"Make Your Proof": Interpretation and Twelfth Night's Conclusion

Chris Roark

John Carroll University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, History Commons, Philosophy Commons, and the Renaissance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol15/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Act 2, Scene 5: Malvolio with Maria's letter
An engraving by J. Quarterly after the painting by William Ralston
From *The Pictorial Works of Shakespeare*,
compiled by W. C. Prescott in 100 volumes, n.d.
That it should all depend on there being an indistinguishable twin brother always troubles me when I think about it, though never when I watch the play. Can it be that we enjoy the play so much simply because it is a wish fulfillment so skillfully presented that we do not notice that our hearts are duping our heads?¹

C. L. Barber’s observation touches on a characteristic of Twelfth Night that divides the play’s commentary. On one hand is the desire to privilege our experience of the play in performance, to see Twelfth Night reaching back to the earlier festive comedies in which closure is less problematic. On the other hand is the need to pause, reexamine the text, and notice how we may be duped into seeing the play as essentially festive. The first impulse encourages us to give ourselves over to the flow of events and identify with the characters; the second makes us question both the characters’ behavior as well as the festive atmosphere of the play and seek to “prove,” as Feste might say, the foolishness of the first view (I.4.52).²

The first view has been less prevalent in the thirty or so years since Barber’s *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedies*, but it still has advocates. For example, William Carroll, who like Barber situates the play among the other comedies, recognizes some problems but sees Viola’s role as unproblematic and the play itself as essentially festive. Conversely, Terry Eagleton and Alexander Leggatt offer especially negative evaluations of Olivia, Orsino, and Viola through analysis of the characters’ language, with special attention paid to Orsino’s opening remarks. More recently, a similar darker perspective has been developed by a psychoanalytic reading and, as we could expect, by a historicist reading.

How much should we privilege in interpretation a positive response to a performance of *Twelfth Night*, declaring certain textual proofs an enemy to the play’s comic life, or how much heed those proofs that seem to illustrate Shakespeare’s restless awareness of unresolved difficulties? Through the fool’s part, I will offer a reading of the last scenes that complicates our perception of Viola and then consider how seriously we can take such a reading in a play where reading itself, the characters’ uses of evidence and proof, and the willfulness of interpretation are at issue. *Twelfth Night* at once encourages us to seek conceptual antinomies, like text against performance or the festive transcendence of theater versus the historical determinism of society, through which to evaluate the play, but it also makes us inevitably self-conscious about the limits of such approaches. *Twelfth Night*, I will argue, shows the limits of such binary logic, and works to

---


triangulate these oppositions, complicating our efforts to divide and conquer the play. The fool, though usually at the heart of these interpretive conceptual antinomies, both exposes their limitations and suggests alternatives. Indeed, it is often what an interpreter decides to make of the fool that betrays the limitations and biases inherent in many arguments about *Twelfth Night*.

A problem for some interpreters that, I would argue, rarely occurs to an audience or C. L. Barber is Viola’s disguise and deception of others. On the one hand, she can be self-consciously ironic concerning the disguise. Viola asserts to Orsino that women “are as true of heart as we” (2.4.106) while deceiving him and with Olivia remarks, “I am not that I play” (1.5.176), winking at the audience about her disguise. But later, in a moment of passion, she swears “by innocence” to have “one heart, one bosom, and one truth” (3.1.154–55), unaware now that the disguise implies otherwise. Even more odd is her “if I do feign you witnesses above / Punish my life for tainting my love” (5.1.131–32) in the last scene, when her feigning in disguise is causing so much confusion. It seems she would rather die than reveal herself. How can she one moment be highly conscious of her appearance as a man, playfully joking about it, and the next, seemingly unaware that she is “feigning”? At first she thinks that Antonio has been misled by the disguise because she imitates Sebastian (3.4.359–63), yet in the last scene she remarks that Antonio “put strange speech upon me. / I know not ’twas but distraction” (5.1.61–62), ignoring his potential to “prove true” that Sebastian is alive. Since she could reveal herself and clear at least part of the confusion when Antonio is first arrested, and has the chance to do so again early in the last scene, Viola not only subtracts proof needed by the characters to communicate, but also seems to ignore potential proof that Sebastian is alive.

Though Viola does not have Malvolio’s desire to control others, her disguise in the last scenes, as the play moves toward farce, gives her an unexpected advantage for brief moments over the devoted emotions of Antonio, Orsino, and Olivia. There is something analogous between Feste’s disguise as Sir Topas, which misleads Malvolio in jail, and Viola’s misleading disguise, which helps to jail Antonio and also,
perhaps, incarcerate another loyal servant, the helpful captain from the second scene. While it is clear that farcical confusion followed by a reconciliation is part of Shakespeare's motive for the disguise, it is clear too that the dramatist presents proof that complicates our perception of Viola. We don't know clearly her "intent" with the disguise. When requesting the captain's help she does not indicate whether the disguise is self-protective, or formed out of a nascent attraction to Orsino, or is for some other motive (1.2.55). She quickly finds herself in the difficult position of mediating between the man she loves and another woman, requiring that she smother her desires in accordance with her disguise; something Viola did not initially anticipate.⁶

Viola's difficulties are reflected in Sebastian, her apparently indistinguishable twin. After Malvolio struggles in a dark prison to prove he is not mad, Sebastian, noting the "glorious sun" and a pearl given to him by Olivia, wonders about what sorts of proof his senses provide. He is

... ready to distrust mine eyes
And wrangle with my reason that persuades me
To any other trust but that I am mad,
Or else the lady's mad.

(4.3.13–16)

Sebastian sees his senses as untrustworthy mediators, but his "flood of fortune" is, finally, reason enough to fetter the reason of those senses. As Viola did in the last scene when she calls Antonio's remarks "distraction," Sebastian ignores the madness of others and "having sworn truth ever will be true" to Olivia in marriage (4.3.33). But while we do not see the marriage, we can assume that in the ceremony Sebastian permits Olivia and the priest to use the name "Cesario." Thus, like Viola when she swears her love before Olivia and to Orsino,

Sebastian's swearing in marriage is odd; both swear to love by calling attention to truth in a manner that recalls their false identities, swearing "by that that is not," as Touchstone might suspiciously remark (1.2.78). Especially in moments when characters swear to the truth and singleness of their love in *Twelfth Night*, they must simultaneously forget or ignore something that their very swearing unconsciously seems to point to, as, for example, Orsino's declarations of love indicate his egotism (2.4.92–102). The final scene is approached through a marriage off stage that an audience might gratefully welcome, but that also implies some degree of deception.

In the final scene Shakespeare seems to be clearing the waters in one way to allow the reunion while simultaneously clouding them in another. Orsino either ignores or misses the point of the fool's remarks about profiting in the knowledge of oneself from a foe and pays Feste a compliment in return, dismissing him with money (5.1.8–44). The Duke's initial compliments to Olivia, "My soul the faithfull'st offerings breathed out / That e'er devotion tendered," echo Antonio's remarks moments earlier to Cesario, "My love, without retention or restraint, / All his in dedication. For his sake / Did I expose myself pure for his love" (5.1.109–10, 75–77). Orsino's desires mirror those of his captured foe, Antonio. Both he and Antonio have done homage to "images" and both feel that the pains they suffer for their "pure" love are not recompensed. Though one cannot expect the changeable Orsino to identify with his captive, repeatedly in the last scene characters who reflect each other "make no compare" between themselves (2.4.100). Viola, as noted, is unable or refuses to see that Antonio sees her as indistinguishable from Sebastian, forgetting her previous hope that Antonio's words will "prove true" even when confronted by more proof that Sebastian is possibly alive.

7 Orsino calls himself "unstaid and skittish in all motions else, / Save in the constant image of the creature / That is beloved" (2.4.17–19); Antonio remarks, "And to this image, which methought did promise / Most venerable worth, did I devotion" (3.4.342–43). They both serve the appearance of a person and not the substance. For both, like Malvolio, "when the image of it leaves him, he must run mad" (2.5.180).
To reveal herself to Antonio and the others before Sebastian's entrance would, in effect, break Shakespeare's plotted reunion. Yet much seems designed to make us uncomfortable with Viola here. Moments after Antonio is silenced by Orsino, Viola remarks, "My lord would speak; my duty hushes me" (5.1.101); yet what sort of duty is it that allows her to conceal proof while Antonio remains deceived and Orsino proceeds to make a fool of himself? Olivia's question to Viola—"Hast thou forgot thyself?"—is unknowingly to the point (5.1.135). Viola seems to have forgotten who she is, that is, who she looks like, not just when Antonio describes Sebastian's rescue (5.1.71–73) but also when she "most jocund, apt, and willingly, / To do your rest a thousand deaths would die" (5.1.126–27). Perhaps she fears admitting her deception and also fears possible rejection by Orsino, willing to pay the price of death and willing to lose a chance to find Sebastian rather than reveal herself.

The priest provides verbal proof of Olivia's marriage to Cesario, mentioning an ocular proof, the wedding rings. But like Antonio's forgotten purse, such proof is ignored. Until Sebastian enters, all the characters are paying with "pain," as Feste might remark, for their deceptions or their ability to ignore or forget possible proofs (2.4.66–69). By reuniting Sebastian and Viola these problems are forgotten, at least momentarily. Each first expresses disbelief and seeks proof to confirm the evidence of eyesight. But even this effort to "make compare" between two people, like the other missed instances for identification, is strange. Viola asks about a mole upon their father's brow and his date of death. Proof is not so much arrived at

8Perhaps neither Olivia nor Sebastian would wear rings because of an agreement "To keep in darkness what occasion now / Reveals before 'tis ripe" (5.1.47–48). Shakespeare mentions and then forgoes the chance to use a device that could push the play towards more farcical confusion, similar to the chain in The Comedy of Errors, or to emphasize the eventual reconciliation, as the rings, arguably, do in The Merchant of Venice and All's Well That Ends Well. Antonio's purse, whose return could perhaps replace the rings during the reunion, would uncomfortably imply the self-regarding nature of so much of the behavior in the last scene, as Feste's begging for money suggests.
through a reciprocal exchange between two people (as rings might imply) but lies in a deceased third person.

Additionally, in *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare seems to ask us to ignore that the evidence which resolves the main characters' problems can only "prove true" in "imagination": twins of different sexes cannot be identical (3.4.55). It is "a natural perspective that is and is not," a phrase that joins Feste's two earlier contrasting parodies concerning the solipsistic and subjective creation of proof, "nothing that is so is so" (4.1.8) and "that is" (4.2.14). In other words, the circular and solipsistic reasoning Feste mocked earlier now seems to unite into a solution, giving the wish fulfillment of this moment a strange tone. A "trick of singularity," "one face, one voice, one habit, and two persons," is unknowingly (or is it? How can Viola not sense Sebastian is near?) caused by two people. A comparison between two people, and thus reunion, is finally achieved. While the supposed singularity of Cesario leads to the farcical confusion, it is also a "trick of singularity" that releases the characters (2.5.139). Viola's behavior in the last scene recalls Malvolio and the others (Andrew, for instance) throughout; she ignores (or forgets?) proofs that seem to demand attention. Yet the antifestive idea of singularity epitomized by Malvolio's antifestive behavior is now transformed and unites the characters, and in a typically Shakespearean fashion something that could make us uncomfortable is reversed into a seeming strength. Tricks of singularity complicate the action and then simplify and resolve it, calling attention to the ending as fiction and wish fulfillment as many have remarked, but also, perhaps, reminding us of the characters' inordinate willfulness, or at least strange behavior when it comes to ignoring proofs.

The problem is whether or not this final trick of singularity and problems with Viola's disguise and swearing are meant to have negative connotations, and thus whether the presentation of this particular wish fulfillment (in contrast to, for example, the ending of *As You Like It*) clearly supports the darker interpretations of *Twelfth Night* that have become almost automatic in criticism. If the trick recalls Malvolio's singular willfulness and desire for control, it also seems to put
the conclusion beyond problems of individual will, momentarily patching up difficulties like Feste's "botcher" (1.4.40-44). Though blood, anger, and ill will have burst forth so far in the final scene, the action is reduced to farce, perhaps reason enough for an audience to ignore, or miss, proofs of other difficulties. As Barber remarks, he has a problem only when he thinks about the resolution, never when watching the play.

And yet Viola puts off embracing Sebastian until,

... each circumstance
Of place, time, fortune do cohere and jump
That I am Viola—which to confirm,
I'll bring you to a captain in this town.

(5.1.243-46)

Until, it seems, she can show him proof that she is herself. Thus also, as Olivia was married to someone by the wrong name (Sebastian as Cesario), so Orsino proposes to Viola without using her name, referring to her once as "boy" and once more as "Cesario." Though Orsino offers Viola his hand, to become fully "your master's mistress" or "his fancy's queen," Viola must prove that she is a woman. In addition, Olivia's and Orsino's indulgent self-conceptions are allowed to remain intact. In Feste's phrase, God gives those wisdom that have it—willful ignorance of proof combined with a singular trick of chance or wishful biology has confirmed the wisdom of Olivia's and Orsino's attractions (1.4.13). There seems little reason to be uncomfortable here, though there is also little chance for the characters to profit in knowledge of themselves as they are released from nearly all proofs of their folly.

All are released, that is, except Malvolio. In contrast to the others, God, or rather the revelers have sent Malvolio a speedy infirmity that the other characters, the interpreters, and the audience cannot ignore. Malvolio is given the chance to admit his folly and so profit in the knowledge of himself from his foes. The fool, when delivering Malvolio's letter, reads as though he were a madman:
Clown: Look then to be well edified when the fool delivers the madman. [Reads loudly] By the lord, madam—

Olivia: How now, art thou mad?

Feste: No madam, I do but read madness. An your ladyship will have it as it ought to be, you must allow vox.

(5.1.282-87)

Feste’s “vox” suggests that those who permit their own willful madness must also accommodate that of others. The fool’s names for Olivia, “Madam” and “Madonna,” nearly echo his name for Malvolio, “madman,” hinting that the steward’s madness is not so singular. But Feste’s and the madman’s vox is, like the fool’s former observations to Orsino, ignored.

Malvolio is the one character who does bring concrete proof—the letter—into the last scene, but it is false proof and is dismissed. To put him aside, as Olivia does when she calls him a “poor fool,” is in part to put aside the willful interpretation characterized by the steward’s earlier self-regarding reading of the letter, and in part to relax our reason and give ourselves over to events as Malvolio cannot, to join the festive community and ignore proofs of problems with singular individuals. But when confronted with Malvolio’s folly, Olivia and Orsino, as Feste implies, make no compare; they fail to distinguish their own image in Malvolio’s portraiture of self-regarding singularity. Malvolio is the “foe” from which the others possibly could, but do not, profit in the knowledge of themselves. Yet Malvolio is not just the “third” who must “pay for all,” a scapegoat left out of the various love triangles resolved here as Feste’s earlier remark hints, he is also the third party through which the final proof in the play, Viola’s maiden weeds, must be sought. Malvolio has imprisoned the captain who holds Viola’s clothes, reiterating the earlier suggestion of proof residing in a missing third party (the dead father). Both marriages and Viola’s need to prove “that I am Viola” are partially at the mercy of Malvolio’s revenge.

9Feste’s association of “madonna,” “madam,” and “madman” occurs repeatedly in his first scene (1.4.38-131).
With the exception of Sebastian's entrance, in the last scene and throughout the play a third person who could help bring two characters together and enable a fuller recognition of themselves and their limits is ignored, missing, misled, or misleads others. The fool, like Malvolio, is a third person dismissed here; Toby's surgeon, Maria, along with the dead father and imprisoned captain are third persons missing; the priest is a third person misled and, like the fool, is ignored after his speech. Toby himself, Maria, and Viola have been third person mediators who have misled others, sometimes for their own profit. If "Primo, secundo, tertio, is a good play," as Feste observes, the "tertio" desired, a third element to mediate honestly a combination of the first two, is insufficient. Like the characters on stage, to be comforted by Orsino's closing lines the audience and interpreters must either ignore or remain ignorant of uncomfortable proofs, ourselves excluded third persons, like the "ass" of Feste's "We Three" (2.3.16). The absent third party implies something Shakespeare's plays and poems repeatedly reflect about romantic love: without a three-way correspondence, a community generously mediating between the two lovers, such love is temporary. Shakespeare's rarest expression of this is "The Phoenix and the Turtle." 

Yet some of the most useful criticism of *Twelfth Night*, including that of C. L. Barber, is influenced by performance and ignores the problems noted, as audiences can. Feste's final song, though, seems

10 In *All's Well That Ends Well* the third party is Helena's (and Bertram's?) child. Typically Shakespearean and similar to *Twelfth Night*, proof is deferred, residing now in a child who is both there and not there.

11 Ralph Berry, in contrast to Barber, argues that Malvolio's desired revenge leaves an audience ashamed and unable to escape the dark origins of "bloodsport," the bearbaiting inferred from the word "pack" (5.1.367). Even in performances gauged to make the most of Malvolio's last line (for example the New York Shakespeare Festival's outdoor production in 1989 that had Jeff Goldblum, as Malvolio, shout the line over thunder blasting from the audio system), the ill will seems balanced by Orsino's final speech, rather than overwhelming the play's end. See "Twelfth Night: The Experience of the Audience," *Shakespeare Survey* 34 (1981): 111–20. Stephen Dickey has written persuasively on bearbaiting in *Twelfth Night*. See "Shakespeare's Mastiff Comedy," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 255–75.
to offer a choice between these competing experiences of the play that arise from the difference between performance and reading. The steady build up of difficulties throughout the song, where time is linear and excess brings decline, leads to a final line that alters the stark refrain to please us. The last stanza suggests we can leave Orsino’s golden time unblemished, ignoring uncomfortable proofs, saying “that’s all one our play is done,” accepting the topsy-turvy world of farce and a trick of singularity that leads to reunion. To do so, though, is also to let various proofs “slip” and to align ourselves, perhaps, with Shakespeare’s fading past more than with the dramatist’s near future. The final verse partially undercuts a grim song that makes it hard to ignore proofs of Twelfth Night’s incomplete fulfillment, but at the same moment the last stanza reinforces what the fool has suggested all along—the temporary nature of comic delight.

Twelfth Night shows evidence of problems that will later dominate Shakespeare’s tragedies. The play’s delimited world, and the smaller worlds of solipsism, farce, festivity, and love created within that world, parody problems which will explode in the tragedies: the desire to cross social boundaries, the corruption of language and service by mediators influenced by willful self-indulgence, the blindness to oneself and others. These problems are not new to Shakespearean comedy or his previous plays, but here the effort to control them focuses on strategies that enable the characters to ignore proofs of these difficulties yet also allow us, often through the fool, to trace their development.

Yet, though no “exquisite” reasons exist, is the possibility of harmony announced by Orsino still reason enough to argue that Shakespeare was more interested in defusing through farce the corruptions of language and human behavior than highlighting those problems? In line with these two competing experiences of Twelfth Night, there are, at least at first, two answers to this question. The play does manage to keep its problems within the modest bounds of festive disorder and farcical confusion. We see violence and revenge threatened but not carried out and a promise of “a solemn combination.” These things are comforting to the extent that, as
Shakespearean comedy often encourages, we relax our need to interpret, and we treat the play as the characters on stage treat the fool—as entertainment. In effect, the audience interprets the play as a communal experience, to make the competing singular “ones” into a paradoxical union of “all one” that both is and is not, to trust the imaginative ocular proof of identical twins of different sexes over our literal eyesight and over textual proofs. A satisfied audience, like the characters, is joined together by the reunion and potential marriages, seeing the portraiture of their desire for community and love in the image of community on stage. In contrast, the singular reader pores over the page, pursuing the problems of characters who, to that reader, seem separated. How we see Twelfth Night depends in part on our social context, on where we are when viewing the play. It is almost as though Shakespeare knew, and hinted to us through Malvolio, that those who read the play in isolation make interpretations that may be set against the responses of an audience, whose disposition, because of its location, is more communal.

Yet those considering this essay are, most likely, more often isolated readers of Twelfth Night than playgoers. For those whose experience of the play makes them pause and interpret, Orsino’s “golden time” is temporary, something underscored by the knowledge that what has been brought about takes place not because of the characters’ better qualities, but rather, to a degree difficult to define, through a combination of chance and the ability through their weaknesses to ignore uncomfortable proofs. As singular readers, we could argue that the final song raises a problem then quickly patches it in an uncomfortable manner. It offers us relentless evidence of a man’s decline and disappointed hopes, in distinctly linear fashion, before circling back to the world’s beginning and making these problems “all one,” ignoring the proofs in the rest of the song as the characters ignore the implications of their behavior in the last scene. The song’s last lines are exquisitely balanced: we are at once exiled from the play world, and presumably the “golden time” it promises, since the “play is done,” but leave knowing we can return to be pleased every day. When we read Twelfth Night and then turn to the plays that follow,
it is hard not to feel that the force of Shakespeare’s development is carrying his creative energy towards tragedy and that the linear, irrecoverable time of tragic drama beckons. The dramatist’s progress could be described as the search for flexible strategies to solve progressively greater human differences, to make them “all one,” but to do so by ignoring as few proofs as possible of human limitations. Here, the trick that resolves the comedy is questioned in a manner that is unnoticed by any character except the fool. With Feste, readers can be compelled to feel a discomfort that pays for the pleasures we also feel when experiencing *Twelfth Night*.

And yet, proposing such a conclusion based on manipulating textual proof can make us as interpreters hesitate, sensing ourselves too like that reader Malvolio with his letter, in a position that offers immense invitations to distort or make what we will of Shakespeare’s words and to slide a bit too comfortably into a darker interpretation. Viola’s “Prove true imagination, O, prove true” also seems a warning to interpreters (3.4.355). It is fairly easy both to seek and to create the conceptual antinomy between text and performance (as well as to find audiences, from the interpreter’s experience, idealized to fit the interpretation), and then use the play’s richly suggestive details to argue, but not really “prove,” that a particular conflict crucial for interpretation exists, crushing things here and there. In productions I’ve attended, darker proofs marshalled from the text seem hardly to register with an audience and may be as narrow as Malvolio’s proof, though the argument also assumes that Shakespeare intended this split and left it up to us to choose which experience of the play we prefer. An act of reading by Malvolio helps to separate him from the community, and so reading also helps the interpreter find and develop problems less available to an audience that does not question the play’s community. Maria’s letter is designed to encourage Malvolio’s dreams of control and his separation from others, and likewise the written text of the play encourages the dreams of singular interpreters. An “indistinguishable twin” emerges, but the twin may also be an image of the interpreter who cannot distinguish his or her own folly acted out in Malvolio. As remarked at the outset, it seems many interpreters split
the play into various oppositions and, according to their perspective, find evidence to push the play either more toward festive release and the possibility of love or more toward dark tragedy and determinism, though both camps usually also qualify their arguments. But if this binary logic is not so, what can we know, or prove, at this point about Twelfth Night's conclusion?

Perhaps Feste's "Nothing that is so is so," followed closely by Olivia's "Say so and so be," and then Feste again with "That that is is," though also courting highly subjective interpretations, can be of further use. Olivia's "Say so and so be," falling between the fool's remarks, is a third suggestion that triangulates, and perhaps mediates, between the antinomy of the other two remarks. It implies that an interpreter can create a solution simply by saying it is so: as the characters create their own terms to reconcile their desires with others and marry, so the interpreter creates contrasting terms to describe and perhaps reconcile difficulties that interpreter both sees and seeks in the text. And if "that that is is," then perhaps some measure of objectivity is possible with the text. Yet the fool's parody of a priest, Sir Topas, at this moment implies one cannot be so sure. Indeed, Feste's sarcastic "Nothing that is so is so" tosses us back into the world of stage and text, realizing how easy it is to create conceptual antinomies more for our own sake to impose order than to interpret reliably the play's evidence.\(^{12}\) If Olivia's phrase offers a way out between conceptual antinomies, Feste's parody of antinomies can still make an interpreter doubt his or her own.

Yet the doubt caused by these three related phrases, remarks which invite us to impose our willfulness on the text while offering a parody of such interpretative willfulness, can instruct. The phrases clearly keep before us the uncertainty of our position as

---

\(^{12}\) Freedman writes, "By leaving itself unfinished, by holding back what it will, the play derives depth and individuality, emphasizes its separateness from us, and questions our need to find completion in it" (206). The problem of Viola's deferred unveiling, for example, should be left alone, since it invites us to impose our will on the play in search of an answer.
interpreters and mediators. Even in the process of trying to consider my own subjective manipulation of proof, I am still manipulating proof, corrupting words, to create an interpretation that satisfies my willful desires, generated as much by time and place (our late twentieth-century critical and historical milieu and my desire to see the text as about interpretation) as attempts to treat *Twelfth Night* more objectively. Yet the play shows that the third term to consider is the social milieu and thus the interpreter’s perspective, and the problems that come when one tries to erase this. Before he reads the letter, Malvolio dreams of rising out of his social class “to be Count Malvolio” (2.4.32). Maria knows this dream directs, both enabling and blinding, his interpretation of the letter and the steward’s understanding of his relationship to Olivia. Indeed, she uses his presumption about class to step into a higher class herself, since her marriage to Sir Toby, anticipating Helena’s skilful intelligence and marriage in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, is based on this “device.” Feste’s phrase “the third pays for all,” a monetary image, is particularly apt for defining how this third influence works, since it implies that self-interest colors our interpretations of the first two terms. How much do we, in our efforts to suit our ideas to Shakespeare’s words, more often tend to suit his words to our ideas for various self-regarding reasons?

The link between willfulness, especially regarding social class, and the difficulty of simultaneously interpreting both a text and oneself is clear in the play. *Twelfth Night*, while about Shakespeare’s habitual comic problems of constructing a community and learning one’s limitations, is also about how we do not so much interpret proof as isolated individuals, but rather as communities. Like Malvolio, perhaps the more one tries to rise above a community when interpreting proof,

---

13 Freedman writes, “In question is whether . . . we can continually displace and defer the fulfillment of our own desire” when interpreting the play (233). Frank Kermode writes, “What we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.” See *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne: Renaissance Essays* (London: Routledge, 1971), 158.
the more the interpreter will inevitably be dragged rather painfully back into that community, especially when dealing with Shakespeare's comedy. Shakespeare's fascination with the tension between the play world and the social world encompassing the theater argues for his own awareness of the dramatist as less a third-person objective creator and more a socially and financially ambitious servant of society. Bradley sees Feste, whom critics often idealize (as I do), as Shakespeare himself commenting on the play.¹⁴ And one of Feste's chief concerns is payment.

The play provides other guides to interpreters. Viola's uncertain mediation between Olivia and Orsino offers a more complex example than Malvolio. As remarked, she seems to forget twice in the last scene that she "imitate[s]" Sebastian, thus offering an image for interpretative difficulties that is more subtle and thus difficult to check in ourselves. She forgets (it seems) how she looks to others in her disguise and, like Malvolio, in the heat of emotion ignores various proofs. But her seeming forgetfulness and ambivalence about her mediation between Olivia and Orsino suggest a triangle that mirrors our own position as interpreters. How can she sue honestly to another woman for the man she loves? To do so she must forget herself. As interpreters, we are yet living in this glass: in the process of trying to marry others to Shakespeare, striving for objectivity, we can forget ourselves and the self-interest that can influence our attempts to mediate this marriage, even in the process of trying to rise above such self-interests. Attempts to be more objective that lead to removing consideration of our individual perspective and desires as readers and interpreters lead to paradoxical results, as with Viola, whose attempt at patient pure love seems also (unconsciously?) involved with self-regarding control of the emotions of others, to the extent her disguise

offers such control. It is not odd that careerism seems an increasing part of our academic lives, for both selfish and unselfish reasons, at the same moment the plays themselves are most about the tensions of social class and power struggles. Just as Shakespeare's art is in many respects inseparable from the materiality of Renaissance culture, so our comment about that art is inseparable from our modern culture and institutional milieu. The conflict between class struggle and festive transcendence is echoed in our own day-to-day concerns with our careers, which condition such readings.

This is not to argue that readings concerned with historical determinism in the Renaissance are themselves simply determined by our present enthusiasm for this subject and its relationship to contemporary institutional conditions. These readings are useful, yet what interpreters make of Feste indicates the limitations of this and many other approaches to *Twelfth Night*. The fool mocks authority, including the authority of the critic who writes about the fool. With Feste this mockery takes the form of the fool becoming the indistinguishable twin of the critic and the critic's perspective. Viola unconsciously makes Feste into an image that describes her own behavior earlier with Olivia, a wise observer of the moods and quality of others (3.1.58–66). Bradley also makes Feste into an image of himself, since the fool has "an insight into character and into practical situations so swift and sure that he seems to supply . . . the poet's own comment on the story," which is, of course, Bradley's aim also. For the historicizing critic, Feste "signifies a resonant deconstruction of the boundaries between festivity and history," complicating the relationship between theater and history exactly as the interpreter desires to do. For C. L. Barber, Feste knows "too much," a remark that echoes Barber's own worries of thinking too much about the indistinguishable twin.¹⁵ This essay itself is included in the process of critical projection, as I reconstruct the fool, with what could be termed a kind of

¹⁵Bradley, 64. Coddon, 323. Barber, 259. Eagleton also unconsciously seems to make the fool into an image of a powerfully self-conscious critic, whose "ironic self-awareness, his insight into the confusion, is a negative mode of sanity" (228).
critical narcissism, to suit my own willful desires. A difference here, though, is that my desire is to see the limitations of my methods as much as to see Twelfth Night. The truth one tries to tell about literature is not any different, often enough, than the truth one tries to tell, or unconsciously reflects, about oneself.

The point, then, is this: Proofs that argue for or assume various "pure" conceptual antimonies when interpreting the plays, such as text versus performance or festive transcendence versus historical determinism, are often polluted by a third force, our own desires—though our own beautiful writing doth oft close in attempts to ignore or disguise proofs of this pollution. Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, showing us this, anticipates difficulties with its own interpreters and interpretation. To quote Feste again:

Primo, secundo, terti o is a good play; and the old saying is that third pays for all. The triplex, sir, is a good tripping measure; or the bells of Saint Benedict, sir, may put you in mind—one, two, three.

Feste is endearing because, unlike the other characters who often imagine their own selfish behavior as sacrifice, he is utterly open about his self-serving desires, knowing they color his gestures, revealing bits of his own folly and willfulness even as he tries to show others their


own selfishness. If interpreters invariably tend to idealize Feste and make the fool unconsciously into an image of themselves, he self-consciously resists idealizing himself and thus strengthens his critique of others. Orsino, at the opening of the last scene, misses the point; the fool’s selfishness is not all the sin of covetousness since it mocks the Duke’s own fault, provoking Orsino to see himself in the fool’s mirror. Looking myself into that mirror, I wonder how much these concluding paragraphs are more a parody of a preacher/interpreter, like Sir Topas, than honest preaching about the word of Shakespeare. Who can clearly separate beliefs and desires from reasoned argument, or the dancer from the dance, the fool asks?

My desire to idealize Feste, admittedly, may have less to do with interpreting the play than with voicing my own metadramatic concerns and other anxieties about how Shakespeare’s words and characters both invite interpretation but often confound those who wrestle with the text, especially when that wrestling ignores the current assumption that the most useful interpretations see the works embedded in the historical tensions of Shakespeare’s age (future generations of interpreters will see our most desired myth, to be sure, as the need to demythologize). It is both pleasurable and disconcerting to return to the Erasmian realization that the moment one becomes confident enough in his or her proofs to preach them is also the moment one is most vulnerable to blindness, standing naked before the tempting but often beautiful inscrutability of Shakespeare’s playful language and comic drama. It is not new to say, regardless of our methodology, that Shakespeare’s text is always too rich to contain. But perhaps the avoidance of openly confronting counterarguments suggested by the text, an avoidance that characterizes so much recent criticism, is simply a tacit admission that Shakespeare’s art is not, for example, as embedded in history as many recently have argued. Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* always will, at some point, undo our arguments. And just as the characters in *Twelfth Night* are brought together not because of their potentially good qualities but in spite of their willful love, joined by mutual weaknesses, so are the play’s interpreters, who likewise cannot resist the urge to prove their imaginations true, to
make our beliefs, in the disguise of interpretation that gives us some brief though not altogether false control, into Shakespeare's truth.

If we assume that the dramatist himself cared about proving true his own belief in art and theater (a risky comic "if," since now essentialist notions of truth, and the use of the word itself, are often dismissed out of hand), then the mirror that art holds up, showing us the forms and pressures of our own age and interpretive limitations, becomes a clearer window into the play itself.\(^1\) The problems *Twelfth Night* suggests about the act of making proofs can usher us to better proofs about the play. Leslie Fiedler, writing of *Hamlet*, remarks that "Shakespeare inherited a genre and a tradition which defined the artist as Patcher, mender of the recalcitrant given."\(^2\) Feste’s enthusiasm for this image, “Anything that is mended is but patched; virtue that transgresses is but patched with sin” (1.5.42–43) supplies not only another connection (that Bradley would appreciate) between this fool and Shakespeare as a self-conscious dramatist, but also offers another metaphor for the interpreter’s task: stripped of our various methodological motlies and the virtues and sins of these methods, we mostly patch things together, ever aware of the paradox that such patches may partly mend even as they call greater attention to the very flaws they set out to repair. Regardless of whether or not the plays support essentialist values (as I argue here, one value encouraged by *Twelfth Night* is a method that is willing to acknowledge its own limitations), we surely can say that Shakespeare’s plays are dramatic because they both entertain and are skeptical of such values, just as the plays both entertain and are skeptical of historical determinism. Our task as critics is not to prove true one or the other of these conflicting assumptions but self-consciously to mediate between such extremes, realizing the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches. This is notably true in a play where proof itself, especially regarding reading, is posited as

\(^1\) Murray Krieger, among others, has explored this suggestion. See *Theory of Criticism: A Tradition and Its System* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976).

a willful creation of the reader’s desires as much as anything else, compelling us to examine those desires.

The unknown conflict between the sea captain and Malvolio offers a final antinomy that invites interpretation and also willful mediation by an interpreter. Why should the captain, with Viola’s clothes, be in jail at Malvolio’s “suit”? (5.1.268). What can or should we make of the playful pun on “suit” here, since Viola’s suit is the issue? The almost anonymous captain, holder of the play’s final proof, Viola’s maiden weeds, silently waits at the suit of a killjoy who, in contrast, writes from a dark prison compelled by both selfishness and love to prove himself. Malvolio needs to prove himself to the community; the “mute” captain (1.2.62) appears to accept the community’s judgment. Admittedly, by idealizing the captain’s “gentle help” and seeming patience, perhaps we can see in him a circular and comic generosity in opposition to Malvolio’s battle with the determinism of class and impulse toward stratification and revenge. The captain’s gentle help offers an invitation silently beckoning the impasse which could “taint the condition of this present hour.” What would it take in place, time, and fortune to make these opposing impulses cohere and jump, to find Feste/Sir Topas’ “Peace in this prison”? Since the answer, and the proof, lies only in part within the play, imprisoned and obscured in the opposition between the enabling comic captain who begins the play and the disabled determined steward who ends it, perhaps the rest of the answer lies in a third party, the interpreter and the perspective he or she brings to Twelfth Night.

References


