

PERSPECTIVES OF MADNESS IN *TWELFTH NIGHT*

Shakespeare uses such words as 'mad' and 'madness' more often in *Twelfth Night*¹ than in any of his other plays, so it is a reasonable assumption that he was interested in madness when he wrote it, and that this play will give us an idea of what he means by it. Interestingly, he never gives us a definition of the word 'madness' per se. As in other plays, we are left to work out the definition for ourselves, and the dramatist rather behaves as though the meaning is readily understood by all members of the audience. What, in fact, *did* Shakespeare mean by the term?

I believe that he meant by 'madness' something like 'a state of mind in which a character seriously confuses reality as most of us see it with what the character takes it to be'. I prefer this as a working definition to vaguer notions like 'being out of one's mind', or 'being mentally deranged'. Definitions like 'being out of one's mind' are question-begging, in that we wonder what, in turn, is meant by such a phrase. So one of my purposes will be to consider some examples of the use of words like 'mad', 'madness' or 'madman' within the play, to see whether my definition fits Shakespeare's usage.

When Viola first comes to woo Olivia on Orsino's behalf, Olivia is told that there is a visitor for her who is detained at the gate by Sir Toby. Upon hearing this, Olivia says about Sir Toby: 'Fetch him off, I pray you; he speaks nothing but madman' (1.5.87). The statement is surprising, for in general one does not think of Sir Toby as living in a fantasy world. What Olivia has in mind, however, is that Sir Toby is frequently drunk, and she is right to suspect that he may be drunk on this occasion, for his entry soon after shows that he is. His drunken state prompts Olivia to ask Feste:

What's a drunken man like, fool?

To which Feste replies: 'Like a drowned man, a fool, and a madman: one draught above heat makes him a fool, the second mads him, and a third drowns him' (1.5.107-10). The expression 'above heat' means 'above bodily warmth', and Feste, who is an intelligent commentator throughout the play, appears to mean that the use of alcohol will take one through three mental states, of which madness is the second. This, I believe, explains why upon Sir Toby's entry Olivia remarks about him, in a way which is far more precise than we think at first, that Sir Toby is 'half drunk' (1.5.96). He has moved beyond the state of being a fool, but is not yet, so to speak, drowned.

This telling comment by Feste about alcohol also allows us to see that Shakespeare, in contrast to what many commentators appear to believe, distinguish-

¹ Donno, Elizabeth Story, ed., *Twelfth Night*. Cambridge, 1985.

es between folly and madness. Obviously, folly is a less serious mental condition than madness. Feste does not elaborate, but I suggest that the play as a whole shows that congenital folly, to Shakespeare, means 'a mental state characterised by a striking lack of intelligence'. The most obviously foolish character in the play is Sir Andrew, who is not so much confused as comparatively dumb. In saying that there is a distinction between folly and madness I do not mean that the two cannot co-exist in one and the same character, or that the distinction is always sharp, but I do believe that Shakespeare nevertheless makes it. It is a very important distinction. For one thing, folly, if it is inherent in a character, is incurable, and for that reason Sir Andrew remains much the same at the end of the play as he was at the beginning. For another, the famous 'wise fool' in Shakespeare, of which category Feste is a representative, is not – and could not be – thought of as mad in any sense. The point about a wise fool is that he is, ironically, intelligent while his appearance and the superficial sense of his words suggest the opposite. Such an irony is not applicable in the case of madness, for madness is not a matter of lack of intelligence, but of mental confusion.

Sir Toby is mad when he is half drunk, and the implication is that in such a state of confusion a person views things in a somewhat fantastic fashion. Shakespeare hints that a normal person sees the world as most of us do most of the time, while the consciousness of a mad person is at least to an extent alienated from such a perception. This basic concept, I submit, is consistently present whenever people in the play are described as mad. We must distinguish, of course, between a character who really *is* mad, in Shakespeare's view, and one who is merely mad in the eyes of others who may be mistaken in their perspective. Sir Toby's confusion is real, but that is not true of all the characters in the play who are called mad. For example, towards the end of the play, before its denouement, Orsino thinks of Antonio as speaking madness (5.1.87). This is because Orsino knows less about Antonio than we do. Antonio has given quite an accurate report about his dealings with Sebastian and Viola in her role as Cesario, while the Duke thinks Antonio has been speaking about Cesario only. It is not in any sense a sign of madness on Antonio's part if, like others, he confuses Sebastian with Viola in her disguise. Shakespeare allows us to see more than his characters, and while this is a characteristic of his art generally, it is a trait very much to the fore in *Twelfth Night*.

The important nexus between Shakespeare's view of art and his concept of madness is that he exploits the fact that in both cases we are confronted with the workings of the imagination. As Shakespeare has it, through Theseus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the lunatic and the poet are 'of imagination all compact'. There is nevertheless of course a distinction between the lunatic and the poet. In today's terms, the lunatic dwells in a mental state of delusion, while a poet like Shakespeare avails himself of the art of illusion. At times, in this play, the two kinds of consciousness touch each other closely. The artist presents an illusion; and thus Shakespeare, through Viola, creates the illusion that she, in her disguise as a man, *is* a man. Even perfectly normal people may be taken in by such a disguise, as happens in Antonio's case. But the art of illusion may of course encourage delusion on the part of those who are inclined to suf-

fer from it anyway. It is evidence of Shakespeare's own sanity in *Twelfth Night* that much of the illusion of the artefact strikes us as nothing other than illusion, and that we are given an insight into the difference between our own sense of illusion — which we share with Shakespeare — and the delusion of others. Thus, for example, we ourselves can at all times tell that Viola is a woman, but her disguise as a male seriously deludes people like Olivia and Orsino. Shakespeare's point appears to be that such people are in any case inclined to delude themselves, and are therefore in a sense slightly mad. But, in the predominantly comic design of this play, Olivia and Orsino are not allowed to remain in a deluded state; at the end they know exactly what the status of Viola, and for that matter Sebastian, actually is. Above all, of course, Olivia and Orsino are no longer self-deluded.

It is part of the brilliance of the play that Shakespeare constantly emphasises both the difference between illusion and delusion and the similarity. He thus makes us aware that we are involved in questions of reality versus the imagination, though in the case of illusion the imagination is a positive force, while delusion is negative. Delusion depends on a serious distortion produced by the individual's own mind, whereas illusion depends on what others do to us. They temporarily mislead us, but inherently our mind remains sane. Thus Orsino, for example, is sane at the end of the play. Paradoxically, the illusion that Viola was a man turns out to have had a good impact on him. Admittedly, the extent of the illusion has been such that he has almost killed Cesario; but because the figure of Cesario is only an illusion, it is possible for Orsino to develop an unconscious love for Viola as a woman even while she is disguised.

It will be noted that I have concentrated on madness very much as a mental phenomenon. Of course, Sir Toby's intoxication is only mental in its effect, not in its cause. But by and large the play is not interested in madness as anything other than a mental phenomenon as regards both cause and effect. If, for example, Antonio temporarily seems mad to Orsino, this is not only because Antonio appears to be mentally confused, but because Orsino cannot think of any physical cause for what he takes to be Antonio's apparent fantasies. Shakespeare's view of madness seems to be singularly at odds with platitudinous Renaissance concepts of it as a matter of the four humours. So-called humoral psychology, we all learned as undergraduates, derives from classical antiquity, namely Hippocrates and Galen. According to this way of looking at things, madness, like any disease, is the result of a disordered state of the four fluids in our bodies which were called humours. Much modern discussion of madness in the Renaissance is based on the assumption that there were no people who could look beyond this psychology, in which both cause and treatment tend to be described in physical terms. It is to be remembered, however, that there always were people, well before Shakespeare, who did not see the question of cause and treatment in such a simplistic fashion. For example, in Chaucer's *Nun's Priests Tale* the author clearly pokes fun at Pertelote, who thinks that her husband's nightmare is the result of humoral upset, and best cured by a laxative.

It is true that Shakespeare at times uses the language of humoral medicine,

but on the whole not, I think, in such a way as to inspire us with the feeling that he strongly believed in it. What is conspicuous about a play like *Twelfth Night* is that terms like 'madness' are so frequent in it, while those to do with the humours are not. The obvious explanation must be, therefore, that Shakespeare was interested in madness as a mental phenomenon, as regards both cause and effect.

At this stage I wish to make a few other more general observations about critical approaches to the question of madness in Shakespeare and dramatists more or less contemporary with him.

I have argued at length in my edition of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*² that such a play presents madness thoroughly as a matter of the psyche, as regards both cause and effect, and I believe that the same is true of for example Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Both of these plays show a quite stunning grasp of the way madness may come about, particularly as a result of characters not understanding what lives in their unconscious, so that their consciousness comes to be warped as a result, and they move into the territory of fantasy. Beatrice in *The Changeling* and Ferdinand in *The Duchess* strike me as perhaps the most potent examples of such diseased minds. Plays like *The Changeling* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are ahead of their time, not circumscribed by it.

To say this is not to say that I am guided by Freud's thinking about these matters. On the contrary, I believe that such plays establish their own sophisticated structure of thought, and that their authors are precursors to Freud. I am not interested in importing some later theory into the texts, but in what they have to show us.

However, if later thinkers are to be called on by way of illustration – and to do so is useful – then Freud seems to me to provide far more helpful insight than for example Foucault. Indeed, the most recent book on madness in Renaissance drama which I have seen strikes me as thoroughly misled by Foucault. The book was written by Duncan Salkeld, and is called *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*. It was published in 1993.³ Salkeld argues that madness in the Renaissance is to be seen as a physical matter, in tune with Foucault's view that there was no clear distinction made between mind and body until Descartes did so in the mid seventeenth century. Hence, thus Salkeld argues, what strikes us as madness in drama before 1650 must have a physical cause, and hence, too, we can ultimately see it as political, because the microcosm is linked with the macrocosm.

I suggest that a play like *Twelfth Night* does not subscribe to any such view of things at all. On the contrary, it makes fun of orthodox beliefs about physical connections. Thus, for example, at the end of 1.3, Sir Andrew claims that Taurus governs 'sides and heart' (112). Sir Toby, however, corrects this into 'legs and thighs'. Of course those who were familiar with traditional thinking on such matters would have known that the supposedly correct answer was

2 Daalder, Joost, ed., *The Changeling*. London, 1990.

3 Salkeld, Duncan, *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*. Manchester, 1993.

'neck and throat'. Obviously, Shakespeare is ridiculing both Sir Toby and Sir Andrew. But surely he is at the same time showing that this whole way of thinking about the presumed connection between the body and the signs of the zodiac was passing into oblivion, or should be.

My general point, then, is that Shakespeare is, in his view of madness, more like Freud than the materialist that people like Foucault would turn him into. At least in its manifestation, madness is to Shakespeare a matter of mind, and he offers us no reason for thinking that it arises from any physical cause.

Nor does Shakespeare accept another Renaissance concept of madness, that of demonic possession. This particular concept he plainly satirises through his presentation of Malvolio. Whatever is wrong with Malvolio, he is not possessed by the devil. Yet when Maria claims that Malvolio is mad, it is demonic possession which she thinks of; she even explicitly says to Olivia that 'He is sure possessed, madam' (3.4.8-9). Sir Toby, likewise, tells Malvolio to 'defy the devil' (3.4.85). Obviously Shakespeare alludes, through Maria and Sir Toby, to the concept of demonic possession as a commonly held explanation of the cause of madness. But Shakespeare's art also enables us to know that Malvolio's seeming madness is in fact caused by two things. Most significantly and comically, Malvolio is gulled into acting a part that is so out of keeping with what his identity normally seems like that Olivia thinks he must be seriously deluded about himself and her. As well, and in a serious way, Malvolio's madness is real to the extent that he *is* deluded as a result of his own desires.

When one thinks of Freud and madness one readily thinks of the unconscious. I do believe that the unconscious matters in *Twelfth Night*, especially in relation to love; but I don't think that, in this play, Shakespeare establishes an important connection between the unconscious and *madness*. Instead, Shakespeare shows that the mind, even when it is not steered by the unconscious, may falsely come to accept seeming truths because it desires to accept them though they are not a matter of reality. Malvolio is quite conscious of his wish to rise above his status, and to be accepted by Olivia as her husband. We do not have to look for hidden motives. It is his self-love which Maria can and does exploit, and it would be a mistake to believe that everyone in Malvolio's position would have been similarly duped. As in the case of, for example, Othello, Shakespeare shows that those who mislead gulls tend to be cunning. But the psychology of the gull is nevertheless deficient. However clever those who mislead us may be, we should still be on our guard. It is understandable that Malvolio finds some aspects of Maria's letter convincing, like for example the use of Olivia's seal. Nevertheless, he deludes himself into thinking that the letter is Olivia's because he wishes to, and he does so on the basis of spurious evidence. For instance, the presence of the capitals 'M.O.A.I.' in no sense needs to be seen as having anything to do with the name Malvolio. We watch Shakespeare's theatrical presentation of Maria's trickery as providing a contrast between reality on the one hand, and a combination of her illusion and Malvolio's delusion on the other. Our perspective of Malvolio is one of distance, as we view him in part through the eyes of those who mislead him.

So, as I have said, Malvolio *is* self-deluded, and mad to that extent. But the

business of his treatment is also used to show us the cruelty of a society that locks up lunatics, and Feste's interrogation in the role of Sir Topas is a mockery of what a medical examination should be. Shakespeare no doubt calls into question both the integrity and the sanity of those who should provide care. The professionals of the day, such as curates, clearly do not understand madness, which on the whole Shakespeare appears to approach from a modern point of view. He presents madness as a mental disease. In Malvolio's case it is at least in part caused by his own mind; and Shakespeare appears not to take seriously either humoral psychology or the idea of demonic possession, leave alone that he espouses such materialism as Foucault or Salkeld try to find in him.

But — it may be argued — is not *Twelfth Night* a comedy, which surely cannot deal with madness in a serious way?

My argument is that it can, and does. Even the emotional effect of the comedy is by no means simply one of lightness, laughter, or optimism, though all these ingredients are present. If Malvolio at the end perhaps does *not* return to the society which he rejects, his self-absorption provides something of a tragic note. Perhaps his exit should be seen as fitting in with Feste's sad song about painful realities which the comedy deliberately does not resolve into harmony.

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