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Playing the Fool: Feste and Twelfth Night

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**PLAYING THE FOOL:
FESTE AND *TWELFTH NIGHT***

by
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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“Fools and fooling complicate perceptions, disrupt meaning,
confound and compound perspective.”

Robert H. Bell, *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*

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INTRODUCTION

Twelfth Night is a gender-swapping, madman-creating romp through the land of Illyria. Shipwrecked Viola lands at the shores of this strange land thinking the wreck had killed her identical twin brother. She decides to dress as a young man and present herself as a page to ensure her safety and secure an immediate place at one of the local aristocratic houses belonging to Duke Orsino. The duke takes a liking to the young page and sends Viola, now Cesario, to Lady Olivia, another aristocrat, to profess the duke's love for her. Olivia, in mourning for the death of both her father and brother declines to see anyone representing Orsino. However, Cesario quickly wins an audience with the lady and unknowingly enchants her with his own wit and charm. Viola, as Cesario, falls in love with the Duke during her service to him but cannot say anything because of the entrapment of her disguise.

Meanwhile at Olivia's house, Sir Toby Belch, Maria, Feste and Sir Andrew plan a cruel practical joke on Olivia's steward, Malvolio, because of his sour disposition. Sir Toby, Olivia's uncle, his gullible friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Maria, Olivia's lady-in-waiting, and the clown, Feste, come together to make Malvolio believe that Olivia is in love with him. In a letter they write, counterfeiting Olivia's handwriting, they bid him to wear a ridiculous outfit of yellow stockings and crossed garters to show his love for his mistress. The group imprisons him, making him question if he is mad, and sends the clown in to torment him as a minister, Sir Topas. During these shenanigans it is revealed that Sebastian, Viola's brother, actually survived the crash and has found his way to Olivia's house with the aid of a sailor, Antonio. Olivia, thinking Sebastian is Cesario, confesses her love and wish to marry him. Sebastian, though confused, consents.

Finally, when all of the characters come together in the final act, Feste brings news of Malvolio's madness and the confusion over the identity of the twins is finally revealed. Sebastian

arrives and the siblings are finally reunited. Duke Orsino, realizing that Cesario is really Viola, asks for her hand in marriage. The wedding of Sebastian and Olivia stands and we also learn of the nuptials of Maria and Toby. The couples are paired off and the play ends with the fool's song: "but that's all one, our play is done/And we'll strive to please you every day," (5.1.406-407).

Shakespeare's comedy of twins is certainly an interesting play to examine because of the gender-swapping and complicating of traditional relationships. The connections between Viola as Cesario and Olivia, Duke Orsino and Cesario, and Sebastian and Antonio present possible alternatives to traditionally prescribed gender roles and marriages. The play is revered for its presentation of strong female characters having significant agency over their own fate. Viola and Olivia both break traditional female roles of submission and restriction to the household in favor of boldly disguising one's gender, discovering one's true identity and ruling an estate.

Significantly, however, *Twelfth Night* does not end with the acceptance and consummation of these "alternative couples." Instead, the reveal of the twins has a clarifying effect and the characters are returned to the partner who is considered socially acceptable. The final relationships are heterosexual matches that do not stray from class or any other societal confines. Indeed, the story serves to reinforce common standards equating alternative love with madness and proper love with lucidity. Standing outside of the couplings are only bachelor men: Antonio, Sir Andrew, Feste and Orsino's pages. In effect, these men are desexualized without romantic counterparts. While they are deemed outcasts in Illyria, one character in particular stands to gain from this seeming lack of sexuality and outsider status: the clown, Feste.

Feste plays an important function in *Twelfth Night*. His status as a fool in an aristocratic household affords him the unique position of being able to truthfully comment on everybody

around him. This requires that he be both involved in the action as well as distanced from it in order to properly observe. His lack of sexual partner is a freedom which allows him to focus fully on his jesting. It also presents as an ambiguity in his character. Who would Feste attract and be attracted to? The ability to observe the play and the lack of partner (outsider status) provide Feste with a unique perspective on the play. This alternative viewpoint for examining *Twelfth Night* allows one to more fully explore the alternative matches presented in the play. Analysis of the character of Feste proves a valuable inroad to examining the dynamics of gender and the significance of power within the play.

Gender and power find clarification through the character of Feste because he is afforded all of the privileges of a male in a patriarchal society and in order to analyze him, his positionality¹ within the function and structure of the story must be acknowledged. Usually the character of Viola holds this position in scholarship, but the possibility of Feste played by a female actor introduces similar themes of cross-gender disguise while decoding the heteronormative standards reinforced by the conclusion of the play.

In order to fully explore the role of Feste in *Twelfth Night*, the first chapter will detail a history of the fool-like characters to set up a formal structure from which Shakespeare created Feste. Chapter Two demonstrates the similarities between Feste and Viola that create the opportunity from which to deconstruct the structures which inform gender and gender presentation. The third chapter introduces Feste's interaction with the rest of the characters. This demonstrates how a female-acted Feste further complicates gender and sexuality in Illyria. Chapter four looks at the function of Feste within the whole of *Twelfth Night* in order to

¹ "In cultural accounts of experience, **positionality** refers to both the fact of and the specific conditions of a given social situation. So, where one might talk about the "position" of an individual in a social structure, "**positionality**" draws attention to the conditions under which such a position arises, the factors that stabilize that position, and the particular implications of that position with reference to the forces that maintain it" (Foth, Marcus)

understand exactly how the fool operates within Illyria and particularly through a feminist critique of the play. Chapter five covers specific decisions made in a production of *Twelfth Night* finally coming back to Feste's essence as an entertainer. In total, this paper is an exploration of *Twelfth Night* through the lens of Feste.

1

A HISTORY OF THE FOOL

While the name Shakespeare invokes a specific notion of theatrical text, his plots were hardly original. He used Greek and Roman plays as sources from which to construct his work. These source plays, such as *Menaechmi* by Plautus, where confusion arises due to identical twins, and the Italian play *Gl' Ingannati*, where the page falls in love with the mistress under the influence of a counterfeit letter, were already well known within the collective conscious of his audience. The audience immediately recognized these stories within *Twelfth Night*. Identifying Shakespeare's source material has far reaching implications for the study of his plays. His fool and clown characters are particularly interesting to examine because these complicated, jesting men are not present in Shakespeare's source material and as such are distinct beings of his creation throughout his works.

The Shakespearean Fool is usually separate from the other characters and the resolution of the play. This manifests itself in the lack of any sort of romantic pairing or true friendship between the fool and any other character. In many ways fools exist in a sort of limbo, straddling different worlds. This places these characters at a distance from the action and allows them a unique position so they may comment on, as well as participate in, the events onstage. The distance and freedom allowed to the fools creates an opportunity to learn a significant amount both about the play and the world from which these characters are created. To better understand the function of a Shakespearean Fool, it is helpful to examine the actual history of such characters, for the fool is not simply a comedic literary device but rather is an actual historical

occupation with a rich history of variety and complexity. Willingly or not, real people played this part in their daily lives.

A significant origin for Shakespeare's fool begins with the Buffoon or Parasite whose beginnings are found in ancient Greece. In Enid Welsford's comprehensive historical examination of the fooling person, *The Fool: His Social & Literary History*, the buffoon is described as a "laughter-maker" – someone who "exploits his own weakness instead of being exploited by others" (3). Much of the work of a buffoon resided in telling stories about himself, usually resulting from comic or dishonest tricks he played on folks he met on his travels. Or, if without practical material, he simply made up the far-fetched situations in order to amuse the nearest paying patron. For instance, an Italian buffoon named Gonella, when travelling between two cities posed as a physician and convinced a group of poor peasants that he could cure them of their goiter. He left quickly after providing the "cure" and when he arrived at his destination informed the authorities that they would find a group of peasants in the other city working together to counterfeit money (the outcome of his supposed cure). While this story seems to end rather pathetically, it is an excellent example of how the buffoon uses others to create his jests.

This also meant, however, that these men were utterly dependent on the goodwill of their audience. Buffoonery is not necessarily acting. Rather, it is state of being: "the buffoon gives most pleasure, by being most himself" (Welsford 27). The buffoon or parasite had a rather vulgar and self-deprecating humor, although many buffoons especially those who patronized the courts of Italy, were highly skilled in music or art, along with their sharp tongues skillful at improvisation. Buffoons appear as "morally subnormal but not mentally deranged" and they gained notoriety for their roguery (Welsford 55).

Another iteration of this historical tradition of comedic men is the court-fool. The court-fool in contrast is more absurd and separated from his fellow men. Historically, he is characterized by mental deficiencies and/or physical abnormalities that “deprive him of both rights and responsibilities” while placing him in a position of utter dependency and stark isolation from others (Welsford 55). From this category the distinction between the natural and artificial fool is drawn. The natural fool refers to someone who has decreased mental faculties. The artificial fool refers a sharp witted comedian who creates a façade of folly. In the 1600s, the time of Queen Elizabeth I and Shakespeare, “Elizabethans often distinguished between a natural fool, meaning a simpleton or a lunatic, and an artificial fool, who ‘professionally counterfeits folly for the entertainment of others’ and is conscious of the role he plays” (Bell 1). This definition of a court-fool also introduces a common concept associated with the character of the fool: that he is deprived of all rights and responsibilities. Fools are quite often able to transcend the boundaries of class or status to present their jest. This does not mean they are treated equally to their patrons but rather a fool enjoys a privileged position of not being held accountable to normal standards for their words or actions. This also places the fool at a distance from his contemporaries because no other person or position has license to behave in such a manner. It should be noted that there is no concrete transition from buffoon to court-fool to stage-clown but rather many times these characters existed as contemporaries and there are significant similarities that are part of a shared comedic history.

Another type of fool found throughout history is the “fool as scapegoat”. In early agricultural societies there were often ritualistic rites that may have involved a transference of sickness and bad luck to another being in order to appease the gods of the harvest. The origins of such a creature harks back to the self-deprecating buffoon and the “tendency to connect folly and

sanctity together” (Welsford 83). In some cases, to be abused by a fool is a sign of good luck, justifying the lax enforcement of societal standards upon the fool. “The abusive fool probably owes this partly to the feeling that his idiocy is a safeguard against the Evil Eye and so endows him with good luck which he can transfer to others by raillery” (Welsford 87). Used as a substitute for the ruling elite, the fool absorbed bad luck and represented renewal. One could send the evil towards these fool figures so that the sender might avoid bad luck. Aristocratic households also used this idea of transference of ills and employed a fool so the house would prosper. An interesting feature of the scapegoat fool is that he is “not always the central figure of the rite, he is more often attached to the entourage of the protagonist, or else is a *curiously unattached* figure who seems in some way to *stand outside the performance*” (Welsford 72, emphasis mine).

Shakespeare and the Fool

Shakespeare’s clown characters, the truth tellers and dark players in the plot games, are distinctly connected to the actors who originated the roles. In fact, the personalities and strengths for these performers greatly influenced the way the characters were written and by extension, the play as a whole. In the early years of The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Will Kemp played the clown for Shakespeare. Kemp, well-known and highly successful in his own right, was known for his outrageous buffoonery onstage. He improvised, spoke directly with the audience and would go on tangents whenever he felt like it. While a skilled entertainer, he was difficult for authors because he chose to go off book so often. Shakespeare’s frustration with his antics can be seen in a line from Hamlet as he speaks to the acting company he has invited to perform, “And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh to” (*Hamlet* 3.2.38-42).

Kemp's last Shakespearean role is Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Kemp is important because he represents Shakespeare's use, albeit begrudgingly, of the buffoon character onstage. This paves the way for a more multidimensional fool, influenced by Robert Armin, that is seen in Shakespeare's later work.

In 1599, Robert Armin replaced Will Kemp as the fool in Shakespeare's company. Armin was a very different source for Shakespearean fooling. A rather more literary figure than Kemp, Armin's influence brought the fool from the periphery towards the center of the play's action. Instead of wild antics onstage, "Armin's fools carry out more calculated explorations of folly and wisdom; some become both the object and the source of mockery" (Bell 21). The fool became a cerebral master, outwitting both the audience and his fellow characters. The role of the fool, no longer simply entertainment, also became a confidant and advisor. Similar to Will Kemp, Robert Armin was known for his work outside of Shakespeare's company; however, unlike Kemp, his specialty was music and singing. His lasting influence can be felt particularly in *Twelfth Night*. There are four songs that are all sung by the clown Feste, Lady Olivia's fool, which makes the play one of Shakespeare's most musical.

For Shakespeare, the fool character is a "distancing tool" that allows him to impart some type of morality to his audience. "As a dramatic character he usually stands apart from the main action of the play, having a tendency not to focus but to dissolve events, and also act as the intermediary between the stage and the auditorium" (Welsford xii). It is not to say the fool himself is a moral being but rather can operate as a sort of mouthpiece for the author by pointing out what the audience may gain from this moral. This is a result of the particular relationship that the fool has with the audience. He is one of the few people Shakespeare allowed to break the fourth wall and speak directly to and interact with the viewer. While he is the jester, he actually

speaks more truth than folly, an important distinction for both audience and characters. For instance, Feste presents the qualities in his fellow characters that the audience needs to see in order to better understand their motivations. This catalytic activity is similar to the Fool in *King Lear* because while they operate in different capacities, these two clowning characters bring clarity to the story. The distance afforded these fools from both the audience and their fellow characters puts them in a sort intermediary world from which they comment. For Feste this is most apparent in the ease with which he moves through each household in Illyria.

By distancing Feste, Shakespeare creates a very interesting dynamic of folly within Illyria. It is not only Feste who participates in jesting, but also Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's buffoon of an uncle, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, the target for nearly all of Sir Toby's jokes. Toby takes the semblance of the buffoon because of his vulgar humor and his constant drunken and disorderly conduct. Sir Andrew is the scapegoat not only for Sir Toby but also everyone else because of his gullibility and foolish nature. Feste is allowed to spend less time on general folly and more time learning as much as possible about his subjects of jest. In this way he connects to the fool's clairvoyant roots in that he keeps a careful study of each of the characters in Illyria so that he is better able to deliver his jests. Feste leaves the basic folly to others and find his own way with singing and wordplay, which is another example of his skill as a professional fool – one who is acting at his jest.

Reviewing the history of the fool is important to the analysis of Feste because he does not distinctly fit into one of these categories. His name contains the same root as festival and also fester. Feste's nature is inherently contradictory in that his occupation is for laughter-making but is himself a rather melancholy fellow. These discrepancies illuminate how Feste can be useful when examining *Twelfth Night* because the play is also created upon contradictions. Gender

versus appearance versus identity and misplaced attraction are central themes of the play and the fluidity of Feste's presentation puts him in contact with these issues.

2

FESTE AND VIOLA

Traditionally, scholarship surrounding *Twelfth Night* focuses on the gender duality found in Viola because she is sexually ambiguous in her disguise as Cesario, attracting both Olivia and Orsino. Feste presents a similar complexity of character to Viola. The figurative distance from which the Fool operates within *Twelfth Night* presents an enlightening avenue from which to explore the themes of madness, gender, class and sexuality that are all deeply rooted in this play. Feste connects both the aristocracy and the working class because he moves freely in all spaces and is not constrained by the social norms to which the other characters adhere. Feste's lack of romantic partnership leaves him better able to critique everyone around him. It is useful to approach *Twelfth Night* from the fool's perspective because one can begin to unpack the deeply rooted societal expectations of the heroine by examining the one character who is able to comment honestly and avoids repercussions for his actions. Feste operates both from the position of power of a male in a patriarchal society and as an outsider. While Viola is romantically fluid, Feste is both romantically and situationally free, not bound by class, gender or sexuality.

Feste and Viola present themselves similarly to the other characters in Illyria. Both rely on their wit and ingenuity to survive. Viola conceals her identity behind feigned masculinity and tremendous acuity while Feste hides behind a veil of mystery. Upon meeting Olivia for the first time, Viola is asked if she is a comedian (meaning actor) to which Viola replies "No, my profound heart; and yet (by the very fangs of malice I swear) I am not that I play." (1.5.185-186). Viola's statement is a subtle reference to her true gender identity as well as her noble birth without revealing herself to the Olivia. Feste, when confronted by Maria earlier in the same

scene, is hardly forthcoming about his own whereabouts. Maria chides him: “Nay, either tell me where thou hast been, or I will not open my lips so wide as a bristle may enter in way of thy excuse. My lady will hang thee for thy absence.” (Maria 1.5.1-4). In this case Feste simply evades answering by distracting Maria’s attention with bawdy jokes: “many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage” (1.5.18-19). By avoiding the truth these two characters remain in control of how they present themselves. Their presentation is important because they do what they must to survive in Illyria.

Feste, vague about his own past, does not quite see through her disguise but understands that Viola is indeed hiding something. This mutual aloofness provides a platform for these two characters to approach each other on common ground. Viola does not share with him her true nature and Feste does not allow even the audience to learn much about him. Instead, their interactions are characterized by a sort of equality gathered from their similarities as outsiders in their communities. Viola notices how Feste pays close attention to those around him after their first meeting in Act 3 Scene 1. There is an unspoken commonality between the two characters that makes a study of this dynamic and fruitful study for analyzing the play as a whole.

Feste and Viola meet multiple times throughout the play in a match of wits, both impressed by the other. They establish a common mode of communication in their wordplay. When Feste meets Sebastian, whom he thinks is Cesario, he begins on the same level of witty banter that he has come to expect from Cesario. Feste’s sarcastic and pointed remarks are intended to get a rise from the young man. In this case, Sebastian threatens bodily harm to get Feste away, which to the clown seems like an impressive act to pull one over on him, but is oddly contradictory to the previous bouts of wit between Feste and Cesario because physicality is emphasized instead of cleverness. It is interesting to note that Feste only learns of the existence

of the twins when he reappears onstage in Act 5. He, along with everyone else, is unaware of the duplicity, although he is clever enough to sense something different about Cesario from the beginning. This ignorance on the part of one who seems near clairvoyant about the rest of the characters serves to reiterate the similarities between the two characters because it displays their dual nature of identity – performative but also completely hidden.

Viola approves of Feste. She states that he is sharp enough (the right intelligence and disposition) to play a professional fool. He is not merely performing his position but rather he actually has a natural aptitude for this kind of work. She can tell that Feste lets no one escape his scrutiny.

THIS FELLOW IS WISE ENOUGH TO PLAY THE FOOL,
AND TO DO THAT WELL CRAVES A KIND OF WIT.
HE MUST OBSERVE THEIR MOOD ON WHOM HE JESTS,
THE QUALITY OF PERSONS, AND THE TIME;
AND, LIKE A HAGGARD, CHECK EVERY FEATHER
THAT COMES BEFORE HIS EYE. THIS IS A PRACTICE
AS FULL OF LABOR AS A WISE MAN'S ART;
FOR FOLLY THAT HE WISELY SHOWS IS FIT;
BUT WISE MEN, FOLLY-FALL'N, QUITE TAINT THEIR WIT.
VIOLA 3.1.62-69

In this passage Viola characterizes Feste as observant. She notes he is able to adapt to the mood or situation with ease. She also recognizes the amount of work that goes into his folly. When she states that a fool's work is like "a wise man's art," she shows an understanding that Feste must possess real knowledge about the people he is fooling. Again, this points out that Feste is not just the ordinary fool but rather lives for his work and indeed lives because of his work.

Feminist critique of Shakespeare's women is based on examining three elements: first, the stereotypes to which they are confined; second, the nature and effects of the patriarchal structure; and third, the exploration the influence of genre on the portrayal of women (Lenz,

Greene, and Neely 4). A critique of this nature provides insight to *Twelfth Night* and more importantly asks scholars to consider analysis through Feste, when played by a woman, as not necessarily more informative but contextually more accurate for a modern interpretation of this play. By looking at the play through a female-acted Feste, instead of revolutionary thoughts on gender and sexuality, which is generally assumed of *Twelfth Night*, in fact, the story serves to perpetuate the patriarchal standards of heteronormativity both sexually and romantically. From here one can explore the denied possibilities of non-binary proclivities that modern thought tends to attribute to the play, and more specifically to Viola, because Feste forces one to already acknowledge the normative standards at play due to the character's inherent power from his masculinity.

Feste Onstage

My role as Feste in the November 2015 production on *Twelfth Night*, directed by Art Horowitz at Pomona College, is a gateway to discuss the importance of the fool in dissecting the themes of gender, sexuality and marriage within the play. In this production, Feste, a character written by a man, for a man, usually older to visually represent his sage-like qualities, was played by a 21-year old woman with little consideration of a gendered appearance. Initially in the process of character development, the director and I decided to not specify a gender for the character and let it emerge, if it would, out of the rehearsal process. Because Feste has so much freedom to travel and comment, we wondered if opening up the possibility for gender fluidity would develop both the character and the gender-swapping theme of the play further.

The intention behind this decision was to heighten the deconstruction of gender that begins with Viola's disguise as a man and possibly present Feste as androgynous. Interestingly, the indecision in assigning Feste a gender resulted in a presentation of maleness. Feste, acted by

a young woman, was not in itself groundbreaking nor even challenging to common presentations of the role. This is because the character operates within all of the privileges of maleness and masculinity afforded to men within the play and within Shakespeare's time. None of the impositions of femininity, like clothes or legality of position, affected this rendition of the character in any way.

Playing Feste as a woman might lead one to assume that this gender swap is inherently feminist because allowing a woman to play a traditionally male part creates another complex and important female character but the role is more complicated than that. Feste works within the assumed positionality of a man in a patriarchal society and is unaffected by any womanly characteristics normally attributed to the sex. In this iteration of the play, the gender of the character is not swapped, merely slightly confused (all pronouns remained in original he/his/him form). It is not to say that there is no benefit for redefining female roles in Shakespeare but neither a female-acted Feste nor the character of Viola truly question the patriarchal order in the end. Viola acquiesces to change back to her "womanly weeds" and marries Orsino, which results in a loss of the power that she gained while being Cesario. Feste is able to move freely without expectations for partnership or social responsibility – he maintains his positional power.

For these reasons it is important that *Twelfth Night* be examined through the lens of the fool rather than the female romantic lead. The role of Feste is a gateway for the exploration of gender within the play, and importantly non-binary gender (meaning middle ground from which one could explore both man- and womanhood). The fact that a young woman played the role of the male clown complicates many of the exchanges between characters. Additionally, because Feste communicates with the aristocrats and the servants of both houses creates a space for analysis of the role of gender in *Twelfth Night*.

It is not the similarities between Feste and Viola which provide enough information from which to claim the fool character is as important to the function of the play as the main characters, but rather the actions of Feste that provide enough material from which to develop central themes to the story. Both of these characters open up the possibilities for gender bending within the plot and for actors. They both can operate in non-binary positions through the houses and situations in the play. Viola plays the traditional role of the female in pants and confuses amorous love between two seemingly heterosexual individuals. The fool, who is typically left out of romantic situations, is allowed to speak to whom he chooses creating relationships spanning rank and class. Feste, played by a woman, does not become androgynous nor present as male drag but rather corrupts the common conception of gender. Masculinity allows Feste a greater range of freedom and activities (evidence for why Viola chose to act as a man) because “to act like a man is thus to assume a certain authority and control, and to “be womanly” is to submit to a certain passivity” (Torr and Bottoms 4) and is also why a female-acted Feste complicates the prescribed gender roles and characteristics.

Two specific instances of how a female-acted Feste complicates the interactions between characters is in Act 2 Scene 3 with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew and Act 5 Scene 1 with Duke Orsino. Toby and Andrew are drunk and ask the fool to play a catch for them. Sir Andrew states, “By my troth, the fool has an excellent breast. I had rather than forty shillings I had such a leg, and so sweet a breath to sing, as the fool has” (2.3.19-21). This is ironic because instead of referring to biological reasons for good singing, that is chest and lungs, I do in fact have breasts and he seems to be commenting on my appearance rather than skill. In terms of this production, this joke was not played to be vulgar but was instead presented as a chuckling matter because of the casting choices. Act 5 Scene 1 presents another example: Feste is chatting with the Duke and

continually asks for more money. There is a certain energy between the two characters as Feste attempts to sweet talk Orsino out of his money. This can be interpreted as the fool with his patron, however, the interaction took a surprising turn during the run of the performance. An attractive tension between the Duke and Fool emerged. Feste and Orsino seemed to be casually flirting as Feste attempting to swindle more money from the Duke. This tension originates from a male character flirting with another male character, and also the fact that Feste was acted by a woman.

These interactions demonstrate the value of examining *Twelfth Night* through the character of Feste, especially when performed by a woman. Instead of fitting neatly into normative standards for gender and marriage like the character of Viola, a female-played Feste acknowledges the privileges of a male role within a male dominated society and then confronts the underlying radical themes by confounding the gendered perspective of the character.

3

FESTE AND THE REST

The freedom that the fool enjoys with the characters onstage and with the audience produces an interesting dynamic, which “fragments our perceptions, confusing our conceptions of reality by introducing radically different, even diametrically opposed, perspectives” (Bell 22). It is important to examine Feste’s relationship with other characters in the play to demonstrate the impact of his positionality within the structure and storyline. While he is the jester, he actually speaks more truth than folly, an important distinction for both the audience and the characters. A female-acted Feste perpetuates the norms of a male-dominated society while allowing for subtle gender fluidity. This new iteration of Feste connects with all of the characters in Illyria and complicates many interactions and ideas, which becomes the platform from which to discover the possibilities for alternative relationships and identities that are introduced in *Twelfth Night*.

Feste knows no boundaries or real position but is rather a self-conscious commentator about the events and people in the play. This function for the clown is made clear in the script by the specific ways in which Feste approaches each individual when they interact. For this production of *Twelfth Night*, the directorial decision was made that Feste appear onstage, simply observing, during scenes where he is not originally written in. For instance, in Act 1 Scene 5 when Viola as Cesario and Olivia are talking to one another, Feste, instead of taking care of Sir Toby as Olivia has bid him, sneaks back onstage to eavesdrop on the conversation and thus learns about the new young gentleman. This is important because the dialogue between Viola and Olivia divulges a large amount of information which informs action later in the play. Again

in Act 3 Scene 1, Feste listens in on Lady Olivia and Cesario. This establishes that Feste is constantly searching for new information about each of the characters and that he usually knows more than everyone thinks he does.

Feste and Orsino

Orsino spends the majority of his time talking about love and how much he loves Olivia. His language is poetic and grand, yet strangely hollow. Only when Olivia has refused all other advances sent to her by him, does Orsino finally come to see her himself. Quickly and without pause, Orsino commits himself to Viola once it is established that she is indeed a woman, leaving Olivia free to be with Sebastian. The duke is unable to “reconcile tender affection with sexual desire” towards both Olivia and Viola (significantly so when she presents as Cesario), which results in a “constant vacillation between idealization and degradation of women” (Lenz, Greene, and Neely 9). This can be seen in Act 2 Scene 4 in his conversation with Cesario. Orsino compares women with fair flowers but “being once display’d doth fall that very hour,” which implies that his devotion to the fair Olivia is nothing more than fancy rooted in desire caused by her outward appearance. His nature is not of commitment but of fancy and it is from here that Feste draws inspiration for his blessing of Orsino after his song in the same scene.

Feste, taking his cues from the Duke, approaches him on his same plane of over the top verbosity and drama.

NOW THE MELANCHOLY GOD PROTECT THEE, AND THY TAILOR
MAKE THY DOUBLET OF CHANGEABLE TAFFETA; FOR THY MIND IS A
VERY OPAL. I WOULD HAVE MEN OF SUCH CONSTANCY BE PUT TO
SEA SO THAT THEIR BUSINESS MIGHT BE EVERYTHING; AND THEIR
INTENT EVERYWHERE. FOR THAT’S IT THAT MAKES A GOOD
VOYAGE OF NOTHING. FAREWELL.

2.4.73-79

To Orsino and his pages, this speech is strange and perhaps confusing, but to the keen listener, it is the perfect reply to the grandiose Orsino. Throughout the play, the Duke exaggerates and voices emotions that, due to their repetitive nature and pompous delivery, make the character and the meaning appear hollow. Feste, using Orsino's grand manner, simply tells him he is the real fool and that if Feste had his way he would send him to sea on a voyage culminating in nothing, much like the one he is campaigning with Olivia.

Feste and Olivia

Olivia has an easy relationship with the fool. She allows him free rein to do as he pleases, especially if he is in her good graces (which he assures during his first scene). While Feste recognizes that Olivia is the head of the household, he does nothing to change his jesting around her or to necessarily abide by her rules. He hangs about with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew Aguecheek but does not get into the kind of trouble they do, quite possibly because of his unique position within the household. There is no real accountability for actions. Neil Novelli writes about Feste in a short essay in which he claims that the fool is actually quite desperate to please Olivia when they first meet. By telling Olivia he thinks her brother is in hell, Feste appears to be latching on to the nearest topic with which Olivia is concerned in order to reclaim her full attention. He is attempting to demonstrate his worth to her and the household while she is in her period of mourning.

FESTE: GOOD MADONNA, WHY MOURNEST THOU?

OLIVIA: GOOD FOOL, FOR MY BROTHER'S DEATH.

FESTE: I THINK HIS SOUL IS IN HELL, MADONNA.

OLIVIA: I KNOW HIS SOUL IS IN HEAVEN, FOOL.

FESTE: THE MORE FOOL TO MOURN FOR YOUR BROTHER'S SOUL BEING IN HEAVEN. TAKE AWAY THE FOOL, GENTLEMEN.

OLIVIA: WHAT THINK YOU OF THIS FOOL, MALVOLIO? DOTH HE NOT MEND?

1.5.67-75

While Novelli's idea presents an interesting avenue to explore, upon development for performance Feste's words seem to me not of desperation but rather to entertain and prove a point to both his lady and the audience. Here we see that Olivia is indeed not caught up in her mourning to water her chamber "with eye-offending brine" but rather is happy enough to be entertained by her fool. By calling attention to the fact that Olivia believes her brother is in heaven, he demonstrates for the audience that her grief is not so much felt but rather enacted, possibly to avoid any suitors who hope to also enjoy her family's wealthy estate. For Olivia, this joke has a strong moral purpose to show her that there is a time for mourning but also a time when one must return to life. Feste in this way serves as a motivator for Olivia to begin to enjoy her newfound power.

In comedies women are seen as generally powerful or basically equal to men (Lenz, Greene, Neely 4) This can be seen quite clearly in *Twelfth Night* by examining Olivia's position. Though her uncle, Sir Toby Belch, also lives in the house, she has the ruling power and makes the decisions for the estate. Another supposed equivalent to Olivia is Duke Orsino. While powerful in his own right, in the end, Olivia maintains control of Illyria in Act 5 as she and Orsino plan their double wedding celebration. Olivia suggests that the festivities be at her house. It should also be noted that it is she who asks for Cesario/Sebastian's hand in marriage and calls it "this act of mine" (4.3.35). Although Olivia is quick to arrange a traditional marriage, it must be noted that the "patriarchal order takes different forms and is portrayed with ranging degree of emphasis within the Shakespearean canon" meaning she is afforded a significant amount of power in controlling her own fate as compared to her tragic counterparts, like Desdemona, Ophelia and Juliet (Lenz, Greene, Neely 5).

Feste and Malvolio

The relationship between Feste and Malvolio is tenuous at best. Within their first onstage interaction in Act 1 Scene 5, it is quite clear they have never been on good terms. In fact, Malvolio's comments here spur Feste's participation in the cruel joke later in the play so that he may enact his revenge upon the dour steward. Immediately Malvolio compares Feste's wit and occupation with an infirmity to which Feste compares Malvolio's own humor to a similar sickness. Malvolio, angry at Olivia's attention to the fool, speaks thus:

I MARVEL YOUR LADYSHIP TAKES DELIGHT IN SUCH A BARREN RASCAL. I SAW HIM PUT DOWN THE OTHER DAY WITH AN ORDINARY FOOL THAT HAS NO MORE BRAIN THAN A STONE. LOOK YOU NOW, HE'S OUT OF GUARD ALREADY. UNLESS YOU LAUGH AND MINISTER OCCASION TO HIM, HE IS GAGG'D. I PROTEST I TAKE THESE WISE MEN THAT CROW SO AT THESE SET KIND OF FOOLS NO BETTER THAN THE FOOLS' ZANIES.

MALVOLIO 1.5.84-91

Malvolio's dismissal of Feste as an "ordinary fool" is particularly insulting because Feste lives his occupation and is certainly no simpleton. This is a reference to the natural fool described earlier in Chapter 1. Feste alludes to this statement in his final speech in 5.1.369-376 when he explains his part in the cruel revenge upon Malvolio. Another point of inflammatory language used by Malvolio is the claim that unless attention is paid to Feste, "he is gagg'd." Not only is Malvolio insulting the work that Feste performs but in this instance his identity as well. The freedom afforded to the fool to speak and do what he wills without repercussions is a deeply important part of the fool's self-concept. Not only does Feste take pride in his jesting ability but he relies on it to secure his place in the world. Malvolio not only insults his intelligence but his way of life. When Feste is first introduced, he has been gone from Olivia's house for a few days. It is not out of the question to assume that he was off working for money because Olivia made

the decision to so completely mourn for her brother as well as Feste's constant search for more gold for his jests.

The scene between Malvolio and Sir Topas/Feste presented a very interesting acting challenge. This moment could be quite brutal for Malvolio. In one production, Feste even stepped on the fingers of Malvolio on his way out. Because this production emphasized many of the more comedic moments I chose to explore some of the deeper characteristics of Feste that emerge out of his loneliness, such as anger and melancholy. Sir Toby bids Feste to go to Malvolio in his own voice and see how he is doing. Feste approaches but chooses to continue the ruse by bringing the parson back to torment Malvolio further. The cage where Malvolio was kept turned into the most important physical space in this scene. For ease of movement the cage was placed on wheels. It was covered with shingles and blinds so that the audience could not see through it. For emphasis, I hit my hands on the top shingles for the echo, and for the final statement of the scene, "Adieu good man devil," I shoved the cage so that it rolled away across the stage with blindfolded Malvolio stuck inside (4.2.134).

This scene between Feste and Malvolio is a climactic part in the plot because it is here that the madness all of the characters are acting and reacting to becomes embodied in the steward. Sir Toby, Maria and Feste have created a situation where Malvolio, though he insists he is not mad, does indeed question his own sanity. The practical joke is pushed too far, as Sir Toby realizes after Sir Topas visits, "I would that we were well rid of this knavery" (4.2.69-70). This is a moment with more emotion than we see from Feste in all the rest of the play. Malvolio's insult deeply affects Feste and once Sir Toby and Maria leave, he can act how he pleases towards him. The final moments of the scene where Feste sings to Malvolio, "I am gone sir and anon sir..." is a space where Feste can express how deeply he felt the insult. Malvolio was able to get to the

heart of the Feste's melancholy, which is a reason he is comfortable in a house of mourning that is caused by his outsider status and lack of any real companionship.

Upon researching Feste, one of the greatest characteristics that is discussed is the clown's melancholy. It appears he is more comfortable in a house of mourning than mirth. While it is important to recognize melancholic mood of Feste, it seems he is rather living outside the traditional role of a Fool or clown but is not stuck in his melancholy. He finds purpose in his jesting and is not singularly defined by sadness or loneliness. Any melancholic traits serve to add more complexity to his character. Feste has the time to investigate the other people in the household as well as approach the characters with more candor than if he was simply acting the fool for the aristocracy.

Feste also prides himself of being a wordsmith. When talking with Viola in Act 3 Scene 1, Feste calls himself Olivia's "corrupter of words." During exchange, Viola and Feste are bantering back and forth with wordplay. His play with words, however, does not elucidate any more information about his private life. Feste, when asked by Viola if he lives by his tabor, replies that he lives by the church. This continues into a joke about proximity so it is unclear whether or not Feste actually lives by the church because Shakespeare never specifies if the fool has a room at Olivia's house or not. Playing with words is a central tenant to the freedom that a fool experiences. As Olivia's "corrupter of words" Feste can use his position to directly comment on her actions.

In the Pomona College production of *Twelfth Night*, the play ends with a dance. The partners for each character emphasized the multiplicity of couplings presented in the play. For a moment, Olivia dances with Viola, Sebastian with Antonio and finally, Feste with Malvolio. It was the production's attempt to acknowledge the possible relationships introduced during the

play but were denied by the written ending. The partnership between Feste and Malvolio implies a sort of reconciliation between the two characters that is traditionally deemed impossible once the joke is ended and Malvolio leaves the stage during Act 5. Given the fact that usually Malvolio does not return to stage after his final exit and Feste is usually left out of any sort of pairing or relationship, this moment was unique to this production. Only after the fool said the final words and danced with Malvolio did the lights go down onstage.

Not only does this dance complicate the relationship between Feste and Malvolio but it demonstrates an important part of Feste's character. He is after all, the fool, and works for the joy and entertainment of others. While serious about his work, the clown does not take himself all that seriously. The completion of the play with the partner-swapping dance works to destabilize the normative couplings which are documented at the conclusion of the play because the alternative partners are actually presented to the audience instead of remaining as possibilities which were eliminated in the final scene.

The maddening forces of Illyria are once again at play in that they allow Feste in jest to approach Malvolio for this final dance. Further compounding the situation is the relationship created between a female-acted Feste and the male Malvolio. This act echoes Olivia's proposal to Sebastian. Like Olivia, Feste takes the lead inviting Malvolio to dance. These two characters, their relationship never before resolved, come together in a definitely comedic moment, because these characters dancing together is a ridiculous situation due to their history. This moment is also an act of gender subversion. Feste is a male character and, as such, asking a partner to dance is expected of him. However, in this case he is asking another male to dance. And to compound this further, the actor playing Feste is actually female.

Feste's relationship to all three of these characters illustrates three important ways in which Feste conducts himself in Illyria: he matches the energy of the person with whom he is interacting; he serves as a guide to both the characters and the audience, calling attention to underlying themes; and finally he works to destabilize expectations determined by social status and, when played by a female, gender.

4

THE FUNCTION OF THE FOOL

Feste “breaks down the boundary between chaos and order, but he also violates our assumption that that boundary was where we thought it was and that it had the character that we thought it had” (White 39). Feste walks the line between the madness everyone is afraid of, which can be identified as the “misplaced” affection and love, and lucidity, which forces the characters to conform to heteronormative standards: Viola is with Orsino, Olivia with Sebastian and the apparent love between Antonio and Sebastian is denied. It appears that in *Twelfth Night* the presentation of non-binary love or identities are equated with madness. The distance from which Feste observes the characters and their story provides a space within which the clown can explore some of these mad ideas about relationships as well as comment on them without being effected by them. This is particularly apparent when Feste is played by a woman because then the character can play around with different “male” or “female” characteristics in the presentation of the character to more complexly investigate interactions with other characters. Feste has and will continue to straddle the two worlds of madness and lucidity. This function of the fool is even more apparent when played by a female because the character breaks down both class and gender boundaries. It is important to recognize that the fool maintains this contradiction thereby leaving open the possibility that these relationships could exist in the world.

“Folly in *Twelfth Night* takes the form of madness and maintains its troubling persistence amid the requisite happy ending” (Bell 4). It seems that every character in *Twelfth Night* is attempting to ensure lucidity and avoid madness by any means necessary. Olivia calls her

romantic attraction to Cesario “the plague” and later, in reference to Malvolio’s affliction, characterizes herself “as mad as he, if sad and merry madness equal be” (1.5.296 and 3.4.13-14). Malvolio, when caged, questions his own sanity. Sebastian, at his wits end, questions Feste “are all the people mad?” (4.1.27). It is a common theme in Illyria to speak of madness even when speaking of oneself. There is something about Illyria that inspires people to commit strange acts and behave in peculiar manners, such as marrying one’s page, falling for someone at first sight or agreeing to marriage after knowing the person for less than a day.

“The comic world requires child bearers to perpetuate the race to ensure community and continuity; the tragic world, which abhors such reassurance, consequently shrinks from a female protagonist” (Lenz, Greene, Neely and Berggren 18). This idea can be seen in the initial pairing in the play. Viola and her contradictory sexuality loves Duke Orsino and attracts Olivia. Sebastian and Antonio’s relationship implies a romantic connection and there are many allusions to Sir Toby and Maria’s pairing. However, in the final act, all is unsettlingly reconciled into pretty matches with no real conviction by any of the characters that they have indeed made the correct choice. The dominance of heterosexual and socially acceptable matches dictates an adherence to a standard that the rest of the play seems to flout. The freedom with which characters find love in the majority of the play is one of the endearing elements of *Twelfth Night* but the stark realizations of the ending tramples any breakthroughs the subject matter may have begun. Of course, the contextual information about the playwright and the time in which the play was written are all too important when discussing these far reaching issues. It is true that heterosexual matches were singularly accepted and non-traditional marriages seldom happened in Elizabethan England. There is no denying that *Twelfth Night*, though ripe with undercurrents of dissent, eventually conforms to the preconceived notions of normalcy and societal mandates

surrounding love, marriage and sexuality. Paula S. Berggren, in her essay *The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays*, explains it thus "while the wearing of pants allows expression of a talent otherwise dampened by convention, it does not, in Shakespeare, lead to a direct challenge of the masculine order" (Lenz, Greene, Neely and Berggren 19).

The resolution of the play is one of the most interesting features about *Twelfth Night*. It is not the lovers that have the final word of the play, though Count Orsino does his best, but in fact the Fool who informs the audience that "our play is done." It is significant that Feste sings the last words of the play. With this song, Feste is offering up social commentary along with the potential of telling his own story in the process. It is a somber song that works to point out the unreality of the written ending. *Twelfth Night* provides little in ways of satisfactory endings for most of the characters. There are more questions than answers. Does Viola really accept Orsino's proposal? How does Olivia feel about marrying the wrong person, no matter the gender and identical appearance? What does Antonio feel after learning of the wedding? Does Malvolio actually provide the information about the Sea Captain?

The final scene of the play determines the fate of the characters no matter the possibilities for partners presented in the rest of the play. Feste's song reminds the audience that the "rain it raineth every day" and this is a performance, not reality: "but that's all one our play is done / and we will strive to please you every day" (5.1.406-407) There is a direct acknowledgement that the audience was there for the story the whole time and that the play will be done again very soon. This adds to the relativity of madness and lucidity – that which is real and that which is not.

"The central element in Shakespeare's treatment of women is always their sex, not as a focus of cultural observation or social criticism (though these may be discerned), but primarily as a mythic source of power, an archetypal symbol that arouses both love and loathing in the male"

(Lenz, Greene, and Neely 18) Looking through the lens of Feste forces the scholar to acknowledge the privileged position of the patriarchy within this play. One cannot ignore the perpetuation of the status quo in order to salute the undercurrents of feminist sympathy, which is so often attributed to the way Viola is presented. Feste is an important starting point for analyzing *Twelfth Night* and from him one can begin to discover that “gendered behavior is produced as a consequence of socially determined norms rather than as an outworking of any internal ‘essence’ of gender” (Judith Butler 6).

5

PLAYING THE FOOL

My November 2015 performance of Feste in *Twelfth Night* at Pomona College was an incredible culmination of research, rehearsal and hard work. I developed this character more deeply and more completely than any other before. In the process of conversations between the director and I, as well as experiments onstage during rehearsal, I discovered my own adaption of the clown Feste that influenced both my performance and this paper.

A significant influence to the way that I approached this play was a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in their 2015-16 season. It was one of the best productions of a Shakespearean work that I have ever seen, not because it was visually beautiful, but because the actors used modern inflection when they spoke the lines. Even if the words were not quite as clear because of the iambic pentameter, how the actors said the words and what they meant with that tone was incredibly clear. I focused on clarity of tone to convey meaning as I prepared my own lines so that I could present a relatable character to a contemporary college audience.

Another choice I made, which was rather more reminiscent of Will Kemp than Robert Armin, was to take the liberty to bring in modern songs simply for the enjoyment of the college audience. There are two instances where Feste is onstage by himself for a few moments and because he is the most musical of all the fools I thought it would make the most sense to sing a song. I chose first to sing “Love Lockdown” by Kanye West and then “Hotline Bling” by Drake. These are two very recognizable songs especially to the college students in the audience. The Pomona College production was produced right around the time that Drake dropped his Hotline

Bling music video where he does a very specific style of dance which I then also incorporated onstage.

Including modern idiom provided an avenue for me to take even more agency over the character of Feste by allowing me to channel things I find funny into this character that was created more than four hundred years ago. To me the inclusion of even such small moments of modern idiom is an important way in which theatre makers can present a more accessible version of Shakespeare to the average audience member. It was a trend with the original Shakespeare and the work of Will Kemp but it can also be seen in works like Disney's *Aladdin* and the character of the Genie. I have seen that production a couple of times at Disneyland and I found the show to be that much more enjoyable when the fool-like character made connections to pop culture and recent events.

Sir Topas, played by Feste when he visited Malvolio in his confinement, presents another distinct challenge to the development of Feste. He must at once be separate but also distinctly a creation of the fool. I chose to characterize Sir Topas like a Southern Preacher. I learned of this way of looking at him from *Twelfth Night of the Shakespeare in Production Series* which features notes on how the scene or lines were performed rather than translations or meanings of words. My first instinct was to deliver the lines in a grossly affected voice; however, when I took the chance to speak with a southern drawl, an entire vocabulary of movement opened up to me simply from that inflection. I felt the freedom to add an affected "Amen!" in the middle of a line, to the delight of the audience, and had a legitimate identity with which to differentiate between Sir Topas and Feste. This was important to me because I wanted to be clear but also bring the audience with me on this back and forth voyage between the Fool and Sir Topas.

Finally, in my preparation for the role of Feste, because he sings so often onstage, I took voice lessons and worked closely with the sound designer to learn and adjust the music for my own singing voice. Shakespeare wrote the words for all of the songs in *Twelfth Night* and the music was from one of the original productions, which the sound designer selected for the production. For both acting and singing, breath support is an essential skill. Most people tend to breathe high in their chest, not taking advantage of their entire breathing capacity. My vocal classes structured a practice of deep, full breathing to access the full potential resonance of my voice. Not only was this helpful for singing a Capella onstage but also for projecting my voice through the whole theatre. Seaver Theatre is a large indoor space which requires actors to send their voice all the way to the back wall in order to be clearly heard by all audience members. This was the first time that I had ever sung onstage and my challenge was to build the confidence I needed to sing, play music and act like this was the most natural thing for me to do as this character.

The music is of specific importance to *Twelfth Night*. Nowhere else does a seemingly secondary character like the fool get to have the last word, in this case song, in a Shakespearean play. In this strangely self-reflective song Feste appears to be sharing his personal story and also commenting on the drudgery of the day to day human condition. It is a fitting ending for the uncomfortable comedy because its sadness underscores the dissatisfaction of the couples. However, the tongue-in-cheek message in the last two lines, “but that’s all one our play is done, and we’ll strive to please you every day,” reminds the audience that this is indeed a play for entertainment and that Feste at his core is indeed a clown.

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