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We'll Strive to Please You Every Day:

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An Examination of Feste as Fool and Performer in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

Long, long ago and the world began,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
But that's all one, our play is done,
And we'll strive to please you every day.
(Feste, V.i.405-408)

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare weaves an intricate, carnival plot of romance and trickery. There are lovers and pirates, sailors and stewards, drunks and Puritans. And overseeing it all is one of the most intriguing characters in the play: the fool who is more than a Fool; the traveling player who mocks and triumphs over moralizers; the speaker, perhaps, of his creator's view and opinions: Feste.

Feste jests with everyone in the cast, playing to their moods and foibles in whatever way he can. Malvolio, Olivia's Puritanical steward, is the only character who consistently fails to be entertained. From their very first scene together, the intense dislike between Malvolio and Feste is established. Malvolio says of Feste, "I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal" (I.v.80-81). This comment distains Feste for his lack of worldly possessions by referring to him as "barren," and for his social position, as Malvolio speaks his criticism to Olivia, rather than deigning to speak to the Fool. Feste's dislike takes a more subtle form, constrained as he is by his unstable, peripatetic existence to please his audience. He merely wishes "God send you [Malvolio], sir, a speedy infirmity, for the better increasing your folly!" (I.v.75-76). Feste knows Malvolio has no taste for folly, and disapproves the wildness that attends any festivity. By wishing the steward illness and folly, Feste is wishing Malvolio two things Malvolio emphatically does not want. In fact, considering Malvolio's desire to

rise in the world and how low he considers such an accomplished Fool as Feste, folly is one of the things that he desires least. Feste knows this and plays on it.

This first scene shows, among other things, how well acquainted Feste and Malvolio are with each other's characters, a theme that continues throughout the play. Malvolio says of Feste, "Unless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged" (I.v.83-84), which is inarguably true; the Fool's livelihood is entirely dependent on his audience. If he means to have food to eat and a roof over his head, Feste must please those for whom he performs. In order to please, Feste must be good judge of character to know what his audience will prefer. In the Sir Topas scene, Feste shows how well he has learned Malvolio's character as he taunts the steward's "madness". Malvolio is terrified of madness, of being thought mad, as is evidenced by his repeated "I am not mad," (IV.ii.41) to Sir Topas and to Feste. Feste, both as himself and as Sir Topas, insists that reverse to a distressed Malvolio, observing that even a fool like himself will "ne'er believe a madman till [he] see[s] his brains" (IV.ii.117-118). For Malvolio, who had been ambitious of becoming Count, to be distained so by a mere traveling player must be a bitter pill to swallow.

Feste and Malvolio, festivity and ill will, carnival and reality: they are such opposites that their disagreements are inevitable and timeless. They begin their first scene in conflict, a dissonance that is never resolved. They end the play with the same enmity that they began; if they met in ten years, they would still clash. Feste observes, "The whirligig of time brings in his revenges" (V.i.376-377). Malvolio replies more fiercely, promising to "be revenged on the pack of you!" (V.i.378). This exchange emphasizes their unending cycle of conflict and revenge, revenge and conflict. It also

emphasizes the difference in their characters. Malvolio cares intensely for his revenge; his pride unable to rest until he will no longer be told, “Alas, poor fool, how they have baffled thee” (V.i.369). As discussed above, Malvolio has a horror of folly, mostly because fools and jesters are often the dregs of society. In this line, Olivia places Malvolio below even Feste, who, though a Fool, is never baffled. Feste’s use of the passive, voice makes his remark much milder. His refusal to use the personal pronoun implies that he himself will not enact the events that opportunity for revenge; that job will have to be done by the cyclical nature of fate and their relationship, the “whirligig of time” (V.i.377). Feste does not seem to care particularly about the future, and while the course of *Twelfth Night* has been diverting, he is aware that his victory over the Malvolios of the world is fleeting, and sees no reason to dwell on it.

This disassociation from past and future in the normal way is a consistent theme in Feste’s character. Unlike the other major characters in the show, Feste has no monologues, no great speeches. But he has songs. Songs performed to a variety of audiences, for a variety of reasons. The first is ‘O Mistress Mine,’ the requested love song for Sir Toby and Sir Andrew. The narrator is male, and courting, mirroring Sir Andrew’s current experience. Feste sings, “Trip not further, pretty sweeting” (II.iii.42), implying that the lady in the song is, like Olivia, avoiding her swain. This puts her in the controlling role in the relationship, an unusual position for a romantic heroine, but very fitting to Olivia and Viola, the two strong female characters in *Twelfth Night*. Feste gives Sir Andrew hope with his closing line of the first verse, “Journeys end in lovers meetings” (II.iii.43). This line also foreshadows the ending of the play, as Viola and Sebastian’s life-changing journey comes to an end with love in Illyria. As with Feste’s

wish to “send [Malvolio] a speedy infirmity, for the better increasing your folly!” (I.v.75-76), which predicts Malvolio’s sudden madness, Feste speaks truth about a future he does not yet know. In the second verse,

Present mirth hath present laughter;
What’s to come is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty,
Come and kiss me, sweet and twenty;
Youth’s a stuff will not endure.
(II.iii.48-52)

Feste sings to an oblivious Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, presenting his own peculiar ideal: to live in the moment. He is a consummate performer, living every moment disassociated with every other moment, and giving each performance as though completely new. The present, as conveyed by the song, is pleasant, especially as compared to the future.

Worrying about the future and delaying is uncertain, Feste suggests with this lyric, and it is better to enjoy what is happening in the present. The command to “Come and kiss me” (II.iii.51) while youth and love last, reiterates this idea, and the use of the present subjunctive in line 51 reinforces the notion of future uncertainty.

The song Feste sings for Orsino and Olivia is not of his making, so it lacks his love of chronological alienation. The song is one suited to his aristocratic audience, a tale of a youth dying of his love. This is not the sort of love Feste applauded to Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, but a constant, everlasting love that lives in the past. Feste’s disagreement with the moral of his song is his advice to Orsino to have “thy tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta” (II.iv.74), implying that such a changeable nature is to be advised. Feste also advises that the constant lovers of songs be “put to sea” (II.iv.76), that the ocean, that inconstant of myth and legend, may cure them of their attachment to

things that are past. Later, in 'I am Gone, Sir,' Feste considers the uncertainty of the future, but in a very different way from 'O Mistress Mine'.

I am gone, sir,
And anon, sir
I'll be with you again,
In a trice,
(IV.iii.121-124)

Feste sings, using the short lines and varied chronology (moving from present to future) to emphasize the uncertainty. This verse, however, makes no promises for joy in the present. Feste moves on to discuss Vice and madness, painting a confusing and none too happy state of existence. But Feste still implies that the future holds no more promises of happiness than the past, especially for Malvolio. Malvolio believes that when freed, he will receive justice; sanity and his future once he has regained his proper sanity are assured if only Feste will bring him some paper. The ex-steward even promises Feste that he, Malvolio, will "requite it [the fetching of paper and ink and light] in the highest degree" (IV.iii.118), as though he will be capable of such a recompense. Feste's response to this commendation is 'I am Gone, Sir,' in which he seems to recommend against trusting in the future.

This ephemeral world of a fleeting present is the one that Feste inhabits, and the one in which most of *Twelfth Night* takes place. The kingdom the shipwrecked twins find themselves in is Illyria, a made-up realm with a name that conjures illusion and magic. The season is one of joy and madness, the last gasp of Christmas gaiety before the true winter sets in. The whole play has a carnivalesque feel, where the societal boundaries of class and decency are briefly relaxed. Because of the festival time and place, Viola's great immodesty is not regarded as dreadful, as it would in any other world, and it gains her happiness and a future rather than the social exile such a stunt deserves. The other

characters are also allowed more flexibility in their actions than would normally be the case. In no realistic world would Orsino marry his serving man, or Sir Toby persecute his niece's steward as he does. There is a sense from the action of the play, and from Feste's songs, that the entire interlude is merely "a midsummer madness" (III.iv.58), out of season and fleeting. Feste, by virtue of his acquaintance with the floating world, and by his inability to be touched by the folly of it, takes the role of the Master of the Revels in this strange Twelfth Night masque. Unlike Sir Toby, who some have claimed holds this position, Feste has a part in all the plot threads. He inspires Orsino and Viola's love with his music, brings Sebastian to Olivia, and helps Sir Toby and Maria drive Malvolio to the edge of madness, all without being noticeably changed by the experience. Feste is the same person when he tells "Wit, an 't be thy will, put into a good fooling!" (I.v.31) and when he tells the audience, "Well strive to please you every day" (V.i.408). Unlike the happy lovers or the shamed Malvolio, Feste remains constant in his place as performer and entertainer.

Feste stands outside the temporary insanity of the play, yet his name implies that he must permanently inhabit a mad world, traveling from one carnival to another, living to please his audience with his jests. Feste is, before anything, a Fool. It is his chosen profession, for, as he says to Maria, "those that are fools, let them use their talents" (I.v.15), and by his success in convincing Olivia that she is more the fool than he, it is clear that he does have the talents of a Fool. The place of a Fool in society and drama is an interesting one. Drawn from the real jester in medieval and Elizabethan courts, the dramatic character "allowed Fool" (I.v.91) is isolated and almost mad, speaking in nonsense and riddles that baffle the other characters, but are always true. A good jester

can speak the perfect truth of anyone without offense. Feste is in many ways such a Fool: he is isolated from the action, and never seems to watch his tongue. But he is too recognizably human to be only a traditional Fool. He gets away with more blunt truth than most characters, but unlike the stock character, he does not always speak the truth. In his dialogue with Viola/Cesario, he says, “How quickly the wrong side [of a word] may be turned outward!” (III.i.12-13), admitting that he can (and does) twist words from their meaning. While Feste accepts, and even sometimes revels, in the title of Fool, but he also tells Cesario that he is “not her [Olivia’s] fool, but her corrupter of words” (III.i.35-36). This implies that he is both not a traditional fool and acknowledges, even more than the other observation, his ability to twist the truth. This ability seems to be related to his other realistic characteristic: a certain less than Foolish sense of the practicalities of life. As Feste says, he is not Lady Olivia’s Fool, for he has no permanent place of residence. He has been absent from court for some time, Maria implies in his first scene: he is not truly tied to Olivia’s court. As such, he has no constant source of income, room or board. To ensure that he keeps whatever place he is inhabiting, Feste must please his current patron, and everyone else, as well. When Viola pays him for her entertainment and information, she observes,

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 who he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time,
And, like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eye.
(III.i.60-65)

She sees the uncertainty and instability of Feste’s life, and his dependence of his own native wit and ability to judge character. He must be incredibly sensitive to his audience,

an attention a traditional Fool, secure in his place at court as Feste is not, need not bother with.

Feste also is more aware of the audience beyond the fourth wall than the rest of the cast, even speaking to the spectators directly in the epilogue, promising, as always, entertainment. Throughout the production, Feste's sensitivity to his audience has been established. Each song is sung to the audience it was intended for, and in so doing serves to please the intended audience. Feste, with his comprehension of all the characters around him and a finger in every pie, sees to be, by virtue of his profession, in the position of manipulating any and all of the cast. This subtle characterization implies that of all the people one knows, it is the performers that know one best. Feste's jests and hardships can be seen to mirror Shakespeare's, as the world of a London player is nearly as precarious as that of an Illyria musician and jester. Feste's major opposition in the production is Malvolio, who Maria calls a "devil [of] a puritan" (II.iii.146). This mirrors the conflict Shakespeare and his fellow player had with the Puritan elders of London. As Malvolio would like to exile Feste from Olivia's court, so the Puritan had managed to exile the theater of London beyond city limits. The parallels between Feste and his creator imply a certain similarity in their intents and abilities, as well as in their circumstances.

Feste is an odd character, fulfilling a number of thematic and plot-related purposes. He is a wise Fool, seeing and sometimes speaking the unsayable truth; he is Master of the Revels, seeing and controlling the various plots; he is an itinerant minstrel, threatened by the so gullible a moralizer as Malvolio, but still living by his wit and labour. Feste glories in the moment and in the play of words through it, not in the

romance and social position that satisfies the other characters. Though, as mentioned above, the circumstances of his life relate him to Shakespeare, this taste only for the present alienates Feste from his audience, who would have social and romantic ambitions. In 'The Wind and the Rain' Feste acknowledges his isolation. "'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gates" (V.i.395) Feste sings in relationship to reaching "man's estate" (V.i.393) or adulthood. The image suggests that in growing up, most people learn to distrust folly and foolish things that lead, as knaves, to lies and the corruption of words. Thus Feste, who lives in a land of folly and near-madness, is outside the gate of the psyche, always isolated from the normal human relationships. Yet this isolation doesn't seem to bother him, and indeed is one that any Fool must survive. Feste delivers his last lines directly to the audience, stepping away from the contrived world of the play to speak not as Feste, but as every performer everywhere. The penultimate line "That's all one, our play is done" (V.i.407) suggests the dual meaning both that this production is over, and that the period of fun and pleasure must come to an end, and one must now be serious. The affirmation of purpose comes after that return to seriousness, lending unexpected weight. "We'll strive to please you every day," (V.i.408) Feste says firmly, telling the audience that the effort he put to please the other characters is the same effort expended by performers for every audience. Feste controls so many subplots by virtue of understanding his audience. If the actor playing Feste and his fellow players (for it is to be remembered that he uses the first person plural form in the final verse) have succeeded in pleasing the audience as well as Feste ever please the Countess, do those same players have the same control over and understanding of their audience that Feste had of the various machinations and motivations of his audiences?

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