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“What’s to come is still unsure”: Madness and Deferral in Nunn’s Twelfth Night

by ERIC C. BROWN

SHAKESPEARE’S Twelfth Night, or What You Will evokes an immediate concern with time both by its suggested occasionality and its self-effacing title(s). In Kenneth Rothwell’s recent analysis of Trevor Nunn’s 1996 adaptation, he describes the inherent liminality of this “Christian feast day of ‘Twelfth Night’ (January 6),” which both “terminates the Twelve Days of Christmas, and shadows forth Lent” (238). Further, the play’s main title insists on a heightened present, the twelfth-night holiday, while its subtitle suggests a displacement not only of the first title but of the present by the future. What one will do always threatens to alter what one is doing. The Elizabethan sense of “will” is of course manifold; its primary literal significance for the play seems “wish” or “prefer,” as when Olivia commands Malvolio to dismiss the Count Orsino’s servant with some excuse: “I am sick, or not at home—what you will, to dismiss it” (I.v.108-09). Yet even these hopeful imperatives promote a liminality, a demarcation between present and future. The play likewise blends the now with the still-to-come, as Feste’s song “O mistress mine” underscores: “What is love? ’Tis not hereafter; / Present mirth hath present laughter; / What’s to come is still unsure. / In delay there lies no plenty, / ... / Youth’s a stuff will not endure” (II.iii.47-52). In Nunn’s Twelfth Night, Ben Kingsley’s rendition mutes the exhortative, carpe diem trope to convey a bittersweet ambivalence. For nearly all the characters in Twelfth Night struggle with continual delay and deferral, a strain Feste’s listeners seem to acknowledge as they avert their eyes from one another upon the song’s conclusion. The tension between “present mirth” and “what’s to come” creates a whorl of forces, summed well by the film’s final image of Feste swept away as if by the “whirligig of time” (V.i.376), twirling like a top down the seacoast ridge. But throughout, the film manages to express powerful centripetal and centrifugal forces; the former pulls towards a finite present, a realm of mirth and laughter, while the latter spins outward towards the future, the past, and all that is not now. For characters caught in this vortex, the tension disturbs to the point of madness, deriving from an inability to reconcile one’s present circumstances with an expected future always in deferral. ¹ Tracing this pattern reveals the manner in which Nunn conveys cin-

¹ For some additional views, including the point that “Shakespeare uses such words as ‘mad’ and ‘madness’ more often in Twelfth Night than in any of his other plays” (105), see Daalder. A fuller reading of madness in Shakespeare can be found in Neely, who also provides a valuable recitation of the major critical arguments.

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ematically both the levity and gravity of a play that many critics have rightly
demned one of Shakespeare’s darkest comedies.2

The temporal conflict between present mirth and future uncertainty consis-
tutes a particular species of early modern madness. In The Anatomy of
Melancholy (1621), Burton describes the condition as part of a “concupisci-
ble appetite,” incorporating ambition, love of women, and those who are, as
Olivia charges Malvolio, “sick of self-love” (I.v.96): “with what waking
nights, painful hours, anxious thoughts, and bitterness of mind, betwixt hope
and fear, distracted and tired, they consume the interim of their time. There
can be no greater plague for the present” (243). Malvolio’s concupiscence
may be most readily diagnosed (Nunn has him wide awake in the middle of
the night, engrossed in the pages of Amour, and develops his malady fully in
the garden scene), but the main characters all participate in the “painful
hours” caught between hope, fear, and uncertainty. This “plague” must be
reconciled with the present, as Viola suggests with her decision to join
Orsino’s court, and “What else may hap, to time I will commit” (I.ii.60),
though most figures in the film achieve only a semblance of union with their
imagined futures, and only in the final scenes. Thus while Nunn employs
Viola in the vanguard of this struggle against perpetual deferral, which can
prompt both a “sad and merry madness,” as Olivia will describe it (III.iv.15),
the film treats these categories of “sad” and “merry” as largely overlapping.
The ultimate inclusion of proactive Viola and the ultimate exclusion of reac-
tive Malvolio derive from the same tension, and several scenes juxtapose
these two figures even as the whirligig of time spins them in opposite direc-
tions. The suggestions of madness in the play, then, are drawn forth by Nunn
as a series of moments in which promised futures move tantalizingly away,
even as uncertain futures wind their way unexpectedly into the present to cre-
ate a “golden time” of partial rapprochement.

The film itself begins in a state of textual deferral: Shakespeare’s urgent
opening lines, “If music be the food of love, play on,” are displaced by
Nunn’s vision of the tempest-tossed shipwreck of Viola and Sebastian. And
the initial voice-over—“I’ll tell thee a tale ... now”—assertively contrasts
Shakespeare’s original, conditional “If.” So too the narration forecasts clearly
the tension of what’s to come with what is, assertively and emphatically,
now. But uncertainty clouds this storytelling; the visual effects of the opening
scenes approximate the whirlpool of tension plaguing so many characters.
Just before the ship sinks, for instance, the performance of Viola and
Sebastian presents their identities and gender as already indeterminate. They
appear successively as veiled women (whose voices are cracking), musta-
chioed cross-dressers, and finally—apparently—man and woman, though

2. Crowl notes its “darker” sensibility as compared with Branagh’s Much Ado About Nothing, and argues
Nunn even “exaggerates” the play’s already problematic conclusion, “sponsoring a mass exodus of principal
characters at the film’s end” (37). Rothwell puts this somewhat differently: “The fashionably melancholy
Illyrians in their desire for love, and frustration in not being loved, reflect various stages of order and disorder,
with little Viola/Cesario at the still center of a whirligig of emotions” (238). On earlier film adaptations, see
Osborne, Trick of Singularity 105-36.
Viola notably moves to remove the facial hair from her brother, as if a final revelation awaits, had it not been interrupted by the ship’s jarring catastrophe. Thus gender lines are hardly ever “straight” but asymptotic, always nearing and becoming but never reaching or being. Other visual references for this deferral will include Olivia and Cesario almost but not quite kissing, later mirrored by Orsino and Cesario, Andrew Aguecheek repeatedly shut out from Olivia’s garden, and Antonio and Olivia both interrupting sword duels. Part of a recurrent image of rushing, swirling water, Viola and Sebastian are then plunged into the sea. And in a crosscutting sequence that counterpoints the chaos on deck with the relative serenity below the waves, the twins for a brief moment are suspended, hand in hand, beneath crashing waters. Until, that is, the undercurrents draw them apart. The scene neatly encapsulates the forces at work in the play as a whole: a threat of centrifugal uncertainty at odds with even the most tenuous attempts at comic reunion and reconciliation.

The opening sequence gains further coherence later in the film, when Feste echoes the near-drownings of brother and sister in his observance of drunken men who progress through libations as a fool, madman, and finally a drowned man: “One draught above heat makes him a fool, the second mads him, and a third drowns him” (I.v.131-32). The drowning of the mad, in Feste’s continuum, becomes reversed in Nunn’s opening, transformed into the maddening of the (near-) drowned. And imagistically, the scene also reverses Feste’s conceit, proceeding instead from inebriation to sobriety: surging waves batter the ship, and table after table of wine glasses crash to the floor. It is ironically the loss of drink that foreshadows the imminent drownings. The Tempest subtext—Rothwell calls it a “Titanic trope” (238)—thus matters less here than the movement from festive revelry to abstinent distress, from present mirth to uncertain future. The film flows from this initial (deferred) drowning into the madcap, metaphorical drownings of the plot proper. While crapulent men like Sir Toby Belch combine the mad, foolish, and drowned man, other characters mingle their drownings and surfacings with equal ease. Olivia’s sunken misery, for instance, gives way to mirth as quickly as Helena Bonham Carter’s black dress is replaced by her turquoise. And Crowl rightly observes that drowning is “a literal prologue to the emotional turbulence that will follow,” especially since the sea never really leaves Illyria: “It seems to surround [Orsino’s] craggy castle, and it is evoked to image his immature insistence on his capacity for love ... [b]ut it is more subtly associated with Viola/Cesario, who comes out of the sea to bring both emotional disturbance and spiritual balance”; even Olivia’s inland estate has

3. For an extended look at voice and gender in this scene, see Burt 176-79. Though he writes that the “gesture of removing the moustache is completed at the end of the film when Sebastian and Viola are reunited” (277 n. 23), the reunion merely recycles Sebastian’s removal of Viola/Cesario’s facial hair, as with the opening scene: final revelation remains deferred. Nevertheless, Burt’s argument that “the film raises the possibility of an infinite regress of false revelations in which any gender marker always has to be put in quotation marks as a performative signifier” (177) helps locate the trajectory of this film as one of approach rather than attainment.
“garden paths lined with small conches and the wall of the garden’s grotto ... made with a mosaic of seashells” (37). Characters seem to remain submerged in a seascape, an array of pelagic images that suggest that the frustrated attempts at reunion in the opening underwater scenes are being recast and replayed throughout the entire film.

When Viola and her fellows land on the coast of Illyria, the shoreline quickly tenses with a favorite Shakespearean paradox, uncertain safety, and Nunn stresses the imminence of danger. Advancing soldiers comb the beach for survivors, and the screenplay omits the Captain’s pacifying words to Viola concerning her brother’s being “most provident in peril” (I.ii.12). The omission makes, conversely, the perils of providence all the more poignant in the film: Sebastian ought not to have more certitude about the future than other figures. His foresight would not only undermine the uncertainty Nunn locates in Viola, but the menace of the future in general. Here begins, too, a visual pattern to which Nunn repeatedly turns, guiding his characters through a chiaroscuro vision of light and dark. The beach sequence exhibits only a hint: a half-lit cavern, the black silhouettes of horsemen against a pale blue sky, perhaps, too, the black and white piano keyboard floating aimlessly in the tide. But these brief images are enough to suggest juxtapositions that will later vividly emblematize madness itself: Malvolio locked in a house “as dark as ignorance” (IV.ii.45), unwittingly participating in his own ignorant madness while vainly proclaiming his clear vision. The perception of light and dark consequently heightens the temporal difference between known and unknown, surety and uncertainty, present and impenetrable future.

The differences in light and dark are further exemplified by the relative depictions of Orsino’s and Olivia’s households. The saturnine world of the Duke’s court is often a darkly chambered abode where absolute blackness seems ready to engulf its inhabitants, as in the scenes of the parlor, billiard hall, and bathhouse, but culminating in the blustery night when the evidently erotic tension between the Duke and Cesario reaches its climax. A favored technique of Nunn’s is to begin a shot focusing on a window, and then pan away to subsume an interior area, thus capturing a sense of audience as voyeur, peeping through the apertures into the filmic world, but also paradoxically strengthening the sense of enclosure in that world. The first view of Orsino’s inner chambers commences with a stained glass window, perhaps the “storied windows richly dight, / Casting a dim religious light” of Milton’s homage to melancholy, II Penseroso. However, Orsino’s melancholic world barely resembles Olivia’s even at her most mournful. Rather, Nunn offers a visual pun: Olivia’s “mourning” light interwoven with a chilly “morning” sunlight. The often stark use of sunbeams and shadow around her estate are in constant flux as well. Sir Toby, chafing at the strict lamentation of the house, sheds heavy tapestries to illuminate a ballroom. Upon his return, the clown mimics this revelation when he raises Olivia’s dense veil, and her first encounter with Cesario plays on both images when the countess herself discloses her visage: “we will draw the curtain, and show you the picture”
Cesario subsequently throws a sudden light upon Olivia with yet another sweeping away of a curtain. Each of these instances betokens the impending alleviation of Olivia’s grief, but also provides a transition from grief to the impassioned madness of Olivia. Not knowing—not seeing past the veil of the future, but always through a glass darkly—elaborates the madness of Burton’s “concupisent appetites,” who suffer “betwixt hope and fear,” consuming the “interim” of their time. And although Olivia “will draw the curtain” (I.v.233) here, her subsequent madness of hope and fear culminates in a further veiling—her white wedding veil. Even the lifting of that veil by Sebastian, glimpsed by Feste outside the church, is not one of pure revelation (still deluded by hope of Cesario); that remains for the “golden time” when future and present finally merge.

Aiding this visual contrast are the “distinctive temporal strategies of film”; Laurie Osborne outlines Nunn’s technique: “he films continuous scenic sequences across a series of settings; he crosscuts pairs of scenes, like 2.3 and 2.4, so that continuous action becomes discontinuous by virtue of apparently simultaneous interactions between two scenes; and he literally divides up both scenes between Viola and Orsino and spreads them throughout the play” (“Cutting up Characters” 94). In his use of crosscutting, especially, Nunn creates a temporal disruption in the text that mirrors the temporal divisions unfolding in the film’s thematics: that tension between an inward, stabilizing, seemingly constant present, and the outward, destabilizing, apparently mutable future. Time divides characters from one another and from themselves (complicated in a play that implicitly questions constructions of identity—is Viola separated more from Cesario than Sebastian?). As Montaigne aptly put it, “we are always outside ourselves. Fear, desire, hope, impel us towards the future; they rob us of feelings and concerns for what now is” (11). Insofar as this breaks down to concepts of present mirth and uncertain futures, Nunn’s splitting of the text further interrogates time’s linear continuity: what is to come, when scenes ostensibly in the future can interpenetrate those in the “present,” creating an illusion of simultaneity? Thus the crosscutting of Sebastian and Malvolio’s proclamations of madness/not madness unsettles textual certainty even as Feste’s “Oh Mistress Mine” both unsettles and develops present mirth, or even as Sebastian and Malvolio each unsettle one another’s crosscut claims. The song “Oh Mistress Mine,” in particular, dislodges the sequence of narration: thanks to Aguecheek’s distaste “for good life” (II.iii.38), Feste revisits in Olivia’s kitchen the same song the twins began (but never finished) on their doomed voyage. Further, the song is itself intercut with the scene of Orsino’s card table tête-à-tête with Cesario, the melody played on piano in the background, since rather than “Come away, come away death,” it is apparently Orsino’s requested “old and antique song we heard last night” (II.iv.3). The song encapsulates the presiding tensions of the film—“present mirth” and “What’s to come”—and Nunn’s placement allows it to resonate further with Orsino and Cesario agreeing “women are as roses,” “To die, even when they to perfection grow” (II.iv.39, 41). The future
of love, of mirth, is always in deferral, never now but passing away even as it matures to “perfection.” So too linear continuity in the film, both in relation to the play text and itself, is displaced by scenes that ever look backwards and forwards (perhaps governed by the two-faced deity Janus, whose month subsumes Twelfth Night), while simultaneously making the audience aware of simultaneity itself.

A further consequence of the madness among the characters is the slippage of identity, already hallmarked by the gendered indeterminacy of Sebastian and Viola at the film’s opening, by the Viola/Cesario combination, and by the divided selves of characters always already “outside themselves,” consuming time with thoughts of what’s to come. Identity switches as readily as letters in a word, as in the anagrammatic names “Olivia,” “Viola,” and even “Malvolio.” (Hence the Duke unknowingly anticipates his own eventual union when he notes the “sweet sound / That breathes upon a bank of vio­lets” [I.i.5-6]—music played by Viola herself in Nunn’s version—and later Viola when she tells the Countess Olivia, “I hold the olive in my hand” [Lv.210].) Nunn plays up a more telling slippage in language when Olivia, called “madam” in three successive lines by Maria, orders Cesario be met at her gate by Malvolio, replacing Sir Toby who “speaks nothing but madman” (I.v.106-07). That Malvolio should supplant here a madman for his madam is further ironic. For Olivia’s later ultimatum to Cesario prepares for the subsequent incarceration of her steward: “If you be [mad], be gone. If you have reason, be brief” (I.v.199-200, Nunn’s emendation of “not mad” in the Folio text). Those who speak “nothing but madman” must be displaced, deferred. Those who are mad, who are driven beyond themselves by that centrifugal force of the future, have no place in the realm of present mirth. However, since until the very end of the film all of Illyria appears swept away by that force, differentiating those finally included (Orsino, Olivia, Viola, Sebastian) in a mirthful present from those expelled (Feste, Andrew, Toby, Maria, Antonio, Malvolio) becomes an exploration of that “sad and merry madness” that lends them commonality in the first place.

Viola, played deftly by Imogen Stubbs, is tugged in at least two directions, evidenced by her ability in the opening sequence to “sing both high and low” (II.iii.41). Male and female, desired and desiring, Viola serves as a mythical hermaphrodite: a fusion of lover (Aphrodite) and messenger (Hermes). Even as a masculine figure, however, she embodies a liminal state. Her request to be presented to Orsino “as an eunuch” (I.i.56) is replaced by Nunn with a request to be presented as “a boy.” No longer lacking sexual function, Viola as “boy” is sexuality in potentia, awaiting the inevitable metamorphosis of puberty. Her sexuality is not removed but deferred, a condition she must maintain “like Patience on a monument” (II.iv.114). Yet this identifier is also challenged soon by Malvolio, who introduces Cesario to Olivia as “Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy” (Lv.156-57). In this version, then, Viola exists less in two worlds than in neither, and indeterminacy impels her constant motion between the courts of
Orsino and Olivia. Indeed, Nunn spends a great deal of the film tracing Cesario’s travels, locating especially the soliloquies (as “Fortune forbid my outside have not charm’d her,” II.ii) explicitly between either locale. Viola maneuvers between realms and identities with such fluidity that her outside and her inside lose distinction. Moreover, her merging and diverging identities seem to afford an awareness of time’s part in the confusion, an insight into the maddening separation of present and future, and importantly an acquiescence to uncertainty. Upon realizing Olivia’s enamorment, she remarks, “O time, thou must entangle this, not I, / It is too hard a knot for me t’ untie” (II.ii.40-41). The knotted tension, created and eventually unraveled by time, fosters Viola’s mobility and agency. She is ever beyond Olivia’s reach (“Poor lady, she were better love a dream” [II.ii.26]), ever within Orsino’s, and seemingly willing to persevere in that state of indeterminacy. For this reason, she is prepared when present mirth finally comprehends uncertainty, and she can be included when that “solemn combination shall be made” of “dear souls” (V.i.383-34).

At an opposite extreme, Richard E. Grant’s Andrew Aguecheek is locked also in continual deferral, but his delays result rather from interruption and stagnation than oscillation and movement. He has door upon door slammed in his face, and likewise is unable to pass over a threshold from his position of perpetual “outsider.” Similarly, his grotesque dancings are quashed by Malvolio’s hawkish glares, and even when he tries overperching a garden wall rather than passing through the portal, he crashes into the glass of a greenhouse on the other side. Lost in the madness of concupiscible appetite, he remains largely static and alienated throughout. His stagnant moments—becoming stuck in a croquet wicket, threatening to exit but always returning, toting about an empty bird cage (a double conceit—restraining and inert), waiting for Viola to move first in their duel—maintain this exteriority complex. He seems madly frozen between hope and fear of what’s to come, a malady he shares with Antonio, also excluded from the film’s comic resolution. Antonio (Nicholas Farrell) first appears on the ship, entranced and alone on the fringes of the audience gathered to hear the twins’ performance. It is a position he never really leaves, always just a step behind Sebastian. Shakespeare discloses his anxiety over that gap: “I could not stay behind you. My desire / (More sharp than filed steel) did spur me forth” (III.iii.4-5). Concerned for Sebastian’s safety, he more bluntly adds a few lines later, “My willing love, / The rather by these arguments of fear, / Set forth in your pursuit” (III.iii.11-13). Farrell only reveals a bit, “But not all love to see you, you sir are a stranger in these parts,” but the frustrations of his desire to join with Sebastian, and the permanency of his concern for future things just beyond

4. On the collapse of gender categories in this play, see Howard and Osborne, “Cutting up,” exp. 190-03, who articulates the “comparable abilities of the twins as entertainers,” both on the ship and in their sleight-of-hand coin tricks, as well as Viola’s “rough equality to her brother which extends beyond dress. This Viola plays cards and billiards as well or better than a man ... ; ‘Cesario’ even (for once) acquits himself well in the duel” (102).
his grasp, become clear when he, too, gathers a coat tightly about and leaves Sebastian behind.

More than any other figure, however, Nigel Hawthorne’s Malvolio is the key to the tension between present and future, between sanity and madness. Certainly Hawthorne plays him from the beginning as somewhat less “sane” than merely “sanitary”—he is obsessive, compulsive, ultra-orderly. He is so aware of order’s implications, in fact, that in one early scene he is notably the last to leave in Olivia’s train from the church (implicitly therefore greatest in piety, and apparently more willing to grieve for Olivia’s losses than she). In short he embodies a force attempting to rule misrule, to rein in forces spinning out of control, to exert some dominion over time itself. Confronting the caterwauling quartet of Toby, Andrew, Maria, and Feste, Malvolio demands, “My masters, are you mad? ... Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?” (II.iii.86-92). For Malvolio, the proper ordering of time is concomitant with sanity; thus the time of night alone makes their behavior inappropriate, even “mad.” To this accusation, Sir Toby responds with a jest, educating “time” as the primary conflict: “We did keep time, sir, in our catches” (II.iii.93-94). Their respect for the rhythmic timing of their songs (punctuated by the loud beating of pots and pans) displays utter disregard for the flow of time as Malvolio conceives it. Maria disparages him as a “time-pleaser” (II.iii.148), one who seeks flattery by affecting trends. But the implication is that Malvolio also keeps his time well-ordered and certain, not deranged. Fittingly, Toby, Andrew, and Maria will dupe him by tempting him to lose control, to let his concern for the future gain sway over his fastidiousness over the present. By the end of this scene, Toby and Andrew remain disruptive of time’s order, concluding that “’tis too late to go to bed now” (II.iii.190-91). They project that pattern of disorder onto Malvolio in the ensuing garden scene.

That scene begins with Malvolio strolling through chilly air, pausing momentarily to adjust the time on the sundial to his own pocket watch, a last emblem of his control over both time and his sanity. For Malvolio is already off guard, transported from the present and relishing aloud his fantasies of future marriage and dominion. In his fantasy, delivered upon a throne-like alcove in the garden, he maintains a control over time, but is able to extend it to Sir Toby as well: “I frown the while, and perchance wind up my watch.... Toby approaches; curties there to me—” (II.v.59-61). He envisions a clockwork court, where subjects follow a natural flow of time, order, and degree. As easily as he might manipulate the gears of a slowed or stopped watch, he aims to mend the drinking and the stagnant present mirth of Toby, since Malvolio’s mirth is all of the future variety, “still to come.” His discovery of the letter snaps him back to the present, and Hawthorne evokes a conventional Renaissance trope here, not carpe diem but carpe florem; if “in delay there lies no plenty,” one must “stop and smell the roses.” In Malvolio’s appropriation, erotic overtones illuminate the ecstasy of the moment. For though he does not exactly stop to smell the roses, he is arrested
by the scented envelope, a fragrance that he recognizes instantly: “’Tis my lady” (II.v.93). The conflict in this attention to the moment, and the epistolary riddles within riddles, lead him on to false revelation and, finally, a contorted grimace that owes something to Hawthorne’s previous mugs in *The Madness of King George*. The riddle condenses the play’s present and future tensions: the sequence of the letters “M.O.A.I.” is out of joint: or, as Malvolio remarks, “there is no consonancy in the sequel that suffers under probation: A should follow, but O does” (II.v.129-31). And so he must “crush this a little” (II.v.140) and enforce the same control over literal chaos that he has attempted to exert over the household. The letters are out of order, and so too Malvolio’s time. His deferred future, full of “rich jewels” and Jovial power (he later thanks ironically this king of gods, revealing his prideful alignment with all things mighty even when he is most clearly duped), has become abruptly, imaginatively, his present. The prospect of ruling over Sir Toby’s drunken carelessness has become tangible. Unfortunately for Malvolio, the prospects are but illusions, driving him headlong into a delusional future. He imagines his “golden time” has arrived, that his ambitions and other concupiscent appetites have enlivened and not plagued his present. But even Malvolio’s calculated attempt to correct the time on the garden sundial cannot reprove the temporal forces that finally will blind, bind, and discard him.

The garden scene evokes, too, the paradoxical landscape of Nunn’s film. Cold but sunny, dead leaves but spots of greenery, much of Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* occupies a liminal world seemingly suspended at the horizon of “daylight and champian” (II.v.160). Like the reddened sun in several scenes (Viola washed onto the beach, Feste pirouetting down an escarpment), the film seems always on the verge of rising (or setting) into another time without ever quite finalizing it. The time of year is apparently autumn, but could as well be an interseason between winter and spring. The ambiguity of the transition marks the play as a whole: are we witnessing a decay into the winter of old age, as Nunn proposes of Toby, Maria, and Andrew, “trying to parade to the world as young,” but “aware that the parade is passing them by” (“About the Production”)? Or are we to see maturation from a discontented winter into a glorious summer, as with the “four principal lovers ... played as teenagers, all on the verge of adulthood, all rocked by recent traumas”

5. Some textual critics take Malvolio’s reference here (and throughout) to be a replacement for an original “God,” censored due to the antiprofanity statute of 1606 (see Evans 457n.). Nunn does replace with “God” Malvolio’s later references to “Jove,” at III.v.74-75, but by keeping intact the allusion at II.v.178, he maintains the irony of the “jovial” and imperious in Malvolio’s new-found mirth.

6. The on-line “About the Production” notes refer to “[s]hooting on location in November,” when “the sky was dark by mid-afternoon. Cornwall, secretive and lush in late summer, blazed with deciduous colors in the autumn. In the smoky twilight at Lanhydrock, the red and yellow leaves shone dullly in the park, like coals.” Nunn is quoted as saying, “*Twelfth Night* is the most autumnal of Shakespeare’s comedies because it touches on mortality, the end of youth, and how fleeting our lives are. I can’t claim that when I set out on the project I was imagining it would be quite as autumnal as it proved, because my original idea was to get going several weeks earlier; but we were much blessed by the God of irony. We had some wonderful patches of weather and a most glorious autumn, much of which we managed to capture on film. We have a denouement that could benefit from some sunshine and we’re not getting it; but then Shakespeare did round off his play with the song ‘the rain it raineth every day’ so that’s all right too.”
Malvolio’s golden time commences

(“About the Production”)? The time of year suggests the simultaneity of these alternatives. There is, too, a frozen quality to the stark and barren trees, or the dried floral decor of Olivia’s sitting room, or the statuary that Malvolio fondles in lieu of his beloved countess. And the ostensible time covered by the action—we learn from Orsino later that Cesario has attended on him three months—alters nothing in the appearance. Images of change and transition swirl about steadfast permanencies. Even Nunn’s attention to the seacoast, a horizontal blend of earth’s solidity and water’s flux, attests to the tension between constancy and change. This tug of war inherent in time, the present threatening to slide into the future while also trying to remain stalwart and unchanging, still a present, still now, thus forms the foundation for the film’s time as well as the tension around which its characters fall into the madness of love, ambition, desire. Feste suggests of Orsino that “men of such [i.e., no] constancy put to sea, that their business might be every thing and their intent every where” (II.iv.75-77). The ways of water are fickle, approaching a solid shore if only to undermine and transform it. When seafarers come to land in Illyria, however, they seem to bring the tidal ebb and flow of constancy and inconstancy with them. Not only Orsino seems susceptible to it.

Convinced of Olivia’s love, and that “[n]othing that can be can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes” (III.iv.81-82), Malvolio practises his smiling while standing at his window, a rehearsal Cesario witnesses and from which Malvolio then immediately recoils. The two figures—steward and servant through a looking glass—are each embarrassed in their own
way. He retreats in a contorted huff, she shrugs confusedly. Briefly, this scene mirrors their respective dissembling: just as Viola has practiced walking, talking, fencing, and riding like a man, disguising her true nature, so, too, Malvolio exercises previously neglected mannerisms in order to be assimilated into a world that his present demeanor ill suits. In a 1997 interview, Nunn confirms this comparison: ‘I think [Shakespeare] was writing not only about ‘disguise’ in the outward physical sense (with Viola changing herself into her brother), but disguise in the sense of hypocrisy, the face that you present to the world as opposed to what you are really like inside, and that’s obviously the case with Malvolio’ (90). Though he seems disgruntled in the window, he nevertheless soon appears within his lady’s chamber, cross-gartered in yellow stockings and grinning like an animate gargoyle. His gallivanting prompts Olivia to declare, ‘Why, this is very midsummer madness’ (III.iv.56), a pronouncement that locates Malvolio’s madness within temporal parameters.\footnote{The Love Letter (dir. Dan Curtis, 1998), another film that toys with the convention of mistaken epistolary love, alludes to its Shakespearean precursor when the central character, Helen (Kate Capshaw), scribbles on her quote-of-the-day chalkboard, “This is very midsummer madness.”} For Malvolio, no longer respecting “persons, place, or time,” his desired and deferred future has seemingly become his present; but for Olivia, this collision of times is incongruous. His mad behavior more befits a time not yet arrived, midsummer, and her present time cannot accept or contain it. She dismisses him from her presence and does not interact with him again until the end of the film. Malvolio, meanwhile, assures the tormenting Toby, Maria, and Fabian, “I am not of your element” (III.iv.124). Hawthorne delivers the line while peremptorily mounting a staircase, as if given ballast to reach the second floor by the rise of his fortunes. His final proclamation, “You shall know more hereafter” (III.iv.124-25), ironically undermines the very premise Malvolio has been entertaining: “What is love? ’Tis not hereafter, what’s to come is still unsure.” Of course, Toby and the others already know more than Malvolio perceives. By asserting they shall know more, he reveals a pompous opposition to “present mirth,” though he believes just the opposite. In Malvolio’s final speech he will again climb the staircase, whose semi-spiral (accentuated in the end by the sinuous arrangement of servants trailing down and along it) suggests Malvolio’s centrifugal expulsion, only to stumble near its summit. The collapse demonstrates how so many forces in the film, like the fortunes of a steward, loom just out of reach.

The play of madness and deferral finally reaches a fervor during the contrapuntal scenes of Malvolio’s cross-examination by the Clown and Sebastian’s interrogation of himself. The steward desperately defends his sanity, while the twin passionately questions his own; Malvolio’s freedom and sanity both are denied, while Sebastian’s are embraced by an even more “improbable fiction”: his sudden betrothal to an unknown beloved. When Olivia first actively and ineffectually woos Cesario in the garden, she despairs, “The clock upbraids me with the waste of time” (III.i.130). In rec-
ompense for this lost time, she rushes to him with the words “Blame not this haste of mine” (IV.iii.22), replacing her waste with haste. The interplay of light and dark also reaches its height here as the mood itself darkens; alternating cuts help point out how far Malvolio, now in a stygian cell, is removed from his “daylight and champion.” Maria, now disturbed, looks on disapprovingly at the treatment of Malvolio which she herself once gladly catalyzed. So too Feste, who has just remarked to Sebastian, “nothing that is so is so” (IV.i.8-9), changes his tune in the guise of Master Topas to “That that is is” (IV.ii.14). Bedraggled, dirty, desperate, Malvolio finds himself now humiliated publicly. The dispute over his sanity depends partly on his perception of light and dark; he says rightly, “they have laid me here in hideous darkness … I am not mad” (IV.ii.29-30), to which the Clown also responds rightly, “it hath bay windows transparent as barricades” (IV.ii.36-37). Differences between light and dark collapse along with other differences in the play: male and female, mad and sane, present and future.

Conversely, Sebastian is relatively sunbathed. Rapid cuts between him and Malvolio find the former rather claiming madness then denying it, “Or else the lady’s mad” (IV.iii.16). Interestingly, Sebastian assures himself Olivia cannot be mad, since “if ’twere so, / She could not sway her house, command her followers” (IV.iii.16-17), or in other words perform exactly as Malvolio has done. The conflation of madam and madman returns. But when the slats are finally shut on Malvolio, with Sebastian rushing off to wed Olivia, two images remain: one of deceit spun into wider and wider circles, the other of deceit drawn together more and more closely. As Olivia remarks in the play, though not on screen, regarding Malvolio, “I am as mad as he, / If sad and merry madness equal be” (III.iv.14-15). Malvolio is left waiting, his fate and fortune again deferred beyond his capacity to comprehend, while Olivia’s hopes are answered. The dichotomy here is nevertheless a false one, as Nunn will emphasize: both sadness and merriment, for many characters, are equal partners in the whirligig of time. And the pull of one against the other leads to as much disjunction as reunion—those who can sustain the combination, who can with Viola permit time to unknot itself, make it to the last dance.

In the film’s final scenes, Nunn recasts a few of his prior images. Recontextualizing Malvolio’s fondness for Olivia in the form of sculpture, Orsino in confrontation refers to her as a “marble-breasted tyrant still” (V.i.124). If Malvolio’s statue appeared as a kind of Venus rising from the seashell alcove, Orsino constructs Olivia here as a frozen, frigid, “still” heroine, one from whom he gains not even the petrified embrace Malvolio receives. (Malvolio’s fondling of the garden statue prepares for his consequent clasping of Olivia in her chamber, Hawthorne effecting approximately the same body language in each scene.) The cycling of these images creates a
kind of tidal undertow, the film demanding to be again read Janus-like, backwards and forwards against itself. Such collisions are rampant in the last scenes, as when the deferred future rushes into the present in Olivia's lines to the priest. "Father, I charge thee by thy reverence / Here to unfold, what lately we intended / To keep in darkness," a line continued by Shakespeare to read "what occasion now / Reveals before 'tis ripe" (V.i.151-54). To which the Duke, crushed suddenly by the loss of two loves, responds by demanding of Cesario, "what wilt thou be / When time hath sow'd a grizzle on thy case?" (V.i.164-65). The future's collision with the present, violent for both Orsino and Viola here, inspires the Duke's question: if the present is so full of sly deceit, how much worse the future (one Olivia intended to keep in darkness). The film having reiterated so much uncertainty, the hesitancy of Sebastian and Viola to reunite may be less surprising. A telling vilification of time occurs almost immediately, when upon Sebastian's entrance he tells Antonio, "How have the hours rack'd and tortur'd me, / Since I have lost thee!" (V.i.219-20). The pains of loss are tremulously reviewed by Sebastian and Viola during their reunion scene in prolix expression of doubt and joy. But their eventually wordless conjoining, while accomplished in baby steps, knits together the opposing forces at work in the film: Viola requests succinctly, "Do not embrace me till each circumstance / Of place, time, fortune, do cohere and jump" (V.i.252). In such an instant, present and future, time and fortune will coincide; and instead of collision, the blend produces what the Duke soon terms a "golden time" (V.i.382). The ambivalence of the event unfolds with the return of Malvolio and the dispersal of other characters from this otherwise utopian golden age.

Kingsley ends the film with a song celebrating the paradoxes of constancy and change. "For the rain," he sings, "it raineth every day" (V.i.392), constantly, while the speaker in the song moves inconstant from boy to man to husband to deathbed. Meanwhile, scenes of the mirthful, kaleidoscopic ballroom are crosscut with the dull, gray, misty grounds through which pass the excluded. Finally, all Feste can offer is a promise, "And we'll strive to please you every day" (V.i.408), the last words repeated several times (and once with arched eyebrow) with the effect of engendering both an ironic jest and a last jab at sincerity: "every day." Nunn importantly frames Feste against the backdrop of the sea, which he has used previously as an emblem of both placidity and foment. In the whirlpool of time evident in the film, Antonio, Aguecheek, Toby, Maria, and Malvolio are spun out of Illyria even as Sebastian and Viola, once parted by the maelstrom currents of the waves, are reunited in the same place. In a world in which the future repeatedly threatens, Malvolio's brooding end, in which he both valiantly and pathetically proclaims vengeance, is fittingly projected beyond the scope of the film. While Shakespeare is silent on his destiny, Nunn provides at least a trajectory. Malvolio is backed throughout this scene by a sturdy grandfather clock, a potent reminder of time's role in his madness. (Though this clock, unlike the tolling bells that upbraid Olivia, never sounds.) When he leaves, suitcase
and umbrella in hand, he seems in as abject an expectation of daily downpours as he once was of Olivia’s love. As with each of the characters who depart, his passage into the drab climes beyond Olivia’s estate concretizes the estrangement he has experienced throughout. It ultimately reinscribes Malvolio, Andrew, Antonio, Toby, Maria, and Feste as not just outsiders at the end but all along.

In its production of visual imagery that adopts and enlivens ideas already available in the play, this film refashions early modern notions of time, hope, and madness into a vibrant exploration of the power and impotency of love, desire, and identity. Nunn’s attention to light and dark, the sea and land, motion and stasis, and to moments that challenge the audience’s own comfort over what’s to come, and what’s already been, all contribute to these problematics. Though much of the marketing for this film asserts a rollicking, gender-bending *jeu d’esprit* (the video cover proposes “Wittier than *The Birdcage* and more fun than *To Wong Foo*”), Feste, Malvolio, and the virtual horde of courtly refugees highlight the disruptions in the comic plot. Still, the credits roll only after the twins, who first slipped from one another’s grip in the tempest, conclude by clenching those same hands tightly together, fusing in the now what had been spun into the future. If love, as Shakespeare writes, is “as hungry as the sea” (II.iv.100), it sustains itself in here with a cycle of binges and purges. Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* presents a world of sad and merry madness, and one that manages to pit time against itself even as it celebrates the conflict.

Works Cited


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9. I cannot agree with Holland, who argues that “the film’s final moments, with Malvolio … leaving Olivia’s employ with his dignity (and toupee) restored and Sir Toby and Maria riding away by carriage as newlyweds, again fails to resist the lure of the upbeat ending.” If only because Malvolio clearly leaves without benefit of his hairpiece, his worldly possessions enclosed by what Rothwell terms a “pathetic suitcase” (240), his departure is emblematic much more of exposure and vulnerability than upbeat dignity. Nunn describes the exit in similar terms: “he has completely lost his power by then; he’s lost his authority” (90).

10. My thanks to the late Herbert Fackler for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay and to Laurie Osborne for her many useful insights into Nunn’s film and the play in general.


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