

The Title of 'Twelfth Night'

January 6th, the festival of epiphany and the twelfth day from Christmas was formerly observed with number of ceremonies and festivals. A common feature of these festivities at court and at houses of great nobles was the performance of plays. From the topical dating Leslie Hutson argued that Shakespeare's Twelfth Night was specially commissioned for performance on 6th Jan 1601 when Don Virginio Orsino, the Duke of Bracciano, was entertained at the court. However the earliest reference to the play is found in John Manningham's note in his diary. Going by Manningham's records it was on 2nd Feb 1602- Candlemas Day- the play was enacted to entertain the members of Middle Temple. Now, Hutson's suggestion to justify the date and title can be rejected both by reasonable inferences and internal evidence. Primarily the portrayal of lovesick Orsino would be an affront to the Queen as well as her distinguished guest. Moreover the arrival of the dignitary was not known until 26th Dec. And in this case it allowed too short a time to write and rehearse a play to perform in the court. Lastly three of the scenes are laid in Olivia's garden suggesting either spring or summer. So Hutson's argument to date the play as well as justify the title seems reasonably wrong.

The title Twelfth Night actually refers to the festive spirit prevailing in this comedy. Festive pattern had a highly developed theatrical and literary convention. The classically trained innovators like Lyly, Kyd and Marlowe included folk themes and conventions to form a complex tradition. Since his Love's Labour's Lost, Shakespeare in his plays worked out the holiday sequence of release by weaving his story around an elegant aristocratic environment. But it was only in A Mid Summer Night's Dream, that he used the festive pattern brilliantly. The title Twelfth Night suggests that the play owes its origin to a native tradition which is remarkably similar to that behind Aristophanes at the start of the literary tradition of comedy.

The community observances of periodic sports and feasts were very important part of the English social life. In this holiday mood people came out of their social identities and enjoyed the freedom of not being themselves. This spirit which C.L Barber calls 'Saturnalian' causes release. The title Twelfth Night actually indicates this Saturnalian spirit which works through release. Indeed Shakespeare's play places its characters in the position of festive celebration. Hence we find that the characters of the sub plot almost always seek holiday and incidentally the others too get involved in the merry making and revelry which persists throughout the play.

Interestingly enough even Malvolio (Olivia's steward), who happens to be a staunch opponent of the festive spirit too unwittingly becomes a participant of this mood. Again like Rosalind in As You Like It, Viola in Twelfth night is forced to adopt a male disguise. At the same time, Olivia thinks she is mourning. But subsequent events force her to come out of her mourning mask and participate in a

courtship game which ends up in her clarification about herself. She understands that she is a woman who needs to love and be loved in return. She would not have recognized it voluntarily but mistaken identity and disguise force her to do so. The same may be said about Orsino. He too is forced to come out of his idealistic pretensions of love to a realization of true love when he unconsciously surrenders himself to Cesario's attractions. "The characters of Twelfth Night" are therefore "made to participate in a heightened awareness of the relation between man and 'nature'" (Ruth Nevo). Truly we witness that the unnatural preoccupations like greed, pride, sorrow and idealistic notion of love are mocked at and laughed at in the course of the play and eventually the natural order of genuine love and harmony is restored by the end of Shakespeare's comedy. Thus the title of Shakespeare's play hints at the 'saturnalian' spirit which causes release and is also purges individuals from the excesses of self love.

If disguising is a part of community observances of periodic sports and feast days, misrule and madness is another means through which Shakespeare offers release to his characters. Almost all the characters of Twelfth Night are subject to this motif of madness. Malvolio and Sir Toby are perhaps the most pertinent examples. Again in the course of the play Olivia recognizes her frenzy. Antonio too wonders if he had gone mad. The disillusion and misapprehensions of all these people are however resolved by the findings of objects appropriate to their passions. And this should be reasonably seen in the larger framework of Twelfth Night festivities.

Twelfth Night is the only one of Shakespeare's plays to have two alternate titles. The second of these- What You Will is also the title of a play by Marston. In all probability it appeared early in 1601. Armed with this fact R.K Turner proposes that What You Will may have been Shakespeare's working title which was adopted before Marston pre-empted it. Now, the question is then why Shakespeare did not abandon it altogether. Contextually T.W Craik and J.M Lothian in the New Arden edition had pointed out that What You Will along with the new title- Twelfth Night remind the audience that the title bears no significance than the casual titles of Shakespeare's previous comedies like -Much Ado About Nothing and As You Like It. Shakespeare scholars also argue that the secondary title seems to refer to the character of the play. Truly, Shakespeare's Twelfth Night is a combination of a very rich theatrical and literary tradition. It bears affinities with the romantic comedies, dramatic romances and even comedy of humours. Therefore, the title seems to invite the audience to form their own decisions regarding the nature of the play. Indeed analyzed from this perspective the title What You Will seems just and perfect.
