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"None Can Be Called Deformed but the Unkind": Disruption of Norms in *Twelfth Night*

Dimiter Daphinoff

Despite the work of H.C. Goddard, Clifford Leech and Alexander Leggatt, who were among the first to draw critical attention to the discordant notes in *Twelfth Night*, and despite a recent deconstructive study like Geoffrey Hartman's subtle essay on "Shakespeare's Poetical Character in *Twelfth Night*," the most influential readings of the play to this day are interpretations in the "romantic" or "humanistic" tradition. In these readings, *Twelfth Night* is seen as Shakespeare's supreme achievement in the art of comedy and the play itself as funny and dreamy, hilarious yet not without a touch of sadness, blending native medieval traditions and the conventions of ancient comedy in a happy mixture. In these interpretations, the confusions created by Viola's disguise are delightful, never really problematic, as they lead the main characters to a clarification of their true selves, and through self-knowledge to merited happiness in wedlock. The triple marriage at the end is not seen as a rather facile resolution to a complex web of entanglement and deception but as a logical union of those that really belong to each other.¹ As late as 1981, a critic could see in the recognition scene "a renewal of identity and the human bonds of kinship and marriage" when each of the women "wins the husband she desires."² Harmonizing readings of this kind, it is fair to say, have occasionally been troubled by the role of Malvolio and more specifically by

¹ An excellent account of such interpretations is given by Mahood, esp. 3–8.

² Greif (125, 129). See also Bellringer: "The happy ending does not jar as being one capriciously arrived at, or arbitrarily imposed, but is felt as appropriate to those characters who respond to life in such a way as to evince understanding of it" (2).

the trick played upon him. And they have, as the example of J.D. Wilson shows, tried to redeem Olivia's steward somewhat by calling him a man of spirit and self-respect and by emphasizing the tragic implications of his humiliation.³ Such doubts, however, have never been able to tip the balance, and in the late nineteen fifties the humanistic readings received an additional boost by the seminal studies of Northrop Frye and C.L. Barber, who described the movement of Shakespeare's mature comedies as proceeding through festive confusion to the restoration of order in marital bliss. In these influential readings, we remember, Malvolio is the blocking character or kill-joy, the scapegoat who is ritually expelled from the festive society that forms around the young and the hopeful. It is therefore only logical that for Barber, for example, *Twelfth Night* is Shakespeare's "last free-and-easy festive comedy" (130).

In what follows, I shall attempt to show that *Twelfth Night* does not quite deserve its status as one of Shakespeare's sunniest comedies.⁴ My starting point will be a transgression of norms, namely the first and most obvious one, Viola's sexual disguise. In his influential essay, "Art and Nature in *Twelfth Night*," D. J. Palmer observes several deviations from the norm but fails to clarify his use of the term. For the purposes of my paper I shall define a norm as a set of socially approved and sanctioned rules regulating human relationships. Social and moral norms are usually recognizable as such in the world of the artefact but they need not, of course, coincide with the norms it creates. In fact, as we all know, fiction more often than not questions accepted values. It is my contention that in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare puts several norms to the test, but seems, in the end, to be less confident about their transgression than in his earlier comedies. In *Twelfth Night*, the crucial deviations or disruptions seem to have lost their convenient status as mere generic conventions.

In Palmer's view the play exhibits two such transgressions of the norm: Malvolio's usurpation of power in Olivia's household, which is seen as "an

³ See Mahood 7. On this last point, see also Clemen 59 and Logan 237.

⁴ For a critical discussion of this influential school of interpretation, see Langman 102–22, esp. 102–13. Among the anti-romantic critics of the play, three have already been mentioned: Goddard, Leech, and Leggatt. See also Auden (520–22), Draper, Kott (305–14), and more recently R. Berry. A persuasive attempt at reconciling the divergent approaches "if we posit that the locus of growth and self-discovery is the audience" has been made by Logan (223).

upsetting of the natural order"; and the "clamorous revelry of . . . Sir Toby and company," which "constitutes a parallel source of unrest, for they refuse to confine themselves 'within the modest limits of order'" (206). Curiously enough, Palmer omits in his list the most striking of these transgressions of the "natural order" in *Twelfth Night*, namely Viola's decision to change herself into a male — perhaps because he regarded it as a mere dramatic convention, or maybe because the term usually applied to Viola's sexual metamorphosis, "disguise," is far too innocuous for such a crucial act.

Although for the more sophisticated spectators in Shakespeare's audience, disguise and sexual transformation in a comedy may have seemed normal, if not quite the norm, the fact as such, then as much as now, always reaches beyond the aesthetic level into the deeper regions of the spectator's own experience. Aesthetic norm and social norm clash audibly in *Twelfth Night* and produce a feeling of instability which is far more unsettling than that occasioned by the mistaken identities in *As You Like It*, for example. This sense of unease is caused by Viola's initial transgression, which she, unlike Rosalind in the earlier play, is quite unable to control. But there are other reasons for instability too. One of them is the sense of *strangeness* that the play as a whole conveys. Washed ashore "by chance," Viola finds herself a stranger in a strange land. Illyria is, in every sense of the word, a strange place indeed. Its strangeness, however, is not simply that of an exotic country or a mere geographic impossibility. Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale*, for example, poses admittedly more vexing topographical problems. What makes Illyria strange in the first place is its social indefiniteness.⁵ Even *As You Like It* — a romantic comedy, too — has a better delineated and a more developed social world in the contrasting courts of the efficient usurper and the anarchic green-world court of the rightful Duke. At the end of that play, as Northrop Frye has shown, one intact society replaces the other, which is equally intact, if malevolent and corrupt (Frye *Anatomy* 163–67, 182–84, and also *Natural Perspective* 72–117, esp. 92).

In *Twelfth Night*, all we get is a vague suggestion of a dukedom that is much neglected by its love-sick ruler, and of a large feudal household run by a young woman evidently unprepared for the task. Apart from the

⁵ For a different reading of the play's social structure, see Krieger (317–31).

seaside, a few ill-defined locales in the houses of Orsino and Olivia, a garden perhaps, and a street, all Illyria seems to consist of are a few taverns and a couple of officers who opportunely show up to arrest the hapless Antonio. Ironically, the world at large seems more realistically present than the small world of Illyria. As has been pointed out, the play makes reference to geographical expeditions and discoveries; the Orient as well as the Far East, for example, are alluded to more than once (see Ungerer 85–104).

Viola, however, is by no means the only stranger in this strange country. The spectator soon comes to realize that most Illyrians, too, are strangers in their own very special ways. The Duke has estranged himself from his people and neglected his duties as a ruler, but he has also estranged himself from his court. Surrounded as he is by numerous attendants, he needs them merely as an audience for his monologue-like expostulations. He is alone with himself, and this is the most pleasing sensation. His passivity is expressed not only by the fact that he employs messengers and go-betweens to woo Olivia for him, but more importantly, that he confines his passion to words. In these, however, he is most rich. Orsino is a stranger to love in deed as much as he seems to be a stranger to the day-to-day business of ruling his country. Olivia is not much better, either. She has voluntarily estranged herself from the company of men and has decided to retire from society for seven long years to mourn the death of her brother. In Malvolio, she has an able and efficient steward to ward off intruders and to keep at bay, and if possible from her sight, her unruly kinsman Toby and his foolish companion Sir Andrew Aguecheek. In short, when Viola is washed ashore in Illyria, she is a stranger in the technical sense of the word only.

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Stranger in a strange land, Viola hides her true self to protect herself (I.ii). Of course, by putting on man's clothes and adopting the name of Cesario, she also, however imperceptibly at first, changes her inner self, if only the better to impersonate her brother Sebastian. *Je est un autre*, and Viola soon comes to realize what she has set in motion both in herself and in the initially self-indulgent, alienated, and isolated Illyrians, Orsino and Olivia. However, for Viola to preserve her female identity and integrity intact while persevering in her sexual disguise is one thing, to keep up the role

while observing the emotional confusion it creates, is quite another, and a much more problematic one. Sexual metamorphosis, then, entangles Viola almost inextricably in a net of constraints and mistakes which she cannot master:

O Time, thou must untangle this, not I;
It is too hard a knot for me t' untie. (II.ii.39–40)

Of course, Shakespeare's handling of scenic structure makes it clear that a solution will be found, and that Sebastian's miraculous rescue and his timely appearance will provide the happy resolution. However, the spectator is equally aware that but for such external help (call it providential, authorial or simply conventional), Viola, for all her intelligence and courage, would probably fail.

Viola's disguise as a male brings to the fore the latent sexual ambivalence in the main characters, and despite harmonizing readings of the play which stress her "delightful femininity,"⁶ the fact remains that she attracts male and female alike, and that both Orsino and Olivia see in her at once the boy and the girl.⁷ I need not dwell on this aspect of the play beyond pointing out that one transgression of the norm necessarily entails another, in the mind at least if not in deed.

Viola's disguise is so successful that she wishes she had never decided on it. Only the Fool is not fooled by it. He is the only one who is not immediately charmed by Cesario's graceful appearance and wit. Already in their first encounter in III.i, Feste is put on his guard by what he sees. His somewhat surprising rudeness has been explained by Cesario's allegedly beating him at his own game (Palmer 126), but careful reading of the

⁶ "We are particularly delighted with Viola. . . . she provides us with a center for the movement, a standard of normality which is never dull" (Summers 93).

⁷ A number of studies using psychoanalytical or anthropological approaches have drawn attention to the sexual ambiguities in *Twelfth Night* which they explain either in terms of an adolescent search for (sexual) identity or as a rite of passage from childhood to maturity. (See Fortin (135–46); Huston (274–88); Moglen (13–20); Hayles (63–72); Kimbrough (17–33); MacCary, Kahn, Garber and E. Berry). Logan puts the case starkly: "Insofar as Viola is a girl, her encounters with Olivia inevitably suggest lesbianism; insofar as Cesario is a boy, all his relations with Orsino suggest homosexuality" (232). For a positive treatment of the play's androgynous aspect, see Slights, especially 329 and 347.

dialogue shows Feste in control of the repartees. Moreover, he has the last word, and Cesario/Viola acknowledges his superiority by offering him money for his wit (III.i.42). The Fool's hostility, therefore, must be owing to something else. Is he offended by Cesario's offhand manner ("I warrant thou art a merry fellow and car'st for nothing," III.i.25–26)? Maybe. But in view of his answer, I am inclined to believe that the Fool has misgivings about Cesario's identity. He literally smells something "fishy" about the page who has come from the sea. Hence the almost offending directness of his reply:

Not so, sir; I do care for something; but in my conscience, sir, I do not care for you. If that be to care for nothing, sir, I would it would make you invisible. (III.i.27–29)

Feste's harsh reply baffles Viola. Her change of sexual roles has been burdensome, as she has already had ample opportunity to realize, but no one has made her aware, so far, that it might be foolish or contemptible. The Fool does. By doing so, he not only compounds Viola's psychological difficulties and her self-doubts, he moreover provides the audience with an alternative perspective on the transvestism it might otherwise uncritically accept as a mere dramatic convention. Feste's role in *Twelfth Night* is to provide a yardstick by which to measure the delusion of his fellow-men and their deviation from the norm. As the one character in the play unaffected by love's foolish merry-go-round, he is a shrewd observer of his environment, trained to distinguish between appearance and reality. And more than any other fool in Shakespeare, he maintains a precarious balance of being at once in and out of the general folly. He chastises Malvolio as much as he exposes the absurdity of Olivia and Orsino; he confronts Viola with the limits of her power and charm, but he also drops out of Toby's schemes altogether when they degenerate into gratuitous sadism. Supremely intelligent and sensitive, Feste moves freely between the parties and collects the material rewards for his wit. Whatever social reality there is in *Twelfth Night*, the fool is firmly rooted in it.⁸ He is the only character in the play to remind the spectators that, like the majority of them, he has to earn his living. Hence he affords the audience orientation in a plot in which "Nothing that is so is so." Only when confronted with

⁸ For the opposite view, see Frye, *Natural Perspective* (92–93).

Sebastian does the fool lose patience and fall, albeit for a short moment, into the general confusion of the play. He had sensed the crucial inauthenticity in Cesario and had professed not to care for him. But he had ended up by accepting appearance for reality chiefly because Cesario had been openhanded. Yet now that she denies being the man Feste has reluctantly agreed to see in her, the fool loses his temper:

No, I do not know you; nor am I sent to you by my lady, to bid you come speak with her; nor your name is not Master Cesario; nor this is not my nose neither. Nothing that is so is so. (IV.i.5–8)

The general confusion occasioned by Viola's metamorphosis finally catches up with him. Feste's outburst of anger marks precisely the point where the confusion cannot be mastered by rational means any more and where the masquerade results in an extraordinary waste of energy. According to Summers, Sebastian is the "What You Will" of the play's subtitle, the wish-fulfillment device the audience has been expecting since the opening scene of Act II.⁹ Characteristically, Feste makes his peace with him because Sebastian offers money to get rid of him (IV.i.18–22), but Feste never again talks to him. Neither is he seen to approve of Sebastian's marriage with Olivia.

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Occurring at the beginning of the central act of the play, Feste's first exchange with Viola/Cesario serves as a prelude to a series of actions and events whose purpose is at once to erode her self-confidence *and* to show both to her and to the audience the uncanny consequences of the initial disruption of norms. In view of the destabilizing effect that these events, which culminate in the duel scene, have on Viola (and the audience), I find it difficult to agree with critics who insist on seeing in her the embodiment of the play's norms (Summers 93).¹⁰ And certainly what happens to her in

⁹ Other explanations of the subtitle are given by Bellringer (1 and 12–13); Logan (224) and Taylor (71–80). For the view that *What You Will* is not the play's subtitle but rather an integral part of its full title, see Everett (294–314).

¹⁰ See also Williams (in Palmer *Casebook* 170–87, esp. 184: "Viola is always the touchstone . . .").

Acts III and V cannot justify Barber's generalization that she is having great fun playing a man's part (133) let alone his facile conclusion about the strangeness created by Viola's transvestism: "when the normal is secure . . . playful aberration is benign" (117). The normal is far from secure in Shakespeare's comedy, and if we are to trust Lawrence Stone, it has never been secure in the world outside his theatre. What matters, however, is that the play itself does not offer us much that could be confidently identified as normal, while the aberrations, far from being all "benign," are legion.

Viola's initial disruption of the norm is contrasted with Malvolio's rigid respect for norms and his almost religious insistence that they be scrupulously observed. The disruptions caused by Sir Toby and his crew serve to throw into relief the steward's concept of order and propriety. But not only is his adherence to a rigid code of behaviour hostile to life's irrepressible spontaneity, it is moreover a cloak that hides his own disruptive urges. It has recently been shown that Malvolio's well-known social ambition is compounded by an almost obsessive sexual immodesty.¹¹ The norms Malvolio stands for, then, the norms of order and respectability, are undermined from within. The kill-joy is rightly exposed to laughter not only because he arrogantly refuses to tolerate the fun Sir Toby and company are having, but because his own norms, upon scrutiny, turn out to be so unsavoury.

His main opponent, Sir Toby Belch, cannot provide the play's standard either. Sir Toby has often been romanticized on the stage and in literary criticism as a boisterous merry-maker and amiable drunkard. Yet critics tend to exaggerate his inebriety and to overlook that his entertainment is invariably at someone else's expense. On the most obvious level, he literally lives on his kinswoman; moreover, his revels cost Sir Andrew some two thousand pounds ("I have been dear to him, lad, some two thousand strong or so," admits Toby to Fabian, III.ii.48–49). What's more, he delights in gulling the hopeless knight for the sake of making a fool of him, he devises the scheme of Malvolio's utter humiliation ("Come, we'll have him in a dark room and bound," III.iv.127), and it is he who sets Sir Andrew and Cesario/Viola against each other. For all his vitality and witty pranks,

¹¹ Ungerer (94–104). For the view that Malvolio's sexual life is essentially self-centered, see Huston (286–87).

he is basically a parasite and a mischievous manipulator. This becomes quite evident in the duel he arranges between the girl and the gull. At this point the action threatens to get out of hand altogether. The instability created by the initial disruption of norms and by the lack of a character who embodies them unequivocally creates an ever-growing sense of futility, meaninglessness and sheer gratuitous foolery which borders on sadism. If the humiliation and punishment of Malvolio are acceptable — though they are admittedly too drastic for the occasion — the scene of the duel between Viola/Cesario and Sir Andrew exhibits the essential cruelty inherent in the seemingly harmless reversal of order and the holiday mood of the play. Sir Toby's joke is too gross, the fun too facile to be enjoyed uncritically ("This is as uncivil as strange," exclaims Viola in her anxiety; III.iv.237). It raises the disturbing question: "What for?" Since the duel and its preparation cannot heighten the already established imbecility of Sir Andrew, its main purpose, it would seem, is to suggest that sexual metamorphosis is potentially deadly. To be another can be fatal.

Dramatically, of course, the duel is needed to prepare the appearance of Sebastian and to give Viola a ray of hope in her predicament when Antonio mentions her brother's name. Antonio, albeit a minor figure himself, is from his first appearance on a spokesman of socially and morally sanctioned values, those of generosity, friendship, and loyalty.¹² In themselves, they are not different from those held by Viola. But it is significant that she should flout them, albeit unwittingly, in her encounter with him. It is important to see that, unlike Viola, with whom he shares so many features, Antonio does not resort to disguise and metamorphosis, although, as an enemy to the state, he would have every reason to do so. The play's irony is that both decisions — the decision to disguise oneself as well as to be oneself — involve the characters in serious straits. Antonio has a generous and affectionate mind and he expects the like from the man he has rescued. He emerges as the one figure in the play whose values are not disqualified — by either the rigidity of a Malvolio, the irresponsible opportunism of a Sir Toby, or the androgynous fickleness of the noble lovers. Thus, when he is arrested as an enemy to the Duke, Shakespeare lends words of epigrammatic density and truth to his outrage: "None can be

¹² Lewis, however, surely goes too far when she calls Antonio "a Christlike giver of love" (190).

called deformed but the unkind" (III.iv.348). The adjective "unkind" in Shakespeare, we remember, could have a much stronger meaning than the present-day "unfriendly," "rude" or "ungentle." It could literally mean "not of one's kind," "not according to one's nature," hence "unnatural." To be unkind, then, is to have perverted one's true self and hence to be ugly and deformed. Antonio mistakes Cesario for Sebastian, of course, but the implications of his outcry are nonetheless far-reaching. Since Viola has chosen to act a part which is not "in kind," to be Cesario rather than her own self, she has implicitly, if unwittingly, accepted the consequences of being unnatural – moral and emotional bewilderment, and the contagious spread of fake, lie, and make-believe.¹³

The seemingly innocuous physical disguise, then, ends up by questioning the very premises of civilization. Selfless love is seemingly denied, help forgotten, virtue unrewarded, natural kindness unkindly answered. The play has reached the moment of its greatest ethical instability, but the violence and the frustration caused by the duel and Antonio's hapless intervention increase further in the final scene when Olivia accuses Viola/Cesario of treachery and Orsino, maddened by jealous anger, threatens to kill the page for allegedly marrying Olivia. Of course, the spectator has by now been sufficiently prepared by dramatic convention and by Shakespeare's skilful handling of the plot to consider the sombre episode as momentary, the nadir of the action as a prelude to the happy resolution. But the absurdity of the duel scenes, the meanness of the manipulators, the depth of Antonio's disgust cannot fail to influence his reaction to the dénouement. Contrary to *As You Like It* or *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, the happy end in *Twelfth Night* is not brought about by a supremely intelligent, perspicacious heroine who holds all the strings, but by mere coincidence and miraculous timing. The ending, rather than being exuberantly happy, has something of the *faute de mieux* about it.¹⁴ It is probably the best under the circumstances, but there is a strong flavour of the frustration, waste and folly of the recent past. As Feste puts it early in the play: "Anything that's mended is but patched" (I.v.42–43). Things are patched together in the end but the several pieces of cloth remain distinctly visible in the final pattern. The fool is present throughout the dénouement

¹³ For a radical view of Viola as a cunning manipulator, see Levin (213–22).

¹⁴ A number of critics have felt uneasy about the play's ending; see for example Leech (50).

of the final scene, but while he acidly confronts Malvolio with his former blindness and arrogance, he remains conspicuously silent on the pairings the resolution brings about. His final comment before his concluding song can therefore be read retrospectively as well as prospectively: "And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges" (V.i.365–66). Time has rescued the main characters from the increasingly unbearable confusion created by Viola's change of sex, but it may well have substituted one form of folly for another. Feste, for one, knows about Time's revenges, and he wisely refrains from commenting on the restoration of order in Illyria. The lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we remember, had woken up to find themselves restored to their senses and to their respective partners, but they had not, for all that, forgotten the emotional confusions of the night in the wood of Athens. Likewise, Olivia may readily transfer her affection for Viola/Cesario to Sebastian, and Orsino may abandon Olivia for Viola, nevertheless there is a lingering uneasiness about the swift transaction both in the minds of the audience and in the characters concerned. It is reflected in Orsino's ambiguous final words, which seem to prolong the instability of judgement and self beyond the play's end:

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. (V.i.374–77)

Just before Feste reminds us of the wind and the rain outside the world of art and wish-fulfillment, Orsino reminds us of the continuing presence of the boy in the woman and fails to silence our doubts as to the nature of his affection. Is it all a matter of clothes only? The final stress falls on "fancy" and "queen." The play seems to come full circle. Was not, after all, Olivia the queen of Orsino's fancy when first we saw him? Time may have more revenges in store than either the play or Feste wish to disclose.

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I began by suggesting that sexual metamorphosis in *Twelfth Night* is anything but harmless. Shakespeare makes the actual deviation from the norm behind the generic convention more clearly visible here than in his earlier comedies. One transgression sets a series of disruptions in motion

which culminate in the absurdity of the duel scene and in the emotional frenzy that precedes the revelation of identities. Shakespeare's innovative handling of generic requirements can also be seen in the fact that he does not obliterate the consequences of the initial disruption in the final return to "normalcy."

How questionable and precarious that normalcy really is becomes painfully evident in the play's failure to endorse unequivocally the moral norm of gratitude and recognition of merit. Albeit a minor figure in the plot, Antonio has done much to earn himself respect and affection. But his devotion goes curiously unrewarded, and no gesture is made to integrate him in the final configuration of the play. And while Malvolio's exclusion from it is just, Antonio's is unkind. The undeserved treatment he receives may well be the only disruption of norm in *Twelfth Night* that is not finally redressed, the one deformity that remains "unpatched." The audience is reminded of Antonio's outcry: "None can be called deformed but the unkind." The end seems to put a question mark behind the play's subtitle: is *this* "What You Will"?

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