*Twelfth Night* and the Justice of Love

By setting the play at the end of the festive season Shakespeare reminds us that all “pleasure will be paid, one time or another” (2.4.70-71). The financial transactions which play such an unusually pervasive role in *Twelfth Night* direct the reader’s attention towards the central question which the play raises; namely, how can one earn what is truly of value (1.2.18, 1.2.52-57, 1.3.22-24, 1.4.38-40, 2.3.31-34, 2.3.182-89, 2.4.67-71, 3.1.43-53, 3.3.38-48, 3.4.2-3, 3.4.340-52, 4.1.19-21, 4.2.118, 5.1.27-49).[[1]](#endnote-2) Clearly, any exploration of this issue must be based on an understanding of what is required for the fulfilment of our deepest needs. It is no coincidence that the play’s subtitle, *What You Will*, is almost synonymous with that of *As You Like It*, which, I have argued elsewhere, is entirely focused on the *summum bonum*.[[2]](#endnote-3) In *Twelfth Night*, as in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare presents deep attachments as an irreducible ultimate good, and argues that they are naturally just, since they offer the reward of lasting intimacy in return for a high level of self-denying, diligent care. The play also evaluates the nature and extent of the effort involved in pursuing prestige and sensual pleasure in relation to the returns which they yield: sensualists attempt to reduce their cares to a minimum, but gain only fleeting and insubstantial pleasures, whereas pride, whether manifesting itself as honour, piety or philosophical detachment, offers entirely illusory rewards, despite frequently demanding a considerable outlay of courage or self-restraint.

Because the friendship between Sebastian and Antonio develops into the nearest thing to a fully reciprocal attachment in the play, it provides a benchmark by which all the other relationships can be measured. Weighed down both by grief for his twin sister, Viola, whom he presumes drowned in the wreck from which Antonio rescued him, and by an awareness of the extraordinary “trouble” which he has caused the captain, Sebastian declares that the guilt would “kill him” if he allowed his saviour to share any further in the “malignancy of [his] fate,” since this would be “a bad recompense” for his painstaking care (2.1.1-42). Accordingly, although Sebastian eventually feels “charge[d]…in manners” to recount his history and parentage by the very “modesty” which makes Antonio refrain from trying to “extort” these details from him, he still attempts to conceal his destination from his friend for fear that he should insist on following him. However, when Antonio finally abandons his carefully maintained restraint to protest that his beloved’s decision to cut all ties with him is tantamount to “murther[ing] me for my love,” Sebastian feels duty bound to tell him that he is going to Illyria (2.1.12-43). Paradoxically, therefore, Antonio’s apparently self-denying generosity, although from one point of view absolutely noble, turns out to be a prudent investment, since it enables him to set in train the cycle of obligation and requital which Shakespeare presents as the foundation of intimate relationships.

Antonio does indeed follow Sebastian to Illyria, but eventually manages to soothe his friend’s sensitive conscience by insisting that he has been led by an entirely “willing love” to guide him through this “rough and unhospitable land” (3.3.8-13). Just as in the previous scene Antonio was finally driven to reveal the depth of his need for his friend out of pure desperation, when Sebastian seemed to be about to “murther” him by cutting all ties, here he admits to a “desire (more sharp than filed steel) …to see” his friend only in order to reassure him that he “make[s a] pleasure of [his] pains” (3.3.1-5). If Sebastian had responded less sensitively to Antonio’s advances, the captain would undoubtedly have continued to efface his own needs, while foregrounding the display of humble devotion through which he hopes to gain his beloved’s trust and gratitude. The intricate transactions through which Antonio gains Sebastian’s friendship are thus crucial to the thought of the play, since they are designed to expose what the other passionate lovers in the play quite naturally conceal; namely, that they expect in the end to gain a proportionate return for their outlay of humble devotion.

One might assume that the captain’s open-hearted generosity would be easy to exploit, but, unlike his namesakes in The Merchant of Venice and Antony and Cleopatra, he has always retained a keen sense of what is due to him: we learn, for instance, that he “stood out” robustly against the purely expedient decision of his former comrades in arms to hand back the spoils of what he still sees as a just war with Orsino (3.3.30-37, 5.1.74-76). He pursues his friendship with Sebastian with such diligence because he expects ultimately to gain a rich reward for his efforts, for he sees in his beloved a “promise [of] most venerable worth” (3.4.362-63). Thus, the anger which Antonio feels when Sebastian apparently refuses to return his purse is proportionate to the effort which he now thinks he has wasted:

Is’t possible that my deserts to you

Can lack persuasion? Do not tempt my misery

Lest that it make me so unsound a man

As to upbraid you with those kindnesses

That I have done for you.

(3.4.348-52)

Antonio’s willingness to abandon his display of self-denial when he has lost all hope of being rewarded for his efforts provides the clearest evidence in the play that lovers’ sacrifices are essentially a means of securing their beloveds’ affections. Again, however, his efforts to restrain his “unsound” impulse to call in Sebastian’s debt underscore the point that lovers normally repress or sublimate what we might call the strategic aspect of their erotic transactions, lest too direct an expression of their own needs should undermine the harmonious rapport with their beloved which they have worked so hard to establish.

This view of love as a transaction is not as reductive as it might appear. Antonio’s strategies may not be straightforwardly noble in the way that they seem, but his desperate assertion that it would “murther” him to lose Sebastian and his willingness to follow his friend to a country where he has many mortal enemies–and where in fact he may well in the end be executed (5.1.69-100)–demonstrate that his attachment is strong enough to override even the most instinctive desires and fears (3.3.25-37). Antonio does indeed “make [a] pleasure” of his “pains” in a sense, because he relishes the fact that in supporting Sebastian, he is continually reinforcing his beloved’s trust and gratitude and in so doing, progressively deepening the relationship.

Antonio’s strategic combination of apparently self-denying care and direct emotional demands ultimately gains the desired effect. Since Sebastian makes his apparently spontaneous proposal that they should go sight-seeing together immediately after apologising for his inability to reward Antonio financially and acknowledging that his repeatedly expressed gratitude is “uncurrent pay,” we may conclude that it is indeed inspired by a new understanding that he can requite his friend’s generosity simply through his affectionate companionship (3.3.13-19). After tacitly accepting the erotic contract that he has been offered, Sebastian completely abandons his earlier reticence and at last gives free rein to his underlying desire to rely on his friend, even to the extent of accepting his purse without protest (3.3.38-48).

Almost as soon as Sebastian allows himself to express his need for intimate companionship, he finds that he can hardly bear to be without his friend:

Antonio, O my dear Antonio!

How the hours have rack’d and tortured me,

Since I have lost thee.

(5.1.218-20; see also 4.3.8)

This intense exclamation of relief indicates that, once lovers have been drawn into an intimate attachment, they will inevitably experience a compulsive urge to protect the beloved upon whom their happiness now depends. The concern which Sebastian feels for Antonio’s welfare now precisely reciprocates the “fear” that the latter expressed for Sebastian’s own safety in Illyria (3.3.11-13; see also 3.3.35-37). Similarly, as we shall see, Maria strives to protect Sir Toby from being banished by Olivia and the terrified Olivia intervenes in order to prevent Sebastian from fighting a duel (2.3.72-74, 2.3.131-33, 4.1.45-59). The corollary of this point is of course that when passionate characters like Viola, Sebastian and Olivia actually do experience a major loss, they feel it with an intensity which is almost commensurate with the depth of the original attachment.

Sebastian’s scrupulous sense of justice makes him particularly difficult to court, but it is precisely this quality which gives him the potential to be an unusually loyal and affectionate friend, since his desire not to build up unmanageable emotional debt springs from his sensitive awareness that deep intimacies entail ceaseless, reciprocal care. From this point onwards the friendship between Antonio and Sebastian will cause both men to make a “pleasure of [their] pains,” since they know that each expression of concern not only helps to protect and nurture the beloved upon whom their happiness depends, but deepens an attachment which they have enshrined as their ultimate good. The story of this relationship therefore perfectly illustrates the paradoxical justice of what one might call the erotic contract: in return for his apparently free, painfully pleasurable gifts of generosity, loyalty and restraint, Antonio eventually secures the only recompense he ever desired; namely, a deep intimacy with Sebastian, in which both men gain a trusted, constant companion in return for their sympathetic care. Thus, Shakespeare shows that there is a close link between justice and eroticism, since relationships are fulfilling to the extent that lovers are capable of creating and requiting obligation.

Like Antonio, but unlike Olivia (see below), Viola balances her care for others with a healthy attention to her own needs. She realises from the start that she is grieving for her own loss rather than for Sebastian himself, whom she at first presumes to have been drowned when their ship was wrecked:

And what should I do in Illyria?

My brother he is in Elysium.

(1.2.3-4)

It is significant both that she has an identical twin and that she subsequently changes her plan to present herself to Orsino as a eunuch: Viola is an intransigently erotic character, who must always be searching for a twin soul. (The description of the twins as “an apple, cleft in two” might well remind us of Aristophanes’ account of love in Plato’s Symposium, 5.1.222-24.[[3]](#endnote-4)) Viola promises the captain that she will prove herself “worth [Orsino’s] service,” since she can “sing and speak to him in many sorts of music,” but this slightly odd phrase must be a figure of speech, for she never sings for the count, despite having ample opportunity to do so (1.2.57-58). Since music is regularly linked with passion throughout the play and Viola herself is named after a musical instrument, her alleged virtuosity could serve as a metaphor for her innate ability to create harmonious relationships.

Viola understands that attachments, in however nascent a form, can oil the wheels of even the most mundane transactions, but also that they come at a price. Having picked out one of her rescuers who shows ‘fair behaviour,” she extends herself to reward him freely for disguising her as a man and even promises him further remuneration if she should succeed in making herself useful to Orsino (1.2.52-57). In return for her generosity she gains a loyal and discreet servant, who is motivated by an ongoing cycle of gratitude and requital: “when my tongue blabs, then let my eyes not see” (1.2.63). Her dealings with the captain, which take place in the immediate aftermath of the shipwreck, are evidently much more prosaic and superficial than those which take place between Antonio and Sebastian, who have had “three months” of unbroken companionship in which to develop their relationship, but for this very reason they illustrate with particular clarity the essential process by which attachments are formed (5.1.94-96): Viola achieves her aims because she chooses an open-hearted man to help her, and secures his affection for the future by showing him the enduring benefits of their relationship.

Viola uses a glorified version of this strategy to endear herself to Orsino once she has fallen in love with him, since she does all she can to show him the advantages of her devoted affection, even to the extent of courting Olivia on his behalf with great dedication and self-restraint (1.5.139-54). The impediments of Orsino’s prior attachment to Olivia and his notorious inconstancy, not to mention her own relatively humble status and assumed gender, matter less to Viola at this point in the relationship than one might have thought, since even under normal circumstances trust and gratitude can only be accumulated through careful, restrained diligence (2.4.73-78). As she herself suggests, her fidelity is as absolute as that of the lover in Feste’s song, who is prepared to die of grief rather than abandon his devotion to his inconstant beloved (2.4.21-22, 2.4.51-66). The significance of this “old and plain” song is underlined both by Orsino and Viola: it is “silly sooth, and dallies with the innocence of love, like the old age,” evoking self-denying constancy with such poignancy as to “give…a very echo to the seat where love is thron’d” (2.4.42-48, 2.4.21-22). Viola recapitulates the theme of the song in her account of her imagined sister, whom she famously represents as “Patience on a monument, smiling at grief” (2.4.110-18).

Ironically, however, Viola’s evocation of stoical resignation itself has a strategic purpose, since it is designed to attract the duke’s interest in as proactive a manner as her unusual situation allows. Similarly, when she advises Orsino that he might have to resign himself to Olivia’s indifference, she is certainly concerned for Orsino’s well-being, and implicitly for her own, since she is in the same situation, but it is clearly also in her interests that the duke should follow her advice (2.4.87-92). These ambiguities point to Shakespeare’s paradoxical implication that it is precisely Viola’s seemingly self-denying fidelity which ultimately enables her to fulfil her deepest desires. It is not to demean her efforts to point to their strategic purpose, for the strategy can only succeed if it is maintained with an intransigent consistency which is from one point of view absolutely noble. She is so intent on making herself indispensable to Orsino and earning his gratitude that she throws all her considerable resources into her vicarious courtship of Olivia, regardless of the fact that it seems unlikely at this point in the relationship that he would ever be in a position to appreciate the full extent of her sacrifice.

Orsino is as intrigued by Viola’s constant devotion as he is by that of Olivia and the lover in Feste’s song: when her true gender is eventually revealed, he quickly remembers that she has told him “a thousand times [she] never should…love woman like to me” (5.1.267-68). After initially offering simply to pay her for her services, even the self-involved duke eventually feels impelled to reward Viola with his intimate attention, asking her a series of searching and sympathetic questions (1.4.38-40, 2.4.20-29, 2.4.104-19). Eventually, Viola’s efforts are rewarded, in however partial and paradoxical a manner: when the duke vows to “sacrifice the lamb that [he] love[s]” and “tender[s] dearly” in order to spite her rival, Viola submits “willingly” and in a “jocund” spirit, since, even as he is threatening to kill her, he finally acknowledges the depth of an attachment which quite literally matters to her “more than…life” (5.1.125-35). Like Antonio, she is prepared to override her instinct of self-preservation in order to prove her humble devotion, in the hope that her beloved will eventually respond in kind.

Viola’s love for a character who is prone to such outbursts of childishly tyrannical rage–characteristic, we may infer, of the habitual sensualist–might seem undiscriminating, but the paradoxical tenderness which Orsino also displays at this point is, as we shall see, only the latest in a series of indications that he is beginning to outgrow his fickle hedonism. The justice of love is, it seems, only tangentially related to conventional moral standards, for the only judgement that matters to Viola regarding Orsino’s character is whether he is willing and able to return her affection. The eventual success of her courtship underscores Shakespeare’s paradoxical implication that, in matters of love, utter humility and unstinting, apparently disinterested devotion often constitute the shrewdest investments. Evidently, however, there are risks involved: until Olivia asserts her marital rights, Orsino seems as determined to execute Viola as he is Antonio (5.1.141-69). A more common danger is of course that passionate lovers might simply be ignored or rejected, like Viola’s imagined sister or the lover in Feste’s song.

The parallels between the strategies adopted by Antonio and Viola suggest that a risky initial investment of apparently self-denying benevolence is usually required to set in train the cycle of gratitude and reciprocal generosity by which attachments are established and sustained. Despite her unusual situation, Viola’s courtship of the self-involved Orsino is in a sense more straightforward and conventional than Antonio’s, since she can concentrate purely on stimulating the duke’s gratitude and trust through her devoted, apparently selfless service -although, precisely because the duke lacks Sebastian’s sensitive conscience, it is unlikely that her affection will ever be fully requited. In contrast, the captain is compelled, first by Sebastian’s conscience and subsequently by his apparent ingratitude, to abandon his initial “modesty” and make his own emotional demands more frankly than he might have wished. The complicated transactions between Antonio and Sebastian are designed to expose with more clarity than Viola’s “modesty” allows her to do the integral role that justice plays in determining the depth of an attachment: relationships are fulfilling to the extent that both parties are equally determined to make a strategic investment of apparently self-denying devotion, from which, however, they each ultimately hope to realise a profit that is proportional to their efforts.

With the exception of Maria, the other characters are distracted from their deeper needs either by pride or sensuality, although several of them change their priorities as the play goes on. Because Orsino’s “appetite” is primarily for the countess’s body, “that miracle and queen of gems that nature pranks her in,” it is bound to “sicken and so die” immediately after “surfeiting” (1.1.2-4, 2.4.85-86). As the duke contemplates the way in which the “strain” of desire inevitably ends in “a dying fall,” his sadness gives way for a moment to a fully-fledged nihilism:

O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou,

That notwithstanding thy capacity

Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,

Of what validity and pitch so’er,

But falls into abatement and low price

Even in a minute.

(1.1.9-14)

Orsino’s melancholy stems from his recognition that the sensual life to which he is addicted cannot satisfy his innate yearning for constancy. The implication is that he turns to “love-thoughts” at the end of the first scene in order to avoid the “dying fall” which must inevitably follow an orgasm (1.1.39-40).

Orsino hopes to escape these frustrations by battening on Olivia’s intransigent constancy:

O, she that hath a heart of that fine frame

To pay this debt of love but to a brother,

How will she love when the rich golden shaft

Hath kill’d the flock of all affections else

That live in her; when liver, brain, and heart,

Those sovereign thrones, are all supplied and fill’d

Her sweet perfections with one self king!

(1.1.32-38)

The duke clearly admires the way in which truly passionate lovers sacrifice “all affections else” that might impede their attempts to establish a deep rapport with their beloved, but at the same time he himself has no motive to take such pains–as is implied by the fact that he seems to court Olivia entirely through go-betweens–since his primary goal remains physical pleasure.[[4]](#endnote-5) Thus, even as he praises Olivia’s constancy, he prioritises her “liver”–that is, her sexual appetite– over her “brain, and heart” in the list of the “perfections” which he hopes to “fill” (no doubt literally as well as metaphorically). Orsino shows the self-absorption of the habitual sensualist when, instead of describing himself as hunting Olivia’s heart, as one might expect, he declares that it is his own heart which is constantly being harried by “fell and cruel” desires (1.1.17-22). Having no reason to practise self-denial himself, he offers the countess no reason to feel that she owes him a “debt of love” in return. Olivia’s rejection of Orsino’s advances implies that she is absolutely aware of his shortcomings, which must seem particularly egregious when contrasted with the loyal affection of the brother whom she is mourning. Thus, Orsino’s courtship is precisely contrasted with those of Antonio and Viola, both in its strategies and in its outcome.

Nevertheless, Orsino’s frustration with the transience of sensual desire and appreciation of Olivia’s fidelity suggest that he may be on the cusp of prioritising loyal attachments over physical stimulation. Not only does he praise the “silly sooth” of Feste’s song about a lover so constant that he resigns himself to dying of grief, but he indirectly criticises his own dedication to sensual pleasure when he tells Viola that a woman should marry an older man in order to “sway…level in her husband’s heart,” since a young man’s “fancies” are likely to be more “giddy and infirm” than her own (2.4.42-46, 2.4.29-35). Characteristically, however, he then contradicts this latter point by declaring that such an inequality of age is also necessary because “women are as roses, whose fair flow’r…doth fall that very hour;” an argument which assumes that even the passion of older men is primarily sexual and therefore inevitably fleeting (2.4.36-39). He also contradicts his admiration for the stoicism of the lover in the song when he insists that his love for Olivia “can give no place, bide no denay” (2.4.124). It is Orsino’s focus on physical passion which confuses him: his boast that male sexual desire is “as hungry as the sea” and therefore more constant than female passion not only contradicts his initial point, but his recognition in the first scene that even a sensual passion which “receiveth as the sea” inevitably “falls into abatement and low price” as soon as it has been consummated (2.4.93-103, 1.1.9-14).

Aided rather than impeded by her masculine disguise, however, Viola has clearly managed to induce her beloved to form an attachment which for once has more to do with gratitude and trusting reliance than physical attraction. By interrogating Viola so searchingly, and in a manner so unlike his long range, generic, but at the same time bullish, courtship of Olivia, Orsino shows that he has finally been distracted from his self-absorption: it is significant that his most intimate conversation with Viola is eventually ended by her own embarrassed reticence, rather than any lack of interest on the duke’s side (2.4.104-22).[[5]](#endnote-6) This extended expression of sympathetic concern is a sign of a new understanding on Orsino’s part that it might pay to apply himself to his friendships -which is not to suggest that he would ever be able to match Viola’s dedication. Later, his sudden decision to abandon his spiteful revenge and marry Viola demonstrates that he has already formed a deeper attachment to “the lamb that I do love” than his habitual absorption in his own physical desires has allowed him to recognise (5.1.266, 5.1.385-88, 5.1.130). The couple’s married relationship will of course be sexual, but it will be sustained in the long run by Viola’s humble devotion, which the duke admits to having found intriguing long before he knew that she was female (5.1.267-68). Orsino’s changing priorities are illustrated by the fact that it is Viola’s passionate avowal of undying loyalty which triggers his desire to see her in her “woman’s weeds” (5.1.269-73).

Orsino’s significantly named servants are used to highlight the contrast between the Duke’s fickle hedonism and the austere constancy of Olivia’s mourning: while Curio’s invitation to “go hunt…the hart” might remind his master that a truly determined courtship would demand a far more careful approach, Valentine implicitly criticises the countess precisely for prioritising her cares over her pleasures (1.1.16, 1.1.25-31). Olivia’s “cloistress”-like withdrawal from the world and determination to “once a day…with eye-offending brine…season a brother’s dead love” suggest that she takes a perverse pride in the constancy of her mourning, which by now has come to overshadow her natural sadness (1.1.27-31). It takes Feste’s wit to induce Olivia to understand that her real emotion is not as nobly self-denying as it seems, since she is mourning for the “dead love” which she used to share with her brother rather than for the man himself, who she is sure is in heaven (1.5.62-74). Feste’s implication is that it must be an affectation on Olivia’s part, rather than a sign of pure constancy as she imagines, to allow her own needs to be side-lined for seven years by cares which are themselves ultimately derived from those needs (1.1.25-26). Thus, Olivia’s display of pious ascetism is shown to be as far removed as Orsino’s narcissistic sensuality from the balanced, equitable love represented by Antonio and Viola, who invest a huge amount of self-denying care in their beloveds, but whose ultimate purpose is, as we have seen, to fulfil their own deepest needs. Just as Antonio’s self-denial has its natural limits, we can see that after three months Sebastian’s intense grief for a lost sibling is, in contrast with Olivia’s, beginning to give way to the restless energy which eventually brings him to Illyria (2.1.39-43).

Although Olivia’s mourning is indeed, as Orsino realises, a sign of her capacity to love deeply and constantly, her passions are evidently tangled up with her pride, just as her name itself is a tangled version of ‘Viola’ and ‘Malvolio’.[[6]](#endnote-7) However, with these passions now partially liberated by Feste’s serious joke, the countess is not too haughty to be entranced by Viola’s fervent declaration that she would “make a willow cabin at [her] gate” and sing “loyal cantons of contemned love,” if she herself loved with “such a suff’ring, such a deadly life” as her master does (1.5.264-76). It is above all this vision of patient, determined fidelity–inspired no doubt by Viola’s own deep feelings for Orsino–which attracts the countess, since it seems to offer her the promise of a loyal intimacy to rival or even surpass her “brother’s dead love.” At this point Olivia certainly abandons her contempt for physical beauty, which is, as Viola implies, nothing more than a “proud” affectation, and begins to fish for compliments (1.5.231-51). She is, however, still more attracted to Viola’s “tongue” and “spirit,” which she places first and last respectively in her list of desirable qualities, than her “limbs,” which are of course unimposing by the standards of masculine beauty (1.5.292, 1.5.156-62). Viola endears herself to Olivia for the same reasons as Orsino admires the countess herself: all three characters appreciate that loyalty and self-denial are the measures of true devotion, although Viola is the only one who consistently prioritises love over pride and sensual desire.

Olivia’s pride manifests itself in her piety, her concern for social status and her maidenly sense of honour. Her pious ascetism is abandoned as abruptly as her “cloistress”-like veil - which is, ironically, briefly redeployed to facilitate her flirtation with Viola before finally being discarded for good (1.5.164-235). Her initial impulse after realising that she is attracted to “the man” rather than “the master” is to reassure herself that Viola’s “state” and “parentage” must be noble (1.5.289-94). She attempts for a while to resist her feelings, reasoning that her “eye [is] too great a flatterer for my mind,” but she is, as we have seen, in the grip of a stronger force than Viola’s assumed masculine appearance could ever exert unaided, while her objections are weaker than she realises, since they actually stem from pride rather than reason, as she imagines (1.5.308-9). After being rejected for the first time, she again strives desperately to restrain herself, attempting to distance herself from her feelings by dwelling on her superior rank: “how apt the poor are to be proud…how much the better to fall before the lion than the wolf” (3.1.126-34). Almost immediately, however, Olivia is again driven to prioritise her intense passion over both her social position and her maidenly virtue: she is unable to restrain herself in the end from swearing “by maidhood, honor, truth, and everything” that she loves Viola (3.1.111-20, 3.1.145-56, 3.4.201-05). Despite her desperate words, Olivia nevertheless still hopes even at this point to preserve her status and reputation for virtue by conducting a secret affair with Cesario: she reminds herself not to “speak too loud” as she wonders what to ‘’bestow of him, since youth is bought more oft than begg’d or borrow’d,” and tells Viola that she will deny her nothing “that honor, sav’d, may upon asking give” (3.4.2-4, 3.4.211-12).

It is not until Olivia finds herself experiencing abject terror at the thought of her beloved fighting a duel with Sir Toby that she is finally forced to acknowledge the depth of her attachment. She curses Sir Toby at this point, not so much for endangering Cesario’s life as for “start[ing] one poor heart of mine, in thee,” with the result that she can now no longer blind herself to her love, or seek to minimise the price which she will have to pay in terms of loss of status in order to secure her beloved’s affection (4.1.64-59). Having experienced this exasperating epiphany, she abandons her dignity and modesty completely and, after shamelessly shepherding Sebastian back to the house regardless of the presence of five onlookers, marries him with indecorous haste, so that her “most jealous and too doubtful soul may live at peace” (4.1.64, 4.3.22-28). From now on she has no interest in maintaining her social standing, as she shows when she casually leaves it to Sebastian to decide when their marriage will be “celebrat[ed]…according to my birth” (4.3.28-31). Her new found humility and self-restraint are shown at the end of the play, when her response to Viola apparently denying their marriage in the most cowardly and fickle manner possible is simply to plead abjectly with her beloved not to desert her (5.1.146-50, 5.1.170-71). The near silence which the countess maintains after learning that she has in fact married Sebastian illustrates this new restraint perfectly: she is perhaps reflecting that this match is as close as she is likely to come to marrying Viola, and will at least ensure that she can preserve a connection with her beloved. (Unbeknownst to her, however, her humble passion may even reap its full reward, since Sebastian undoubtedly has the same capacity for loyal devotion as his sister.)

Overall, Olivia’s story is designed to show that, unlike sensual desire–which will no doubt play an ongoing role in all three of the play’s romantic relationships–pride is completely incompatible with the humble devotion which deep attachments demand. Olivia’s desperate struggle to secure Cesario’s love contrasts sharply and ironically with the poised solemnity of her mourning in act 1. Over the course of the play she gradually disentangles herself from the pride which has exposed her to the influence of conventional conceptions of piety, social rank and honour, substituting for the artificial restraints that these codes impose a humbler discipline which flows naturally from the recognition that love can deliver far more substantial rewards. Whereas sensualists can begin to fulfil their deeper needs simply by caring for others, the portrayal of Olivia implies that it is often particularly difficult for proud souls to acknowledge and prioritise their passions, because they are so prone to be swayed by these artificial demands. Her story suggests, however, that passionate individuals are in the end unlikely to be ruled by pride because it does not provide the intrinsic satisfactions for which they yearn, however unconsciously.

Comparisons and contrasts between the subplot and the main plot deepen Shakespeare’s analysis of the ways in which pride, sensuality and deep attachment affect relationships. Broadly speaking, Malvolio’s pride parallels Olivia’s, but whereas the countess is progressively humbled by her passion for Viola, her steward is irremediably “sick of self-love” (1.5.90).[[7]](#endnote-8) Malvolio’s Puritan creed has, however, taught him that he can only achieve his ambitions in this world and the next through disciplined service (2.3.140). The emphasis which he places on moderation and restraint, and particularly his opposition to drinking and bear baiting, are typical of his sect (2.5.7-8). His pious sense of duty runs so deep that even in his–supposedly–private fantasies about becoming “Count Malvolio,” his ambition expresses itself as a desire to quell Sir Toby with “an austere regard of control” (2.5.35-80). It should not be forgotten that he is following his mistress’s orders, sometimes word for word, when he rebukes Sir Toby for his rowdiness, however much he might also relish the opportunity to patronise his social superiors (2.3.86-101, 1.3.3-6, 2.3.72-74). In fact, Olivia relies on Malvolio heavily in her dealings with Viola as well as Sir Toby, since he is “discreet,” “sad and civil” (1.5.95-96, 3.4.5-7, 1.5.139-64, 1.5.299-307, 2.2.1-16). The countess shows her gratitude for the valuable role that he has played in her household at the end of the play, when she makes a serious effort to redress his wrongs (5.1.280, 5.1.345-55, 5.1.379).

Maria realises that she can fool Malvolio easily by appealing to his vanity, since he “is so cramm’d (as he thinks) with excellencies that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him” (2.3.50-53). By encouraging the steward to “cast off [his] humble slough” and “be proud” in the knowledge that Olivia loves him, Maria’s fake letter exposes the vanity which underlies his dutiful piety (2.5.148-49, 2.5.161). Whereas Olivia has sublimated her desire for praise into pious devotion, Malvolio is vulnerable to Maria’s trick because he pursues secular advancement as avidly as divine grace -indeed his faith seems to draw little distinction between the two. Encouraged by the letter, Malvolio discards all restraint, and becomes convinced that “Jove” is supporting his ambition in an immediate, material way, rather than, as formerly, merely promising rewards in an afterlife in return for punctilious service (2.5.172-73; see also 2.5.178). The letter exposes a Malvolio whose passions are stunted or distorted, as his name implies, since he is unerotic himself, and concerned with Olivia’s alleged love only as a means of advancement. Once he has discarded his piety and pursuit of praise, there is nothing in his nature to restrain his overweening ambition. His assumption that smiles and laughter are conscious performances, to be forced or “quench[ed],” is one of many indications in the play that he is a stranger to the moderating influence of ordinary human companionship (1.5.86-88, 2.5.65-66, 2.5.178-79). He lacks the “generous…and…free…disposition” which ensures that even Viola’s most mundane transactions are regulated by a sort of natural justice, based on the spontaneous flow of mutual trust and gratitude (1.5.91-93).

Audaciously (but in an understandably indirect fashion), Shakespeare has Feste rehearse the principal tenets of Malvolio’s faith when, disguised as a parson, he attempts to persuade the steward that his “complain[ts]…of obstruction” in the dark cell where he is imprisoned are simply symptoms of his deranged “ignorance,” since his confinement is in fact nothing more than a diabolical delusion (4.2.34-44). This assertion, when combined with the fool’s insistence that Malvolio can only free himself by subscribing to the Pythagorean doctrine that “the soul of our grandam might happily inhabit a bird,” could be seen as a veiled allusion to the doctrine of salvation by faith: just as there is no real suffering apart from that which stems from resistance to God’s will, so the only true emancipation is that granted to the elect in the afterlife as a reward for their determination to remain faithful in the face of the tribulations which they will inevitably endure in a fallen world (4.2.50-60). Malvolio’s angry rejection of Feste’s catechism suggests that he has been radically disillusioned, or, one might say, enlightened by his unjust treatment: his repeated assertion that no hell could be darker than his cell suggests that he is determined from now on to trust only the evidence which the material world provides his own senses, and will never again allow himself to be reconciled to his lot by divine rewards or sanctions (4.2.33-47). His parting thrust– “I’ll be reveng’d on the whole pack of you”–also implies that he has finally cast aside the constraints imposed by his pursuit of worldly advancement (5.1.378). The folly of his worldly ambitions must have been brought home to him by the fact that the mistress whom he has served so loyally has, for a while at least, forgotten about him completely (5.1.279-80).

Although the play focuses mainly on the role that justice plays in personal relationships, it undoubtedly also has a political dimension. Malvolio’s engrained gracelessness is exposed when he angrily rejects Olivia’s considerate proposal–borne of guilt and a lasting sense of obligation to a loyal servant–that they conduct a formal trial of his persecutors, in which he himself would be “both the plaintif and the judge,” in favour of an indiscriminate revenge (5.1.351-55, 5.1.378). Far from humbling his pride, his suffering seems to have liberated it from the moderating influence which was previously exerted by his piety and desire for praise. Clearly, sensualists are equally prone to be tyrannical: when Orsino’s desire for Olivia, which “can give no place, bide no denay,” is finally thwarted, the duke’s sexual frustration manifests itself in a rage which is at least as boorish as Malvolio’s spiteful outburst (2.4.124, 5.1.117-31).

In contrast with the outbursts of anger which punctuate much of the final act (see also 5.1.69-72, 5.1.206-07), it is significant that both Viola and Olivia maintain a careful restraint when under even greater stress than Orsino and Malvolio. Ironically, the only such outburst which comes close to being proportional is that which Antonio mistakenly directs at Viola for not returning his purse, for, as her heartfelt reply indicates, “ingratitude” is the worst of all vices, presumably because it “taint[s]” the intimate attachments which Shakespeare presents as the ultimate good (3.4.347-70, 5.1.76-92). Unlike Plato, who argues that all non-philosophers must be driven by physical desire and are therefore inherently unjust–because the body is of course ineluctably private–Shakespeare suggests both here and throughout the play that human nature is generally biased towards justice, since it is innately disposed to form bonds of mutual gratitude.[[8]](#endnote-9) Shakespeare’s disagreements with Plato arise from his belief that attachment is a distinct behavioural system, which stimulates a powerful desire for harmonious intimacy that is often in tension with the baser bodily drives, which are indeed potentially tyrannical.[[9]](#endnote-10)

Nevertheless, Olivia needs someone like the loveless, but dutiful Malvolio, who finds it congenial to maintain order by threats, to control sensualists who are restrained neither by an innate sense of obligation nor by conventional piety. Sir Toby is typical of a “rough and inhospitable” country: Illyria, situated in the western part of the Balkan peninsula, was generally associated with piracy and drunkenness in Shakespeare’s day (3.3.8-11, 5.1.51-63).[[10]](#endnote-11) Like Plato’s guardians, however, the steward is only useful as long as he believes in salutary myths which valorise humble service.[[11]](#endnote-12) A thoroughly enlightened Malvolio not only loses this usefulness, but becomes a dangerous figure, since it is an easy step to convert his ambition into an attack on the whole social order, once he has discarded the beliefs which have previously motivated his dutiful service. The educated and gentlemanly steward, who has previously “con[ned] state without book” and now intends to read “politic authors,” whose demand for a far more radical justice–as he conceives it–than Olivia can offer him, is now restrained neither by convention nor nature, and who is no stranger to legal proceedings, is perfectly capable of turning his world upside down (4.2.82, 2.3.149-50, 2.5.161, 5.1.275-77). Malvolio’s pride is ultimately more dangerous to society that Sir Toby’s sensuality, although it is easier to control through habituation.

Sir Andrew’s decision to change his “dun” stockings to what he imagines to be a more fetching colour invites particular comparison with Malvolio: both characters are tricked into pursuing Olivia and both are easy to flatter because they are ruled by self-love (1.3.101, 1.3.115-20, 1.3.125-41). Sir Andrew is too competitive to engage passionately in any relationship, and, like Malvolio, is less focused on desiring others than on being “ador’d” himself (1.3.123-24, 2.3.31-34, 2.3.81-83, 2.3.181). His flirtation with Maria is completely unerotic, as she slyly hints, while his courtship of Olivia is an entirely artificial affair (1.3.69-79, 3.1.86-91). His passions, such as they are, seem to be primarily sensual: he “delight[s] in masques and revels,” dances enthusiastically and was born under Taurus, which is ruled by Venus (1.3.113-33).

Whereas Malvolio has been taught by his religion to take pride in his virtue, Sir Andrew is fashionably scornful of piety, which means that he has only his sense of honour to limit his feckless pursuit of stimulation and kudos (1.3.83-84, 2.3.140-46, 3.2.31-32). As Olivia’s contrasting judgements of Sir Andrew and Malvolio indicate, the code of honour is much less useful to society than Christian virtue, presumably because it is less likely to exert a moderating influence over its adherents (1.3.15-17). There is no doubt, however, that it controls the knight’s behaviour rigidly in a variety of contexts. Not only does Sir Andrew’s sense of honour make him “a great quarreller,” despite his cowardice, and impel him to overcome his reluctance to “accost” Maria romantically, but it also imposes a code of virtue of sorts: he eschews “policy” as shameful and feels that he must win Olivia purely by “valor” (1.3.58-79, 1.3.30, 3.2.28-32).

The challenge which Sir Andrew pens after being persuaded that he can only earn Olivia’s regard by fighting a duel with Viola reveals with naïve clarity the true cost of honour, rather in the same way as Feste’s “sermon” arguably conveys the essence of Puritan teaching regarding the price of eternal life (3.4.147-70). Although the foolish knight–whose name ironically means ‘manly’–searches for the swaggering tone that Sir Toby recommends, he cannot suppress his underlying anxiety: “if it be thy chance to kill me…thou kill’st me like a rogue and villain” (3.4.160-63). His instinctive fear exposes the artificiality of the insouciance which more sophisticated honour-lovers strive to project: “a swaggering accent…gives manhood more approbation than ever proof itself would have earn’d him” (3.4.280-310, 3.4.180-82). It seems that Sir Andrew must distort his nature almost as much as Malvolio in order to win praise.

However, despite this quite considerable outlay of effort, the rewards which Sir Andrew gains are insubstantial. The motive for the duel with Cesario is of course to win praise and honour rather than the intrinsic pleasures of a passionate attachment: Sir Andrew informs Viola, quite accurately, that “[Olivia] uses thee kindly. But…that is not the matter I challenge thee for” (3.4.155-57). The responses of the three female characters to the code of honour provide the natural standard by which its conventional demands can be measured: Sir Andrew’s forced gallantry makes as little impact on Olivia as Orsino’s sensuality, while the anxiety which Viola feels when confronted with the foolish knight’s challenge and Maria’s worries about Sir Toby offering to be his second against Malvolio are surpassed only by the sheer terror which the countess feels at the prospect of her beloved risking his life in a duel (1.3.15-17, 3.4.226-72, 2.3.126-33, 4.1.45-51). The fear and mystification which the three women exhibit are a measure of the extent to which honour entices its adherents into a sort of closed, artificial loop, substituting for the virtuous circle of gratitude and requital which could fulfil their deeper needs a diligent and absorbing pursuit of entirely illusory rewards.

Like Olivia, however, albeit on a much more trivial level, Sir Andrew proves himself to be capable of turning away from his pursuit of prestige. An unobtrusive pun underlines the extent to which the foolish knight’s pride has been deflated by the end of the play: Sir Toby picks out Sir Andrew’s conceit to attack by calling him “a coxcomb” just after the foolish knight has twice lamented the “bloody coxcomb” which Sebastian has given him (5.1.190-207). Significantly, it is precisely at this humiliating moment that Sir Andrew is able to show real concern for Sir Toby for the first time, worrying about his friend’s wound as well as his own and suggesting that they are “dress’d together” (5.1.172-76, 5.1.204-05). Thus we can infer that Sir Andrew, Malvolio and Olivia all ultimately recognise the futility of their diligent, joyless efforts to gain prestige, whether through courage, pious ascetism or dutiful service, although they are clearly not all equally capable of aligning themselves with their deeper passions after achieving this insight.

Just as Sir Andrew and Malvolio offer a bathetic parallel to Olivia’s pride, so Sir Toby’s sensuality is a grosser version of Orsino’s. Like the music demanded by Orsino in the opening scene, the song which Sir Toby requests highlights the ephemerality of physical desire: “kiss me sweet and twenty; youth’s a stuff will not endure” (2.3.51-52). His alcohol-fuelled attempt to spin out his sensual pleasures indefinitely is cruder than Orsino’s: rather than retreating to “love-thoughts” like the duke, he simply refuses to accept that the Christmas festivities must end (as the play’s title of course reminds us), maintaining against all the evidence that “not to be abed after midnight is to be up betimes” (2.3.4-13).

Ironically, however, Shakespeare shows that the natural desire to perpetuate physical pleasure imposes cares even at the lower, more sensual end of what one might call the erotic hierarchy: just as, on a somewhat higher level, Orsino tries to exploit Olivia’s caring nature as an antidote to the frustrating “sicken[ing]” of his “appetite,” so Sir Toby can only sustain his riotous life style by working hard to convince Sir Andrew that he still has a chance of winning Olivia’s hand (1.3.20-22, 1.3.88-112). He is often, therefore, much more calculating than is immediately apparent, as we can see when he warns Maria cryptically to be on her best behaviour when he sees the foolish knight approaching (1.3.42-43).[[12]](#endnote-13) Despite his initial bravado, he is increasingly alert to the dangers of alienating Olivia (4.2.66-71).

Not only is Sir Toby’s life therefore less care-free than he would wish, but his outlay of effort represents a poor investment, for sensual pleasure, however frequently repeated, will always be cancelled out by the pain of a “dying fall.” At the same time, however, he dismisses–initially, at least–more prudent outlays of effort, which would yield more durable returns: whereas Orsino understands enough of love to appreciate that Olivia’s mourning is a sign of her capacity to form deeply rewarding attachments, the drunken knight brands such “care” simply “an enemy to life” (1.3.1-3). Since he is at first exclusively bent on pursuing physical gratification–which is, as we have seen, inevitably a solitary business–he has even less reason than Orsino to engage in the cycle of gratitude and requital which invariably drives intimate attachments: he is, for instance, completely unmoved by Olivia’s request, as conveyed by Maria as well as Malvolio, that he “confine himself within the modest limits of order,” even though he is dependent on the countess for his bed and board (1.3.4-13). Sir Toby’s casual nihilism reflects the fact that in freeing himself from the cares of love, he has forfeited its substantial rewards: thus he shrugs off Maria’s adoration at first–“What o’ that?”–and brusquely dismisses the duke’s concern for his injuries -“That’s all one” (2.3.179-180, 5.1.196-97).[[13]](#endnote-14)

However, even Sir Toby realises in the end that he can only secure lasting happiness by working to reciprocate the care of those who love him. He shows even less desire for the diminutive Maria than Orsino does for Viola in her male guise, but eventually marries her to “recompense” her for her gulling of Malvolio and her absolutely consistent loyalty: “she’s a beagle, true-bred, and one that adores me” (2.5.182-85, 5.1.362-64, 2.3.179-80). Perhaps Sir Toby’s anger regarding the unreliability of the doctor who was to have dressed his wounds– “I hate a drunken rogue”–reflects a new understanding that the contracts which supply our needs cannot be fulfilled without self-discipline (5.1.200-01; see also 1.5.26-28). By rejecting Sir Andrew so conclusively at the end of the play, thus ensuring that he can no longer finance his riotous life style, he perhaps signals his readiness to accept the constraints of married life: “Shall I play my freedom at tray-trip, and become thy bond-slave?” (2.5.190-91). Certainly, any care or generosity which Sir Toby is able to display in fulfilling his marital contract would be bound to be more productive than his previous machinations, since he would be working to secure Maria’s witty company and loyal affection rather than an endless repetition of ephemeral pleasure. Indeed, it is significant that none of the four main relationships in the play are primarily sexual, although two of them involve habitual, self-confessed sensualists. This is not to deny that sensuality is more compatible with deep attachments than pride: it is significant that Orsino and Sir Toby are given the space to mature gradually and partially, whereas Olivia has to be forced by her own underlying needs into an abrupt and painful reappraisal of her priorities.

As befits the subplot, Maria is less obviously heroic than Viola and Antonio–although Sir Toby is only half joking when he calls her Penthesilea (2.3.177)–but there is no doubt that she is equally devoted to her beloved. Her name might suggest that Catholicism is more compatible with deep attachments than Puritanism, at least insofar as the former tends to prioritise loving kindness over faith.[[14]](#endnote-15) Her ‘adoration’ of Sir Toby has triggered a determined effort to restrain his behaviour, which is partly motivated by a desperate fear of losing him if he were to be “turn[ed]…out of doors” by Olivia (1.5.27-28, 2.3.179-80, 1.3.4-14, 2.3.72-74). As with Antonio and Olivia, it seems that her desire to possess her beloved has provoked a fierce urge to protect him. As we have seen, she actually agrees with the substance of Malvolio’s rebuke of Sir Toby, and only turns against him when he directly threatens his interests–and therefore hers–by vowing to report her beloved’s “uncivil rule” to Olivia (2.3.72-74, 2.3.85, 2.3.103, 2.3.121-25). Her scheme to dupe Malvolio actually originates as a hasty attempt to distract Sir Toby from his determination to act as Sir Andrew’s second in a duel with the steward: she begs the drunken knight to “be patient for to-night,” warning him that Olivia is “much out of quiet” after her encounter with Viola, and immediately develops a plan which does not require his direct involvement, but which is guaranteed to keep him equally entertained (2.3.126-137).

Maria’s strategies, like Antonio’s, serve a dual purpose, since they are designed not only to protect her beloved, but to inspire his undying gratitude. Like Viola and Olivia, Maria has to deal with her beloved’s initial indifference: her diminutive stature is the concrete embodiment of her insignificance in Sir Toby’s eyes, and perhaps also its cause, since her physical appearance would have probably been his foremost concern at first (1.5.204-05, 2.5.13). Undaunted, however, she shows herself to be courageous as well as witty in her attempt to captivate her beloved, for, as Malvolio reminds her, she is risking her own position by supporting the drunken knight (2.3.121-24). Through sheer tenacity she gradually gains Sir Toby’s respect: he compares her both to gold–precious of course partly because it is completely unchanging–and to “a beagle true bred,” presumably because she makes up in persistence what she lacks in size (2.5.14, 2.3.179). When her scheme succeeds, Sir Toby vows to “follow” her “to the gates of Tartar” (2.5.204-06). In sum, Maria gives Sir Toby the same loyal, diligent care that Viola and Antonio offer Orsino and Sebastian, although each tailor their devotion in slightly different ways to fit their beloveds’ needs. Essentially, the same erotic contract proves effective in all three cases, which suggests that it is the most natural way for courting lovers to proceed.

Feste is truly a philosopher by most definitions, since he has a curious mind, well suited to abstract thought. Since his way of explaining his movement between the two households makes “Foolery” resemble philosophy in its universalism–it “does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere”–it is particularly significant that he sees Viola’s peregrinations as a sign that she is a kindred spirit (3.1.38-41). The two characters certainly display a similar degree of scepticism as they exchange a series of jokes which depend on viewing the Church from a purely material perspective: Feste is connected to churches only in the literal sense of living next door to one, which means that, as Viola seems to suggest, he is in fact being exploited by those who do actually “live by the church” and therefore “stand…by [his] tabor”–for the clown’s music presumably helps him to pay his tithes–but offer him no substantial recompense for his efforts (3.1.1-10). It is Viola who extends the covert satire on the artificiality and injustice of the established order to include the secular hierarchy: “the king lies by a beggar” (3.1.8). She shows, moreover, that she can match Feste’s level of insight–and, as we have also seen throughout the play, the subtlety of his rhetoric–precisely by registering the flexible awareness of “mood…quality of persons, and the time”–“as full of labor as a wise man’s art”–which allows him to “check at every feather” in order to accommodate his wit to his various audiences (3.1.60-68).[[15]](#endnote-16) Like Shakespeare himself, and Plato and Aristophanes before him, these two philosophical characters both know how to use comedy to conceal controversial opinions.[[16]](#endnote-17) Viola differs from Feste, however, in that she invariably uses her capacity for sympathetic insight to endear herself to her interlocutor.

However, there are sharp contrasts between the two characters: Although Viola is as happy to mock the Church as Feste, she draws back from him as soon as he extends his scepticism to loyal attachments, realising that the fool “care[s] for nothing,” since he presents “words [as] very rascals, since bonds disgraced them,” virtue as purely a matter of preserving one’s “name,” and loyal husbands simply as fools (2.3.14-35). The strategies by which Viola endears herself to Olivia are as intelligent and unconventional as Feste’s, but her passionate evocation of absolute fidelity is in every other respect the polar opposite of the fool’s coolly cynical attitude towards his mistress’s devout constancy (1.5.64-74, 1.5.139-49, 1.5.264-76). Whereas Feste questions any attempt to transcend the mutability of the world, whether inspired by natural passion or conventional beliefs, Viola, who is “sick” for love, focuses all her intelligence on the task of establishing an enduring friendship with Orsino (3.1.46-53). Ironically, however, it is precisely Feste’s prioritisation of truth over friendship which cuts him off from understanding the most important truths: he leaves the joys of love completely out of account when he claims that he is “the better for [his] foes and the worse for [his] friends,” since only the former tell him his faults bluntly (5.1.12-26).

There are signs, however, that Feste’s cynicism is not primarily philosophical, but springs from a fear of being deceived: “He that is well hang’d in this world needs to fear no colors” (1.5.3-6). His underlying nature is passionate, as perhaps must be true of those who are of a genuinely philosophical disposition: his uncharacteristic reluctance to receive payment for the song he performs for Orsino on the grounds that he “take[s] pleasure in singing,” implies that he is as deeply affected as the duke by the idea of a loyal, but rejected lover, dying of grief, and furthermore that he has for once actually enjoyed sharing this feeling with his audience (2.4.51-71). This unique display of passion–which contrasts sharply with his earlier acceptance of a double payment for the song celebrating “present mirth”–could suggest that he is drawing on his own experience of “bonds disgrac[ing]” the “words” which purported to seal them forever (2.3.31-38, 3.1.20-21).

Feste protects himself from loss and betrayal by withdrawing from deep attachments, while using his sceptical philosophy to justify this retreat on the grounds that absolute constancy is beyond the scope of human nature: “virtue that transgresses is but patch’d with sin, and sin that amends is but patch’d with virtue” (1.5.47-52). His continual oscillation between the two households, his repulsion of Maria’s and Viola’s friendly advances and his surly treatment of Sebastian are all indicative of this habitual and deliberate detachment (1.5.1-6, 3.1.28-30, 4.1.1-23).[[17]](#endnote-18) Having consciously disengaged himself both from conventional moral codes and from the natural graciousness which encourages passionate individuals to fulfil their obligations, whether personal or professional, Feste is no more diligent in attending to Orsino than he is to Olivia -or even to Sir Toby and Maria, who expect him to be present when Malvolio reads the planted letter (2.4.8-14, 2.3.173-75). Thus, although his opening admonition of Olivia undoubtedly helps her to understand that constancy has its natural limits, it turns out also to be symptomatic of his own more radical rejection of all pretensions to fidelity.

In the light of his reductive conclusion that human nature is inherently fickle, Feste has scaled down his erotic needs to focus purely on physical pleasure: “As there is no true cuckold but calamity, so beauty’s a flower” (1.5.51-52). Consequently, he keeps a mistress, although like Sir Toby and Orsino, he has discovered that even the most reductively sensual “pleasure will be paid, one time or another”: “My lady has a white hand, and the Mermidons are no bottle-ale houses” (2.4.70-71, 2.3.27-28). Thus, although he avoids both the risks and the effort involved in deep emotional investment, he still needs to extend himself even to earn fleeting and nugatory rewards. Feste’s ambiguous name associates his continual pursuit of diversion with decay, which underscores the point that his cynical acceptance of impermanence is no more likely to fulfil his deeper needs than Olivia’s idealistic determination to remain devoted to her brother’s memory forever.

However, Feste’s philosophy does offer him an enticing–if ultimately illusory–substitute for the substantial and lasting satisfactions of intimacy which it has encouraged him to forfeit, since it continually bolsters his sense of superiority to those who strive to achieve some degree of constancy in their lives. His underlying pride is exposed most clearly when he casually punishes Malvolio for belittling him earlier at the start of the play by delaying the delivery of the letter that would have secured the steward’s release (5.1.370-77). (Unlike Sir Toby, he is sufficiently detached from prudential considerations to run the risk of incurring Olivia’s wrath in order to extend Malvolio’s torment -4.2.66-71). It is typical of Feste that, notwithstanding the fact that he has clearly been harbouring a lasting grudge, he manages to present his gloating over Malvolio’s humiliation as an expression of serene resignation to an all-pervading mutability: “thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges” (5.1.376-77). Thus, far from restraining his vanity, Feste’s philosophising enables him to justify and rationalise it in a way that further bolsters his sense of his own superiority.

Although Feste and Sir Toby both use the phrase “that’s all one,” as a sort of verbal shrug to express their casual cynicism (5.1.196, 5.1.373), the fool’s philosophical resignation to a mutability which he sees as all-encompassing has fostered a much more radical nihilism than the sensualists of the play could ever countenance: “many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage” (1.5.19-20). Feste’s response to Maria’s warning that Olivia will hang or banish him for his prolonged absence–"for turning away, let summer bear it out”–undoubtedly shows that he is less attached to life than those who have more reason to live, but again he seems to be using his sceptical philosophy to repress his real feelings, for he prays that his “wit…put [him] into good fooling” as soon as he is left on his own, and then delivers a performance which seems carefully calculated to regain his mistress’s approval (1.5.20, 1.5.32-33). Similarly, he gives Viola the impression that his wanderings are entirely free-spirited, but he is clearly more intent on earning tips than he admits, and there are signs that he has resorted to Orsino’s court partly because he has found the grieving Olivia to be less generous than her more frivolous father (3.1.31-39, 2.4.11-12, 3.1.49-55, 2.3.25-28, 3.1.43-55, 5.1.29-49).[[18]](#endnote-19) Although he is indeed largely disengaged, we can infer from these contradictions that Feste exaggerates his indifference to his instinctive need to make a living, presumably in order to impress his listeners, or perhaps to convince himself of his superiority to those who are more prudently attached to life because they are less radically resigned to their own fleetingness and insignificance.

Ironically, therefore–for he is undoubtedly indifferent to honour and status as they are conventionally conceived–Feste’s philosophy functions in the same way as Malvolio’s piety, since it enables him to repress his true needs, while bolstering his proud sense of superiority to an ephemeral world. This parallel is underscored by the fact that Feste and Malvolio are the only characters who show absolutely no signs of passionate attachment at any point in the play.[[19]](#endnote-20) The contrasts between the fool and Viola on the other hand seem designed to indicate that, far from constituting a ruling passion in its own right, as in the Platonic tradition, philosophy tends to be simply an expression of pride when it is not regulated by love. Indeed, of the various forms of pride which Shakespeare explores–Protestant piety, honour, whether maidenly or macho, the hauteur born of high social rank–philosophical pride is perhaps the most insidious. Feste is as unjust in his dealings with others as he is unfulfilled in his personal life: he is as proud as Malvolio, Olivia and Sir Andrew, but, unlike them, is a “corrupter of words,” who sees virtue purely as a conventional matter of preserving one’s “name,” and as sensual as Orsino and Sir Toby, but, unlike them, deliberately eschews loyalty (3.1.14-36).

Feste’s final song goes well beyond the fool’s own perspective to provide a covert overview of the play’s themes: whereas in what might be called the first phase of desire, one instinctively pursues sensual pleasures–“A foolish thing was but a toy”–in the second, one naturally seeks to secure a more lasting contentment, taking care to “shut [the] gate” of one’s “estate,” thus creating a small enclave of justice in a world of “knaves and thieves” (5.1.389-96). Marriage, described earlier by the priest with unexpected solemnity as “a contract of eternal bond of love,” is the typical expression of this urge, but marriages only succeed when both parties are prepared to prioritise their mutual devotion over their pride: “when I came, alas, to wive…by swaggering could I never thrive” (5.1.156-61, 5.1.397-99). The reward for those who protect their “estate” and avoid “swaggering” is lasting contentment: they “still [have] drunken heads,” even when old age restricts them to their “beds” (5.1.401-03). The last verse concludes the argument with unobtrusive precision: actors illustrate the balance which lovers strike between pleasure and care in a committed relationship, as they “strive to please…every day” (5.1.408).

Of course, these little enclaves of justice cannot resist the inevitable depredations of nature forever, for “the rain it raineth every day,” but this larger philosophical perspective is irrelevant to lovers: “A great while ago the world begun…but that’s all one” (5.1.392 and passim, 5.1.405-07). The force of this latter phrase, previously expressive of Feste’s and Sir Toby’s nihilism, is completely reversed at this point, since it is now used precisely to reject philosophical perspectives which adduce the ultimate ephemerality of lovers’ efforts to protect their “estate” as proof of their insignificance (compare 5.1.196, 5.1.373). This reversal of meaning provides a hint that Feste’s enigmatic song conveys Shakespeare’s own overview of the play rather than the fool’s: the second and fourth verse remind us of the diligence of the constant lover and how it is rewarded, while the first, third and fifth focus respectively on the ways in which sensual pleasure, pride and philosophical detachment can obstruct this process.

Feste’s final song reminds us that time is central to the theme of the play. The problem with sensual desire is its ephemerality, whereas ‘swaggerers’ are frequently deluded into thinking that they can transcend their own mortality, whether through faith in divine providence, or through sceptical philosophy, which drains humanity of its significance by viewing all actions *sub specie aeternitatis*. Between these two extremes erotic contracts represent a humble, but determined effort on the part of lovers to secure their substantial pleasures against “the wind and the rain” for as long as possible.

Antonio, Viola and Maria are the characters who protect their “estate” most effectively, since they prioritise their love over all other desires and fears, working hard to safeguard the welfare of the beloved on whom their happiness depends, and above all to inspire their gratitude and trusting reliance through a noble display of courage and generosity. Although lovers usually strive to present this display as entirely altruistic, lest they introduce a divisive note in a relationship which they wish to portray as absolutely harmonious, their apparent self-denial is in fact strategically designed to secure the ultimate good of a lasting attachment, even if they also relish the sacrifices which are the necessary means to this end. The Antonio/Sebastian relationship reveals the nature of erotic transactions with relative clarity: the ultimate aim is to secure a deep intimacy, but this is only available in perfectly just relationships, where both lovers appreciate that happiness needs to be earnt through diligent investments of care and acknowledge fully the binding nature of the obligations which these investments create.

In contrast, Orsino and Sir Toby embody the initial, sensual phase of passion, which seems to offer immediate, carefree satisfaction– “a foolish thing was but a toy”–although in fact even sensual pleasures usually need to be “paid” for, in however minimal a way (2.4.70-71). As Shakespeare’s metaphor implies, however, these pleasures represent an immature stage in the natural development of desire, since they are always shadowed by a painful awareness of their brevity. Orsino and Sir Toby both show a nascent understanding that the rewards of a loyal, intimate attachment are more substantial than their habitual pleasures. To gain this ultimate good, however, sensual lovers have to moderate their physical appetites, which are of course ineluctably private, and strive to unite with their beloveds as far as is possible by diligently reciprocating their sympathetic care.

Unlike sexual desire, pride has no place at all in deep attachments: Sir Andrew, Malvolio, Feste and–at least in the first half of the play–Olivia herself all fail to “thrive” in their relationships because of their penchant for various types of “swaggering.” Shakespeare constantly teaches that the rewards of pride are not only illusory, but actually form an obstacle to true fulfilment, since the trust and gratitude on which deep attachments are founded can only be earnt through humility and self-denial. Pride exposes one to the distracting influence of the various codes and conventions which offer an all-absorbing alternative to deep attachments, granting insubstantial rewards in a sort of closed loop to those who fulfil their rigorous, joyless demands through their demonstrations of bravado, ascetism, or dutiful service. Whereas Olivia is close enough to her deeper needs to sacrifice piety, honour and social status in order to pursue a constant attachment, those, like Malvolio, who are more proud than passionate have no reason to reject these conventions apart from their own intrinsic futility.

Of the two great systems which control the behaviour of these less erotic characters­, namely Protestant piety and the code of honour, the former is more useful to society, since it channels pride into dutiful care, reinforcing the natural desire to win praise with the promise of eternal life. However, although the pious man’s disciplined service may outwardly resemble the lover’s, it can only be sustained through systematic indoctrination, since its rewards lack intrinsic satisfaction. Although Shakespeare acknowledges that pride and sensuality are naturally tyrannical when not restrained by conventional codes of behaviour, he also implies that human society has an innate bias towards justice, since attachments constantly create obligations which exert a pervasive influence over even quite humdrum social transactions.

Shakespeare portrays philosophy as regulated either by love or pride, rather than as a ruling passion in its own right. Philosophers are well placed to become successful lovers, since they can understand the nature of their beloved and ignore social convention when pursuing them. Philosophical pride, on the other hand, originates in a self-protective impulse to retreat from deep attachments, which is justified by interpreting inconstancy as a manifestation of an all-encompassing mutability. This apparent insight encourages proud philosophers to scale down their desires and their investment of effort to focus narrowly on sensual gratification. In return for forfeiting the intrinsic satisfactions of passionate constancy, such philosophers gain a pervasive, if unacknowledged, sense of their own superiority to the attachments and dogmas which claim to offer a more lasting alternative to their transient pleasures. They are in fact nihilists, however, for the rewards of pride and sensuality are too insubstantial to provide them with a sustaining purpose -although they are nevertheless still instinctively attached to life, and therefore constrained to make a living in ways which conflict with their stance of carefree resignation to an all-pervading mutability. Philosophers of this sort are unjust in their dealings with others as well as unfulfilled in themselves, since their scepticism regarding any form of constancy, whether natural or conventional, allows them to deny their obligations, while not preventing them from harbouring spiteful grudges when their pride has been wounded.

In sum, truly passionate lovers are naturally just, since they recognise that they need to make a humble and determined effort to serve their beloved in order to experience the substantial benefits of a loyal, intimate relationship. Although their investments are likely to be presented as disinterested gifts, the value of their returns tends to be directly proportional to the amount of care which they devote to developing an intimate attachment. In contrast, the rewards gained by sensual hedonists are fleeting and insubstantial, while the efforts of ‘swaggerers’–whether status-conscious, pious, honour-loving or philosophical–are radically misdirected, since they yield only illusory returns, while preventing them from ever acquiring the humility of the true lover.

1. W. H. Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur C. Kirsch (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000): 152-58; Valerie Forman, *Tragicomic Redemptions: Global Economics and the Early Modern English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008): 53. All references to the play are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Richard Burrow, “Fulfilment in *As You Like It*,” *Interpretation: a Journal of Political Philosophy* 41/2, Fall (2014): 91-122. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. A. S. Leggatt, “*Twelfth Night*,” in “*Twelfth Night”: Critical Essays*, ed. Stanley Wells (London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1986): 251; Barbara Everett, “Or What You Will,” in *“Twelfth Night”; New Casebooks* ed. R. S. White (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996): 211-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Dympna Callaghan, “Body Politics and *Twelfth Night*,” in *“Twelfth Night”; New Casebooks*: 146-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Harold Jenkins, “Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*,” in “*Twelfth Night”: Critical Essays*: 178-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Christina Malcolmson, “Social Mobility and Gender in *Twelfth Night*,” in *“Twelfth Night”; New Casebooks*: 171; Barbara Everett: 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Harold Jenkins: 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. For the Platonic view see: Leo Strauss, *The City and the Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1964): 109-15; Leo Strauss, “Plato,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Co., 1963): 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. For the view that attachment is a behavioural system with its own imperatives, which are as powerful as those of sex or self-preservation, see John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory* (London: Routledge, 1998): 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Leslie Hotson, “Illyria for Whitehall,” in “*Twelfth Night”: Critical Essays*: 89 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. This is of course close to Plato’s view: Leo Strauss, “Plato” in *History of Political Philosophy*: 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. J. B. Priestley, “The Illyrians,” in “*Twelfth Night”: Critical Essays*: 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Elliot Krieger, “*Twelfth Night*, ‘The morality of indulgence,’” in *“Twelfth Night”; New Casebooks*: 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. For Shakespeare’s indirect allusions to Catholicism see: Paul Dean, “’Nothing That is So is So’: “Twelfth Night” and Transubstantiation,” in *Literature and Theology* 17 (2003): 281-97; Maurice Hunt, *Shakespeare’s Religious Allusiveness: Its Play and Tolerance* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004): 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. A. S. Leggatt: 235 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. See Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Bks., 1966): 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. A. C. Bradley, “Feste the Jester,” in “*Twelfth Night”: Critical Essays*: 20; Barbara Everett: 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (London: Methuen, 1985): 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Elliot Krieger: 38 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)