

THE FOOL IN TWELFTH NIGHT

The humanist revival has made a special place for the 'folly' tradition. Now it is evident from Petrarch's On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Other People to Erasmus's Praise of Folly published in 1511. This folly tradition however continued to remain quite in vogue during the Elizabethan period. Indeed like Erasmus, even during Shakespeare's time, licensed fools were kept in great households. This custom did not die out until 1700. Shakespeare's comedy Twelfth Night by introducing Feste thus follows the Erasmian tradition and also the Elizabethan stage convention. The character of Feste in Shakespeare's play however appears unique in the way that he does present a mirror in which the follies of the characters are reflected. He indeed serves as a keen observer of what goes around him and also a rational commentator on events and persons.

That Feste is the mirror to the other characters is seen times more than one even within the range of first three acts. In his first encounter with Olivia it is evident. Already Maria had informed him of her lady's displeasure and weariness regarding his absence. Now Feste's meeting with Olivia is a parody of catechism to render an important service for her search of new life-

Olivia: I know his soul is in heaven.

Feste: The more fool, Madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul in heaven. Thus Feste does the hard but useful task of delivering Olivia from the trauma of bereavement. Since then she rests aside her bereavement and becomes receptive to new life. The fool therefore performs the benign office of comic exorcism. If all reports of Olivia's overpowering melancholy are not borne out in her demeanour, it is because of the priestly task of purgation that does for her. It is Feste's comic but curative wisdom.

The mutual and inevitable hostility between Feste and Malvolio needs no elaboration. Soon after this catechism Malvolio explodes- "I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal..." This insult Feste remembers till the end as it is more than personal, and by nature against the very spirit of comedy. In this sequence, Feste hits hard saying-"God save you, Sir, a speedy infirmity for the better increasing your folly." Twelfth Night does rally against serious rationality and proves its wisest characters to be fools. Hence Malvolio who is deep in the delusion of being the wisest is almost exposed from inside out by such witty retorts of Feste.

That Feste holds the mirror up with his comic brilliance is again reflected in his encounter with duke Orsino. Immediately after his song-"come away, come away..." for which Orsino has a great fascination, Feste makes a comment full of comic insight after accepting the money that the Duke offers. He (Feste) says-"Now the melancholy God protect thee, and the tailor make thy changeable taffeta, for thy mind is very opal." Thus Feste becomes the first to comment upon the 'opal' nature of Orsino's love. And hence he is the one who focuses our attention upon what seems to be the two most sticking traits of the Duke's character- changeableness and melancholy.

Twelfth Night is no less a comedy of language. The non-conformity of words to co-exist with reason even in casual construction is a preoccupying thought in Shakespeare. Feste embodies this aspect with his brilliant pun and wordplay, provoking thoughtful laughter. Instances of such dialogues are almost unending and only a few may suffice. In the beginning of Act III Viola and

Feste seem to be engaged in word play, leading to a conversation about language itself. Their conversation opens with the question of living as Viola asks "...Dost thou live by thy tabor?" Now to this Feste replies-"No sir, I live by the church." So, even in the most ordinary and casual sentence there remains a kind of ambivalence. And Feste's dexterity in handling words gets further evidence as he remarks-"A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit; how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!"

Feste convinces us that he is a hang over of the past. Indeed Lady Olivia's father took much delight in him. Although Olivia too occasionally takes his side, it is evident that she is more willing to fall back on Malvolio. Hence Feste has to suffer insecurity and uncertainty to a certain extent which is evident when Olivia herself speaks of his dryness and also refers how other people think of him. Now though Feste overcomes this insecurity by his wit and intelligence, yet, it lends on him a commercial touch unlike Touchstone in As You like It. He (Feste) seems to coin words to mint money from every opportunity. Thus after the song when Duke Orsino offers him money, he quickly says -"Truly, Sir, the pleasure will be paid, one time or another."

A conventional courtly fool should customarily possess a fine singing capacity and Feste has this skill to perfection. Orsino in his bid to assuage his love sickness is seen deliberately in search of Feste and is immediately regaled by the song- "come away, come away death..." even in the midnight revelries of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, Feste's song is supposedly always present- "O mistress mine, where are you roaming?" Feste's love for song and music seems to transcend all other conditions because, we find when Orsino offers him money after his song, he rejoins-"No, pains, Sir, I take pleasure in singing, Sir." Feste's deep love of song for itself is again reflected in the last scene, when Feste sings alone on the stage as all the other pairs of lovers have left, perhaps to enjoy the bliss of love.

Feste naturally invites comparison with other fools, more particularly with Touchstone in As you Like It. Feste's case however seems to be peculiarly hard. He has no Celia or Lear to protect and love him and yet in many important respects he is superior in mind than other fools in Shakespeare. He has no friends in the true sense although Maria defends him within limits. So, although he delights other characters, we the readers can not but feel sorry for him. This loneliness and melancholy of Feste is more manifest in his last song that closes the play. The married couples have already shut the doors perhaps to enjoy the union and happiness when he stands alone and sings. Perhaps it is this strain of melancholy that bears which had made the critics like A.C Bradley to comment that Shakespeare has lent on Feste his towering superiority and hence his loneliness on this endeared fool.
