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MISTAKES IN TWELFTH NIGHT AND THEIR RESOLUTION: A STUDY IN SOME RELATIONSHIPS OF PLOT AND THEME

By Porter Williams, Jr.

A STUDY of the significance of the mistakes in Twelfth Night, like the study of any important aspect of Shakespeare's art, must be made upon several levels, for mistakes by the protagonists are both a part of the superficial fabric of the plot and a subtle means of revealing underlying themes that often manifest themselves only indirectly below the surface action. This is not to say that the artificial devices of disguises and mistaken identities, all timeworn devices, are nothing more than a mere plot framework for the profundities that lie beneath. Rather, as Miss Bradbrook expresses it, there is an "interdependence of the natural and the artificial, the human and the literary." The ridiculous mistakes that control the plot are therefore like Freudian slips which incite their superficial laughter and at the same time reveal subconscious patterns of human behavior. It is these slips, the mistakes of all the leading characters, that we must follow into the thematic material of the play, for it is on this level that they become of most interest.

Twelfth Night, then, on its superficial level is based upon familiar patterns, suggesting Plautus and Italian Renaissance comedy. Characters are symmetrically grouped, there are disguises, a twin brother and sister, a fool, and scarcely believable deceptions. Added to this is something of the comic spirit of the Twelfth Night Feast of the Epiphany in which the world is turned topsy-turvy. Traditionally in such celebrations, servants change places with their masters and say what they please, jests and pranks may be carried out with impunity, and the Fool becomes enthroned as the Lord of Misrule. All of this Italian artificiality and the happy Twelfth Night nonsense can be felt as a background in Shakespeare's play, though they have been transformed into something that is sophisticated and even profound, possibly designed for a learned audience at the Inns of Court or to be acted before the Queen, as Leslie Hotson would have it. Thus the maskings, deceptions, and the foolery may suggest the celebrations of the traditional Masks and Revels, or even hint at the seriousness behind such religious holidays, but they have been "translated into an entirely different idiom." Nevertheless, disguises and deceptions of one sort or another dominate the play, and the errors to be studied spring from them. These disguises may be merely physical, as with Viola dressed as a page or Feste dressed as Sir Topas, or they may be psychological, as with Orsino and Olivia who have deceived themselves into believing that they have been overwhelmed with love or with grief. Such disguises may fool others or only the deceiver. Out of this emerges the full richness of one of Shakespeare's finest romantic comedies.

Superficially, the plot may be seen to develop in terms of Exposition, Complication, and Resolution, which might be described as masking, the resulting deceptions and errors, and a final unmasking. But the significant developments and revelations of character, and even the resolution of the errors, take place beneath this sparkling surface of disguises. The play opens to reveal Orsino and Olivia at an impasse, and both wear psychological masks, for one is foolishly determined to renounce love and grieve seven years for the loss of a brother; while the other, overcome with love melancholy, is determined that he can love only the woman who rejects him. Orsino's melancholy is reminiscent of the sadness that lengthens Romeo's hours while he is away from his unresponsive Rosaline. These are the two great mistakes opening the play, for Olivia and Orsino are self-deceived, both assuming false personalities and unaware that by all the rules of romantic comedy and love psychology, they are destined for marriage, though not to each other. The Complication of the play begins with the entrance of Viola disguised as the page Cesario, the central deception of the play; and the action of the main plot as well as of the subplots may be said to proceed as a series of thwarted suits for the hand of Olivia or the love of Orsino. Mistakes control the direction of the action throughout. Viola cannot obtain Orsino's love as long as she is mistaken for Cesario and as
long as Orsino mistakes the object of his love; while Olivia, though abandoning one error, that of a seven years' grief, still cannot love Orsino and can never win the disguised Viola. Olivia's other suitors, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Malvolio, hopelessly deceived into playing the roles of lovers, are each fooled to the top of his bent until unmasked before all by Sir Toby, Maria, and their associates in the sub-plot. The action reaches its turning point with the cleverest "disguise" of all and the happiest deception. Sebastian, appearing as himself and hence unwittingly disguised as Cesario, his masked sister, accepts the hand of Olivia, now most truly herself and yet most completely deceived. Only unmasking can follow after this, with the pairing off of the lovers and the dismissal of the thwarted. Feste, the wisest fool of them all, is left alone to frame the action in Time.

It has already been suggested that mistakes, besides being at the center of the superficial and hardly believable fabric of disguises and deceptions that activate the plot, are also at the center of the rich psychological revelations that represent the important themes of the play and supply a believable kind of motivation. Errors on this level supply startling insights into patterns that run through many of Shakespeare's plays. On this level, deceptions, or the effort to deceive, and the mistakes they produce, all tend to reveal rather than to hide human nature. There is a danger here, of course, of losing sight of the specific problem of mistakes by merely repeating what has already been discussed so admirably by such critics as Professor H. B. Charlton, Miss M. C. Bradbrook, and Professor J. R. Brown. In a sense, most of the themes that are implicit in all of Shakespeare's comedies cross the pattern of mistakes in Twelfth Night. Our problem here will be to show not so much that the comedies are informed by Shakespeare's "attitude to life and, in particular, to love and personal relationships," but to show that the mistakes themselves have an intimate bearing upon the revelation of these themes of love and personal relationships.

It is through his mistakes that we can see a character in the play either find or avoid what for him is a right relationship. For example, Olivia's spontaneous love for Cesario, a mistake on most levels, unconsciously prepares her heart for a happy union with Sebastian, just as it also reveals the fallacy of contemplating an unnatural seven years' grief. Likewise, Sebastian, thrust into a world of misconceptions but sensing his own occasion mellow, accepts an offer of marriage in complete ignorance and fully aware only "That this may be some error" (iv.iii.10).? The examples above lead naturally to a control point for a discussion of mistakes—the marriage of Olivia and Sebastian, the happiest and most important error in the play. Superficially, it is a daring and spontaneous act, suggestive even of the "too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden" betrothal in Romeo and Juliet (ii.ii.118). Olivia is aware of her haste and anxiety:

Plight me the full assurance of your faith,
That my most jealous and too doubtful soul
May live at peace. (iv.iii.26-28)

Likewise, Sebastian is enwrapped in "wonder," aware of the possibility of "error" or even "madness," and ready to "distrust" his eyes and "wrangle" with his reason (iv.iii.1-21). And yet these mistakes are fortunate ones of the mind rather than the heart, even though Olivia thinks that she is marrying Cesario. Intuition, not reason, is at work. Unlike Malvolio, they find happiness because they know what it is "To be generous, guiltless, and of free disposition" (r.v.89-90). Such impulses can bring tragic disaster, especially if fiery Tybalt's or jealous Iago's are about; but given a world this side of tragedy, then the generous impulses of open natures are the surest way to happiness. A willingness to love and, something more, perhaps the gift to recognize a kindred spirit and to risk all, are the touchstones to Shakespeare's serious world of romantic comedy. Olivia's words, "Love sought is good . . . but given unsought is better" (m.i.158), seem to be the dominant note for those who win happiness in terms of love and friendship, but such giving and receiving must be done without counting the cost or measuring the risk. Viola gives her love unsought to Orsino, while on a more material level a surprising quantity of money and rings is given generously throughout the play, sought and unsought. Viola awards the Sea Captain gold without being asked, and she is quite willing to share what she has with the perplexed Antonio. Antonio gives unasked to Sebastian, and all pour coins into the open hands of the Fool.6 Seldom in a play does money flow so freely or so readily symbolize generous love and friendship. Olivia specializes in sending rings and pearls to those she loves,

7 All references to Twelfth Night are from The New Shakespeare, ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1949).
8 See i.ii.17; r.v.305; m.iii.28; r.iv.67; m.i.43ff.; m.iii.38ff.; m.iv.343; r.v.18; iv.iii.2; v.i.27ff.
though not quite so spontaneously as to be unaware that "youth is bought more oft than begged or borrowed" (iii.iv.3); and even the irritable Orsino sends to inform his "sovereign cruelty" that neither her "quantity of dirty lands" nor her fortune interests him, 

But 'tis that miracle and queen of gems
That nature pranks her in attracts my soul.

Perhaps his love should have gone deeper than the "gem" of her beauty, though surely the note of generosity is there. In sharp contrast to these generous lovers is Malvolio, who is rebuked by Olivia for being neither "generous" nor "free" (v.89–90), not to mention Sir Toby's obvious abuse of friendship in his typical reminder to Sir Andrew that "Thou hadst need send for more money," or Sir Andrew's equally mercenary reply, "If I cannot recover your niece, I am a fool way out" (iii.189–190). Shakespeare makes it clear enough that such self-love and such mercenary friendship lead nowhere, for all three are used according to their desert. These are their mistakes. The secret of true love and friendship, therefore, is a subtle and delicate relationship, depending upon uncalculating generosity and spontaneous impulses. Professor H. B. Charlton links this idea to the Elizabethan discovery that man was "a much less rational and a much more complex creature than he had taken himself to be." More than this, man had discovered that his instincts, intuitions, and emotions were "often a much more exciting and satisfying part of his nature than was his sober intellect." For the express purpose of comedy, man was becoming intellectually aware that "the tumultuous condition of his being which followed his falling in love and urged him on to woo, was in fact no mean and mainly physical manifestation of his personality; it was, in fact, the awakening in him of the fuller capacities of his spirit." Shakespeare was particularly adept at underlaying the awakening of these spiritual capacities by revealing them while the reason was perplexed with error, with the very mistakes that threatened well laid plans opening the way for intuitive solutions. Olivia's marriage to Sebastian, a farcical mistake of her intellect, nevertheless allows Shakespeare to explore with sympathy "the subtle flow of unacknowledged attraction between man and woman." The very tone of the poetry conveys the spiritual quality of Olivia's "most extracting frenzy" as she goes with Sebastian to the priest who is to marry them: 

Then lead the way, good father, and heavens so shine, That they may fairly note this act of mine!

(v.v.34–35)

Sebastian also takes his "fair hour" with equal rapture. The verse alone informs us that all is well:

This is the air, that is the glorious sun, This pearl she gave me, I do feel't and see't, And though 'tis wonder that enwraps me thus, Yet 'tis not madness.

(v.v.1–4)

Add to this the solemn words of the priest as he mistakenly testifies to having performed the holy ceremony of wedlock between Olivia and Cesario, and we see the richest fulfillment of spiritual capacities under the surface of error. With the thoughts of the jealous Duke ripe in mischief, the Priest announces

A contract of eternal bond of love,
Confirmed by mutual joinder of your hands,
Attested by the holy close of lips,
Strength'ned by interchangement of your rings,
And all the ceremony of this compact
Sealed in my function, by my testimony:

(v.i.155–160)

The Priest's confusion, even if it should be a moment for laughter, is also the final blessing of the marriage of Olivia and Sebastian. Unmasking after this can only reveal what has already been fulfilled under the "darkness" of error.

Further light can be thrown on the subtle flow of attraction between man and woman by examining some of the unhappy errors in the play, the errors of the unsuccessful suitors. These errors reveal no redeeming capacities of the spirit. Malvolio's "rapture" has nothing to do with love, and Sir Andrew's hopes draw on nothing more than the recollection that he "was adored once too" (iii.188). Malvolio loves only the selfish vision of "Count Malvolio" with all the coveted trappings of officers, velvet gowns, rich jewels, and the "prerogative of speech" (v.24 ff.). He would like to think that Olivia "did affect" him, but there is no underlying love to redeem his error of exposing to the world his impossible ambition of becoming Count Malvolio:

I will be proud, I will read politic authors, I will baffle Sir Toby, I will wash off gross acquaintance, I will be point-devise the very man. I do not now fool myself, to let imagination jade me; for every reason excites to this, that my lady loves me. (v.165–169)

This selfish dream was too large for a mere

steward and could not stand the test of reality. Once he had imagined his dream to be real, the real world took its harsh revenge. Similarly, Sir Andrew came to grief by trying to rise to the dignified role of knighthood. Deceived into believing that he was loved, he made a fool of himself as he bought Sir Toby's friendship and bargained for a fortune. He leaves the stage fleeced and unloved, redeemed by no spiritual capacities, and content once again to be Sir Toby's drinking companion.

Orsino, a more dignified suitor, presents the same kind of complexities as Olivia. Like Olivia, he too had a spirit capable of being awakened, but like her he made the mistake of assuming a false mask, that of a self-centered melancholy delighting in the luxurious inactivity of unrequited love. His finer nature is so mesmerized by self-indulgence that he almost forgets to seek the object of his love except in the dream world of rich music. "Instead of seeking opportunities to 'give and hazard,' he passively takes what seeming pleasures can be his." This is his mistake, and like Olivia he must be tricked into awakening by another's fresh, spontaneous love. This is the work of Viola.

Viola, both protagonist and catalyst in the central action of the play, suffers and triumphs through the mistakes of others. She too must take part in masking and deceit, and yet she is the least deceived of the three. Her mask is a physical disguise and not one of the spirit, for she knows herself always to be "one heart, one bosom, and one truth" (11.i.160). Her mistakes rise out of her inability to foresee all of the consequences of her disguising, not from any self-deceit, but this is enough to bring her close to disaster and to force her to respond with all the chords of her rich personality. Again, superficial farce reveals the inner depths of human psychology. Her first unexpected difficulty arises when she finds that in the role of Cesario she must against her own good unfold the passion of Orsino's love to Olivia, a task she undertakes so honorably that she ends by charming Olivia and winning her love. Already she has discovered the unexpected complications that can arise from deceit, however good one's intentions:

Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness,
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
(11.ii.27–28)

Consequently she must continue to throw herself upon the mercy of time and the unknown:

O time, thou must untangle this, not I,
It is too hard a knot for me t'untie.
(11.ii.40–41)

Other complications follow that draw heavily upon her reserves, for as Cesario she must face the unexpected "rivalry" of Sir Andrew and the jealous rage of her own master, Duke Orsino. The first exposes her to a test of her courage and to ridicule, as well as to the accusations of ingratitude from Antonio; the second brings her close to death. She learns how truly difficult it is to pretend to be a man:

Pray God defend me! A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man.
(iii.iv.300–301)

But left to the care of time, Viola's mistakes or miscalculations operate to clarify the mistakes of others. Her "one heart" and her "one truth" secretly bring about the resolution of all her problems, for she is not deceived about the essentials of love. In spite of her own difficulties, all the great mistakes of the play can be evaluated against her "one truth." This can best be seen by discussing her complex relationships to Orsino and Olivia.

In the very first scene of Twelfth Night we are presented with the two great mistakes of Orsino's lovesickness and Olivia's unnatural effort to "keep fresh / And lasting, in her sad remembrance" all the wealth of a "brother's dead love" (1.i.30–31). Orsino unwittingly touches upon Olivia's mistake when he comments upon this "debt of love but to a brother" and anticipates the wealth of love in her nature which she is trying to deny:

How will she love, when the rich golden shaft Hath killed the flock of all affections else That live in her . . .
(i.34–36)

Olivia has yet to learn, in the words of the Fool, that "beauty's a flower" subject to time (v.50), and in the words of Viola, that "what is yours to bestow, is not yours to reserve" (v.189). Here, again, is the Duke willing to console himself with music for seven inactive years, and a Countess willing to stifle her rich wealth of love for the same length of time in useless grief. A few lines later, in dramatic contrast to the themes of frustration and wasted time of the opening scene, Viola presents her first rich "commentary" upon Olivia and Orsino. She too has lost a brother and feels the apathy of true grief: "And what should I do in Illyria?" (i.i.3) Then quite spontaneously she thinks of her brother as happy in "Elysium," though at the same time is still willing to hope that "Perchance he is not drowned" (i.i.5). Like her brother, "Courage and hope both teaching

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11 Brown, p. 164.
him the practice” (1.ii.13), she will make the best of what life offers: “Mine own escape unfoldeth to my hope” (1.ii.18). This hope unfolds itself with startling swiftness at the mention of Orsino’s name and the words: “He was a bachelor then!” No bachelor duke is safe against a mind of this swiftness, however long the time to untangle events between the thought and the “occasion mellow.” A final commentary on Viola’s willingness to trust herself to time and to the responsive goodness in others can be found in her words to the Captain:

There is a fair behaviour in thee, captain,
And though that nature with a beauteous wall
Doth oft close in pollution, yet of thee
I will believe thou hast a mind that suits
With this thy fair and outward character.

(1.ii.46-50)

Viola’s free and generous nature, though perhaps incautious, is not a sign of naive inexperience. As will be shown later, she well knows that “wickedness” can appear in “disguise” (π.ii.27), but she instinctively realizes that fulfillment of inner promise involves commitment to events:

What else may hap to time I will commit,
Only shape thou thy silence to my wit.

(1.ii.59-60)

The errors of Olivia and Orsino stand sharply revealed here. In terms of the fulfillment of love’s wealth, “In delay there lies no plenty” (π.iii.52).

Once Viola enters the stage as Cesario, fully involved in the action herself, she continues to offer her “commentary” upon the error of denying love’s fulfillment. Like Rosalind in As You Like It, she teaches others the true meaning of love—the kind of love that would bring a woman down upon her knees to “thank heaven, fasting, for a good man’s love” (As You Like It, π.iii.57-58). Phebe and Orlando profit from such instruction, as do Olivia and Orsino, though Viola’s subtle lessons must thread their way through more complex obstacles. But the instruction is persuasive, for the teacher speaks from her own heart, and error itself helps point the way to truth. Olivia abandons the error of seeking a “brother’s dead love” only to mistake Viola as an object of her new love. But this mistake, though perhaps begun by her being charmed with Cesario’s fair “outside” (π.ii.18), soon leads to an intensity of love that is far deeper than the pain of Orsino’s “Unstaid and skittish” love (π.iv.18).

Nevertheless, the error of being mistaken in the object of her love bears for Olivia its own rich reward, for it has prepared her to love Sebastian at first sight. We have here an interesting variation of the Platonic doctrine of “elective affinity,” for we see Olivia fall in love with Viola and then Sebastian at first sight, while at the same time we can also say that the mistake of loving Viola has really prepared Olivia for giving herself generously to Sebastian. In this sense, she loves Sebastian before seeing him because she has learned to love him through Viola. The psychology here is perhaps sounder than that of the lover in Donne’s “The Good-Morrow” who excuses his past conquests as a mere preparation:

If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desir'd, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

Viola stood for something much more substantial than a mere dream of Sebastian, and the consequent marriage by mistake to Sebastian needs no apology. Similarly Orsino, not really profoundly in love with Olivia, learns in his subtle relationship with his page Cesario something of the depth of true love, and is therefore prepared through that aspect of Viola hidden in Cesario to accept the real Viola the instant she is unmasked. More than one meaning is revealed in Viola’s beautiful lines,

I am all the daughters of my father's house,
And all the brothers too . . .

(π.iv.120-121)

Among other meanings, at this point in her relationships to both Orsino and Olivia, she is creating as one person subtle ties that will become binding for her brother as well as for herself. It is the dénouement that must unmask Viola, reveal a brother and sister, and pair off lovers already destined for each other. The unmasked Viola will be no stranger to Orsino, nor Sebastian to Olivia. Like the sudden conversion of Beatrice and Benedict in Much Ado About Nothing, the apparently superficial and hasty avowal of love has had its stormy preparation in misunderstanding.

Above everything else, it is Viola’s love for Orsino that secretly teaches both Olivia and Orsino the true meaning of love and emphasizes the ridiculous inadequacies of Malvolio, Sir Andrew, and even the affectionate Sir Toby. Viola’s love may have been disguised; it could not be entirely hid. In sharp contrast is the introspective Duke, eloquent as he compares the constancy of his own love to that of a woman’s, but he is not speaking from experience:

There is no woman’s sides
Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
As love doth give my heart: no woman’s heart
So big, to hold so much, they lack retention.

Alas, their love may be called appetite—
No motion of the liver, but the palate—
That suffers surfeit, cloyinent 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. (v.i.93–103)

The Duke is wrong; and Viola’s answer, based
upon her own intense passion, is one that gives
“a very echo to the seat / Where Love is throned”
(v.ii.21–22). Viola knows only too well “what
love women to men may owe” (v.ii.105). Here
she tells her own sad story to counter the Duke’s
argument:

My father had a daughter loved a man,
As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,
I should your lordship. (v.ii.107–109)

Unlike Olivia, only too well does she know the
danger of wasting time by sitting “like Patience
on a monument, / Smiling at grief” (v.ii.114–
115). This danger has been made all the more
intense by the unconscious cruelty of the Duke’s
earlier reference to time:

For women are as roses, whose fair flower
Being once displayed doth fall that very hour. (v.ii.38–39)

Knowing her own constancy, she can at least risk
telling the Duke some of the things about love
that he does not yet know:

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. (v.ii.116–118)

Not until the last scene of the play does Orsino
experience the full truth in this, when he reveals
his own divided heart and threatens to kill, “had
I the heart to do it,” both Olivia and Viola. His
language here betrays his own shifting devotion,
for he first threatens Olivia with the words,
“Why should I not . . . Kill what I love”
(v.ii.116–118); and then he turns upon Viola,
threatening her also, but at the same time using
terms of affection that seem to warm into love:

But this your minion [Cesario], whom I know you love,
And whom, by heaven I swear, I tender dearly,
Him will I tear out of that cruel eye (v.i.124–126)

Three lines later he is saying, “I’ll sacrifice the
lamb that I do love.” And shortly after this when
Viola is unmasked, of course, the Duke is fully
prepared to call Viola “Orsino’s mistress and his
fancy’s queen” (v.i.387). At last he finds his
right love, but surely not through the kind of
constancy of which he had bragged. Such con-
stancy was Viola’s alone, and there is no more
moving proof of this than the moment at which
Viola turns to follow the angry Duke to her own
sacrifice:

And I, most jocund, apt and willingly,
To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die. (v.i.131–132)

Comedy here touches for a fleeting moment the
pathos of tragedy. Viola’s love would have en-
dured a test as final as Desdemona’s.

Olivia, too, receives her painful lessons about
love from Viola. For example, Viola adopts the
tone of the Sonnets in what comes close to being
the kind of rebuke a Rosalind might have given
in a courtly setting:

Lady, you are the cruellest she alive,
If you will lead these graces to the grave,
And leave the world no copy. (v.i.245–247)

Later, Viola perhaps has herself in mind when
she tells Olivia how she would love if she were
Orsino:

Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
And call upon my soul within the house,
Write loyal cantons of contempl’d love,
And sing them loud even in the dead of night
(t.ii.272–275)

This almost parodies the language of an outworn
code of love, but a fresh sincerity is in the
speaker. Viola, to her surprise, reaps an unex-
pected reward for her sincere efforts when she
undertakes Orsino’s commission and finds her-
self beloved of Olivia. This is perhaps Viola’s
greatest error, but it serves to teach Olivia all
she needs to know about herself and her waste of
time, though more than once Viola must remind
her “That you do think you are not what you
are” (v.iii.141). Such, then, are the deceptions
and self-deceptions of Olivia and Orsino. It takes
the love of Viola, knowing herself and trusting
to time, to untangle the web of mistakes.

No one in Twelfth Night entirely escapes the
darkness of ignorance, but at least those who
come to know generous love and friendship
escape time’s harshest revenges. Those who
escape make it clear why the others suffered, for
comedy thrives on poetic justice. Viola is always
the touchstone, though Feste may point the
moral. Once Viola emerges from the sea, displays
her courage and hope, and reveals her generous
capacity for love, we have our standard by which
to judge the others. Thus Sebastian reaps his fine
reward by following his sister’s path of open-
hearted commitment to events. We can expect
Antonio, the model of generous friendship, to
find generosity in return, as will the Captain who
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helped Viola, though mistakes have been obstacles to them. Interestingly enough, some of the most important statements about friendship and generosity are made each time Viola and Antonio meet and quarrel over the vice of ingratitude. Either Viola or Antonio might have been given the following words as they confronted each other:

I hate ingratitude more in a man,
Than lying vainness, babbling drunkenness,
Or any taint of vice whose strong corruption
Inhabits our frail blood. (III.iv.352–355)

The words are Viola’s, addressed to Antonio who has mistaken her for an ungrateful Sebastian. Neither of them is tainted with any of the vices listed in the passage, but the list may easily be related to the errors that lead the minor characters into the den of error. Malvolio’s vanity, Sir Toby’s drunkenness and unkindness, and Sir Andrew’s foolish limitations, all show how far short they fall in human relationships.

In terms of the action of the drama, it is the appearance of Sebastian and Viola together that is the signal for the final resolution of all mistakes, although in another sense the appearance of Sebastian is merely a revelation of what has already been resolved earlier on a hidden level. The Duke’s startled comment upon seeing Viola and Sebastian together for the first time makes clear to all that most of the problems have already been solved: “One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons” (V.i.215). In short, Olivia’s mistaken marriage has already given her the right husband, and Orsino’s unconscious love for Cesario has made it clear where he is to find an adoring wife. Antonio and the kind Captain need now fear no breach in true friendship. And Viola finds a brother whose presence she has already half suspected and a husband she already loves. As for the injured parties, they come to see the cause of their miseries, their own foolish errors. Sir Andrew experiences the limitations of a shallow friendship, Malvolio the end of an egotistical dream, and Sir Toby the end of at least one foolish jest and his irresponsible bachelorhood. Virtue, open-heartedness, and sense have prevailed, although no one has escaped the perplexities of mistakes, and no one has escaped being called a fool or mad. As the wisest of fools observes, “Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere” (III.i.38–40).

The wise and the generous, then, survive their foolish mistakes, and profit. Most important of all, there has been revealed a kind of wisdom of the heart that flourishes even while the intellect is perplexed. Feste’s remark that “there is no darkness but ignorance” (IV.ii.42–43) achieves its fullest meaning on this deeper spiritual or psychological level. It is strange that a study of mistakes, instead of restricting criticism to a discussion of superficial farce, leads directly to the inner life of the play. Every mistake may be a blemish of the mind, but the inner life of the play reveals that only the blemishes of the heart destroy:

In nature there’s no blemish but the mind;
None can be called deformed but the unkind
(III.iv.365–366)

This is a note running through all of Shakespeare.

Beyond this point lie the tragedies, exploring again the problems of the heart, but presenting monstrous deformities and disastrous mistakes. In this darker world, death would have entered to measure the depth of Viola’s love. It is enough for the world of the comedies that Twelfth Night closes with Feste’s cryptic song after the happy talk of marriage to remind us once again of time, mortality, and the passing of all things—a tragic theme that scarcely disturbs between the “curtain” and the applause.

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