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Heart and Music: The Songs of Twelfth Night

Melissa Cyperski '10

John Case once said, "The human soul is nothing but a kind of sweet harmony: therefore, because of this similitude and sympathy, the soul is excited, softened, or stirred by the sound of vocal or instrumental music more than by the phantasms and shadows of other senses" (qtd. in Iselin 98). Originally used to glorify God, music has always been an intangible pleasure, touching the human soul to indescribable depths. It was only a matter of time before music reached the secular world and mortals attempted to harness its power. William Shakespeare is one such mortal, though his stage music has proven to be immortal as his plays are read and performed throughout the world on a daily basis. His music has endured the test of time and transpired into solo pieces, choral arrangements, orchestral compositions, cinema soundtracks, and operas. Several of Shakespeare’s most famous songs are found within the fan-favorite Twelfth Night, or What You Will. Shakespeare draws on Feste the Clown as something of a minstrel who uses his musical devices to enhance the love-laden themes of the text. Feste is also engaged to appeal to the hearts of the Elizabethan audience by providing the audience with their beloved music while concurrently questioning their notions of romantic love.

In many ways, the science of music was still very primitive during Shakespeare’s days. While several musical instruments were in existence, they were frequently poorly constructed, such as the lute’s strings, which were merely attached with glue; however, this is not to say that music was not a cherished and evolved art form. Musical terminology that was established during the Renaissance is still utilized today, both directly and circuitously. When learning music theory in the modern age, one is still taught strains and phrases that truncate the music into sections consisting of several measures, or as the Elizabethans referred to them, “semibreves.”

The notion of keeping time and a steady tempo was very important in both the realm of public interest and on the Shakespearean stage, as evident in The Tragedy of King Richard the Second. The definition of musical “time” today is the same as it was during the 16th century; however, it has now modulated into simpler categories. Today, music is composed in patterns of twos or threes, whereas in the Renaissance, proportions of time were categorized as dupla, tripla, quadruple, sesquialtera, or sesquiquartia (Naylor 6).

Time signatures are just one example of how music was far more sophisticated during the Renaissance and can be attributed to society’s high appreciation and practice of the art. All classes were exposed to music on a daily basis albeit with differing locations and stipulations. After dinner, in the homes of the nobility, scores of music were passed around and guests...
organs, recorders, flutes, fifes, sackbuts, trumpets, drums, lutes, and viols, among others; all instruments were merely used, however, as vocal accompaniment, as was the rule of Renaissance performance. In addition to clear intentions, Shakespeare also exuded a strong confidence in his music, as obvious by the frequency in which he ended performances with a song. twenty-one of the thirty-seven plays contain either allusions or straight performances immediately before, after, or during the final exeunt (von Ende 48-9).

Due to the depth and breadth as well as the careful employment of Shakespeare’s music, it is suggested that he himself was trained in the musical arts, perhaps under the teachings of Thomas Morley, a widely respected composer of the era. Not only were these two artists colleagues, but it is believed that they were personal friends, as well. The 1596 Rolls of Assessment of St. Helen’s Parish display both Morley and Shakespeare’s surnames, suggesting they both resided in the parish and, invariably, knew each other. Furthermore, there are only a handful of transcripts containing Shakespeare’s original songs, but of those select few, Morley is the confirmed composer of one or two, including “O Mistress Mine” from Twelfth Night as the melody appears in Morley’s Book of Consort Lessons as was published during Morley’s boarding period at St. Helen’s (Long, “Morley” 2).

While there are few existing records containing the original Shakespearean backed compositions, Shakespeare’s stage songs were frequently set to the melodies of popular songs from the era. In addition to the melodic line, Shakespeare alluded to songs in the titles of his works, including Twelfth Night which derives from the song “O the Twelfth Day of December,” a battle story (Duffin 293). It is suggested that the song, as mentioned by Sir Toby in Act II, scene iii, is actually a comic misquote of the popular tune, confusing it — perhaps due to his drunken stupor — with the carol “On the Twelfth Day of Christmas” (Lothian and Clark 48-9).

A confused title aptly fits the disguise plot element of the work while a musical title, nonetheless, applies to the vast number of instrumental and vocal songs, the four most famous being “O Mistress Mine” (II.iii.40-5, 48-53), “Come Away, Come Away” (II.iv.51-66), “Ah Robin” (IV.ii.72-82), and “When That I Was” (V.i.387-407). These compositions are some of the most beloved in all of Shakespeare and seek to define the characters, as well as to appeal to the audience’s cognition.

Feste directly plays to the desire of his patrons, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, two older gentlemen who are yet to be married. “O Mistress Mine” serves, mostly, as a characterization of the two men, as the Elizabethan audience would have been expecting due to their payment for the tune (Seng 94). They are aged bachelors who frequently consume copious amounts of alcohol at all hours of the day and night, as occurring in this particular scene. They pine for the Fool’s love-song pertaining to the love they know not and ultimately find themselves bitter and alone, awake in the wee hours of the night, admitting to the fact they “care not for good life” (II.iii.35). Thus, the song opens with a sweet commentary on love and was performed, as composed by Sir Thomas Morley, as a light and pretty waltz (Duffin 286).

Feste sings:

O mistress mine, where are you roaming?  
O, stay and hear! your true love’s coming,  
That can sing both high and low.  
Trip no further, pretty sweeting;  
Journeys end in lovers meeting,  
Every wise man’s son doth know (II.iii.40-45).

However, as the first stanza is a loveable ditty, it yet implores the men to stop searching for love and cherish that which they do find. While it is often suggested that Feste refers to the Viola plot and gender bending roles by referencing those who “sing both high and low,” Shakespeare may be commenting on homosexuality and pleading to the audiences’ hearts through the only means which they can bear so delicate a subject: song. The nature of music is pleasant and memorable yet somewhat transient as located amidst the text; therefore, Shakespeare had more freedom to challenge society’s accepted norms of true love.

He also had more leeway to blatantly criticize Sir Toby and Sir Andrew since the second stanza further heightens the attack and serves as a commentary on morality and the establishment of a passionate life.

What is love? ’Tis not hereafter;  
Present mirth hast present laughter;  
What’s to come is still unsure:  
In delay there lies no plenty;  
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,  
Youth’s a stuff will not endure (II.iii.48-53).

Feste suggests that time is of the essence and one must seize the day — carpe diem — while there is still life and breath to be had. As life after death is yet unknown, love must be enjoyed in the present with the delay of such enjoyment yielding great loss. Thus, cast away worries and apprehensions and love who or what you will; very fools, sons of wise men, do know of the importance of love so why waste time being drunken and slovenly? Find a pretty, young woman and love her for, as the Duke soon suggests, a woman’s beauty falls every day as petals do from the rose. The men then rouse up, affected — as the spirit of the music is contagious — and join Feste for a catch of merriment.

After several interjections of song among the lower class men, the Duke is next to entreat Feste for a performance. While Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are drunkards, Orsino is egotistical, melancholy, and patriarchal. This is evident within the music he patronizes as well as the commentary previous to the song, where he insists that a woman’s beauty and significance wane with every hour that passes. Requested by the Duke
Orsino is "Come Away, Come Away," a song regarding the innocence and romance of love, but the lyrical content of Feste's performance instead suggests sexual oppression, self-love, and grief: descriptions of the Duke's psyche. When Orsino is first introduced within the work, he is quick to describe his deep-seated love for the fair Olivia. "O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first, / Me thought she purg'd the air of pestilence; / That instant was I turn'd into a hart, / And my desires, like feel and cruel hounds, / E'er since pursue me" (I.i.19-23). This description of love contains two Renaissance taboos: trusting the eyes and admitting to desire. The eyes were deceitful and by the mere mention of love at first sight, the audience was immediately alerted of love's falsity. This mistake is acceptable at first as immature puppy love; however, the Duke continues to state that he has ever since pursued his desires: a term used almost entirely to imply fornication.

Clearly, the song later requested by the Duke Orsino denotes strong sexual undertones with the opening lines being:

Come away, come away death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid.
Fie away, fie away breath,
I am slain by a fair cruel maid (II.iv.51-4).

Thus, with the Renaissance euphemism of death as orgasm and the double-entendre of "come," Feste begins the song with a strong implication that Orsino lusts for fair maidens and thus loves them not. This suggestion is a continuation of the play's theme of the quest for true love and attempting to reconcile the many different formations love may assume. The Clown continues singing, "My part of death, no one so true / Did share it" (II.iv.57-8) which is translated plainly to "I am truer to love than any other has been or ever will be." The question is, however, who does Orsino indeed love? The lyrics continue to mention that "[n]ot a flower, not a flower sweet" (II.iv.60) will be cast upon his deathbed, a direct reference to the comparison of women to flowers but a few lines prior. By substituting orgasm for death and henceforth a bed for a coffin, Feste's lyrics suggest that a woman does not fulfill the Duke, either sexually or romantically. This is, again, a comment on the Renaissance view of homosexuality albeit a confused one since he who would satisfy the Duke is Cesario, Viola in disguise.

The song's final lines represent Feste's interpretation of the Duke's character as a lustful, sex-driven knave asking to not be so completely in love that those whom he loved - or rather made love to - will weep when he is gone. The song concludes with: "Lay me, O, where / Sad true lover never find my grave, / To weep there" (II.iv.64-6). The romance of dying consumed by love and thus shielding the grave in the attempt to protect the significant other from the pain of grief is completely undercut by the haughty assumption that the given lover would horribly mourn the loss at all. Furthermore, Orsino's severe loneliness and depression is palpable as he has no such true love who would mourn for him. This is yet but an unrequited dream for those whom he seeks, Cesario and Olivia, since they will not be had.

Feste is also quick to remind Malvolio of his unrequited love for Olivia in the song "Ah, Robin" (IV.i.72-82). Throughout the song's brief duration, Malvolio is imprisoned and discomfited, crying out to the Fool for assistance. Feste then appears harsh and unforgiving in his wit as he thrusts the man further into madness.

Clown. Hey, Robin, jolly Robin,
Tell me how thy lady does.
Mal. Fool!
Clown. My lady is unkind, perdie!
Mal. Fool!
Clown. Alas, why is she so?
Mal. Fool, I say!
Clown. She loves another (IV.ii.72-82).

The song refers to the pain that ensues when love is unreciprocated, specifically the psychological effects when another lover is preferred over one's self. Within the context of Twelfth Night, Malvolio is the neglected love, Viola the "other," and Olivia the woman of their affections. The text for this popular song derives from a poem of the same title by Sir Thomas Wyatt and was arranged into a round by William Cornish in 1523 (Duffin 48). Shakespeare’s audience would have been very familiar with this song and regarding the allusion, there are several key stanzas that contribute to the play. Wyatt writes:

My lady is unkind, perdie,
alack, why is she so?
She lovy' th another better than me
and yet she will say no. Ah, Robin...
I find no such doubleness
I find women true;
My lady loveth me doubtless;
and will change for no new. Ah, Robin...
Thou art happy while that doth last
but I say as I find,
That women's love is but a blast
and turmeth like the wind. Ah, Robin...

(Duffin 48-9).

The first stanza listed is almost verbatim what Shakespeare included in the play, but with a slight variance commenting that the other lover is better than the self. The poem continues to say that the speaker trusts women to be both true to themselves and true to their lovers. However, that very love and trust...
is soon to be betrayed and falters in the wind. Love, like life, is subject to ebb and flow, to tests of strength, to hope of enduring through the storm.

One of the longest and most famous of all the Shakespearean songs, "When That I Was," is used to conclude the play and takes upon it the same notion of toils and perils. Some experts theorize that the song was not Shakespeare's pen at all, but rather the composition of a player who merely wanted to appease the groundlings and to showcase his own musical talents (Seng 123-4). However, the song appears to be intentional and premeditated by Shakespeare as it does have contextual merit, especially in comparison with the other songs of Twelfth Night, and also because it is referenced again in King Lear.

The translation can be interpreted as the life cycle containing many ups and downs. The song begins as a jovial, joyous tone where a boy is consumed by the innocence of youth and disregards those things which please him not; however, as he grows to become a man, no longer does he find such pleasure for humans are judgmental, critical, and unaccepting. As the man continues to age, his follies dwindle still and he fails to thrive and enjoy the things society warrants he should, such as love. Life must then be escaped, one such route being alcohol. Now at the infirmary of old age, death is upon him; moments are fleeting and yet the wind still blows and the rain does fall. It is no matter now, however, for life has ceased, but there is a quasi-rebirth since the youth of the world still have the opportunity to enjoy life. Thus, he shall strive for excellence and aid the youth in seizing every moment.

It is also suggested that the lyrics are the protocol for a Shakespearean romantic comedy. While this may be true, in examining the interpretations of the other songs in Twelfth Night, this particular song is more than likely an invitation for carpe diem. Shakespeare is urging memento mori and while man is but mere mortal, life should be lived fully. In this sense, "When That I Was" is very reminiscent of O Mistress Mine.

More than likely, carpe diem was encouraged via song in order to impress upon the minds of the audience. A simple melody, especially when performed for five verses, is ingrained in the mind and may be called upon at any given moment. Ending the play with a long song also brought down the house, as they say, for, in the Elizabethan Era, love, music, and especially the love of music conquered all.

William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, or What You Will is surely a play of great literary merit; however, it is so much more than another face in the throng. At a time when Shakespeare was truly coming in to his own as the greatest playwright in history, Twelfth Night delivered the extra zest necessary for assured adoration. The Elizabethans loved escaping the pains of reality and sought to do so by any and all means possible; two of their favorite pastimes, however, were, invariably, music and theater. Shakespeare's meticulous use of stage music to develop the romantic plot line as well as to combine the beloved art forms of theater and music accounted for the play's wild success during the Elizabethan Era and still today in the Modern age. As Orsino perfectly illustrates within the very first line of the play, "If music be the food of love, play on, / Give me excess of it" (I.i.1-2). After all, as the modern Broadway musical A New Brain boasts, "Stories of passion, stories of friendship, and tales of how romance survives—I have so many songs... Heart and music get along."

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Works Cited


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