under-burden of melancholy) his Farewell to Comedy.

But, to make this clearer, we must first devote a page or so to its alleged 'Sources'—a task we usually undertake against our will, with the proviso that three times in four Shakespeare's 'sources' are as likely as not any man's or everyman's sources. Now and again, to be sure—as with *Romeo* or *As You Like It* or the Roman plays—we can point to some definite piece of another man's writing and demonstrate that Shakespeare used it as his material: and, where this can be done, we find our understanding of him and his ways of work enlarged and our criticism correspondingly the surer. But this source-hunting becomes futile and even dangerous if the pursuit of it encourage the notion that Shakespeare was the kind of man to borrow his minutest or his most ordinary effects from this or that suggestion discoverable in this or that obscure pamphlet or Italian *novella*: that his habit was, so to speak, to walk around a library telling himself 'I want a new plot' and picking out books with a 'Will this do?' 'Will this other give me a hint?' To take one of his devices for an illustration—that of the girl who dons boy's apparel and follows her lover in guise of a page. It was a favourite with him, as with a score of playwrights in an age when women's parts were enacted by boys: but it is as old as the hills, and it were a confusion of industry with idleness to hunt the suggestion back through medieval to ancient literature, to chase Julia or Rosalind or Viola panting back through time and space and into Noah's Ark.

The truth is, as Stephen Gosson reports in *Plays Confuted* (1581), that Shakespeare's contemporaries were ransacking Latin, French and Italian comedies to

fetch home grist to their mills; and if we say that Shakespeare, that powerful inventor, was also a great economist of invention (as he undoubtedly was, having learnt that thrift as an apprentice in furbishing up old dramas), why then we must follow it up by admitting that he was sufficiently master of his trade to sit and watch more menial men doing his work for him.

For useful critical purposes, then, we hold that hunting after any distant wildfowl of 'originals' can only justify itself as harmless recreation—no farther—until it fetch home some bird from whose wing Shakespeare demonstrably feathered one of his arrows.

The subject of Shakespeare's possible sources for *Twelfth Night* has already been pretty exhaustively treated by Furness in his edition of the play and by Mr Morton Luce in his admirable volume in *The Arden Shakespeare*—a book which can hardly be overrated for its intelligent painstaking. To them the reader must be referred; but for our present purpose we may be content with the following summary.

John Manningham, as we have seen, found *Twelfth Night* 'much like the commedy of errores or Menechmi in Plautus, but most like and neere to that in Italian called Inganni.' Now there were two Comedies of that name: (1) *Gl'Inganni*, by Nicolo Secchi, or Secco, first acted in 1547 and printed at Florence, 1562: (2) *Gl'Inganni*, by Curzio Gonzaga, Venice, 1592: with a third (3) by Domenica Cornaccini, Venice, 1604, which we may leave out of account. But none of these *Inganni's* bears much resemblance to *Twelfth Night*: and it is generally supposed that Manningham's memory confused *Gl'Inganni* with *Gl'Ingannati*, a comedy presented at Siena in 1531. *Gl'Ingannati* was published at Venice in 1537 in a volume entitled *Il Sagraificio*—the 'sacrifice' being a preliminary and ceremonious offering-up of sonnets, madrigals, etc. sung to the lyre

as each member of the Intronati¹ casts on the altar some love-token of a lost mistress: the Comedy following this 'induction,' *Gl'Ingannati*, may have been brought into England by a troupe of Italian players who performed before Elizabeth in 1577-8. But this is unnecessary guess-work: for the play had a European vogue. It was translated into French by Charles Estienne, physician (Lyons, 1543), and adapted for the French stage under the title of *Les Abusés* in 1549: for the Spanish, by Lope de Rueda in 1556. The French version fathered a Latin one, *Laelia*, given at Queens' College, Cambridge, in 1595². But apart from translations and adaptations of the play, the story occurs in Bandello's *Novelle*, ii. 36 (Lucca, 1554), Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (Monte Regale, 1565) and Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*, vol. iv (Paris, 1570). The list may finish with an English version of the story, *The Historie of Apolonius and Silla*, found in Barnabe Rich's *Farewell to Militarie Profession* (London, Robert Walley, 1581), a version long accepted as the *vera origo* of *Twelfth Night* and printed—a poorly told tale—on that supposition in Hazlitt's *Shakespeare's Library*.

From all this it is obvious—if the quest be worth pursuing—that Shakespeare, writing in 1601 or thereabouts, had plenty of sources to irrigate his invention, if he chose to draw upon them. A more useful conclusion would seem to be that the primal source dates back beyond Boccaccio, beyond Plautus (out of whom Shakespeare had dipped a pailful for *The Comedy of Errors*), and is in fact as old as the hills.

¹ One of these offerings, *un Cupido scolpito, dono della sua Donna*, is cast into the flames by Messer Agnol Malevolti, a name which may have suggested 'Malvolio.' But the term *mala voglia* ('evil concupiscence') is frequent in Bandello, v. *infra*.

² Edited by Dr Moore Smith from a MS in Lambeth Palace.

For it cannot be too often or too strongly pointed out that the exploration of Shakespeare's 'sources' varies greatly in the amount of profit it yields to us, but still more in the *kind* of profit. Where, for example, we know that he had Holinshed's *Chronicles* before him, we can learn (with wonder) something of the dramatic genius which pounced on a passage of it for *Macbeth*, to expand and work tragedy upon it. Still more usefully we can read North's *Plutarch* alongside *Antony and Cleopatra* and follow the magical process as it converts by a few touches good prose into great poetry. Quite usefully again, where we know the dramatist is working in *As You Like It* upon Lodge's novel of *Rosalynde*, we can watch him and what his skill makes of it. But when, as with *Twelfth Night*, the story is a primal one, and we have a dozen sixteenth-century versions capable of providing a hint here or a phrase there, the quest may easily turn to a folly of delusion. And after all, for our relief, no one has yet found Shakespeare a debtor to anyone for Malvolio.

IV

Whomsoever Shakespeare plundered, or may have plundered, at one time or another, it is certain he never used so constant a victim as himself. No one can piece together the scraps of information and gossip left to us and construct out of them any biography to satisfy a mind reasonably scrupulous in separating good evidence from bad—no one, after every baffling attempt to build, out of fragments that again and again break in his hand, a figure of Shakespeare as he lived *totus teres atque rotundus*, can survey the result—without admitting that he has made shift to force his own conception of what consummate genius ought to be into the mould of a plain man of business. (And this we suppose to lie at the root of the Baconian and other heresies.) But a like

difficulty in scene after scene must tease anyone who examines the plays themselves. Here is a man so prodigal of invention that every situation teems with thought and metaphor, throws out tendrils, foliage, fruit, as a volcanic soil obeys the heat beneath. And yet this poet who apparently cannot help himself is found, on examination, to be a strict economist, almost a niggard, of all his superabundance.

The solution may, after all, be simple enough. As the younger Dumas once boasted, 'Give me two trestles, four boards, three actors, one passion, and I will make you a drama,' so this paradox of Shakespeare may perhaps be explained by a mighty indolence, such as may easily beset a great artist who has mastered his trade. 'I have toiled hard enough at the theatre to know its tricks: I have toiled even harder, from *Venus and Adonis* on, at the more difficult business of putting beauty into speech: I have acquired the mastery of that, too—*une jolie façon de dire les choses*; moreover I have lived in the country, in London, at its Court, and have suffered. You demand a new play of me? Well, fetch me an old one—any old story with stuff in it, and I will make it new enough.'

In dealing with several of the Comedies we have had to face this paradox; but *Twelfth Night* forces it upon us everywhere. From beginning to end we find it a tissue of incidents, of characters, of situations, which have been proved effective by previous stage-experiments. Confusion of identity (out-Plautusing Plautus) has been worked in *The Comedy of Errors*, with the shipwreck that leads to recognition, and the friendly ship-captain who goes to explore the strange town. This friendship of an elderly man for a youth reappears in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Antonio, the friend's name in that play, is Antonio again in this. Viola again—the boy-actor exchanging skirts for trunk-hose, revives Julia, and like Julia attends her chosen lover as a page—revives also

Portia, Nerissa, Jessica, Rosalind—all by different ways of playfulness working up towards Imogen, paragon of women in boy's attire. We all recognise Sir Toby and Aguecheek as sibs to Falstaff and Slender: the trick played on Malvolio is cross-cradle with that played on Beatrice and Benedick—and so on. Even Viola's

Make me a willow cabin at your gate

echoes *As You Like It*; as her famous lines on her supposed sister,

My father had a daughter loved a man...

echo, with a deeper note, Katharine's story in *Love's Labour's Lost* of the man who killed her sister—

He made her melancholy, sad, and heavy—
And so she died: had she been light, like you,
Of such a merry, nimble, stirring spirit,
She might ha' been a grandam ere she died....
And so may you...for a light heart lives long.

Out of this account we leave for a while the echoes of mere music in our play. But we summarise for the moment, with Barrett Wendell, its many self-derivative origins—

Twelfth Night, far from being essentially different from his former plays, is perhaps the most completely characteristic we have yet considered. For what reason we cannot say—indolence we might guess in one mood, prudence in another—he was exceptionally economical of invention, except in mere language. Scenes, characters, situations, devices which had once proved themselves effective he would constantly prefer to any bold experiment. This very economy of invention, perhaps, contained an element of strength; it left his full energy free for the masterly phrasing and the spontaneous creation of character which has made his work lasting. Strong or weak, however, the trait is clearly becoming almost as characteristic as the constant concreteness of his style: and nowhere does it appear more distinctly or to more advantage than when we recognise in

Twelfth Night—with all its perennial delights—a masterpiece not of invention but of recapitulation.

V

We shall attempt to show by and by, and in summary, that *Twelfth Night* uses all these echoes, these recapitulations, in a strangely subtle way of its own, transmuting them, or at least throwing around them an atmosphere of illusion through which we neither recognise, nor seek to recognise, them for the old puppets, the familiar stage-tricks: in which we care nothing for date of composition, 'sources,' even the poet's development, but just surrender ourselves to the play's entertainment. As has been wisely said:

Whether you read it or see it, you find it thoroughly amusing: and you are hardly ever bothered by the lurking consciousness, so often fatal to the enjoyment of anything, that you ought to take this matter more seriously. Rather, if you let yourself go, you feel comfortably assured that here at any rate is something to be wholesomely enjoyed.

'This play is in the graver part elegant and easy,' pronounces Johnson, 'and in some of the lighter scenes exquisitely humorous.' 'This is justly considered one of the most delightful of Shakespeare's Comedies,' says Hazlitt. And as it is permissible to smile even when a Shakespearian scholar confesses he has felt his nose tickled by his author's comic spirit, let us quote the reluctant Halliwell:

The genius displayed in the works of Shakespeare is of so transcendent a character, *an editor is placed at this disadvantage*, that in the progress of his labours, the consideration of each successive drama unfolds so much of wonderful art, the tendency of his criticism is liable to be influenced unduly in the estimate of the one under consideration, impressed by those newly discovered excellencies which ever attend a diligent study of Shakespearian drama; but, making every allowance for the enthusiasm resulting from a recent examination of the beauties of the following

play, it may fairly be estimated as the chief monument of the author's genius for Comedy, and the most perfect composition of the kind in the English or any other language.

VI

If the jollity of this play so compels a painful scholar against his will that we may see Queen Mab hath been with him, let us philosophise the attraction a little. To begin with, the title and its sub-title—*Twelfth Night* was, as we have said, traditionally a feast of mirth in Christian countries: a revel in which children took part as audience or actors; the whole game being a sort of topsy-turvy under a Lord of Misrule. For a few hours, at a date after Christmas, our ancestors agreed that *dulce est desipere*—

Misce stultitiam consiliis brevem;
dulce est desipere in loco

or

It's no bad rule to play the fool,
If only once a year.

If, with this in our minds, for the while we set aside subtleties which will afterwards assert themselves, and consider the play as a thing to be enjoyed *sub persona infantis*, we shall see that the actual structure of *Twelfth Night* is laid out so simply that any child can enjoy it from beginning to end. A shipwreck—a girl changing into boy's dress—consequent misunderstandings, leading up to a forced duel between a braggart and a maid, both timorous—a marplot steward mocked—with a plenty of fun, much music, and a happy ending—What more can a child want for entertainment, looking into a happy Illyria and taking all its improbabilities for granted? Structurally *Twelfth Night* is a piece of fun as primitive as a harlequinade. Misrule rules all the while in Olivia's household; songs and catches turn night into day: and the culprits work their final jest upon the Steward who

would suppress it. His downfall, again, is just of the sort to tickle a child's humour—the sort of risibility that does not reach beyond the sheer fun, for instance, of seeing a solemn personage slip up heels-aloft on a slide of butter.

Let us remind ourselves, too, that *Twelfth Night* contains no bawdry: that Feste, while one of the most philosophical of Shakespeare's clowns, is also the cleanest mouthed; that the jolly back-chat of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Maria, Fabian runs innocent throughout as battledore and shuttlecock: that the plentiful disorder of Olivia's household, in short, is never that of a disorderly house. Even the love-making never passes beyond such simple romantic play as children have learnt from their fairy-books and take as much for granted as the glass slipper fitted by the Prince on Cinderella. No hearts break; passion never obtrudes upon sentiment, save by a hint. Orsino sighs; Viola sighs with a difference; Olivia, presented as love-proof, suddenly capitulates to love for a disguised maid and then as impetuously tosses her cap over the mill, to marry the twin-brother. Everything ends happily and, as it began, to the pretty illusion of music.

VII

But it is high time to reverse the shield and attempt to show how by Shakespeare's magic he turns this Christmas romp into pure and delicate Comedy appealing to the knowledge, the refined intelligence, even to the wistful memories, of cultivated men and women. As John Earle said of 'A Child'—

We laugh at his foolish sports, but his game is our earnest; and his drums, rattles and hobby-horses but the Emblems and mockings of man's business. His father hath writ him as his own little story, wherein he reads those days of his life that he cannot remember, and sighs to see what innocence he has out-lived.