

## Some Notes on Shakespeare's Style in *Twelfth Night*

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*Twelfth Night* embraces and harmonizes with unique fulness all the comic strains and most other ones that have appeared in its predecessors.....It sustains imponderableness of character and atmosphere that of course no analysis can ever fully capture.<sup>1)</sup>

### I

Shakespeare's achievement in comedy is seen in the three joyous plays, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*, written at the turn of the century, between 1598 and 1601. One of the characteristics of these comedies is that the heroines play an important role, showing a lively and marked personality which cannot be seen in the earlier comedies and tragedies. Another is that these comedies are prominent and distinguished by their wide use of prose.

In the earlier and later plays, prose is not used as much as in the middle comedies, and *Merry Wives of Windsor*, supposedly composed in 1597, is almost wholly written in prose, with occasional verse as an exception. *Twelfth Night* shows about 60% prose lines, which is a little above the number for *As You Like It*. However, the general atmosphere of *Twelfth Night* is far more poetic than that of *As You Like It*.

In *As You Like It*, the heroine Rosalind dominates the main plot and hardly speaks verse except in dialogues with the Duke and the shepherds. Her prose is witty, flexible and sensitive, while her verse is formal and sometimes stilted.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice mainly appears in the prose scenes of the comic sub-plot, and shows herself at her best in the wit-combat with Benedick. And eventually the sub-plot displaces the main plot of Hero and Claudio, changing the entire atmosphere of the play.

On the other hand, Viola in *Twelfth Night* mostly speaks in verse which sometimes attains a lyrical perfection, and, as will be shown in the following passage, Orsino's speech is also highly poetic containing melancholy and romanticism. Though the

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1) E. C. Wilson, *Shakespeare, Santayana, and the Comic* (Univ. of Alabama Press, 1973), p. 101.

sub-plot of Malvolio, Sir Toby, and others is regularly in prose, which gives much comic vitality, *Twelfth Night* does not make such multifarious use of prose as *As You Like It*. It may be said that verse used in *Twelfth Night* excels prose in its quality.

## II

The famous opening scene plays the keynote of *Twelfth Night* with poetic images, sweet rhythms and contemplative sentiment, which suggest the changeability of human emotion:

If music be the food of love, play on;  
 Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,  
 The appetite may sicken, and so die.  
 That strain again! it had a dying fall:  
 O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound,  
 That breathes upon a bank of violets,  
 Stealing and giving odour! Enough; no more:  
 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.  
 O spirit of love! how quick and fresh art thou,  
 That, notwithstanding thy capacity  
 Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,  
 Of what validity and pitch soe'er,  
 But falls into abatement and low price,  
 Even in a minute: so full of shapes is fancy  
 That it alone is high fantastical.

(I. i. 1-15)<sup>2)</sup>

In these lines Orsino's character is symbolically represented. He loves music, not for the sake of music itself but as temporary food for his love. He commands it to be brought in excess and then complains of surfeit. He is suffering from his unrequited love for Olivia, but seems to be enjoying this state of being in love—that intoxicating mood of melancholy and despair. The image of 'food', 'appetite', 'flowers', 'the sea', etc., recurring in the important scenes, is significant in producing the poetic atmosphere of this play.

II. v begins again with Orsino's speech, "Give me some music," and he asks for that old antique song sung by the Clown Feste the night before. While Curio goes to seek him, Orsino addresses Viola on the subject of how true lovers suffer:

2) Line-references are to *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Hardin Craig, Illinois, 1961.

*Duke.* Come hither boy: if ever thou shalt love,  
In the sweet pangs of it remember me;  
For such as I am all true lovers are,  
Unstaid and skittish in all motions else,  
Save in the constant image of the creature  
That is beloved. How dost thou like this tune?

*Viola.* It gives a very echo to the seat  
Where Love is throned.

*Duke.* Thou dost speak masterly:  
My life upon't, young though thou art, thine eye  
Hath stay'd upon some favour that it loves:  
Hath it not, boy?

*Viola.* A little, by your favour.

*Duke.* What kind of woman is't?

*Viola.* Of your complexion.

*Duke.* She is not worth thee, then. What years, i'faith?

*Viola.* About your years, my lord.

*Duke.* Too old, by heaven: 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 worn,  
Than women's are.

*Viola.* I think it well, my lord.

*Duke.* Then let thy love be younger than thyself  
Or thy affection cannot hold the bent;  
For women are as roses, whose fair flower  
Being once display'd doth fall that very hour.

*Viola.* And so they are: alas, that they are so;  
To die, even when they to perfection grow!

(II. iv. 15-42)

He speaks in verse that is formal, public and rhetorical with magnificent rhythm, while Viola's verse is private, reserved and inward-directed with elliptical short sentences, since she is under the disguise of a boy and cannot relate her love frankly, though she knows more about the pangs of love than the Duke. Orsino compares women to roses, signifying the frailty and transiency of their beauty. In contrast to his poetic expression, Viola's speech is less rhetorical but more sensitive and moving, inclosed in a melancholy and hopeless tone.

At that time Feste enters and sings, "Come away, come away, death", one of the sweetest of Shakespearean love lyrics, the theme of which expresses Orsino's mood and also that of Viola, and certainly suits the musical atmosphere of the play as a whole.

After singing and some verbal playing Feste leaves and Orsino again bids Viola to go to Olivia. She asks him, "But if she cannot love you, sir?" and he says, "I cannot be so answered.", which shows that he will not accept the reality of the situation. Then she presents the case to him in a different light. She shows an instance of how a certain lady loves Orsino as much as he loves Olivia, and how Orsino cannot love this lady. He denies the parallel, saying no woman could possibly love with such a strong passion as he loves. He compares women's love to an 'appetitie' and his to 'the sea':

Alas, their love may be called appetite,—  
No motion of the liver, but the palate,—  
That suffer surfeit, cloyment and revolt;  
But mine is all as hungry as the sea,  
And can digest as much. Make no compare  
Between that love a woman can bear me  
And that I owe Olivia.

(II. iv. 100-106)

His words hurt Viola because she heartily loves him, but, unable to reveal her love, she expresses her affection under the guise of an imaginary sister:

She never told her love,  
But let concealment, like a worm i'the bud,  
Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,  
And with a green and yellow melancholy  
She sat like patience on a monument,  
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?  
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.

(II. iv. 113-121)

This is one of the most lyrical expressions in the play. In the earlier plays, poetic passages are usually appreciated for their own beauty, rather independently of the plot. In *Twelfth Night*, however, Viola's poetic speech is closely connected with her character and her feminine awareness, having a dramatic function of its own, which also suggests the transition to the later plays.

In Shakespeare's romantic comedies, as stated before, the heroines are gifted with marked personality and individual ways of expression. But in *Twelfth Night*, Viola is treated quite differently. There is of course something in common between Viola and Rosalind; both of them disguise themselves as men, and for that reason are wooed by women. And Viola, as well as Rosalind, encounters her partner with lively spirit and witty expressions. Rosalind, however, has some vitality in her spirit with which she overcomes difficulties, while Viola, in the predicaments created by her disguise, would rather leave it to fate than solve the problem by herself. She says, "O Time, thou must untangle this, not I! It is too hard a knot for me to untie." (II. ii. 38-39). She is by nature very feminine and passive; gentle, humble and delicate.

Viola's first speech in the play is made in simple blank verse, beginning with, "What country, friends, is this?" (II. i. 1). In contrast to Orsino's speech in I. i, which is fantastic and rhetorical with alliteration and assonance, Viola's speech here is frank and matter-of-fact in a sense without superfluous adjectives and figurative expressions.

At the beginning of I. iv, she is talking in prose with a gentleman who serves the Duke, and when the Duke appears she changes to verse:

*Duke.* I have unclasp'd  
To thee the book even of my secret soul:  
Therefore, good youth, address thy gait unto her;  
Be not denied access, stand at her doors,  
And tell them, there thy fixed foot shall grow  
Till thou have audience.

*Viola.* Sure, my noble lord,  
If she be so abandon'd to her sorrow  
As it is spoke, she never will admit me.

*Duke.* Be clamorous and leap all civil bounds  
Rather than make unprofit return.

*Viola.* Say I do speak with her, my lord, what then?  
Surprise her with discourse of my dear faith:  
It shall become thee well to act my woes;  
She will attend it better in thy youth  
Than in a nuncio's of more grave aspect.

*Viola.* I think not so my lord.

(I. iv. 13-29)

Orsino uses metaphorical expressions, such as "unclasp'd...the book...of my secret soul", etc., while Viola answers with some hesitation in negative and common sentences. This is because she is most reluctant to woo Olivia on Orsino's behalf, since she herself has fallen in love with him at first sight. She says to herself, "Whoe'er I woo, myself

would be his wife”.

### III

When Viola comes to Olivia’s house as a messenger of Orsino’s love, she meets with many obstacles. While Sir Toby is detaining her at the gate, Malvolio comes to send her away. But when Malvolio tells of his attempt to keep her out, Olivia is interested in this extraordinary persistent youth. Viola’s first interview, as Cesario, with Olivia begins in witty and pompous prose:

*Viola.* The honourable lady of the house, which is she?

*Olivia.* Speak to me; I shall answer for her. Your will?

*Viola.* Most radiant, exquisite and unmatchable beauty,—I pray you, tell me if this be the lady of the house, for I never saw her: I would be loath to cast away my speech, for besides that it is excellently well penned, I have taken great pains to con it. Good beauties, let me sustain no scorn; I am very comptible, even to the least sinister usage.

*Olivia.* Whence came you, sir?

*Viola.* I can say little more than I have studied, and that question’s out of my part. Good gentle one, give modest assurance if you be the lady of the house, that I may proceed in my speech.

*Olivia.* Are you a comedian?

*Viola.* No, my profound heart: and yet, by the very fangs of malice I swear, I am not that I play. Are you the lady of the house?

*Olivia.* If I do not usurp myself, I am.

*Viola.* Most certain, if you are she, you do usurp yourself.

(I. v. 177-200)

She has hitherto mainly used simple verse, but here she speaks prose into which the superlative and formal adjectives, emphatic adverbs and figurative expressions are abundantly weaved. There are metaphors concerning stages, such as “I have taken great pains to *con* (=learn by heart) it”, “more than I have *studied*”, “out of my *part*”, “I am not that I *play*”, etc. which emphasize that she is putting on an act. As she uses a great deal of theatrical words, Olivia asks her with a chaffing tone, “Are you a comedian?” Olivia mistrusts the conventional words of love, and Viola’s emphasis on the theatrical nature of her mission makes this mistrust greater.

Viola also makes a pun on the word ‘usurp’; in reply to her inquiry, “Are you the lady of the house?”, Olivia says, “If I do not *usurp* myself, I am.”, meaning “If I do not assume my identity falsely”, while Viola means “You do make a wrong use of yourself, for it is your duty as a woman to give yourself to a husband.”

When witty Maria uses a nautical metaphor, urging Viola to leave Olivia’s house,

"Will you *hoist sail*, sir? here lies your way.", Viola retorts, "No, good *swabber*; I am to *hull* here a little longer", and adds, "Some mollification for your *giant*, sweet lady." (I. v. 214-216) alluding ironically to Maria's small size. Thus Viola is very free and brilliant here, using witty expressions which remind us of Rosalind's speech.

When Olivia and Viola are left alone, the joking continues in the same vein for a while in prose; but Viola cannot restrain from her curiosity about her rival, and asks to see her face. She is deeply impressed with her beauty and now she can see Olivia from Orsino's point of view and urges his suit with a new seriousness. Viola gives Orsino's message in verse, while Olivia answers in prose, showing no more than a bantering indifference, since she is bored with his rhetorical words. At this, Viola says in a reproaching tone:

*Viola.* I see you what you are, you are too proud;  
But, if you were the devil, you are fair.  
My lord and master loves you. O, such love  
Could be but recompensed, though you were crown'd  
The nonpareil of beauty!

*Olivia.* How does he love me?

*Viola.* With adorations, fertile tears,  
With groans that thunder love, with sighs of fire.

*Olivia.* Your lord does know my mind. I cannot love him;

(I. v. 269-276)

Olivia's question, "How does he love me?" suggests that, for all her joking about the conventional language of love, she has become fascinated by Viola's eloquence and wants to hear more. Her jeering tone disappears and a subtle change begins to be seen in her speech. She now expresses herself in plain and straightforward verse, repeating "I cannot love him" three times, and her interest towards Viola increases so much that she goes as far as to ask what Viola's parents are.

Though she tells Viola that the Duke must send no more, she also adds unconcernedly; "Unless, perchance, you come to me again, To tell me how he takes it." (301-302).

When Olivia is left alone, she recalls their dialogue and repeats Viola's words. She now uses 'thou' instead of 'you' which suggests that Viola has already become an intimate person in her bosom. In this scene, Olivia's psychological movement is ingeniously shown by the subtle changes of her tone of speech.

In *As You Like It*, Rosalind is the sole figure standing in the limelight, but in *Twelfth Night*, not only Viola but also other characters are carefully treated to make the play perfectly harmonious.

Viola's verbal humour is also seen in her conversation with the clown Feste in III. i:

*Viola.* Save thee, friend, and thy music: doest thou live by thy tabor?

*Clown:* No, sir, I live by the church.

*Viol.* Art thou a churchman?

*Clown.* No such matter, sir: I do live by the church; for I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church.

*Viola.* So thou mayst say, the king lies by a beggar, if a beggar dwell near him; or, the church stands by thy tabor, if thy tabor stand by the church.

*Clown.* You have said, sir. To see this age! A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit: how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!

*Viola.* Nay, that's certain; they that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton.

*Clown.* I would, therefore, my sister had had no name, sir.

*Viola.* Why, man?

*Clown.* Why, sir, her name's a word; and to dally with that word might make my sister wanton. But indeed words are very rascals since bonds disgraced them.

*Viola.* Thy reason, man?

*Clown.* Troth, sir, I can yield you none without words; and words are grown so false, I am loath to prove reason with them.

*Viola.* I warrant thou art a merry fellow and carest for nothing.

*Clown.* 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.

*Viola.* Art not thou the Lady Olivia's fool?

*Clown.* No, indeed, sir; the Lady Olivia has no folly: she will keep no fool sir, till she be married; and fools are as like husbands as pilchards are to herrings; the husband's the bigger: I am indeed not her fool, but corrupter of words.

(III. i. 1-41)

Feste sets a trap for Viola, who falls into it, perhaps voluntarily. Thus they take delight in turning each other's sentences inside out to show their wit, which flows fast and free.

Feste's logic is usually based on the syllogistical reasoning, a well-known method of argumentation in the day. The clown, by using syllogistical technique at will, makes the wit-combat more lively and brings the audience a sophisticated and refined laugh.

After Feste is gone, Viola soliloquizes in verse on the paradox of being wise and foolish. But when Sir Toby and others come in, she naturally uses prose.

Olivia wishes to be alone with Viola and tells them to leave her to hear Viola in private. Their conversation continues in witty verse:

*Viola.* My duty, madam, and most humble service.

*Olivia.* What is your name?

*Viola.* Cesario is your servant's name, fair princess.

*Olivia.* My servant, sir! 'Twas never merry world  
Since lowly feigning was call'd compliment:  
You're servant to the Count Orsino, youth.

*Viola.* And he is yours, and his must needs be yours:  
Your servant's servant is your servant, madam.

(III. i. 107-113)

Here the atmosphere of the dialogue with Feste still remains and Viola explains syllogistically and humorously why she is Olivia's servant, but Olivia does not wish to hear anything about Orsino, because she wants earnestly to hear words of love from Viola herself. At first she wants to behave with dignity and says, "I will not have you;... There lies your way, due west." (128-131) but in the same breath she adds, "Stay, I prithee, tell me what thou think'st of me." (149-150).

Olivia is considered as a proud and self-contained lady and it is indeed comical that she loves Cesario (Viola) without knowing him to be a woman. However, as far as her speech is concerned, she is quite honest to herself. No longer reserved, no longer conscious of her rank, she expresses her love directly towards Viola.

Act V consists of a single scene, but is the busiest and most complex one in the play. Most of the major characters appear at some time or other, and the theme of mistaken identity is finally solved.

When Olivia makes an entry, Orsino compares her to a deity, saying, "now heaven walks on the earth," and pleads with Olivia in person. She still resists his suit and he grows furious:

*Duke.* Still so cruel?

*Olivia.* Still so constant, lord.

*Duke.* What, to perverseness? you uncivil lady,  
To whose ingrate and unauspicious altars  
My soul the faithfull'st offerings hath breathed out  
That e'er devotion tender'd! What shall I do?

*Olivia.* Even what it please my lord, that shall become him.

*Duke.* Why should I not, had I the heart to do it,  
Like to the Egyptian thief at point of death,  
Kill what I love?—a savage jealousy  
That sometime savours nobly. But hear me this:  
Since you to non-regardance cast my faith,  
And that I partly know the instrument  
That screws me from my true place in your favour  
Live you the marble-breasted tyrant still;

But this your minion, whom I know you love,  
And whom, by heaven I swear, I tender dearly,  
Him will I tear out of that cruel eye,  
Where he sits crowned in his master's spite.  
Come, boy, with me; my thoughts are ripe in mischief:  
I'll sacrifice the lamb that I do love,  
To spite a raven's heart within a dove.

*Viola.* And I, most jocund, apt and willingly,  
To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die.

*Olivia.* Where goes Cesario?

*Viola.* After him I love  
More than I love these eyes, more than my life,  
More, by all mores, than e'er I shall love wife.  
If I do feign, you witnesses above  
Punish my life for tainting of my love!

(V. i. 113-141)

Orsino cannot take 'no' for an answer and does not realize that his persistent pursuit of Olivia makes him only more tiresome and repugnant to her. He is enraged at her firm refusal, and threatens to kill what he loves, since he has found that Viola is wooed by Olivia. He uses here a reference to a character in Greek novel and also such metaphors as 'lamb', 'raven' and 'dove', suggesting Viola and Olivia.

For all this tyrannical exercise of his power, Viola wishes to go after him willingly. In her speech, 'love' is repeated five times and 'more' three times. She does not want to clear herself of his unreasonable censure but would rather die 'a thousand deaths' because she loves Orsino so deeply that words fail to describe it adequately.

## IV

In spite of much revelry there is a strain of sadness running through this play, which produces a very different atmosphere from the other romantic comedies. It seems to be mainly due to the characterization of Orsino and Viola, as well as that of Feste, who sings of our decay through time.

Feste is a shrewd observer of men and things and always speaks witty prose and, though not unlike Touchstone in his function, is by temperament quite different. His individuality is seen in his certain detachment, which gives him a special perspective and tenderness in his relationships with other people, while Touchstone uses his folly as a cloak for railing sarcasm against the world. Feste knows human weakness and approaches people with a less satiric attitude than Touchstone. Especially in his songs,

he expresses the sadness of love, life and death, which affects the total mood of the play.

Shakespeare's interest in Viola cannot be doubted, but he seems to distribute the interest more evenly among the other characters than in *As You Like It*, where Rosalind is the commanding stature in the play.

In this paper, Viola, Orsino and Olivia, who belong to the romantic main plot, and Feste, who is a mediator between the main and sub plots have been treated and their individual styles examined through their dialogues.