

## ***Twelfth Night or What You Will—the World Turned Upside Down***

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Titles raise expectations. *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*: This double title, however, gives no indication of the content of the play. *Twelfth Night*<sup>1</sup> refers to an occasion, Epiphany, with which Shakespeare's audiences associated very specific expectations. On this day, the Christmas season ended, a time which, according to medieval tradition, was not for contemplation, but for carnival revelry. People played the world upside down, and within the framework of this ritually limited disorder, a *Lord of Misrule*, a kind of carnival prince, often took over the sceptre. The last day was celebrated in a special way, a conclusion and climax before returning to everyday life. At court, this day was a special occasion for music, disguise, masked balls and other festivities. *Twelfth Night* evokes the spirit of this day; if Leslie Hotson, a detective among literary scholars, is right (some are skeptical), then the play was even performed for the first time on this day in 1601.

The second part of the title, *What You Will*, can be understood in a variety of ways. However, three possibilities are at the forefront of understanding the play: The title can refer to the desires that the characters hold up to us as a mirror (*will* in Shakespeare's English can mean anything from a modest wish to sexual desire). The title can also indicate, with a confident gesture, that the players know exactly what the audience wants; perhaps even that no matter what they want, they will find it in this play. In this context, the particle *or* may be significant in this, the only double title in Shakespeare's oeuvre: it even includes the titles in the arbitrariness of the offer: one of the two, or indeed any other, is equally possible.

Can the diversity, the exuberance, and even the arbitrariness, which these titles announce and which—according to the thesis of this essay—the play offers to a large extent, be brought under the umbrella of a single interpretation? The umbrella must at least be very large. Interpreting a play means creating coherence (even if this consists of a specific kind of paradox), showing

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<sup>1</sup> Reference throughout is made to William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, edited by Roger Warren and Stanley Wells. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

connections between characters, plot lines, subject areas, linguistic and visual images, types of scenes, etc., but also between these elements and historical conditions, both at the time of creation and at the time of interpretation. The unity to which these connections add up will be defined depending on the critic's approach and aesthetic or ideological interests; and the closer, the more comprehensive the connections are, the higher the play will be rated, and the more convincing the interpretation will be.

Interpreting a play also means seeing it in a generic context. In the case of *Twelfth Night*, it will be that of a comedy – the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays, the Folio edition of 1623, already assigns it to this group. Critics have tried to work out common features in Shakespeare's comedies. A three-part structure has been described again and again: the characters leave an ordered world and return to it purified – a pattern that can be seen particularly well in *A Midsummernight's Dream* and *As You Like It*. In an influential book, C. L. Barber summarized this three-step process, which is also found in ritual actions, in the formula "through release to clarification." Carnival, or Christmas, also fits into this pattern as an occasion.

The comedies have also been grouped together based on their themes and the time when they were written: *Twelfth Night*, along with *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, is classified as a romantic comedy; these are primarily about love, and the audience can empathize with the characters whose experiences they are laughing at.

A play that lives from the spirit of the occasion like *Twelfth Night* must resist such an attempt to create coherence through interpretation and classification; because this attempt contradicts what it stands for. The interpretation according to the three-step process doesn't really fit; and the characterization as romantic comedy remains one-sided. Coherence in this play, with its variety, exuberance, even arbitrariness, can only be achieved at the expense of omitting and focusing.

To give just one example, but probably the most important: In *Twelfth Night*, three very different plots run alongside one another, a romantic comedy about Viola, Orsino and Olivia, a satirical one about Malvolio, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Maria, and a farce about Viola, Sebastian and Antonio. In the course of the history of reception, the romantic story about Viola was not always seen as the centre; in Shakespeare's time, the satirical comedy about Malvolio and the comedy of errors about Sebastian seem to have been the focus of the play. The earliest evidence, the diary of the law student John Manningham, describes a performance on February 2, 1601: "At our feast we had a play called Twelve Night or what you will, much like the comedy of errors, or Menechmi in Plautus, but most like &

neere to that in Italian called Inganni. A good practise in it to make the steward believe his lady widdowe was in love with him by counterfaying a letter." The play was also performed at court in 1622 under the title *Malvolio*. When critics then began to turn their attention to the psychology of Shakespeare's characters in the second half of the 18th century – incidentally, parallel to the transformation of Shakespeare's plays from stage dramas to reading dramas – other elements of *Twelfth Night* came to the fore. Now the inner life of the characters and their poetic expression became important, the various forms of love and courtship – those elements that shape the plot about Viola and Olivia. Sympathy with the characters was now required. Malvolio's quasi-tragic stature was brought out, in the theatre for example by Henry Irving; the prank that is played on him was increasingly relegated to a subplot, and the comedy of errors involving Viola and Sebastian lost importance. Today, the romantic comedy is still the centre of interest; but unlike since the Romantic period, the inner life of the characters, seen as autonomous subjects, the poetry of their emotional expression is no longer the reason for this; in a variation of character criticism, the interest is instead focused on how characters, like subjects, come into being, especially the social constitution of genders and their relationships. The play features a wide variety of types of love: Orsino pines for Olivia; but he also feels attracted to his page Cesario (and at the end, when it becomes clear that he is a woman, he insists that she keep her men's clothes on). Olivia mourns her dead brother, but falls in love with Cesario, whose feminine features are unmistakable. Viola/Cesario loves Orsino, but also puts himself in the role of Olivia's lover (1.5.257). Antonio loves Sebastian. Malvolio loves himself.

A stimulating and highly influential recent interpretation of the play comes from Stephen Greenblatt, in his brilliantly written essay "Fiction and Friction". It conforms to the pattern outlined by restricting itself to the plot of Viola, Orsino and Olivia, and generalizes what it suggests. Greenblatt is interested in the playful use of homoerotic elements. He explains the plot pattern of the comedy, using a metaphor from Sebastian in 5.1.254 ("But nature to her bias drew in that."), with the trajectory of a ball in a game of bowls, in which the aim is to roll a ball as close as possible to a predetermined target. The ball moves in a certain direction, but then changes its trajectory towards its target thanks to the eccentrically built-in weight. The same applies to people's inclinations; attraction to a person of the same sex would be too direct, too simple; in the end, a "natural" twist leads them back to the predetermined goal, union as a heterosexual couple. Nature, the general order of

things, so the comedy postulates, ensures that everything takes its proper course and ends in harmony.

Greenblatt enriches this basic pattern by questioning conventional notions of gender construction for Shakespeare's period; he does this based on an episode from Montaigne's travel journal and a contemporary medical treatise from France, which he assumes are also relevant to a Shakespeare play. And in a clever mixture of causality and analogical thinking, he applies what he has said about medical notions of the sexual act to those of poetic creation (hence the title "Fiction and Friction").

But do things actually find their way back to the conventionally given, "natural" harmony (even if it is accompanied by a few question marks)? Something important fades into the background in Greenblatt's interpretation: In addition to the romantic love of an Orsino, a Viola and an Olivia, relationships are also shown that are not based on mutual affection. Sir Andrew Aguecheek is encouraged by Sir Toby to court Olivia - it's about money. Malvolio tries to win Olivia's hand - it's about status. And the relationship between Sir Toby and Maria is not easy to describe with the term "romantic".

A similar narrowing of perspective occurs in the carnivalesque motif of disguise: it is most often perceived in the example of the main character, Viola as Cesario -- no doubt because a woman appears as a man, which may still be associated with a certain frisson, especially because these women were played by young men in Shakespeare's theater. But disguise occurs at least three times in *Twelfth Night*, in variations whose similarities are as important as their differences, as Dymphna Callaghan has pointed out: Not only Viola as Cesario, but also Malvolio as Olivia's partner and, less noticed, Feste as a priest. In each case, it is about status: someone takes on a role that is not theirs in the "natural" social order: in Viola the woman as a man (but also the noblewoman as a servant), in Malvolio the servant as a master, in Feste the fool as a priest.

What is striking about this game of identities is that it can mean different things from the perspective of different people involved: the characters themselves, the other characters and the audience. The person disguising is affected by how he or she is perceived by others. The other characters can be deceived by appearance. Only the audience is let in on the rules of the game in any case - and this is not necessary.

Viola is the most impressive example. She disguises herself to be able to be herself and achieve her goals under adverse circumstances. As soon as one recognizes identity, which is also shaped by gender, as a social construct - one of the strengths of Greenblatt's essay - clothing can become one of its constitutive elements. But this makes it uncertain

to what extent the clothing or disguise hides or changes gender. This uncertainty leads to new complications and possibilities for interpretation. It becomes possible to address the confusion, but above all the liberation, that such a breaking through of gender differences can mean for those affected (as Catherine Belsey has done).

Viola obviously disguises herself as a man because she believes this will serve her goals as a woman. In 1.2.55, after hearing about Prince Orsino and wanting to be near him, she decides to serve him as a eunuch, a plan that we hear nothing more about later. In 1.4 she then appears as his page and takes on the task of wooing Olivia for him, although she would much rather be his wife herself (1.4.41-42). In fulfilling this task, she is able to describe to Olivia what she herself would do if she were Orsino, i.e. she puts herself in the role of the man who she is not. And when Olivia gives her a ring, she is somewhat confused. In a monologue (2.2.17-41) she now puts herself in the role of Olivia, who loves Cesario, and is desperate because she can never win Orsino's love in her disguise. Later, Viola also reminds the audience that she is playing a role that does not suit her - most clearly during the fencing match in 3.4. She sees no way of finding her way out of the confusing situation into which her disguise has led her, like Orsino and Viola.

Only Viola herself and the audience (apart from the captain, who takes her ashore and then disappears) know the secret of her disguise; the other characters remain in the dark until the end. Unlike Rosalind in *As You Like It*, she cannot share her experience with another character (cf. her monologue in 2.2.17-41). The disguise therefore means not only liberation for her, but also loneliness. The relationship is all the closer to the audience.

Things are different with Malvolio: he too disguises himself by adorning himself with yellow garters and putting on a smile. His aim is to win Olivia as his partner. He believes that this will enable him to become what he deserves. But his deception is directed against him: in a clever prank devised by Maria, he is seduced into making a fool of himself. He does not gain freedom of action through disguise but is exposed in his self-righteousness and complacency. The audience and all the characters know what is being played out here, except Olivia, who shows a surprising amount of understanding for Malvolio in his disgrace.

The most peculiar is Feste's disguise as a priest in 4.2. It serves only to entertain the other characters and the audience. To free Malvolio from his apparent madness as an exorcist, Feste puts on a robe and a false beard. Both would not be necessary, because Malvolio, who is locked in the dark, cannot see him at all. Everyone, except Malvolio,

knows about his disguise. And we do not need to assume that the disguise has any influence on the identity of the disguised person; on the contrary, it allows the fool to fully develop his role. The reason for the disguise is rather to unmask, in a carnival manner, quite independently of the action, the person whose disguise one is wearing. Feste makes it clear right from the start that the aim is to make fun of the hypocrisy and stilted erudition of priests.

Finally: If disguise raises questions of identity, then they are posed quite radically for the characters in the third plot line, through the doppelgänger motif, through Viola and Sebastian. People are inexplicably no longer themselves. As an audience, we are prepared for the possible complications at the beginning of the second act. The characters, however, are only confronted with them from the fourth act onwards. From then on, however, the mix-ups, together with Viola's disguise, create all sorts of confusion. Sir Andrew is beaten; Sebastian is led into marriage, to his astonishment; Antonio is deeply disappointed in his love for Sebastian.

All the plot elements described exist somewhat abruptly alongside one another (even if they are artfully intertwined at the end); and none of them can completely push the others out of sight. They can only be brought together convincingly under the umbrella of the carnival. The text that we are given for interpretation is, in its diversity and even arbitrariness, itself part of this event, a whole in which the audience also participates. *Twelfth Night* thus determines not only the theme, but all aspects of the play.

What kind of event is this? Carnival turns things upside down for a precisely limited period and thus questions the established order. Depending on the social position of those affected, carnival can therefore mean different things. For those who are served by this order, it means an opportunity to let out pent-up subversive energies. For those who have to serve this order, it means an opportunity to rebel against it. In *Twelfth Night*, the first, the good-natured, affirmative tendency prevails, as demonstrated by various elements: the play can afford to make fun of its own artificiality; as Fabian states about the successful prank with Malvolio: "If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction" (3.4.122-23). The place of the action is, as so often with Shakespeare, far from the world of the audience, in a land of the imagination. Its name "Illyria" probably refers less to a region that exists in geography or mythology, but rather, according to Latin, to one that lies "there" (and not "here"); for this very reason, references to English conditions, for example in Olivia's household, are so effective: Alien things are made familiar, familiar things are alienated.

Music plays a larger role than in any other Shakespeare play; it begins and ends with it (I shall return to the song at the end). Songs of various kinds are sung by various characters; they act as interludes that can become independent of the plot; in the course of performance history, they could also be assigned to different characters: "Come away, come away death" (2.4.50-65), for example, was often attributed to Viola instead of Feste, as Laurie Osborne shows in her edition of the play. Language is played with at every opportunity, not just by Feste; as the Fool states: "To see this age! A sentence is but a chev'rel glove to a good wit, how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward" (3.1.11-13). It may not be a coincidence that the occasions on which early performances are documented did not take place in public theatres, but at festivals at court and colleges (the Inns of Court).

In this diversity, exuberance, and arbitrariness, there is one character who always remains himself, even when he is disguised: Feste, the fool, remains strangely unaffected by the play's confusion; in an unusual monologue (3.1.59-67), Viola expresses her admiration for his behavior and his art. He does not form any bonds (unlike Touchstone in *As You Like It*, for example). He is part of Olivia's household. In 1.5, he reappears there after an apparently long, unexplained absence. In 2.4, he appears at Orsino's court without explanation. He does not take part in planning the prank against Malvolio, and he is not there when Malvolio finds the letter and when he appears before Olivia in his ridiculous outfit, where he remains unclear. He only appears again towards the end, when the play with Malvolio is taken to extremes and (at least for a modern audience) loses its humour. He explains his contribution to the prank as revenge for Malvolio mocking his art (in 1.5.79).

His role in a play entitled *Twelfth Night* leads us to expect that the fool plays the role of an authority, the role of the Lord of Misrule. His name (it is only mentioned once in the play, 2.4.11) is telling, as Therese Steffen explains: Festus means "festive" in Latin, but is also the name of a judge in the Acts of the Apostles. But the expectation that Feste plays an active role is not fulfilled, as we have seen.

Feste has the last word: at the end he is left alone in front of the audience and sings a song, which, in terms of its structure, if not its content, could well be a dance song. Its verses describe the course of an aging world and a life in it with its usual stations. The second and fourth lines repeat themselves and shape the mood of the song, a mixture of bitterness and resignation to fate.

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 I could never thrive,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

[...]

A great while ago the world began,  
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. (5.1.385-

404)

Is the song profound or nonsensical? Its text is full of temporal and logical connections, which prompt us to ask questions about its meaning. But then we are also told "that's all one"; the only thing that counts is whether the audience liked the play.

What is the status of this song? Does it say something about Feste or is it the epilogue to the play? Epilogues step out of the play, allow it to come into view as a whole, and what they say therefore appears as a choral commentary on the whole, in which the author's voice also speaks. They end with a request for applause and thus address the performance as an interaction between the players and the audience. The song fulfils these conditions; and this is how it has been read again and again in criticism, as the expression of a mood that the whole play is supposed to convey: wise distance to the highs and lows of confusing human experience. This was common before the discovery of Manningham's diary. (it was published in 1831), when *Twelfth Night* was dated to 1614 on the basis of certain allusions and was thus considered Shakespeare's last play. The words of the song were understood at that time, as Laurie Osborne has shown, to be the last that Shakespeare wrote for the stage; they were taken as evidence that he had concluded his work in peace with the world, even if he had not left the stage without a certain bitterness. But the status of the song remains unclear: it can also represent Feste's perspective. Ultimately, the question must remain open as to who is speaking (or singing) here, apart from the last two lines, the character Feste, or the chorus, or to what extent Feste has a choral function.

The common reading of the play is based on what we can expect at the end of a Shakespeare comedy, a happy ending in which the couples come together and in which the



order that was temporarily called into question is re-established.

However, as is then noted as a sign of Shakespeare's genius, there is a drop of bitterness in the champagne glass. As in other Shakespeare comedies, someone is excluded from the celebration of harmony: Malvolio, who storms off the stage in anger. But Malvolio is not the only one to whom this happens. Most characters get a partner, but not necessarily the one they originally wanted. Orsino does not get his Olivia, Olivia does not get her Cesario. Sebastian is somewhat unexpectedly given a wife and accepts his happiness with astonishing calm. Only Viola is united with the person she felt attracted to from the beginning. A surprising number of characters come away empty-handed: apart from Malvolio also Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Antonio, whose love for Sebastian was still celebrated at the beginning of the fifth act. Feste (unlike Touchstone in *As You Like It*) is also left alone at the end. The order that is established is, after all that has happened, fragile; and, as elsewhere, it hardly has a different quality than before. Malvolio's threat, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you" (5.1.365), which is usually met with laughter, remains in the air. "The whirligig of time" (V.1.376), the spinning top of time, continues to turn and will ensure that Malvolio's opportunity for revenge comes.

The conventionality of the ending may remind us of the three-part comedy structure outlined above, the departure from an order and the return to it -- a structure also inherent in the carnival. We may therefore be tempted to read the play as a reflection of the carnival -- with moderate success. But if we take *Twelfth Night* seriously as an occasion, then it makes sense to read the play as part of that occasion, the phase in which the world is turned upside down. In other words, the conventions of the genre are also questioned in *Twelfth Night*.

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