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Resolution, or Lack Thereof in *Twelfth Night*

Rachel Shulman

In Shakespeare's canon, *Twelfth Night* is considered one of his great comedies. According to formalist critic Milton Crane, "The great comedies such as *Twelfth Night* show . . . Shakespeare working effectively within the tradition of classical comedy and enlarging it to encompass a rich and harmonious development of fundamentally comic matter" (Crane 8). However, Crane's conclusion is problematic in that it does not reconcile individual's romantic fulfillment with an overarching resolution for the play. Antonio, Malvolio, and Feste are three prominent characters in this comedy who are not comic. Antonio's love for Sebastian leads him into danger, and the audience never knows his final fate. The trick played on Malvolio is initially amusing, but quickly it becomes unsavory mistreatment. Feste, the clown of the play, is rarely funny in a traditional sense, instead performing a melancholic truth-telling role. It is not only these characters who contribute to the problematic ending: the three marriages are also inherently unstable. The cases of mistaken and hidden identities create romantic pairings based on a troubling foundation of deception. Despite its comedic elements, the ambiguous ending of *Twelfth Night* is not decisive or satisfying due to a lack of resolution in the case of characters such as Antonio, Malvolio, and Feste, and due to underlying problems in the three marriages.

Antonio, an experienced sea captain and fighter, is serious and passionate throughout the play. He is not a comedic character, instead embodying the role of protector and devoted servant to Sebastian. His profession of love for Sebastian evinces, at the least, homosocial desire: "I could not stay behind you. My desire, / More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth" (3.3.4-5). Antonio simultaneously talks of desire and love, and his sole focus in the play is Sebastian, for whom he risks his life upon entering Illyria. He only thinks of Sebastian and is heartbroken when he thinks that he was betrayed by the boy he entrusted with his purse and his devotion. When describing his decision to follow Sebastian, Antonio states, "My willing love, / The rather by these arguments of fear, / Set forth in your pursuit" (3.3.11-13). He loves Sebastian, but this love is never equally reciprocated. In *Twelfth Night* Antonio is one of the characters left out of the romantic resolution; he is without a

partner, even more so because he has lost Sebastian to Olivia. In the final scene after Viola and Sebastian both appear on stage, Antonio remains onstage, with no directions to exit, yet he is ignored. Shakespeare instead focuses on the couples, rendering Antonio's fate unimportant and leaving it unresolved. Reducing him to a mute and unimportant bystander creates a troubling and uncertain fate with absolutely no resolution.

Like Antonio, Malvolio is another unpaired character without a decisive conclusion to his role in the play. The situation in which Malvolio finds himself is ultimately not comedic: he endures cruelty and mistreatment at the hands of Maria, Sir Toby, and to a lesser degree Feste and Fabian. Tricks are an important element in comedy, and the false letter from Olivia to Malvolio is at first humorous. This is especially true because the audience is encouraged to think that Malvolio deserves such treatment for his pompous and arrogant attitude. Maria describes him as "The devil a puritan that he is, or anything constantly, but a time-pleaser; an affectioned ass" (2.3.146-7). He is a killjoy, and so it is amusing to see such a puritanical authority figure acting and dressing ridiculously in a futile attempt to please Olivia. The trick played on Malvolio adds a great deal to the comedy in the play, but only until the tricksters go too far in their plan to humiliate Malvolio. They confine him in prison and send Feste as Sir Topas to further confuse Malvolio and tell him that he is a lunatic. However, Sir Toby even recognizes that they have overstepped the boundary of human decency: "I would we were well rid of this knavery" (4.2.67-8). The extent to which they go in order to continue the trick in prison invokes sympathy because "there was never man so notoriously abused" (4.2.87-8). The regret expressed on the parts of the tricksters serves to highlight the extent of the cruelty; if the irrepressible Sir Toby (who fleeces his friend Sir Andrew without guilt) wishes to be rid of the situation, it is evident that the trick has progressed beyond humor to distastefulness.

Malvolio does secure his release from prison and reveals his mistreatment, but Olivia's remark, "Alas poor fool, how have they baffled thee!" (5.1.369), displays the general attitude of condescension toward Malvolio. Olivia and Orsino are sympathetic toward him, yet they never mention punishment for the offenders, thereby implicitly condoning the trick on the puritanical Malvolio. Fabian and Feste confess their roles, but

Sir Toby and Maria are absent. In any case, there is no mention of any future punishment. Malvolio vows, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" (5.1.378); he blames the entire cast of characters, which is indicative of his self-important attitude. Allison Hobgood claims, "When Malvolio attempts to restage himself in scene five, he exposes not only his fellow characters, but a complicit audience as well. He betrays not only the shameful natures of Maria, Toby, Feste, and the others but also directly implicates the audience in his shame" (10). Malvolio may have deserved some humiliation for his pretensions, but I agree with Hobgood's argument that audiences would have identified with Malvolio or experienced shame for being a complicit party to the malicious trick. The ultimate effect of holding both cast and audience accountable for the abuse Malvolio suffers is to make the play less comedic.

This evaluation of Malvolio is in contrast to that of critic Joseph Summers, who asserts, "[H]e is ridiculous in his arrogance to the end, and his threatened revenge, now that he is powerless to effect it, sustains the comedy and the characterization and prevents the obtrusion of destructive pathos" (262). Summers is right to point out that this is in keeping with the characterization of Malvolio. However, the lack of resolution or even punishment in the case of Malvolio's mistreatment detracts from the superficial romantic ending, as "after the general unmasking, those without love seem even lonelier" (Summers 262). Malvolio storms offstage and the audience never learns what becomes of him, which contributes to the unsettling ending. The start of the trick is a great element of comedy, but the progression into accusations of madness turns a joke into a serious crime. Although Malvolio retains his arrogance and self-love through the end, none of the characters laugh or tease him. Instead, Orsino sends a servant after the irate Malvolio to "entreat him to a peace" (5.1.380). Because the main characters of the play take Malvolio seriously, so does the audience, negating any comic effect of his behavior.

Throughout the play, Feste the clown also disrupts expectations with his melancholy nature. He is supposed to play the fool and entertain through his wit and humor. Feste is indeed witty, but his jokes, songs and quips are not especially funny. Instead, Feste reflects the darker aspects of life in Illyria. Thad Jenkins Logan states, "Feste does not often amuse us, or the other characters; we do not often laugh with him—he does

not give us occasion to do so. He seems to be, on the whole, rather an unhappy fellow” (Logan 229). Despite being a clown with the name Feste, he is never festive. Revealing truth is Feste’s role in the play, as he is the one to tell Olivia that she should not mourn her brother any longer. It is mostly through song that Feste tells the truth; he innately comprehends the underlying issues in a situation and proceeds to sing an appropriate song even though the other characters may not recognize Feste’s perceptiveness. Summers contends, “Feste is able to penetrate all the masks of the others, and he succeeds in retaining his own” (261). Viola recognizes Feste’s abilities: “This fellow is wise enough to play the fool, / And to do that well craves a kind of wit” (3.1.60-1). He uses wit as tool of social commentary, but is not the traditional fool in a comedy. Song is Feste’s greatest weapon in the play. He refuses to sing meaningless and nonsensical ditties, instead adding weight to his entertainment with a message versed in song. “All three of his songs direct our attention to aspects of experience we might prefer to forget: death, the swift passage of time, and the fact that, on the whole, life is likely to bring us more pain than pleasure” (Logan 229). Indeed, at the end Feste’s song detracts from the romantic sentiment. He has the final word in the play with a song about the wind and the rain, finishing with an appeal to the audience: “our play is done, / And we’ll strive to please you every day” (5.1.407-8). Feste, the truth-revealer, provides no insight into the resolution of the play, leaving the ending as a romantic conclusion on the surface with underlying uneasiness.

The marriages themselves are not as satisfying as is expected from a romantic comedy. Each pairing does have a degree of inevitability about it, but none of the marriages are without problems. Maria and Sir Toby are never seen married on stage. Sir Toby returns briefly in the final act, but Maria is absent from the stage. The audience learns of their union from secondary sources, and there is no clear indication that they married for love. Fabian states, “Maria writ / The letter at Sir Toby’s great importance, / In recompense whereof he hath married her” (5.1.362-4). Apparently Sir Toby took Maria as a wife in return for her help and guidance in the trick played on Malvolio. As a result of their “knavish” actions, Sir Toby and Maria are implicitly cast out from Olivia’s household. This marriage is certainly not ideal and is not an essential aspect of

the conclusion of the play as a whole since these two characters are absent.

As for Olivia and Sebastian, they also are married off stage, and do not appear together as a married couple until the case of mistaken identities is revealed. However, the most pressing problem inherent in their relationship is the fact that Olivia believes Sebastian is Cesario and so this couple does not truly know each other. This raises the question of future happiness, as Olivia may not be satisfied with Sebastian. He says to his wife about her desire for Cesario, "You would have been contracted to a maid" (5.1.261). Olivia fell in love with the disguised Viola, partly due to Cesario's boyish and almost feminine appearance and mannerisms. At the moment, Sebastian is young and boyish, but he is very clearly masculine and will become a man in the near future. Olivia may not like being married to someone so manly: Sebastian proves his courage through sword-fighting, and Shakespeare clearly contrasts him with the more timid and intellectual Cesario. Thad Jenkins Logan asserts, "In relation to both Antonio and Olivia, Sebastian takes a passive, classically feminine role" (232). He is the object of both their desires, but Antonio's goes unfulfilled as Sebastian chooses the socially accepted role of husband. So although there is potential for a satisfying relationship, Olivia and Sebastian's marriage is unstable due to its beginning marred by a mistaken identity.

Viola and Orsino's relationship is also troubled by a mistaken identity, but it takes a different form in this case. As Cesario, Viola forms an intimate, homosocial relationship with Orsino very quickly. Orsino immediately brings the youth Cesario into his confidence: "I have unclasped / To thee the book even of my secret soul" (1.4.13-4). He feels a strong connection to Cesario which borders on homoerotic desire, a threat to the normal social order which is never resolved in the play. Even after Viola's true identity is revealed, Orsino refuses to call her by her real name until he sees her in women's clothing, which does not occur on stage or even in the course of the final scene. Although it could be argued that Orsino fell in love with the feminine aspects of Cesario, in his speech he seems to embrace the pederastic nature of a relationship with Cesario/Viola. In his final speech Orsino says, "Cesario, come-- / For so you shall be, while you are a man; / But when in other habits you are seen, / Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen"

(5.1.385-8). *Twelfth Night* concludes with Viola still dressed and treated as Cesario. Because Orsino's initial conception of love and marriage is misconstrued and rather ridiculous, his marriage to someone he views as a comrade is more likely to succeed; they are already on intimate terms which will make the marriage stronger. But in the play, the hint of homoerotic desire remains present in the relationship and causes sufficient unease among the audience to remove the comedic element of mistaken identities and hidden desires.

The conclusion does not wrap up the problems of unfunny characters and the questions which plague the required romantic marriages. Within the play situational comedy provokes amusement, but there is an underlying darkness to *Twelfth Night*. Critic Milton Crane states that as a comedy the play "deserves special consideration because it has the greatest complexity of plot structure, and because the net effect of the play...is not comic" (4). Despite the superficial appearance of a romantic conclusion, *Twelfth Night* is in fact a problem play in Shakespeare's canon due to the absence of a decisive and satisfying comedic resolution.

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