Twelfth Night and the Meaning of Shakespearean Comedy

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ALTHOUGH ARISTOTLE does not take up the nature of comedy in the *Poetics*, he does throw out a few remarks which are as intelligent and useful as anything that has been said on the subject. Comedy, he says, differs from tragedy in imitating men worse, rather than better, than we are. And he defines the laughable as a species of ugliness: "a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others." We may derive from these remarks a fairly clear account of one kind of comedy—what might be called the satiric type. In satiric comedy, the characters are worse than we are, so that we do not identify ourselves with them. Even when painful things happen to these characters, we remain detached enough for these events to be painless *for us*. The activities of these characters, furthermore, never eventuates in pain for those with whom we do sympathize. Should this occur, the comic mood of the play would evaporate.

To such an esthetic disaster Ben Jonson comes perilously close in *Volpone*. I refer to the moment when it appears that nothing can prevent Volpone from ravishing Celia, one of the two decent people in the play. While Volpone is gulling the avaricious birds, we identify ourselves in some degree with Volpone. But here our concern for Celia, her helplessness, and the apparent certainty of her fate, make the scene painful rather than funny.

The sort of comedy Aristotle has in mind when he makes his few remarks is the kind where—as in Jonson and Molière—the satirized characters depart more or less from what author and audience assume to be proper behavior. This departure constitutes a kind of deformity which is not painful, and it makes us laugh. The norm from which such characters depart is usually the social code of a dominant class; the laughter is socially binding, promoting a sense of solidarity among the laughers and reinforcing the code by ridiculing any departure from it.

In Shakespeare's gay comedies, this Aristotelian formula does not work. His characters—the important ones, at any rate—are not worse than we are; on the contrary, they are better than we are or on the same level. They may be foolish, but only in the way that the best of men are foolish. The laughter they evoke is not satiric laughter, but indulgent laughter. We laugh, in a way, at ourselves, because we do not stand apart from, or look down on, these characters, but identify ourselves with them.

What keeps such a comedy from being painful? Chiefly plotting and tone. In Shakespeare's gay comedies, the plot and tone are so finely controlled that we never anticipate a serious outcome; we know that everything will turn out well in the end, no matter how foolishly these people behave. Their foolishness, moreover, is not a falling away from some implicit social code; it involves, rather, the inherent foolishness of human nature, the inborn limitations of human existence. And this foolishness is not ridiculed, but accepted, celebrated. The concerns of this life are viewed as ultimately trivial and foolish in the light of the next one;

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yet the joys of this life are acknowledged as real. Indeed, it is not only foolish but prideful to reject these transient delights, because this means rejecting one's humanity, setting oneself up as more than human.

This is the sort of comedy of which Shakespeare is the greatest master. He could write the satiric type too, but he was most at home in what C. L. Barber has called "festive" comedy.[1] It was probably this type that Dr. Johnson had in mind when he remarked that Shakespeare was by nature a comic, rather than a tragic, writer. In any case, it is important to understand the distinctions I have made in order to interpret properly such a play as *Twelfth Night*, the most nearly perfect festive comedy that has come down to us.

For *Twelfth Night* is not a satiric comedy; nor is it a patchwork of inane revelry. Its meaning is commensurate with, and depends upon, its festive form and feeling. Its very merriment and festive ambience convey a profound and genial vision of human life. It is a vision of the goodness and joy in life despite its limitations—almost because of them; a vision of the foolishness of men and a full acceptance of folly, because such acceptance establishes man's proper place in the world, pulls down his vanity, makes the fullest enjoyment of life possible. The play is also touched with a curious, elusive sadness, deriving from the implicit recognition of the shortness of human life, an awareness that the best of worldly goods will soon be gone forever.

This complex attitude is eminently fitting in a play given the name of, and probably performed on, Twelfth Night, the last of the great Christmas holidays. It was a day climaxing the joy and license traditional on these days, a final moment of merriment before the days of order and sobriety to follow. "Holiday, for the Elizabethan sensibility," writes C. L. Barber,

> implied a contrast with "everyday," when brightness falls from the air. Occasions like May-day and the Winter Revels, with their cult of natural vitality, were maintained within a civilization whose sad-brow view of life focused on the mortality implicit in vitality. The tolerant disillusion of Anglican or Catholic culture allowed nature to have its day, all the more headlong because it was only one day. But the release of that one day was understood to be a temporary license, a "misrule" which implied rule, so that the acceptance of nature was qualified. Holiday affirmations in praise of folly were limited by the underlying assumption that the natural in man is only one part of him, the part that will fade. (Barber p. 601)

Orsino, Olivia, and Sir Toby are each foolish in their own way. Yet they are all lovable because they never take themselves too seriously; they are redeemed by an awareness of their own affectation. It is this elusive quality—shared by all the chief characters except Sir Andrew and Malvolio—which at once sets them apart as deserving their good fortune and guarantees that nothing really bad will happen to them. What makes Malvolio the "enemy" is not only his pharisaical egoism, but his lack of self-awareness, what we call today a sense of humor. In the festive world of *Twelfth Night*, this is the greatest, almost the only, sin.

The most prominent "device" of the play is a form of dramatic irony. Usually we associate dramatic irony with tragedy, especially Greek tragedy, where it serves to elicit a sense of bitter mockery at man's aspirations. When Oedipus says to his suppliant Thebans: "You have your several griefs, each for himself;/But my

[1] C. L. Barber in "The Saturnalian Pattern in Shakespeare's Comedy," *Sewanee Review, LIX* (Oct. 1951), 593-611, has convincingly argued for the formal dependence of Shakespeare's comedies upon the kind of feeling and attitude embodied in the traditional festivals of the Christian year.

heart bears the weight of my own, and yours/And all my people's sorrows," we discern a truth that he does not intend. We respond with mingled fascination and horror, for we know that this truth will be his undoing. In the *Agamemnon*, the irony is usually intended but the fictive hearer is unaware of it—as in Clytemnestra's double-edged assurance to Agamemnon: "Of pleasure found with other men, or any breath/Of scandal, I know no more than how to dip hot steel."

Both these modes are used in *Twelfth Night*, but the effect is quite different. Instead of bitter mockery, we get a genial acceptance of the way things are. Instead of reluctantly acquiescing in the apparently inevitable but inscrutable order that directs an Oedipus or an Agamemnon to his doom, we whole-heartedly *accept* the order which brings the foolish to their senses.

This peculiar use of dramatic irony is closely related to the play's thematic heart. Everyone in the play is to some degree foolish, and everyone is to some degree fooled. Orsino is fooled by Viola, Olivia by Viola and Sebastian. Sir Toby and Fabian fool Viola and Sir Andrew, and the three men are fooled by her. Malvolio, of course, is fooled to the top of his bent, and, since he is the greatest fool of all, this is as it should be. Much of our pleasure in the play comes from our godlike knowledge of the truth of things as contrasted with the ignorance of those in the play. Such a double vision reinforces our sense of the generic folly of men, for those in the play are, after all, like us.

The most charming moments of the play involve this sort of light-hearted irony. In the fourth scene, the Duke (whom we suspect from the start to be falling in love with Cesario-Viola) sends Viola to Olivia for the first time. When Viola protests that she is not suitable for such a commission, the Duke replies:

> . . . 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.
> . . . Prosper well in this,
> And thou shalt live as freely as thy lord
> To call his fortunes thine.

We know, of course, that Cesario is Viola (being played by a boy). So we take the Duke's first words in a sense that he does not intend—as, in this case, Viola herself must take them. There is a two-fold irony in his describing her as "semblative a woman's part," because she *is* playing a role, just as the boy actor is playing her. The Duke's reference to Viola's voice—"as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound"—involves a whimsical *double entendre:* she *is* a maiden in the technical sense, and "organ" refers not only to her voice. There is, finally, some beforehand ironic pointing in the Duke's last lines: Viola will, as we know she longs to do, eventually call the Duke's fortunes hers.

An even more brilliant instance of the method occurs at II.iv.15ff. Here the Duke's tenderness, his ease in opening his heart to Cesario-Viola hints at submerged love, as though the loveliness of Viola has affected him in spite of her disguise, as though he responds unwittingly to Viola's love for him. Our full awareness of the situation lends the whole passage a kind of solemn whimsicality, the mood which the Duke has up to now merely affected. "If ever thou shalt love," Orsino tells her, "In the sweet pangs of it remember me." Viola does love and she has no need of reminders from her beloved. When the Duke almost guesses her secret:

> My life upon 't, young though thou art, thine eye
> Hath stay'd upon some favour that it loves,
> Hath it not, boy?

the "boy" replies: "A little, by your favour." ("Favour" is a three-way pun.)

Duke. What kind of woman is 't?
Viola. Of your complexion.
Duke. She is not worth thee then.

The charm of this is dramatic, not merely verbal. The "boy" tells the Duke that she loves him, and the Duke comes close to revealing his love for her in his estimate of the "boy's" worth. A woman of Orsino's temperament is not good enough for Cesario—so highly does Orsino regard his "boy." But *we* know that a *man* of his temperament *is* good enough for Viola, because she already loves him, and, besides, his own humility makes him worthy.

When the Duke hears that Cesario's beloved is "About your years," he objects: "Too old, by heaven!" But his judgment is affirmative as well as negative, for, if a woman of the Duke's age is too old for Cesario, a man of his age is just right for Viola. Viola listens with pounding heart as Orsino goes on to confirm her belief that he is for her:

> Let still the woman take
> An elder than herself: so wears she to him,
> So sways she level in her husband's heart;
> For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,
> Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,
> More longing, wavering, sooner lost and won,
> Than women's are.

His acknowledgement of the fickleness of men's love is encouraging. But at the end of the passage we are brought back to the sweet melancholy of Viola's present predicament: she must, the Duke with unwitting cruelty reminds her, gather her rose buds while she may, women being

> as roses, whose fair flow'r,
> Being once display'd doth fall that very hour.

At which, Viola, with the charming candor about sexual fulfillment that appears in Shakespeare's most maidenly maidens, laments:

> And so they are; alas, that they are so!
> To die, even when they to perfection grow!

Which conveys, not only her love-longing for Orsino, but her awareness that *her* time is flying.

On a more general level, the passage expresses a sense of the ultimate sadness of human life: that it is folly not to make the most of life's joys, folly not to seize the day which will endure but the twinkling of an eye. In the emotional logic of the play, this is the feeling that underlies the more explicit one that life is to be rejoiced in. This, indeed, is the burden of Feste's song in the previous scene:

> What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;
> Present mirth hath present laughter;
> What's to come is still unsure:
> In delay there lies no plenty;
> Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty!
> Youth's a stuff will not endure.

All the "wise" people in the play have this attitude; if they depart from it, their lapse is temporary. In Viola the attitude is manifest in the quality of the verse she speaks, as well as in her actions. And Orsino ought not to deceive us. His pangs of unrequited love are qualified by his affectation, by his parodying of Petrarchan attitudes and rhetoric:

> O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first,
> Methought she purged the air of pestilence;
> That instant was I turned into a hart,
> And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
> E'er since pursue me.

We are aware, therefore, that he does not take his own postures seriously, that he secretly smiles at his own affectation. He knows and accepts and so redeems his folly.

This ought to be made clear in the performance. Even while he protests his pain and eternal love for Olivia, it ought to be apparent that he is falling in love

with Cesario-Viola. This will give the proper ironic touch when he protests (to Viola, who truly loves him) that

> There is no woman's sides
> Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
> As love doth give my heart . . .
> . . . Make no compare
> Between that love a woman can bear me
> And that I owe Olivia.

Viola replies with delicate pathos and irony that she knows

> Too well what love women to men may owe.
> In faith, they are as true of heart as we.
> My father had a daughter lov'd a man
> As it might be perhaps, were I a woman,
> I should your lordship.

And she goes on to tell the sad tale of her own situation, in the course of which she glances at the true nature of Orsino's present passion:

> We men may say more, swear more; but indeed
> Our shows are more than will; for still we prove
> Much in our vows but little in our love.

Orsino, in effect, is being upbraided for his departure from the norm of wisdom, for affecting a love he does not feel. Yet he never departs so far that he needs more than gentle correction by the whirligig of time. When the time comes, he will make an easy transition from Olivia to Viola.

Olivia, too, is gently chastised. She is more errant than Orsino, but she, too, is fundamentally wise. This is certified for us by her defense of Feste and the Fool's function and by her outspoken censure of Malvolio. Her fault, like Orsino's, consists in a kind of pride or egoism. It is exemplified early in the play by her attitude toward her brother's death. Viola, who serves throughout the play as a kind of norm of human wisdom, has also lost a brother—or so she believes. Her attitude is the proper one: saddened by his loss, she tempers her grief with the knowledge that he is in Elysium. And she sets out to make the most of life in spite of death by searching for love and marriage. She thus stands in emphatic contrast to Olivia, who, because death has taken a brother and a father, rejects not merely Orsino's suit, but life itself. "I see you what you are," Viola tells her, "you are too proud." And this, of course, is the point of Feste's witty proof that Olivia is a fool to mourn for a brother she believes is in Heaven.

Olivia will learn to accept and rejoice in life, and Viola in the garb of Cesario will be her teacher. It is right that she should learn of her limitations as a human being through a love which she cannot control. And it is right, too, that the one she loves should be a woman in disguise: this suggests the narcissistic streak in her nature which, ironically, assists in its own destruction. Olivia falls at first sight, overpowered by love and suddenly aware that she is no longer a master of her fate. "Ourselves we do not owe," she says at the end of Act I. "What is decreed must be—and be this so!" In a way she is rationalizing her passion, but she is also speaking truer than she knows: she is becoming acquainted with the inherent irrationality of human nature, and when she accepts it in herself, she will be a fully human person, possessed of the wisdom appropriate to one. At first, as Viola discerns, she thinks she is not what she is. But we will see her happy yet, for her sin is venial, and, having atoned for it, she will receive her reward in Sebastian, a male Viola.

Though Sir Toby carries to an extreme the attitude of wanton revelry, he is never, in the world of the play, felt to be culpable. One reason for this is that he is intelligent and, even when far from sober, fully aware of what he is doing. Another is that he is deliberately opposing his niece's foolish attitude toward life

and death. "What a plague means my niece to take the death of her brother thus? I am sure care's an enemy to life!" These are the first words we have from Sir Toby, and the play as a whole demonstrates that he is right. He is furthermore, Malvolio's natural and symbolic antagonist: his inebriate irresponsibility "becomes" in the dramatic context something positive; he is the leader of the forces opposing proud sobriety and pompous, priggish "virtue." It is Sir Toby who speaks the famous sentence that might serve as epigraph for the play: "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?"

Sir Andrew Aguecheek is in one sense separate from the group I have just discussed; in another sense he is part of it. Utterly lacking in intelligence and self-awareness, Sir Andrew is yet never the object of satirical laughter—only Malvolio is. The laughter he evokes is indulgent, almost grateful; it is very close to the sort of laughter evoked by the blunders of children. Such laughter cannot be satirical, because the blunderer is not culpable. Sir Andrew's stupidity is natural: he was born that way and therein he is not guilty. He is a pure embodiment of that irrationality and blindness which, in the others, is but one of many traits.

He is, moreover, without guile or malice. One feels, indeed, that he would be incapable of performing a malicious act, even should he so desire. Our attitude toward him therefore approximates that of Sir Toby and his friends: they do not make fun of him, but have fun *with* him, all the while rather liking than despising him. It is his stupidity and cowardice and ineptitude, joined to his naive belief that he excels in all noble accomplishments, that provokes laughter, especially when he is expertly managed by Sir Toby. Is Sir Andrew a good dancer? "Wherefore," exclaims Sir Toby, "are these gifts hid? . . . Why dost thou not go to church in a galliard and come home in a coranto? My very walk should be a jig. I would not so much as make water but in a sink-a-pace." Picture the hopelessly clumsy Sir Andrew affecting courtly grace, dancing a lively cinquepace while making water, as Sir Toby fancies him—such comic incongruity needs no analysis.

Perhaps the best instance of the peculiar comic effect Sir Andrew provides is the challenge he composes for Cesario-Viola. It is not merely the absurd non-sequiturs that are funny, but the fact that they have a kind of rationale in the character of Sir Andrew: they are at once stupid and pretending to wit, at once a revelation of cowardice and an attempt at courtly bravado. "Thou com'st to the Lady Olivia, and in my sight she uses thee kindly. But thou liest in thy throat; that is not the matter I challenge thee for. . . . I will waylay thee going home; where if it be thy chance to kill me—thou kill'st me like a rogue and a villain." This has the form of a challenge, but it is really a plea that the recipient spare the life of the challenger. The absurdity is compounded in the wonderful Chaplinesque scene where the coward and the terrified Cesario-Viola perform their duel-dance of terror, neither one capable of hurting a fly.

Aguecheek's character, as Dr. Johnson puts it, is "that of natural fatuity, and is therefore not the proper prey of a satirist." Malvolio, on the other hand, *is* the satirist's proper prey; he is the *only* one satirized in the play. Those who would sympathize with him, who would regard him as shabbily treated, ought to re-read Olivia's retort to Malvolio's attack on Feste. It is perhaps the only time that Olivia really bristles. "O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distemper'd appetite. To be generous, guiltless, and of free disposition, is to take those things for birdbolts that you deem cannon bullets." But that is just what Malvolio will never learn. It is what Orsino and Olivia know both by social inheritance and natural endowment. It

is a kind of natural nobility of soul, and its possession justifies the socially advantageous marriages of Viola, Sebastian and Maria. Aguecheek, who is too stupid to know about such matters, and who aspires to Olivia's hand, has, quite rightly, no chance at all.

But Malvolio is not stupid and he also aspires. This is why he is culpable: he ought to know better. But he is sick of self-love and tastes with a distempered appetite. He is further away than anyone in the play from that generous, guiltless, free disposition which constitutes the ideal of the play. If Olivia and Orsino are touched with egoism, Malvolio is sick of it. The trick that is played upon him is eminently appropriate, for he is, quite literally, mad. To take things for cannon bullets that are really birdbolts is to be out of touch with reality—and so to be mad. To regard folly and festivity as improper to this life is to be out of touch with truth—and so to be mad. To regard oneself as without defect is to think of oneself as more than human—and so to be mad.

Maria's trick is not, as is often assumed, the beginning of Malvolio's belief that he is loved by Olivia and that he eminently deserves her love. He believes this beforehand. As Samuel Johnson perceived, Malvolio "is betrayed to ridicule merely by his pride." In II.iii Maria characterizes him as "so cramm'd, as he thinks, with excellencies that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him." Just before she plants her letter, she tells us that he has been "yonder i' the sun practising behaviour to his own shadow this half hour." And he has been obsessed by the idea of his elevation to the nobility through marriage. "'Tis but fortune; all is fortune. Maria once told me she did affect me; and I have heard herself come thus near, that, should she fancy, it should be one of my complexion."

The truth is that Malvolio is mad: he is a classic instance of what the psychoanalyst calls erotomania.[2] His treatment for madness is therefore well deserved, though apparently it is unsuccessful and the prognosis is bad. His attitude toward life—his self-love, his "seriousness"—are inexcusable in the world of the play, and we should never pity him. He profits not at all from his experience. When Feste twits him good-humoredly about his gulling, Malvolio is as straight-laced, as mean-minded, as ever: "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" he growls.

But the others have learned enough about their own foolishness to accept it wisely, and their reward, as it should be, is marriage. Viola has Orsino, Olivia has Sebastian, Maria has Sir Toby. Aguecheek has but a cracked pate and an empty purse, but everyone, we feel, has what he deserves. Feste has his revenge—and a song to sing, one that sums up with charming inanity that genial acceptance of human joy and sorrow which is the pervading motive and feeling of the play.

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.

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[2] Theodor Reik (*The Need to be Loved*, New York, 1963, pp. 53-54) observes that the trick played on Malvolio may be considered a device for projecting "mental processes cast on the external world. . . . If we think of the statements in the forged letter as externalizations of Malvolio's thoughts and emotions, we have a remarkably clear picture of erotomania with all its symptoms. . . . When . . . the inevitable disappointment occurs and Malvolio lands in prison, he is full of accusations against his mistress who has given him so many unmistakable signs of her love."

But when I came unto my beds,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
With tosspots 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.

Satiric comedy, as we have noted, involves our dislike of those who are the objects of our laughter. Now such antipathy severely limits the possibilities of the form both as to thought and feeling. The characters in satiric comedy tend to be types, embodiments of particular vices or social aberrations, rather than "real" human beings. Festive comedy, on the other hand, deals with fully human creatures, with whom we sympathize and in whom we see ourselves—see, not just particular vices, but our complex humanity in all its richness and mortal foolishness. And we accept this with mind and heart. Shakespeare's comedy, Enid Welsford remarks, "is not a judgment but an embrace."[3] It presents a vision, not of types which depart from some social code or rationalized moral system, but of the ultimate absurdity of human life. It sees human beings, even at their best, as limited mortal creatures, and rather than lamenting this truth, celebrates it, rejoices in it.

It is often said that satiric comedy is a highly intellectual form. What this means, no doubt, is that the response of the audience to such a play is mainly cerebral. Aware of the code implicit in the play, the audience perceives the precise nature of departures from it and sits in judgment on the sinners. This is, of course, an intellectual response. Yet it is a very limited one. Compared to the profound—one might say, metaphysical—vision at the heart of Shakespeare's comedy, and to the whole-souled response elicited by it, satiric comedy seems not merely limited, but superficial.

[3] *The Court Masque* (New York, 1962), p. 290.

Paperback Editions of *Hamlet:* The Limits of Editorial Eclecticism

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SOME YEARS AGO in a comprehensive discussion of the semi-popular edition of Shakespeare, Dr. Arthur Brown stated, "The editing of Shakespeare—and indeed the editing of any 17th century author—has reached an important state of development," and he went on to conclude that "The demand for semi-popular editions of Shakespeare is not likely to diminish; we ought in all fairness, to see that it is honestly met."[1] If the number of available editions of a given play is any indication, the demand for semi-popular editions of Shakespeare has not diminished but has grown to proportions which are staggering. It remains to be seen, however, how honestly these demands have been met. There are, in the case of *Hamlet*, at least eighteen paper-

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[1] "Editorial Problems in Shakespeare: Semi-Popular Editions," *Studies in Bibliography* VIII (1956), pp. 25 and 26.