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The Comic Close of *Twelfth Night* and Viola's *Noli me tangere*

YU JIN KO

THIS ESSAY CAME INTO FOCUS OVER THE COURSE OF a National Endowment for the Humanities Institute on Shakespearean staging during which I saw the same production of *Twelfth Night* a good seven or eight times.¹ Despite my familiarity with every twist and turn in the production, I found myself deeply moved by the ending of each performance. What touched me especially was the recognition scene between Viola and Sebastian; indeed, this moment defined for me the final scene's emotional character, resonating even through Feste's song to make it more poignant than was ever before the case in my experience. Much of my response was due, I realized, to the simple fact that the director chose to follow an internal stage direction at the moment of recognition, a direction that has been largely ignored in both commentary and in productions I had previously seen. After the extended, and not entirely necessary, exchange of identifying clues that clearly and self-consciously delights in comic convention ("My father had a mole upon his brow" [5.1.240]²), the text indicates that Viola interrupts the expected conclusion with a gesture of repulse. Though she signals the arrival of the critical moment with a conditional clause that seemingly points to imminent discovery and an ecstatic embrace—"If nothing lets to make us happy both, / But this my masculine usurp'd attire" (ll. 247–48)—she suddenly breaks her syntax and provides a visible cue for blocking with the interjection "Do not embrace me, till each circumstance / Of place, time, fortune do cohere and jump / That I am Viola" (ll. 249–51). Because her conditions for their embrace immediately follow the negative command as part of one syntactical unit, her rebuff of Sebastian might appear merely a minor bump; this, and the comic wish to witness and/or stage a climactic reunion, may explain why this gesture of rejection has been so consistently ignored or fudged. Noting that it has been usual in his experience to see Viola and Sebastian "move gradually closer to one another during the duologue, and, if not to embrace, at least to touch at some point selected as a moment of full recognition," as formidable an authority as Stanley Wells has remarked, "perhaps the direction is one that

¹ The Institute took place in the summer of 1995 at the Center for Renaissance and Shakespearean Staging; the play was performed by the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express and directed by Murray Ross. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Thirty-first International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, MI, 1996) and the Twenty-first International Congress on Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies (Villanova, PA, 1996); I would like to thank the organizers of both conferences, in particular, Carole Levin of SUNY New Paltz, whose generosity and encouragement proved invaluable.

² Quotations of *Twelfth Night* follow the Arden edition of J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975).

was never meant to be obeyed.”³ The actress in the production I watched, however, emphasized the rebuff by holding the moment—by isolating the command “Do not embrace me” and rooting Sebastian to the spot with an equally commanding pause.⁴ It is this moment whose impact I found so profound. And it is this moment I propose to examine by looking at Shakespeare’s allusion to, and manipulation of, its antecedents in dramatic and literary tradition.

Anne Barton has noted the recognition scene’s open reliance on classical comic convention, suggesting that the play thereby foregrounds its fictive status. By resting the “happy ending” on “consonances that are recognizably fictional,” she argues, Shakespeare reminds the audience that it is in a magical world: “an improbable world of hair’s-breadth rescues at sea, romantic disguises, idealistic friendships and sudden, irrational loves.” Barton adds, however, that this holiday “world of fiction” survives only by being forcibly divided from the “one of fact” that commands equal space on the stage; the newly paired lovers “stand on the far side of a line” that divides them from those like “the chastened Sir Andrew,” who return to an everyday world uninformed by the romance of Illyrian fiction—a world that, significantly, “we recognize as our own.” Nonetheless, according to Barton, the exposure of the holiday world as fictional does not belittle that world but rather confers on it a curious poignancy; it is, for one, a world that “fights a kind of desperate rearguard action against the cold light of day.” For Barton the play’s handling of this complex melancholy defines it as classical in a very particular sense; it exhibits the poise to introduce flaws into formal perfection.⁵

Elegant and enlightening as Barton’s formulation is, the melancholy strain she sees especially in the play’s ending remains essentially a product of the fiction-versus-reality dichotomy she sets up, a dichotomy that assumes formal closure as a defining characteristic of fiction. However, as I have noted, there is a critical sense in which formal closure does not occur even as expectations for it are abundantly generated. Surely the allusive comic excess in Viola and Sebastian’s meeting is calculated to produce not only self-consciousness but also a giddy generosity and shared anticipation of formal completion that would come onstage in the form of an embrace. I agree with Barton that a particular strain of melancholy runs throughout this play and that the recognition scene distills this emotion to an immensely moving purity; but I also believe that, in order to understand this fully, we must notice that Shakespeare turns at this critical moment from classical comedy to Biblical narrative, specifically, to the *noli-me-tangere* moment in John 20:17, when Jesus, risen from the dead, appears to Mary Magdalene in the garden.⁶

³ Stanley Wells, “Reunion Scenes in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*” in *A Yearbook of Studies in English Language and Literature 1985/86* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1986), 267–76, esp. 275. Trevor Nunn’s 1996 film version of the play is typical in showing the two in slow motion engaging in an extended embrace while music swells in the background.

⁴ It is worth noting that in the Folio a comma follows this command, giving more weight (inadvertently or deliberately) to the momentary gesture; modern editors, however, generally remove the comma to make the entire clause seem the product of one breath, reflecting, it seems to me, the tendency to smooth over this significant interruption of expectations.

⁵ Anne Barton, “*As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*: Shakespeare’s Sense of an Ending,” *Shakespearean Comedy*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 14 (1972): 160–80, esp. 175–78.

⁶ This buried allusion was noticed by Cynthia Lewis in “Viola’s ‘Do Not Embrace Me’ as Icon,”

In John's narration of the so-called *hortulanus* episode, Mary initially mistakes Jesus for a gardener but then recognizes him after he calls her by name; in response to her recognition, however, Jesus says, "Touch me not: for I am not yet ascended to my Father."⁷ Among the many mysteries of this episode is Mary's precise response to this rejection; we are told only that she goes to tell the disciples what she saw and heard. Medieval dramatists clearly saw great dramatic potential in this narrative gap. All the extant mystery cycles, for example, incorporate John's account of this meeting, and each renders it explicitly and at some length. They all share similar visions of the moment: Mary's response is one of unmitigated joy. Her speech in the Townley Cycle's "Resurrection" is typical:

Mi blys is comen, my care is gone,
That lufly have I mett alone;
I am as blyth in bloode and bone
As ever was wight;
Now is he resyn that ere was slone,
Mi hart is light.

(ll. 642–47)⁸

Her words speak of complete joy at witnessing regeneration and, presumably, experiencing it herself. The York Cycle's "Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene" does include a moment of sadness in a lament, but it is entirely an expression of heart sorrow for Christ's passion and for human sinfulness:

Thy woundes hath made thi body wete
With bloode that was the withinne.
Nayled thou was thurgh hande and feete,
And all was for oure synne.

(ll. 112–15)⁹

Mary then goes on to celebrate her joy at his resurrection:

Alle for joie me likes to synge,
Myne herte is gladder thanne the glee,
And all for joie of thy risyng
That suffered dede vppone a tree.

(ll. 134–37)

The non-cycle Digby *Mary Magdalen* follows form as well:

Itt is innvmerabyll to expresse,
Or for ony tong for to tell,

Notes & Queries 35 (1988): 473–74. Our readings differ significantly, however. The crucial parallel, Lewis suggests, lies in the fact that, just as Jesus promises through his gesture of rejection a more fulfilling reunion at a later time, Viola "intend[s] an even greater warmth" when she has "reassume[d] her natural appearance" (474). It is unclear to me how female attire will allow Viola to express "greater warmth."

⁷ *The Geneva Bible: A facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, intro. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989).

⁸ *The Townley Plays*, ed. Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, Early English Text Society, S.S. 13, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 1:335–55, esp. 354–55.

⁹ *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 358.

Of my joye how myche itt is.
(ll. 1100–1102)¹⁰

Seeing Jesus risen from the dead evokes joy as the overriding passion. However, experiencing direct rejection might also mingle with the joy a certain pain. Indeed, the language of the York play figures the dramatic action in a way that seems to demand some recognition of this pain. Before finally sending Mary on her mission, Jesus says, “All that me loues I schall *drawe nere* / Mi fadirs blisse that neuere schall ende” (ll. 132–33, emphasis added); drawing the faithful toward him defines the action here. But this same Jesus had earlier said “Goo awaye Marie, and touche me not” (l. 72). Nonetheless, no hint of Mary’s being torn by this strain is registered.

One might say that the medieval playwrights shared the traditional understanding of this meeting as the final cleansing of the “whore” in Mary Magdalene, the moment when she finally, and joyously, learns to distinguish spiritual from bodily life. The 1560 Geneva Bible’s gloss on the scene summarizes this exegetical tradition well: “Because [Mary] was to muche addicted to the corporal presence, Christ teacheth her to lift vp her minde by faith into heauen where onely after his ascension he remaineth, & where we sit with him at the right hand of the Father.”¹¹ But this was not the only reading available. Though Margery Kempe responds normatively to precious little, her appropriately maudlin reflections on the *hortulanus* episode provide a vital alternative that the Geneva gloss seems intended to deflect. As the narrator tells us, Margery thought “it was great marvel . . . that Mary rejoiced, for if Our Lord had spoken to her [i.e., to Margery] as He did to Mary, . . . she could never have been merry”; moreover, whenever she heard the words “Touch me not” in a sermon, “as she did many times, she wept, sorrowed and cried, as if she would have died, for the love and desire that she had to be with Our Lord.”¹² Margery’s sorrow here is not primarily a response to personal rejection but is related to the mourning implicit even in the liturgical *Quem quaeritis* (i.e., “Whom do you seek?”), the trope that presents the synoptic account of the angels announcing the resurrection to the Marys at the tomb, and which includes no mention of rejection. The mourning of Margery grows out of the understanding that the seeking in *Quem quaeritis* does not come to an end with the angels’ announcement of Christ’s resurrection; with his ascension, the seeking that defines existence on earth for all “*Christicolae*” only intensifies. While the promise of future fulfillment must of course occasion a reverent joy, completion in this life is effectively denied, and thus a painful longing still remains. Put another way, inasmuch as incarnational theology regards new life as conditional on death, mourning for *this* life’s incompleteness must attend the celebration of the promise of eternal life; as Henry Staten remarks, “the sacramental meal”—the bread that offers eternal life—is also “the

¹⁰ *The Digby Plays*, ed. Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall Jr., Early English Text Society, S.S. 283 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982).

¹¹ The anonymous author of the medieval *Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of her Sister Saint Martha* (trans. and ed. David Mycoff [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989]) attributes these additional words to Christ: “Do not touch me with a fleshly embrace, for you still do not believe that I have escaped the shackles of death, for though I live you seek me among the dead. First touch me with the embrace of your heart, believing firmly in my resurrection” (72).

¹² *The Book of Margery Kempe (1436)*, ed. W. Butler-Bowdon (New York: Devin-Adair, 1944), 181.

communion of universal mortality, of an infinity of lives each of which must undergo a dissolution that is unbearable.”¹³ In sum, even the *Quem quaeritis* trope implies the thought that Margery Kempe’s reading of John supplies more explicitly, if cryptically: the desire for fulfillment expressed in Mary’s attempt to touch Jesus can ultimately issue only in mourning while in this world.¹⁴

It is the recognition of this pain that I find largely missing in the cycles. In the Viola-Sebastian recognition scene Shakespeare revises the *noli-me-tangere* moment in medieval drama to unearth the painful longing in deferred completion and mix with it the joy of reunion.¹⁵ It is important to note that I am not thinking in terms of psychological motivation when considering this scene. Why Viola-as-character defers the embrace seems to me inexplicable. Furthermore, following the parallel too closely would lead to preposterousness; suggestions to the contrary notwithstanding, Viola hardly shows the transcendent spirituality that would qualify her as a Christ figure.¹⁶ The allusion shifts the dramaturgy into an iconographic mode that presents a palimpsest tableau of figures experiencing the exhilarating joy of reunion while also longing for that anticipated embrace, that moment of completion. But I believe there is more; for the audience the deferral is paradoxically deeply satisfying at the same time. Why this should be so and, more fundamentally, why Shakespeare chooses to embed the allusion in this moment become clearer when we consider the play’s treatment of time.

The title itself announces temporality, or transience, as a motif; it is *Twelfth Night*, the final night of saturnalian holiday. Nowhere does the sense of holiday time rushing to its end appear more palpably than in the revels of Toby and his crew. As the practical jokes on Malvolio turn from sportful to cruel, as the revelers overstep the boundary between fun and disquieting heartlessness, one senses that the delirium in Illyria starts spinning toward its own ruin while everyday order ineluctably encroaches.¹⁷ With Malvolio now

¹³ Henry Staten, *Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 63.

¹⁴ For a discussion of Margery Kempe’s response within the context of medieval works that afforded Mary Magdalene a “privileged tactile relation to Christ,” see Mimi Still Dixon, “‘Thys Body of Mary’: ‘Femynte’ and ‘Inward Mythe’ in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*,” *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995): 221–44.

¹⁵ The existing evidence cannot resolve the vexing question of how familiar, if at all, Shakespeare may have been with the mysteries. The timing of the mysteries’ decline and the formidable distance between Stratford and the cities that produced the extant cycles make it unlikely that Shakespeare witnessed any of the specific plays I have discussed. However, as has been frequently suggested, Shakespeare could certainly have traveled the fourteen miles to see the Coventry Cycle (of which only fragments survive), since evidence now indicates that performances continued there until 1591. See Naomi Conn Liebler, “Shakespeare’s Medieval Husbandry: *Cain and Abel*, *Richard II*, and *Brudermord*,” *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995): 451–73; *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry*, ed. R. W. Ingram (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1981), xiii; John D. Cox, *Shakespeare and the Dramaturgy of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989), 22 and passim. Furthermore, strong evidence of common practices and sources—as seen in the near identity of large sections of the Townley and York resurrection plays—clearly suggests cultural traditions, making it perfectly possible that the Coventry Cycle, along with others, shared crucial elements with the extant cycles. (I have thus stressed the similarities among the cycles.) Lastly, the sustained popularity of Mary Magdalene as a cultural figure would indicate that plays similar to the Digby *Mary Magdalene* made up a part of the popular repertoire throughout England during Shakespeare’s youth. For the Digby *Magdalen* as a traveling play, see Baker et al., eds., xlviii.

¹⁶ See Cynthia Lewis, “Viola, Antonio, and Epiphany in *Twelfth Night*,” *Essays in Literature* 13 (1986): 187–99.

¹⁷ Ralph Berry, in “*Twelfth Night*: The Experience of the Audience” (*Shakespeare Survey* 34

locked in the dark house, and the rollicking brilliance of their contrivance replaced by a forced strain, even Toby begins to feel apprehension: "I would we were well rid of this knavery . . . for I am now so far in offence with my niece that I cannot pursue with any safety this sport to the upshot" (4.2.69–73). Holiday eventually decays. But not only holiday. Olivia may confidently assert that her beauty will "endure wind and weather" (1.5.240–41), but we know that "youth's a stuff will not endure" (2.3.53). It is the progress from pleasure to decay, from the full bloom of youth to "the pangs of death" (1.5.73), that predicates and precipitates what I think is the defining sentiment of the play: mournful longing, or what the play repeatedly calls "melancholy," most notable in Cesario/Viola's elegiac "memory" of a sister who "sat like Patience on a monument" afflicted "with a green and yellow melancholy" (2.4.114–15). This mixing of memory and desire which makes April so cruel in Eliot's *Waste Land* is captured with epigrammatic clarity by Orsino, though a certain misogyny attends its expression: "women are as roses, whose fair flower, / Being once display'd, doth fall that very hour" (II. 38–39). Though here ephemerality is assigned only to the object of desire, it applies equally to the experience of satisfaction; satisfaction decays pleasure. The world of this play is very much that of the *Quem quaeritis* trope, in which absolute fulfillment is impossible. Yet in a paradox that makes "changeable taffeta" (2.4.74) the fitting wear for melancholy, the emptiness at the heart of the playworld becomes the source of its deepest pleasure as well; if the absence of complete satisfaction produces a painful longing, there is satisfaction to be derived from sustaining and deepening that longing. A terrible emptiness is the condition of longing, but in its fullness, longing is also curiously absorbing.

These paradoxes appear from the very opening of the play in Orsino's often-derided words. For commentators, "self-indulgent" is usually the operative phrase, as when Barbara Lewalski suggests that the "opening speech reveals [Orsino's] self-indulgent posturing in the role of love-sick swain."¹⁸ There is no doubt truth to this, as is tellingly revealed in the failure of the play's opening mini-drama. Orsino begins by asserting a purgative intent to his extravagance: "If music be the food of love, play on, / Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken, and so die" (1.1.1–3). Soon enough, of course, he calls it off ("Enough, no more" [l. 7]), only to note that, while the pleasure in music has decayed, his all-devouring desire remains unquenched:

O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou,
That notwithstanding thy capacity
Receiveveth as the sea, nought enters there,
Of what validity and pitch soe'er,

[1981]: 111–19), also notes that "the experience of *Twelfth Night* blends our sense of the title metaphor with the growing magnitude of the joke that goes too far" (111). For another related treatment of time in the play, see Verna A. Foster, "The Dramaturgy of Mood in *Twelfth Night* and *The Cherry Orchard*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 48 (1987): 162–85.

¹⁸ Barbara K. Lewalski, "Thematic Patterns in *Twelfth Night*," *Shakespeare Studies* 1 (1965): 168–81, esp. 172. Lewalski is of course not alone. Linda Woodbridge, for instance, in "'Fire in Your Heart and Brimstone in Your Liver': Towards an Unsaturnalian *Twelfth Night*" (*Southern Review* 3.17 [1984]: 270–91), talks of Orsino's "adolescent auto-eroticism" (283).

But falls into abatement and low price,
Even in a minute!

(ll. 9–14)¹⁹

The rather large dose of self-aggrandizing theatricality in all this is highly visible; wanting in point of fact to luxuriate in his pining desire for Olivia, Orsino stages this failed purgation as proof of his love's infinite capacity and as a prelude to rejoining the "hunt" for her. Self-delusion also plays its part. Should Olivia actually tumble into the sea of his desire, it would only be a matter of time before he would say "Enough, no more"; only a matter of time before, to his horror I am sure, his spirit of love would sicken and die.

What the Orsino-bashers do not acknowledge, however, is the absence, in this playworld, of a true alternative to what is a genuine, if hollow—and properly therefore all the more poignant—pleasure. To the pleasure first: the delicate, synaesthesiac riot that caresses all of Orsino's senses as he listens to the music surely stirs us, too:

O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour.

(ll. 5–7)

"To hear by the nose, it is dulcet in contagion" (2.3.57), as Toby says after Feste's "O mistress mine," a song that introduces the kind of melancholy lull that informs the rhythm of the most deeply gratifying revels. Indeed, the revels scene of 2.3 and Orsino's opening speech are more intimately related than may at first be apparent. Feste's musical *carpe diem* introduces whispers of mortality into 2.3, reminding us of pleasure's evanescence while capturing, when one is most deeply in the moment, the recurrent fear of loss.²⁰ After the song, the revels pointedly become an exercise in sustaining holiday. In 1.1, as Orsino listens to music as a strategy to find release from pain, he experiences, along with the pleasure of hearing his melancholy echoed in the music's "dying fall" (l. 4), a "premonition," as Peter Thomson says, "of the emptiness that follows release."²¹ Luckily for Orsino, he doesn't achieve complete release; his underlying desire for Olivia—his own holiday riot—still remains because the music, though it has lost its sweetness, is only a substitute pleasure for Olivia. If we accept the idea that possession of the desired object necessarily brings about decay of both pleasure and desire, then the sustaining of desire itself becomes the principal pleasure, and the search for substitutes an essential corollary. Given the play's emotional logic, it then makes perfect sense for the romance plot's resolution to depend on substitutions. Pushed to the extreme, this logic says that there can be only substitutes insofar as no

¹⁹ Notwithstanding Stephen Booth's intricate and provocative analysis of this passage's logical slippages ("Why should the power of the sealike spirit of love to convert its contents to flotsam and jetsam testify to its own quickness and freshness?" he asks in "*Twelfth Night*: 1.1: The Audience as Malvolio" (in *Shakespeare's "Rough Magic": Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber*, Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn, eds. [Newark: U of Delaware P, 1985], 149–67, esp. 157), I think the sentence is quite comprehensible. I take "quick and fresh" to mean something like "insatiable for fresh things"; the sentence would then mean that, despite endless consumption, desire remains unsatisfied.

²⁰ I am echoing here a thought expressed by director Murray Ross in a postproduction discussion.

²¹ Peter Thomson, "*Twelfth Night*: The Music of Time" in *Essays on Shakespeare in honour of A A Ansari*, T. R. Sharma, ed. (Meerut, India: Shalabh Book House, 1986), 211–21, esp. 212.

object can absolutely satisfy. In this context all the critical misgivings about the quick-switch apparatus of the ending are beside the point, and the notion that festive purgation constitutes the essential dramatic action misses the point.²² In short, though it is easy to deride Orsino, he is in fact enjoying the deepest satisfaction available.

When Shakespeare has Viola reject Sebastian's approach in the final scene, we in the audience experience not only the pain of deferral but its deep pleasure as well. As the moment lingers, the characters become icons in a larger drama that shares with religious drama a vision of secular desire but which contains no promise of transcendent fulfillment. Though characters frequently refer to God in this play, its true deity is the figure Feste calls "the melancholy god," who protects those who "make . . . a good voyage of nothing" (2.4.73–78); those, that is, who make the pleasure in deferral suffice. Thus it is that Feste's "Come away death" strikes such a chord. Here's the second stanza in full:

*Not a flower, not a flower sweet,
On my black coffin let there be strewn;
Not a friend, not a friend greet
My poor corpse, where my bones shall be thrown:
A thousand thousand sighs to save,
Lay me, O where
Sad true lover never find my grave,
To weep there.*

(2.4.59–66)

This reverses the fantasy of multitudes weeping at one's funeral, a fantasy that allows one to "drink in anticipation, imaginatively, the pleasure of being-grieved";²³ the self-pitying is here denied even the satisfaction of being pitied, which nevertheless sustains all the more intensely a longing that carries through to death. What we have is not so much a desire for death as a desire that lingers into death and evades the death of desire.

In perhaps the most pointed irony of the play, even the attempted evasion of desire results only in further arousing and sustaining it. This irony again turns on a silent allusion to the *noli-me-tangere* moment. As Stephen Orgel has pointed out, Viola's choice of the name Cesario for her disguise perfectly suits what a eunuch physically is: a man who is "cut" (*caesus*) and thus sexless. Presumably Viola thinks this sexlessness will effectively render her cloistered.²⁴ She seems, after all, initially drawn to serving Olivia because the lady "hath abjur'd the company / And sight of men" (1.2.40–41). It is impossible to know whether Shakespeare knew Wyatt's "Whoso list to hunt," but the name Cesario does recall, if not the poem itself about a stubbornly enduring

²² See, for example, Thad Jenkins Logan, "Twelfth Night: The Limits of Festivity," *Studies in English Literature* 22 (1982): 223–38; the notion of festive purgation relies most heavily on C. L. Barber's classic formula of "release to clarification" expounded in his *Shakespeare's Festive Comedies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1959), 4. John Hollander, in "Twelfth Night and the Morality of Indulgence" (*The Sewanee Review* 67 [1959]: 220–38), follows this formula in suggesting that the action represents "the killing off of excessive appetite through indulgence of it, leading to the rebirth of the unencumbered self" (234).

²³ Staten, 15.

²⁴ See Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The performance of gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 53 ff.

desire for an unattainable “hind,” then at least the well-known motto graven on the hind’s collar which makes up the poem’s punchline: “*Noli me tangere* for Caesar’s I am.”²⁵ Paralleling the irony in the poem, however, the *noli me tangere* of Viola’s disguise works only to animate desire. Its purpose notwithstanding, the cross-gender disguise creates an elusive object, an absent presence, that appropriately takes centerstage in the swirl of unhinged holiday desire.

The flip side of Cesario’s sexlessness is his widely noted androgyny. We must be vigilant about reading the current fascination with crossdressing and androgyny into the minds of fictional characters in a historically specific cultural product, but I think it is abundantly evident that Viola-as-Cesario arouses erotic interest in both Orsino and Olivia precisely because of his/her sexual indeterminacy. Orsino’s verbal portrait of Cesario is perhaps the most telling:

Diana’s lip
Is not more smooth and rubious: thy small pipe
Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman’s part.
(1.4.31–34)

An erotic impulse is immediately visible in the reference to Diana, which recalls the story of Actaeon’s trespass and Orsino’s use of that story to represent his own predicament and (partly auto-)erotic longing:

O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first,
Methought she purg’d the air of pestilence;
That instant was I turn’d into a hart,
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
E’er since pursue me.
(1.1.19–23)

In the loose cluster of images associated with the romantic hunt, that is, the Diana figure becomes the central object of erotic desire. Further, the description of Cesario “oscillates between the anatomy of a girl and boy”²⁶ as the musical tropes for voice—“small pipe” and “maiden’s organ”—slide into tropes for male and female genitalia. The easily overlooked second part of the descriptive doublet, “shrill and sound,” reinforces the sense of erotic slippage; “sound,” while glancing at musical sound and perhaps the meaning contained in the phrase “sound as a bell,” must primarily mean “unbroken,” which the voice of a eunuch must be, and which maidenhead must be in order to remain a *maiden’s organ*. The fun that the play has with the word *cut*, which has caused some controversy among editors, can be illuminated in this context. As Malvolio reads the inscription on “Olivia’s” letter, he claims to recognize the handwriting by “her very C’s, her U’s, and her T’s” (2.5.88),

²⁵ Thomas Wyatt, “Whoso list to hunt” in *Sir Thomas Wyatt: The Complete Poems*, ed. R. A. Rebholz (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1978), 77. See also 343n.

²⁶ Jan Kott, *The Gender of Rosalind, Interpretations: Shakespeare, Büchner, Gautier* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1992), 14n. See also Stephen Greenblatt’s “Fiction and Friction” in his *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* ([Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1988], 66–93), where he relates plots involving crossdressing to theories of gynecological homology in the Renaissance.

which occasions Andrew's response that readers have echoed: "Her C's, her U's, and her T's: Why that?" (1. 91). The bawdy joke here seems to be a play on the orthographic convention of using a tilde or sprung dash to indicate a missing nasal consonant. Thus *cūt* would refer to the "nothing" that Hamlet salaciously puns on and which would be left if the male "thing" were to be cut.²⁷ Toby may equate being called "cut" (2.3.187) with being degraded, but for Viola-as-Cesario the word would be most fitting. Though the analogy is inexact, since Orsino is unaware of Viola's crossdressed state, we might also remember here a scene from Dekker and Middleton's *Roaring Girl* that has become the *locus classicus* for androgynous desire. Kissing Mary in her disguise as a page, Sebastian says, "Methinks a woman's lip tastes well in a doublet."²⁸ Sebastian's remark here recalls Marjorie Garber's notion that "the transvestite is the space of desire"²⁹—that is, that the impossibility of complete sexual crossover in the transvestite reenacts the deferral of satisfaction that is the condition of desire. Similarly, Cesario's androgyny evokes a female biological presence that is not there for Orsino and, in so doing, arouses a desire for a perpetually escaping object. Cesario's sexlessness, in short, rather invites a longing to touch.³⁰

His androgyny is also a consequence of, and at once highlights, another feature of his liminality; he is youth on the cusp of maturity. This feature evidently first piques Olivia's interest, as she admits him only after hearing Malvolio's description: "Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy: as a squash is before 'tis a peascod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple" (1.5.158–60). Why this interest is initially kindled and then so quickly inflamed has never been adequately explained. As a cultural matter it may be true, as Stephen Orgel has intimated, that Olivia's actions, in her role as a powerful woman in a patriarchally stratified society where everyone is "feminized in relation to someone," reflect the female fantasy of feminizing a young man into romantic service. Orgel's suggestion comes as part of his effort to understand what may have appealed to the significant numbers of women in the audience. In this connection Orgel further proposes the provocative idea that the crossdressed boy-actors may have appealed to women in an analogous way, "as companionable and pliable and one of them—as everything, in fact, that the socialized Renaissance woman herself is supposed to be."³¹ Orgel thus significantly revises Lisa Jardine's conjecture in *Still*

²⁷ My thanks to Margaret Maurer for pointing me in this direction.

²⁸ Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, ed. Paul A. Mulholland (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1987), 175 (4.1.47).

²⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Desire* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 75.

³⁰ I do not think the homoeroticism itself of the attraction sets Cesario off as "untouchable." The ultimate movement of the plot toward heterosexual union typical of the comedies notwithstanding, no anxiety is visible in Antonio's love for Sebastian, which, as Michael Shapiro points out, "echoes Orsino's eroticized friendship with Cesario" (*Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* [Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994], 161). Shapiro does maintain that Antonio's passion may have "for some spectators probably evoked the homoeroticism that enemies of the stage associated with the playhouse" (161), but his cautious qualification (only for "some") seems intended to endorse the view, as more recently articulated by Stephen Orgel, that English Renaissance culture "did not display a morbid fear of homoeroticism as such" (35–36), evidenced especially by the charged sexual ambiguities in the language of male friendship.

³¹ Orgel, 124 and 81.

Harping on Daughters—one that accepts as fact the sodomitical intrigues alleged by the antitheatricalists—that English theater practice produced the “erotically irresistible effeminate boy” as “a figure vibrant with erotic interest for *men*.”³² However, Orgel’s thoughts concerning Olivia still share some of the materialist determinism of Jardine’s analysis of the subject; “eroticism, in the early modern period,” she says, “is not gender-specific, is not grounded in the sex of the possibly ‘submissive’ partner, but is an expectation of that very submissiveness,” which is why “erotic attention—an attention bound up with sexual availability and historically specific forms of economic dependency—is focused on boys and women in the *same* way.”³³ If, as the taxonomic gesture suggests, eroticism is grounded in the “expectation of . . . submissiveness,” how can we explain Orsino’s interest (however suspect) in a financially independent Olivia? (And does this mean that women, who were generally subordinate to their male partners, essentially missed out on erotic experience?) Further, we are still left with the question of why Olivia falls specifically, and so quickly, for Cesario and not another “submissive.”

Some curious verbal echoes in the play hint at a possible answer. On first encountering Viola in disguise, Sebastian poses a series of questions: “Of charity, what kin are you to me? / What countryman? What name? What parentage?” (5.1.228–29). These questions are startlingly similar to those previously asked about or posed directly to Viola by Olivia: “What kind o’ man is he?” (1.5.152); “Of what personage and years is he?” (l. 157); “Whence came you, sir?” (l. 178); “What is your parentage?” (l. 281). The last question, containing a very infrequently used word, is even repeated in Olivia’s mind as she replays the “enchantment” (3.1.114) Cesario performed:

“What is your parentage?”
 “Above my fortunes, yet my state is well;
 I am a gentleman.” I’ll be sworn thou art. . . .
 (1.5.293–95)

The verbal echoes reinforce the sense that the kind of deep searching that is characteristic of kinship quests underlies Olivia’s questions. What she seeks is made evident in the early description of her daily activities:

[She] water[s] once a day her chamber round
 With eye-offending brine: all this to season
 A brother’s dead love, which she would keep fresh
 And lasting, in her sad remembrance.
 (1.1.29–32)

She, too, in her way, is searching for a lost sibling. The speed with which she transfers her longing from her brother to Cesario suggests that she has found a substitute. Indeed, the movement of new love arising from the brine of salt

³² Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983), 17–18. In this, Jardine argues, the theater was only following “good classical precedent” and Renaissance poetic practice (17). She goes on to cite—somewhat inexplicably—the boy Hermaphroditus in Ovid’s relation of the tale and Adonis of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*; in both, the blushing, effeminate boy is the object of lust by *females*, the naiad Salmacis and Venus. Jardine’s view clearly results from taking at face value the pathological hysterics of antitheatricalists.

³³ Lisa Jardine, “Twins and Travesties: Gender, Dependency and Sexual Availability in *Twelfth Night*” in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 28 and 34.

tears over a dead brother's love follows what David Scott Kastan calls the "comic logic" of the play:³⁴ "Tempests are kind, and salt waves fresh in love!" (3.4.394). The word *kind* in Viola's exclamation here evokes the "kin" who emerges from the waves and the "kind o' man" Olivia seeks.

While the play never indicates the age of Olivia's brother (nor ever suggests actual physical resemblances between Cesario and him), the language used above to describe her mourning hints at his youth. The effort to keep the love "*fresh / And lasting*," (though in combination with "brine" and "season," this language evokes images of preserving food) intimates that the brother was cut off in the very bloom of youth. Mourning for her brother's death then takes on the character of mourning for mortality itself—the transience that defines all things human, including, it would appear, the very "remembrance" of love. In Olivia's reverie after the first meeting with Cesario, the link between this mournful longing and a newly burgeoning desire is intimated: "Methinks I feel this youth's perfections / With an invisible and subtle stealth / To creep in at mine eyes" (1.5.300–302). Perfection, we know, coincides with another moment; not only women and roses but things more generally of this playworld "die, even when they to perfection grow" (2.4.41). Viola-as-Cesario's liminality places her on the very edge of the escaping moment of "almost" and, serving thus as a reminder of things past, resurrects in flesh the "brother's dead love."

This Cesario remains, of course, beyond Olivia's grasp. The disguise makes him an elusive object and puts Olivia on a par with Wyatt's hunter, who seeks "in a net . . . to hold the wind."³⁵ A substitution is made that does not seem to trouble Olivia and which makes deliciously double (non)sense in that the substitution of one lost brother (Sebastian) for Cesario mirrors Cesario's initial substitution for another lost brother. All the substitutions are ultimately doomed, however, not so much because they seem so fictionally contrived but insofar as they attempt to evade mortality; each, imaged emblematically in Cesario's liminality, will prove equally elusive in the wind and the rain of time. A glimmer indicating recognition of this fact appears in words that Olivia addresses to Viola after identities have been resolved and new alliances made: "A sister! you are she" (5.1.325). As an aside I would add that this stammering half-line that essentially states the obvious seems to me a wonderfully inviting cue to the actor; Olivia is given solely this opportunity to face Viola directly and deal with the wide range of possible emotions from embarrassment to wonder. But more than that, I think the utterance is shadowed by its implied antithesis: a sister, and not a brother. That is, subliminally Olivia seems to recognize that the search for her lost brother has metamorphosed, or twinned itself in this play of twinning, into desire for Cesario; at the same time, in the undisguising, or disappearance, of Cesario, she re-experiences the loss that began her mourning and acknowledges it as irrecoverable. Perhaps we are to hear her admonishment of Malvolio's appetite as "distempered" (1.5.90) coming back to haunt her here; all appetite is literally distempered in being mistimed, or out of time, in this temporal world where objects of desire wear, as it were, collars that say *noli me tangere*.

³⁴ David Scott Kastan, "All's Well That Ends Well and the Limits of Comedy," *ELH* 52.3 (1985): 575–89, esp. 576.

³⁵ Wyatt in Rebholz, ed., 77.

My account of the denouement is technically incorrect. Cesario remains in his male disguise, as Orsino's, and the play's, final words remind us:

Cesario, come;
For so you shall be while you are a man;
But when in other habits you are seen,
Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen.
(5.1.384–87)

Readings of this ending have diverged widely, leading to very different interpretations of the play as a whole. Seeing full closure in the restoration of sexual identity, Shirley Staton, for example, remarks that the resolution “rebinds the anarchic forces of gender-free identity loosed by transvestite disguise,” while Catherine Belsey notes with regret that “closure depends on closing off . . . glimpsed transgression and reinstating a clearly defined sexual difference.”³⁶ On the other hand, contending that “in England from the Elizabethan period until the present day and in America, a ‘queen’ is a man in drag,” Jan Kott hears in Orsino's words inadvertent intimations that the true object of his fancy is the crossdressed figure; accordingly, even though a gesture toward restoring order is made at the play's close, the polymorphous holiday desires unleashed by the “wickedness” (2.2.26) of unmoored sexual identity are seen to evade reconfinement: “The girl/boy and the boy/girl will never stop circling between the Duke and Olivia like wooden horses on a merry-go-round during that ‘twelfth’ night that never ends.”³⁷ In a position that stands between these opposed views, Janet Adelman suggests that at the moment of undisguising, the play “mourns the loss of sexual indeterminacy”—what I have been discussing as youthful liminality that prefigures its own passage—but adds that the play also “works to repair that loss” by giving us twins who, in a way, erase sexual difference by being both maid and man in one face, voice, and habit. However, she continues, this is an “image of a fragile androgyny” that remains a fantasy, one whose “very fragility” resonates in and with the play's “melancholy.”³⁸ That is, she sees in the resolution an attempt both to elude the kind of closure Staton and Belsey posit and to continue the spirit Kott detects, but at the same time she hears a strain of melancholy intimating that the evasive device turns on fictive truth and does not usher in an effective reality. Adelman's ingenious reading of the

³⁶ Shirley Staton, “Female Transvestism in Renaissance Comedy: ‘A Natural Perspective, That Is And Is Not,’” *Iowa State Journal of Research* (August 1981): 79–89, esp. 86; Catherine Belsey, “Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies” in *Alternative Shakespeares*, John Drakakis, ed. (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 166–90, esp. 187–88. The transgression Belsey refers to consists in the disruption of the sexual difference on which patriarchy rests.

³⁷ Kott, 16 and 15. Although the use of *quean* and variants for strumpets and other sexually unsavory characters abounds, I have not found other Renaissance instances of its use in the meaning Kott suggests. I ought also to note that Kott shows considerably more interest than Staton does in the kinds of desire aroused by sexual indeterminacy; nonetheless, though Staton and Belsey's interest in transvestism and sexual identity seems more politically oriented than Kott's inquiry into the psychosexual dimensions of identity, they all look to history as the ultimate source of gender identity, and therefore view gender as politically informed constructions.

³⁸ Janet Adelman, “Male Bonding in Shakespeare's Comedies” in Erickson and Kahn, eds., 73–103, esp. 90 and 91.

play's ambivalence, much as Barton's did earlier, serves as a reference point for my reading. It must be remembered that the removal of the disguise at the heart of this play's swirl of longing is associated with the return of Malvolio's everyday rule: Viola's "maid's garments" are with the captain, who is "in durance [imprisoned], at Malvolio's suit" (5.1.273–74). Removing the disguise hence signals genuine loss. Orsino's continued allusion to Viola as "boy" or "Cesario" indicates a tacit recognition that this object of desire, in being captured, loses the very quality that creates its appeal; in this respect Cesario remains an untouchable "Caesarius" indeed. Keeping Viola dressed as Cesario to the end of the play thus symbolically defers Malvolio's inevitable return and works once again to sustain a melancholy longing for an object that effectively denies touch.

The fact that boy-actors impersonated all the women further complicates this final deferral. With respect to the ending of this play in particular, it seems likely that for at least some spectators, as Michael Shapiro proposes, the "reflexive allusion to the actor's maleness generated emotional crosscurrents counter to the play's drive toward heterosexual union."³⁹ For those experiencing these crosscurrents, what Stephen Greenblatt notices would be true: "Orsino does in a sense get his Cesario."⁴⁰ That is, a given stage condition also conspires, though metadramatically, to undermine the finality of the traditional comic restoration. But this evasion, or deferral, suffers the same anguish of a disappearing half-life in that the fiction disappears with the boy-actor retiring into the tiring house. The reflexive allusion in the cross-dressing then relates the holiday within the play proper to the time-bound illusion created by the boy-actor, who, inasmuch as the special license of the theater is defined by the assumption of fictive identities in defiance not only of sumptuary regulations but also biology, further stands as a figure for the theater itself.⁴¹ Indeed, as Belsey notes, if the fact that "Viola occupies a whole range of subject positions in rapid succession . . . constitutes her as an enigma, and correspondingly as an object of desire" within the play proper, her impersonation by a boy-actor analogously constitutes her as an enigma and object of desire "for the audience" as well.⁴² Wishing to see Viola's undisguising deferred is therefore continuous with wishing the play to go on.

But these are desperate wishes. The great whirligig of time brings in his revenges. Thus it is that Feste's final song, appropriately an epilogue that defers the ending, acquires a lyricism far beyond the simple sense of the words; as it delineates time's progress—the eroding wash of everyday—it captures that recurrent moment of all things sliding into deliquescence. The play itself falls victim to the wind and the rain in also ending too quickly. Indeed, the play's ending becomes a trope for the ending of all things in time:

³⁹ Shapiro, 164.

⁴⁰ Greenblatt, 93.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the anxieties produced by imagining the theater as transvestite, see Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and effeminization 1579–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), esp. 10–25. For a more general discussion of the anxieties and hostilities engendered by the theater, see Jonas A. Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981).

⁴² Catherine Belsey, "Twelfth Night: A Modern Perspective" in *Twelfth Night*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, The New Folger Library Shakespeare (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993), 197–207, esp. 202.

*A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
But that's all one, our play is done. . . .*
(5.1.404–06)

But the song also provides an odd solace. While reminding us gently of temporality, it initiates in us a new longing for this spectacle that has just passed before our eyes; it ends by looking forward to the next performance: “*And we’ll strive to please you every day*” (l. 407). So we’re left in that final moment caught between longing further for further longing and experiencing an ending that comes too quickly. We’re left wanting to see the play again, and again, and again.