THE SERIOUS COMEDY OF *TWELFTH NIGHT*: DARK DIDACTICISM IN ILLYRIA

In "Or What You Will," Barbara Everett notes that Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* "poses in a nicely acute form a problem inherent in all the earlier comedies: why do we take them seriously? Or how, rather, best to explain the ways in which it is hard not to take them seriously — the sense that at their best they achieve a lightness as far as possible from triviality" (294). Everett has discovered a question that surely concerns any scholar of Shakespearean drama, for the bard's comedies are undoubtedly serious. But what, precisely, accounts for the dark dimension that pervades so many of the plays? My response is this: close scrutiny of the dramas indicates that, beginning as early as *Love's Labour's Lost* and continuing on into the romances, Shakespeare's comic characters repeatedly come face to face with mortality, learn that one must, therefore, live well, and teach others wisdom accordingly. Oddly enough, then, having a brush with death and urging others to live wisely are staples of Shakespeare's comedies. *Twelfth Night* is a good test case, for this drama, perhaps more than any other, abounds with jests and merriment, yet it also brims over with situations in which characters who are aware of mortality try to bring others to reform by means of this knowledge. Examining Shakespearean drama through the lens of *Twelfth Night*, then, we can respond to Everett's question as follows: a dark didacticism, an urgent sense that life must be lived well because it is short, often underlies Shakespeare's plays, and this principle, at least in part, accounts for the seriousness with which we regard Shakespeare's comedies.

As a brief survey of the canon indicates, several plays have distinct moments in which characters become wiser after encountering death. For instance, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Marcape's abrupt announcement that the King of France has died impels the Princess to diagnose the defects plaguing the court of Navarre; Shakespeare declines to make clear, however, whether the young gentlemen will indeed change their ways. In *Much Ado about Nothing* and *All's Well that Ends Well*, either the wronged lovers or their advisers circulate false news of the women's deaths to provoke Claudio and Bertram to repentance. In *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, Posthumus and Leontes instantly feel the weight of their guilt upon hearing of the "death" of their wives. And in *The Tempest* Prospero deliberately makes the shipwrecked parties on his island think that he is dead or that others have perished, all to make the castaways repent and reform.
Yet few critics systematically examine how the awareness of death is a didactic tool in Shakespearean comedy, and in *Twelfth Night* in particular. One critic who does speak of didacticism in his work is John Hollander, author of "*Twelfth Night* and the Morality of Indulgence." In this essay Hollander asserts that there is a "moral process" at work in this play: characters indulge themselves to their hearts' content, eventually purging themselves of at least some undesirable elements (221-222). In Hollander's own words,

The Action of *Twelfth Night* is indeed that of a Revels, a suspension of mundane affairs during a brief epoch in a temporary world of indulgence, a land full of food, drink, love, play, disguise and music. But parties end, and the reveler eventually becomes satiated and drops heavily into his worldly self again. . . . The essential action of a revels is: To so surfeit the Appetite upon excess that it "may sicken and so die". It is the Appetite, not the whole Self, however, which is surfeited: the Self will emerge at the conclusion of the action from where it has been hidden. The movement of the play is toward this emergence of humanity from behind a mask of comic type. (222)

There is, of course, merit to Hollander's argument, for the characters in this drama do indulge themselves and do show signs of reform before the final curtain. But Hollander's analysis seems to discount somewhat the actions of Viola and Feste in achieving these reforms. R. Chris Hassel, Jr., author of *Faith and Folly in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies*, also examines the didacticism of *Twelfth Night*, stressing many of the passages I do. However, he posits that the means of instruction in Illyria is humiliation (rather than the practice of reminding characters about death's presence). He writes, "The attempt to edify the prideful characters of Illyria without losing their good will is a central challenge of the comedy . . ." (150). He does not place any emphasis on the awareness of death as an instructional tool in Illyria.

With regard to such an awareness, Theodore Spencer lays some of the groundwork for an assessment along these lines in his 1936 study *Death and Elizabethan Tragedy*. He states that "more than any other period in history, the late Middle Ages were preoccupied with the thought of death," adding that "in more ways than one, consciously and unconsciously, it [this period and its emphasis on mortality] influenced Elizabethan thought, and without it the Elizabethan mind, and its product Elizabethan literature, would have been a very different thing from what it was" (3-4). Spencer goes on to discuss how this emphasis on mortality pervades numerous literary works, including a handful of Shakespeare's comedies.
(most notably *Measure for Measure* and *Much Ado about Nothing*). As his title implies, however, he does not restrict his comments to Shakespeare or devote much time to works outside of the tragedies. Among more recent scholars, Marjorie Garber has done some interesting work in this area. In her article "'Remember Me': Memento Mori Figures in Shakespeare's Plays," Garber remarks, "In the dramatic architecture of Shakespeare's plays . . . the literal appearance of a memento mori, a physical figure or image of death, often intrudes itself upon the developing dramatic action, and alters the understanding of the onstage spectator — and his offstage counterpart as well" (3-4). She then briefly assesses how these memento mori figures affect a number of dramas, including *Twelfth Night*. Her analysis of this play, however, focuses primarily upon Olivia's mourning and marriage, Malvolio's captivity, and Feste's songs. Her treatment of the drama thus differs from mine in two respects. First, it is somewhat selective, ignoring numerous passages where characters consciously remind others of the presence of death. Second, her article does not emphasize that these memento mori figures almost always provoke repentance and reform in Shakespeare's comic communities.

To be sure, Anne Barton's introductions in the *Riverside* edition come closest to undertaking the systematic study called for in this paper. She does, for instance, acknowledge the dark undercurrents that run throughout many of the dramas in her introduction to *Much Ado about Nothing*. There she states that "virtually all of Shakespeare's comedies involve some kind of confrontation with death before the characters are allowed to win through to the happiness of the final scene" (330). And her introduction to *Twelfth Night* perceptively examines the excessiveness of Olivia's mourning, notes the bitterness of Viola's statement that women, like flowers, "die, even when they to perfection grow," and observes that references to death escalate as the play continues (406). But, although better than most, even Barton's remarks do not go far enough in bringing up the didacticism that is a key dimension of *Twelfth Night*. This play clearly demonstrates how the awareness of death provokes wisdom in Shakespearean comedy, and it merits further consideration along these lines.

Undoubtedly death's powerful presence in this and other plays should be acknowledged more widely by the criticism. In "*Twelfth Night*: The Limits of Festivity," critic Thad Jenkins Logan notes that "there are thirty-seven [references] to destruction and death" in this drama (236). A key moment, for example, occurs in the second scene when Viola washes ashore, thinking her twin brother has drowned:
Viola: What country, friends, is this?
Captain: This is Illyria, lady.
Viola: And what should I do in Illyria?
My brother he is in Elysium.
Perchance he is not drown'd — what think you, sailors? (1.2.1-5)

Again in this pivotal scene, Viola hears the dark genealogy of Countess Olivia,

a virtuous maid, the daughter of a count
That died some twelvemonth since, then leaving her
In the protection of his son, her brother,
Who shortly also died, for whose dear love,
They say, she hath abjur'd the [company]
And [sight] of men. (1.2.36-41)

The inevitability of death and the passage of time are almost always the subjects of the music in this drama. Threats of death multiply as the play progresses, as Barton has pointed out: Sir Andrew and Cesario nearly duel; Sebastian gives Sir Andrew a bloody head; and Antonio notes that, if he is caught in Illyria, he shall “pay dear” for warring against Orsino’s nephew, who lost a leg in the battle (406). And, oddly enough, characters often identify places, people and events by their relationships to the dead. Antonio, thinking that Sebastian has abandoned him in his hour of need, exclaims, “This youth that you see here / I snatch’d one half out of the jaws of death” (3.4.359-60). The priest, confirming that Olivia and Sebastian have married, pinpoints the time of the nuptials by saying, “Since [the marriage], ... my watch hath told me, toward my grave / I have travell’d but two hours” (5.1.162-3). Even in the recognition scene between the twins, Sebastian calls his sister “drowned Viola” (5.1.241). Our last glimpse of Illyria is that of the solitary Feste narrating the stages of a man’s life. He makes us aware of mortality by singing of childhood, early youth, mature adulthood, and old age, ending the song there; we know death is the final stage in the progression. Mortality is, then, always in the background of Twelfth Night — yet it fails to move the Illyrians to wisdom until Viola and Feste call attention to its presence.

Olivia is the first character who will reform after being schooled by Viola and Feste. Though the reality of death is especially vivid for the Countess, instead of prompting her to get on with the business of life — marrying and raising children, who are, after all, one means of prolonging life and preserving a family’s name — the death of her brother moves her to withdraw from life. As Valentine explains, she plans to mourn for seven years:
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[Like a cloistress she will veiled walk,
And water once a day her chamber round
With eye-offending brine; all this to season
A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh
And lasting in her sad remembrance. (1.1.27-31)

This passage reveals the excessiveness of the endeavor. Though the servant may mean that the saltiness of Olivia's tears will sting her eyes, he also implies that Olivia weeps so much over the loss that her tears "offend" the very eyes that produced them. Anne Barton notes that "the underlying image here is homely, even a little grotesque. Like a housewife who carefully turns a piece of pickled meat once a day in its brine bath, Olivia intends through salt tears to preserve the memory of her dead brother beyond the normal span of grief. There is something forced and abnormal about such mourning . . . " (405). The attempt to keep the memory fresh, too, rather than grieving and then moving on, as is the normal course of things, indicates a strange effort to protract her sorrow. Fred Turner notes, "Death should be mourned, as ritual demands, and having been mourned, it should be forgotten; certainly it should not be allowed to interfere with the living of one's life in the present. Olivia is living in the past . . . " (59). Even the time span she has chosen to mourn — seven years — is excessive, as no one can keep a memory fresh for such an extended period. Again Barton observes, "Olivia is engaged in a war against Time and human forgetfulness. In her case, the struggle takes the form . . . of resistance to that natural psychological process by which, gradually, we cease to grieve for the dead . . . . Seven years is a long time, and youth is very short" (405). Olivia's mourning means she will not go forward with her life: she will neither marry nor reproduce, and she will partake of none of the functions in which a woman of marriageable age usually engages, none of the functions that give humankind consolation in times of sorrow.

Into this situation comes Viola, who teaches Olivia that the inevitability of death obliges one to live wisely. After pointedly observing that Olivia is wrong to withhold herself from marriage, Viola then requests to see the Countess's face, employing language that will remind Olivia of the certainty of death:

Olivia: Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face? You are now out of your text; but we will draw the curtain, and show you the picture.
Look you, sir, such a one I was this present. [Unveiling.]
Is't not well done?
Viola: Excellently done, if God did all.
Olivia: 'Tis in grain, sir, 'twill endure wind and weather.
Viola: 'Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white
Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on.
Lady, you are the cruell' st she alive
If you will lead these graces to the grave
And leave the world no copy. (1.5.231-243)

Interestingly, when Viola makes this impassioned plea to Olivia, the Countess purposely interprets “copy” not as progeny, Viola’s intended meaning, but as an itemized list. But providing an inventory of one’s features as Olivia does — “item, two lips, indifferent red; item, two grey eyes, with lids to them” (1.5.247-8) — is far different from bearing a child who will resemble her and live on after her. Olivia deliberately misinterprets, as Ronald R. Macdonald notes, because she does not want to hear the message Viola is trying to tell her (110).

If the Countess responds incorrectly to death, as many in her household note, then Viola responds rightly to it, appreciating life more intensely because of its very brevity. It is significant, therefore, that Shakespeare tells the story of Olivia twice in Act 1, folding the story around Viola’s arrival in Illyria like a pair of bookends. The two women are foils for each other, as Olivia’s life of mourning is a very real alternative for Viola, but one that Viola refuses to accept. Though the two share much in common (similar names and the loss of a brother and father), Viola refuses to luxuriate in her sorrow and waste the remainder of her life; she recognizes that the inevitability of death means one should make the most of life, not halt one’s life in protracted grief. As a result, she exhibits an acute awareness of the passage of time throughout the drama. Upon first arriving in Illyria, she says, “What else may hap, to time I will commit” (1.2.60). And later on, as she accidentally causes Olivia to fall in love with her, Viola again says, “O time, thou must untangle this, not I, / It is too hard a knot for me t’ untie” (2.2.40-41). Viola thus allows her recognition of the inevitability of death to move her to action, for she serves as a kind of teacher who schools her pupils to use time wisely and to live well.

A second character who needs Viola’s wisdom is the Duke, whose passivity is as obvious as Olivia’s but more difficult to explain. Although we could call the Duke’s weakness self-indulgence (and, indeed, he does preoccupy himself with his own desires throughout the play), we might better call his condition a sort of defective romantic imagination. There is a discrepancy between what he imagines will satisfy him and what actually does so — a discrepancy between theory and practice, we might say. In Act 2, the Duke’s own words indicate that his
imagination is, indeed, the cause of his melancholy. Giving love advice to Cesario, he says,

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 belov'd. (2.4.15-20)

His advice, we realize, is faulty. He is “skittish” and unsteady in all other things because he has managed to obtain them, but his love is only constant because it is unrequited. We suspect that, if he were to obtain Olivia’s hand, he might be dissatisfied with her as well. Barton perhaps puts it best in her essay on Twelfth Night: “Orsino’s love-melancholy is essentially sterile and self-induced, a state of mind dependent upon that very absence and lack of response from Olivia which it affects to lament” (405).

Because of this defective romantic imagination, Orsino is unwilling to accept the reality of Olivia’s rejection. In Act 1, when Valentine returns with news of the Countess’s mourning, Orsino responds by saying:

O, she that hath a heart of that fine frame  
To pay this debt of love but to a brother,  
How will she love when the rich golden shaft  
Hath kill’d the flock of all affections else  
That live in her; when liver, brain, and heart,  
These sovereign thrones, are all supplied and fill’d  
Her sweet perfections with one self king! (1.1.32-38)

His response can be paraphrased thus: “If she has such ardor in mourning her brother, imagine how she will love when Cupid’s arrow strikes!” Once again we can see a discrepancy between what the Duke imagines and what is actually the case. Orsino is so caught up in imagining his future bliss that he fails to grasp a key part of the message: Olivia is not interested in having a suitor. And, too, the emotion that Orsino imagines to be love is not love at all. Love entails desiring what is best for the other, but Orsino never seriously considers Olivia’s sorrow. In The Breath of Clowns and Kings: Shakespeare’s Early Comedies and Histories, Theodore Weiss is right to ask, “With such a supine hero, and such a complex opening, one might well wonder how either the hero or the play will ever stand erect, let alone act. What can possibly stir them? . . . . [Orsino] is in love with his own figures, not the world’s: a mental Narcissus, an egotist sublime.
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Unheard music may not be sweetest to him, but beyond doubt an unseen or at least unavailable love is” (303).

Viola and Feste, however, come to the rescue, moving Orsino to reform by the same techniques used on Olivia; they warn him that death is inevitable and that he must, accordingly, stop wasting time. Orsino, in turn, gives them more to work with than Olivia did, for he clearly realizes that death will come for others, though he seems to overlook the fact that it will come quickly for himself as well. The task of Viola and Feste, then, is to get the Duke to see that he is not immune to death, either. Act 2 contains numerous examples of the Duke’s blindness and of Viola’s and Feste’s actions on his behalf. When asking Feste for a song, for instance, Orsino requests one that he heard the night before, one that is “old and plain. / The spinsters and the knitters in the sun, / And the free maids that weave their thread with bones, / Do use to chant it” (2.4.43-46). His very words, as Leah Scragg explains in Discovering Shakespeare’s Meaning, are replete with suggestions of death:

His [the Duke’s] reference to the “spinster” (i.e., spinners) and “knitters” by whom the song is traditionally sung, together with his mention of “their thread” evokes an image of the Fates, spinning the thread of human life, and this suggestion is heightened by the use of the word “chant,” with its ritual connotations, and by the allusion to the lacemakers’ bobbins as “bones.” Ideas of fate, transience and mortality thus underlie the surface meaning of the words, generating a wistfulness. . . . (215-16)

Feste then sings the song Orsino requested:

Come away, come away, death
And in sad cypress let me be laid.
[Fly] away, [fly] away, breath,
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O prepare it!
My part of death, no one so true
Did share it. (2.4.51-58)

The Duke no doubt enjoys this song because it suits the melancholy nature of a man who is love-stricken. But could the Duke reflect upon this song, he would learn quite a bit. The lesson of the song is that the unrewarded lover who continues to pursue his suit risks a lonely demise, a dark death that, as Scragg again notes, is “seen, not in terms of renewal, but of physical decay” (216). The song thus portrays the ugly, sterile dimension
of unrequited love. Although the message *should* jar the Duke to look for a more suitable object of his love, it does not.

Viola likewise tries to move Orsino to action by alluding to death’s claim upon all. In the following exchange, the Duke only admits that *women* must act with urgency because of death’s inevitability; thus, he neatly excepts himself from those who must be aware of death’s approach:

Duke: *Women* are as roses, whose fair flow’r
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! (2.4.38-41, emphasis added)

Both comments are ironic. Viola’s remark clearly is self-reflective, but Orsino’s remark shows a lack of recognition. Do not men also have a limited lifespan in which to love? Throughout this play the Duke pursues Olivia at his leisure; he does not have the awareness of death and time that Viola has come by through hard experience.

So Viola makes yet another effort to educate the Duke, using a variant of this same approach. She falsifies her ancestry, explaining that she had a sister who died for love:

Viola: *She never told her love,*
But let concealment like a worm i’ th’ bud
Feed on her damask cheek; she pin’d in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sate like Patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief....
Duke: But died thy sister of her love, my boy?
Viola: I am all the daughters of my father’s house (2.4.110-115, 119-120)

Once more we see a double meaning in this speech. Viola is coming to a growing realization that her own situation is not satisfactory, that she may soon have to reveal her love or risk the same fate as Cesario’s “sister.” But she also gives a warning that serves the same purpose as Feste’s song. Unlike the young girl in the story, the Duke has declared his love. But like the young girl in the story, the Duke also risks dying of “green and yellow melancholy.” In other words, unrequited love in any form can be decidedly injurious to the one who suffers from it. In speaking with Olivia, Viola has already said that Orsino, because his love goes unfulfilled, lives a “deadly life” (1.5.265), and such an existence is equivalent to sitting “like Patience on a monument / Smiling at grief.” But
we do have reason to hope; the Duke’s questions to his page, his interest in the young girl’s demise, intimate that with time he will learn his lesson.

And learn he does, as he reveals in Act 5, scene one — an act that again makes reference to death. Realizing that Olivia loves his page, Orsino jealously tells the Countess he will kill Cesario; Viola’s response to the threat, however, is merely to profess her continued devotion.

Duke: 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. (5.1.117-119, 125-131)

In “Mistakes in Twelfth Night and Their Resolution: A Study in Some Relations,” Porter Williams. Jr. analyzes these very lines by saying, “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’ (5.1.387). At last he finds his right love, but surely not through the kind of constancy of which he had bragged. Such constancy 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 . . . . Comedy here touches for a fleeting moment the pathos of tragedy. Viola’s love would have endured a test as final as Desdemona’s” (198). The passage is certainly revealing, for Orsino intimates that he might do violence to the very page he adores. Yet even in the face of such threats, Viola professes a steadfast love for him. Under such dire circumstances, Viola appears all the more noble because she offers the Duke a selfless love and counts as little the possibility of her own demise. In finally uniting these two, Shakespeare merely unravels the rest of the plot. With lightning rapidity, he reveals that Olivia is married, and thus not a suitable object for the Duke’s adoration. Sebastian, not Cesario, is Olivia’s spouse, so the page is still unattached. And Cesario is actually a woman, not a man. The Duke, therefore, is confronted with the fact that the only eligible candidate for marriage is the page he has loved all along — and that she loves him even unto death. There are no more obstacles to surmount, save the retrieval of her clothes and the performance of the nuptial ceremony.

With regard to the lesser members of the play — Sir Toby and company and Malvolio — the task of effecting reform falls primarily to
Feste. In depicting Olivia’s estate, though, Shakespeare has shown an interesting contrast. Olivia errs by turning away from life, while those around her err by self-indulgently immersing themselves in life, filling each day with nothing more substantive than singing, dancing, drinking and jesting. Both responses are unhealthy, but both can be remedied by Feste and Viola’s didactic strategy. During the scene of night revels, for instance, the clown comes upon Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, who ask for a song. When Feste asks whether they would have a love song or a song telling how to live a good life, the two naturally select a love song, which Feste duly gives them. But as he continues, Feste also gives them exactly what they did not want, a “song of good life”:

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;  
Present mirth hath present laughter;  
What's to come is still unsure.  
In delay there lies no plenty,  
Then come and kiss me sweet and twenty;  
Youth's a stuff will not endure. (2.3.47-52)

This song has the same object as nearly all of Feste’s words. It attempts to move these Illyrians out of their self-absorption to consider more worthwhile pursuits by reminding them of the inevitability of death. As John Hollander explains, the song could be paraphrased thus: “This feast will have to end, and so will all of our lives. You are not getting any younger . . .” (233).

But Feste is forced to repeat his correction yet again as the scene continues. Sir Toby’s exuberant singing provokes an angry response from Malvolio, who, hearing the music outside, exclaims: “Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of the night? . . . Is there no respect of place, persons nor time in you?” Sir Toby lamely responds, “We did keep time, sir, in our catches [songs]” (2.3.87-93). Sir Toby then, again in song, affirms his own immortality — an illusion that Feste quickly corrects:

Sir Toby: Farewell, dear heart, since I must needs be gone. 
Maria: Nay, good Sir Toby. 
Malvolio: Is't even so? 
Clown: His eyes do show his days are almost done. 
Sir Toby: But I will never die. 
Clown: Sir Toby, there you lie. (2.3.102-107)

Once again, Feste points out that death will come for Sir Toby, whether he likes it or not.
In addition to singing to avoid thoughts of serious issues, the characters in the subplot also partake of excessive festivity by filling each day with play, jests and pranks. They drink, brag about their skill in “cutting a caper,” deceive Malvolio, and even play tricks upon each other. In sport, for example, Sir Toby sets Cesario and Sir Andrew against each other, unwittingly pulling Sebastian into the fray. Now, such conduct was right in line with the Epiphany, the occasion to which the title of the play, Twelfth Night, refers, the last day of the Christmas season and the day upon which the Magi came to adore the infant Christ. The occasion of Twelfth Night, as Barton explains in her introduction to this play, was an occasion of merriment, a time when the normal order of things was overturned (as it is with carnival), a period in which the usual rules and customs did not apply (404). The members of the household clearly live up to the occasion. In The First Night of Twelfth Night, Leslie Hotson notes, “In the freedom of Twelfth Night, you do what you will, say what you will,” and that is exactly what the members of Olivia’s household do — what they will (148). There is just one problem with such an arrangement, as we can see from C.L. Barber’s comments. He says, “Holiday, for the Elizabethan sensibility, implied a contrast with ‘everyday’ . . . . Occasions like May day and the Winter Revels . . . were maintained within a civilization whose daily view of life focused on the mortality implicit in the vitality . . . ” (10). But in this society, every day is a holiday, for the Illyrians focus on vitality, but neglect to acknowledge mortality — an acknowledgement which could provoke widespread reform.

Feste, in contrast, displays the ideal attitude toward festivity; he is a clown, and thus is closely associated with festivity, but like Viola, he realizes that there are, or should be, limits to such festivity. Though he clearly enjoys merriment (his name reminds us of festivals and lightheartedness), he also sees the defects in his society and attempts to correct them by wisely pointing out the inevitability of death and the importance, therefore, of a life well-lived. It is he, we must recall, who reminds the revelers that “youth’s a stuff will not endure” (2.3.52), who corrects Sir Toby’s false assertion about immortality, and who schools Olivia about grief. It is he who sings about the stages of man in Act 5, a song that, as Barbara Everett notes, teaches us about “simply growing up, accepting the principle that nights before have mornings after; that life consists in passing time, and in knowing it” (308).

A final citizen who needs correction is Malvolio, whose self-love causes him to disdain the other members of his household; to understand how Feste tries to reform Malvolio by means of references to death, however, we must first understand the flaw that mars this complex
character. In *Shakespeare’s Comic Commonwealths*, Camille Wells Slights provides a skillful study of why Malvolio is so distasteful: “The measure of Malvolio’s self-love is not his miserliness or covetousness but his presumptuous belief that he lives in a sphere above and beyond ordinary human relationships” (225-6). Indeed, in Act 1, Olivia herself establishes that Malvolio’s high opinion of himself is a weakness. After the fool has “catechized” Olivia not to mourn so incessantly for her brother, Malvolio (whose name does, after all, mean “ill will”) shows his immense disrespect for Feste by heaping insults upon the fool’s head. Olivia responds by saying, “O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite. To be generous, guiltless, and of free disposition, is to take those things for bird-bolts that you deem cannon-bullets” (1.5.90-93). Maria, likewise, finds that Malvolio’s defect is that “it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him” (2.3.151-152) and vows that her revenge on him will make use of this very defect of character.

Although Maria’s plan does just that, employing Malvolio’s high self-regard to make him look foolish — it is not this aspect of the jest that is important to my analysis. Granted, many commentators focus upon the intricacies of the box-tree scene with good reason, for this scene is, arguably, one of the funniest of the entire play. But another dimension of the prank — the imprisonment — deserves further scrutiny, for here Feste again tries to correct the steward by referring to death. To remedy Malvolio’s habit of holding himself in high regard above others, Feste reminds the steward of his relationship to others — a relationship he may have forgotten:

Clown: What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild-fowl?
Malvolio: That the soul of our grandam might happily inhabit a bird.
Clown: What think’st thou of his opinion?
Malvolio: I think nobly of the soul, and no way approve his opinion.
Clown: Fare thee well. Remain thou still in darkness. Thou shalt hold th’ opinion of Pythagoras ere I will allow of thy wits, and fear to kill a woodcock lest thou dispossess the soul of thy grandam. Fare thee well. (4.2.50-60.)

At first glance this conversation merely appears part of an overall strategy to make Malvolio think he is mad, but upon further consideration Feste seems to have an instructional purpose and method that again make reference to mortality. By turning to Pythagoras’s ideas, articulated by
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Ovid (a writer with whom Shakespeare obviously was familiar, as we can see by the Pyramus and Thisby episode in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), we can see more clearly Feste’s project. In Book 15 of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid presents Pythagoras's view concerning reincarnation by saying,

> [O]ver souls — be sure — death has no sway: each soul, once it has left one body, takes another body as its home, the place where it lives on. . . . For all things change, but no thing dies. The spirit wanders: here and there, at will, the soul can journey from an animal into a human body, and from us to beasts: it occupies a body, but it never perishes. As pliant wax is still the selfsame wax, so do I say that soul, however much it may migrate, is still the same. And thus, lest piety suffer defeat when faced with the belly’s greed, do not expel — so I, a prophet teach — the souls of others by your butchery: those souls are kin to your own souls; don’t feed your blood upon another’s blood. (519, emphasis added)

According to Pythagoras’s theory of reincarnation, souls take new forms after death, and these forms may be human or animal; thus, a kinship arises among all things. In light of this kinship, one should not eat of another creature, because in doing so, one may be committing an offense against another’s soul.

But how does the passage relate to Malvolio and to the warnings about death found throughout the play? Ovid’s warning is relevant because the insolent steward needs to recognize the common bonds he has with all things, whether they be clowns, wildfowl, or serving women. And, because of this kinship, he should not elevate himself at others’ expense. In trying to teach Malvolio, Feste again uses the language of death employed elsewhere in the play; at this point, however, Malvolio refuses to learn his lesson. Unlike Olivia and the Duke, he does not become wiser even after being schooled using the dire language of death.

It is little wonder that Viola and Feste expend such great effort trying to reform Illyria’s citizens, going from one character to another to point out the brevity of human life and the importance, therefore, of a life well-lived. For, as critics have noted, there is a lack of community exhibited in this play. Camille Wells Slichts notes that “Illyria is plagued with stagnation” and claims that “the native Illyrians present a spectacle of isolation rather than confrontation, not so much a society in disorder as a series of discrete individuals without the interconnections that constitute a society” (217). Similarly, Alexander Leggatt explains that here, “[W]e are aware of each character as an individual, out on his own, the lovers trying to make contact but with limited success, and the comic figures either
openly hostile or forming relationships based on temporary expediency... Certainly individual characters come more clearly into focus than in any previous comedy of Shakespeare's, and the sense that they can be bound together in a common experience is weaker" (222-3).

But this sense of fragmentation begins to turn with the entrance of Viola, who after her shipwreck advises her new society that death will come for all and that, therefore, one must live wisely while there is time to do so. Then, a whole serious of interlocking reversals occurs — all spurred on by Viola's and Feste's admonishments. Olivia begins to see that time is, indeed, valuable and that she has erred in not conducting her life accordingly. As Fred Turner observes, "Olivia realizes that she has been misusing her time, that the present moment is something valuable, and to mourn the past is a sin.... She has caught something of Viola's sense of urgency, the... feeling of the preciousness of life..." (63). A secondary result of Olivia's new wisdom is that she reveals her distaste for Sir Toby's actions with such forcefulness that the household becomes better managed as a result — a strength that partly accounts for Sebastian's esteem of her. The marriage of Olivia then leads to the end of Orsino's pining for her. With the revelation of the marriage and of Sebastian's presence, Viola can disclose her true identity (thus, she is released from the bondage of her disguise), and Orsino can acknowledge the love he has felt for Viola all along. Sir Toby and Malvolio can reform if they choose to do so; they have certainly been equipped by Viola and Feste with the tools they need to see the error of their ways. But on this point Shakespeare gives ambiguous signals.

Returning to our initial deliberations, then, a detailed look at *Twelfth Night* provides one answer to the issue that Barbara Everett raises in her critique — that of the serious undertone that pervades many of the comedies — and gives us a window into the dramas; yet, we need to look more deeply at the plays to trace how encounters with death and their resultant warnings to live wisely consistently prompt reform in Shakespearean comedy. For Viola, Feste, and their fellow Illyrians, the outcome is a society which is generally wiser, albeit with a few exceptions. And the same holds true for many more Shakespearean communities, where characters come to realize the inevitability of death and make this knowledge the impetus for a life well-lived. The words of Susanne Langer are quite helpful, then, in pointing out how natural this learning process is and how integral it is to Shakespeare's comic form. Langer says that the "pure sense of life is the underlying feeling of comedy" (120) and explains that, "no matter how people contrive to become reconciled to their mortality, it puts a stamp on their conception of life: since the instinctive struggle to go on living is bound to meet with
defeat in the end, they look for as much life as possible between birth and death” (125). Certainly such is the case with Shakespeare’s Illyrians. In this society, the awareness of death often provokes characters to live more wisely — a point that is generally overlooked by the critics. To acknowledge the prevalence of this pattern here and in other Shakespearean dramas is to uncover a new depth and richness to the plays — a new profundity and poignancy in Shakespeare’s comic form.

Notes

1) I include The Tempest and The Winter’s Tale in this discussion of comedy since they were listed as comedies in the First Folio and since these later works, like the comedies, tend to emphasize that the awareness of death should lead one to wisdom.

2) All quotations of Shakespeare are taken from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

Works Cited


