

The fool as a playwright in twelfth night

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Feste, the fool character in *Twelfth Night*, in many ways represents a playwright figure, and embodies the reach and tools of the theater. He criticizes, manipulates and entertains the other characters while causing them to reflect on their life situations, which is similar to the way a playwright such as Shakespeare interacts with his audience. Furthermore, more so than the other characters in the play he accomplishes this in a highly performative way, involving song and clever wordplay that must be decoded, and is thus particularly reflective of the mechanisms at the command of the playwright. Feste is a representation of the medieval fool figure, who is empowered by his low status and able to speak the truth of the kingdom. A playwright speaks the truth by using actors and fictional characters, who are in a parallel low status in comparison to the audience, as they lack the dimensionality of real people. Thus, the role Feste plays in the lives of the characters in the play resembles the role the play itself plays in the lives of the audience watching the performance. This essay will explore this comparison first by analyzing similarities between the way in which Feste interacts with other characters and the way the playwright interact with the audience, and then focus on the similarities between the aims and content of these interactions. Perhaps the most straightforward aspect of the way Feste communicates with other characters that resembles the communication of theater itself is the overtly performative nature of his character. A clown, Feste is often portrayed in productions caked in elaborate makeup or in a fancy jester costume. In this sense, he is almost a caricature of the way actors don new identities when they become the characters they perform as. Dressing Feste up in a funny guise draws

attention to the fact that he is a fictional character. Similarly, a playwright “dressed up” his ideas in performance, by having actors and actresses show, rather than simply tell them. In four of the seven scenes he appears in, he sings, which makes other characters praise him and marvel at his talent. He sings about love to Sir Toby and Sir Andrew in 2. 3. 35-48 as well as with them at 2. 3. 64; he sings a “silly sooth” about the pains of love to Orsino in 2. 4. 50-65; he sings a traditional song appropriate to Malvolio’s illusion of love to attract his attention in 4. 2. 65-72; and he sings about how even happiness is not safe from the rain to end the play at 5. 1. 376-395. Orsino, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew all reward him with monetary payment for his performances. By singing, Feste gives life to the lyrics to move his audience. This parallels how actors in a more broad sense give life to the script, and convey the meaning of a play only by performing it. The mere text of a play is not enough to represent what a playwright wishes to convey, just as a reading of the mere lines of a song fail to have the same effect as listening to it sung. Feste in particular expresses this fact, for as the “performer” his singing voice is specifically requested, and none of the other characters can convey ideas through song as well as he can. In fact, when Orsino asks for a song in 2. 4, Curio responds by saying “he is not here...that should sing it,” and fetches Feste (2. 4. 9). If someone else were to attempt to sing the song, Curio realizes, they would not successfully “relieve Orsino’s passions.” Through his unique ability to move other characters through performance, Feste symbolizes the actor who moves his theatrical audience by animating the script. In addition to the use of song, Feste dazzles other characters in the play through his use of intelligent wordplay. His wit is best contrasted

with that of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, who in 1. 3 communicate with Maria through puns which are confusing due to an apparent lack of understanding what each other mean. Feste, on the other hand, is a clever fool, and in 1. 5 engages Maria in a quick battle of words. For example, his line “ Well, God give them wisdom that have it; and those that are fools, let them use their talents,” (1. 5. 13) twists a parable from Matthew 25 about doing work with goods, where “ talents” refer to currency. Here, he implies that fools should do work with and develop their foolish ability (“ talent”). He then makes an appropriate pun on the word “ hanging,” which refers to both being put to death and sexual prowess. Feste also impresses Viola with his mastery of language in 3. 1, to the point where she rewards him with payment. For example, she asks him whether he lives “ by” his tabor drum, and he makes the pun that he lives “ by the church,” as in near it; he also puns on the word “ wanton,” which Viola uses to describe the mischievous use of words, claiming that he wished his sister had no name, so that she could not be manipulated lewdly. A further, related way Feste demonstrates his thorough understanding of language is through his ability to switch linguistic personalities when it is appropriate. For example, he adopts a pseudo-religious proverbial tone in addressing Olivia when she mourns her brother in 1. 5, making fun of her allegedly unnecessary grieving. When he first meets Sebastian and believes him to be Cesario, he is put aback by his high language, and parodies his line “ I prithee vent thy folly somewhere else” by responding “ I prithee now ungird thy strangeness.” (4. 1. 13) Indeed, to Feste, “ a sentence is but a cheveral glove to a good wit.” (3. 1. 10) Essentially, he is able to switch voices at will. Feste’s mastery of language

and ability to convey any meaning through it parallels the mastery of language required by a playwright such as Shakespeare. A playwright, like Feste, must know all the properties of words in order to convey the message he wishes to. He must know what tones and vocabularies each character requires to have his or her role fleshed out, which in turn elucidates the meaning represented by their character in the larger organism of the play itself. Essentially, both Feste and a playwright demonstrate a full bag of linguistic tricks, which enables them to get their points across. Profundity need not only come from the complicated language shown by Feste; rather, the understanding demonstrated on the part of Feste shows how a playwright understands how to use different tones for different effects. For example, Shakespeare gives Malvolio lines whose language reflects his arrogance. As Maria points out, he “cons state without book,” (2. 3. 131) that is, he uses pretentious phrases without necessarily knowing their meaning. He speaks with condescending legalistic language as well, such as when he tells Sir Toby “If you can separate yourself and your misdemeanors you are welcome to the house” (2. 3. 89), which shows how seriously he takes himself. Due to his thorough understanding of language, Shakespeare chose lines for Malvolio that bring out the status of his character as a symbol of self-love. Finally, Feste personifies the idea that truth can be very effectively conveyed through the mouths of low characters. Traditionally, fools in medieval courts were the only individuals allowed to criticize the king or queen, and it was their low status that relieved them of any possible punishment. Yet in their cryptic jokes were seeds of the truth, which no one else dared to utter. In Olivia’s court, Feste calls her a fool on several

occasions, criticizing her for mourning her brother. This is an accurate criticism that no one else can make. Olivia and other characters such as Sebastian use the fact that he is a clown to dismiss him. While some characters admire his wordplay and singing ability, almost no one seems to recognize the profound truths he spouts. For example, Malvolio fails to appreciate the appropriateness of Feste's song about a man's love loving another man, and none of the characters are on stage to hear his song at the end of the play which reflects on how one should interpret the whole comedy. Just as truth is conveyed through the low character of the fool, the playwright conveys truth through actors in a play, who are analogously "low." The characters in a play necessarily have a lower status than the audience, since they are directed, fictional entities, who exist solely to perform. Some of the characters are "low" themselves, such as the vain Malvolio, but Shakespeare nonetheless uses his ensemble of confused and misguided characters to tell a truthful story. On a broad level, *Twelfth Night*, while a comedy filled with entertaining misunderstandings and clever wordplay, at the same time makes some important points about love, misunderstandings, the folly of self-love, and so forth. In this sense, all of the actors are like fools, whose lines are riddles containing truths that the audience must solve. In sum, Feste is like a playwright in that they both convey their messages through performance, incorporate intricate wordplay, and tell truths through low characters. In addition to similarities in the way Feste and a playwright communicate, they also both intend to convey the same sort of messages. My understanding of Feste's philosophy of fooling is perhaps best represented by his statement to Orsino in the final scene: " My

foes tell me plainly I am an ass, so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself." (5. 1. 16) That is, in being directly critiqued, Feste believe, one can better oneself, which is why he responds critically without inhibition to most all the characters with which he interacts. One way of understanding theater is to conceptualize it as a sort of critique on human behaviors. This sort of analysis may at least be appropriate for understanding Twelfth Night, due to the presence of the extensive subplot wherein Feste and others try to teach Malvolio a lesson about self-love. Just as Feste tries to put the other characters in their places by making fun of them, theatrical productions such as this one aim to teach the audience about themselves, through subtle criticisms of characters which in turn represent aspects of behaviors inherent to human nature. The aim of these criticisms, presumably, would be to have members of the audience walk away with a better understanding of themselves. Like the clown Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste reflects the other characters in the play and serves as a truthful judge of their character. He is able to see things in people that other cannot. For example, it is suggested that he realizes Viola is only pretending to be a man, through his line, " Now Jove in his next commodity of hair send thee a beard." (3. 1. 39) Viola notices his great skill of perception, and contemplates that " he must observe their mood on whom he jests / the quality of persons, and the time / and like the haggard, check at every feather / that comes before his eye." (3. 1. 55-58) Similarly, a playwright implicitly passes judgement on the behaviors of the characters in his play, and it is only fitting that Feste represents this quality. Like the playwright, the ultimate goal of Feste is to get others to reconsider

themselves, given his assessment of their flaws. Feste criticizes a number of behaviors, some of which later become corrected over the course of the play. He tells Olivia that her plan to ignore courtship so she can mourn the death of her brother for seven years is a foolish one, and by the end of the play she decides to marry Sebastian. He tells Orsino that his “mind is a very opal” (2. 4. 74) that is, that he is too moody while at the end of the play, he is content (albeit naively, as the final song suggests) that things shall be fine for all of them. Transparently, through Feste’s criticisms, the playwright also criticizes these behaviors. The way in which Feste handles the caricatured self-love of Malvolio is perhaps the most striking example of the correlation between Feste and the playwright. Just as the playwright aims to manipulate the audience into reconsidering themselves through the use of fictional characters, Feste aims to manipulate Malvolio into losing his self-love by adopting the role of a fictional curate and convincing him that he is mentally ill. Sir Topas, the curate, springs from the imagination of a character who has sprung from the imagination of the playwright, and is thus a caricature of a fictional character. He speaks in an unconvincing faux tone (“Bonos dies”), and makes up authorities (“the old Hermit of Prague”) (4. 2. 11). That this scene is a microcosm of a play itself is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that the individual who is spoken to is not even on the stage as Feste delivers his lines. Malvolio represents an audience who is entirely too self-involved to realize what is going on around him, and remains unreceptive to the masked “truth” of the fool. It is thus appropriate that he finds himself “in the dark,” no matter how hard Feste tries to instruct him otherwise. Because he is not willing or able to understand what Feste tries to show him,

Malvolio stands for one who is unable to learn from watching a theatrical production. His tragic self-love can be construed to imply some sort of closed-mindedness about his character. In this sense, his story becomes one about the importance of learning about one's self from others, which Feste strains to have him do. This parallels the idea that one should try to learn about one's self from a theatrical production. Malvolio continues to dismiss him as a fool, even when Feste sings him a song explicitly revealing his current situation with Olivia. Appropriately enough, since he did not learn from the character who tells the truth, at the end of the play his is not a happy ending, and he leaves the final scene in an unresolved huff. Feste's final song in the play reveals just how well he understands the mechanics of Twelfth Night. While the play is a comedy, and Orsino's final speech suggests that everyone has had a happy ending, there are several characters, most notably Malvolio, for whom things do not work out so well. The refrain of Feste's song, "For the rain it raineth every day," suggests that he realizes the bittersweet nature of the play's end, and furthermore that while some people have happiness in their lives, others do not. In the fifth verse, Feste replaces the refrain which symbolizes a negative effect on happiness with the self-aware line "And we'll strive to please you every day." By placing this line where the normal refrain should go, he gives them a sort of poetic equivalence, suggesting that the audience should try to discern some sort of common meaning connecting the two ideas. This common meaning ties in with the hypothesized aim of the playwright and the aim of the fool that by being exposed to negative interactions and representative criticisms, one can be "pleased" that is, one can reflect upon one's own life, and come out

an improved individual. In conclusion, Feste, while a fool, is also a figure standing in for the playwright. His character screams to be performed, through dress and song, just as a playwright's text must be performed. He shows off a deep bag of linguistic tricks, and is able to communicate his truthful points through versatile means. He represents truth channeled through a low voice, just as "low" actors channel the truth of a play. His lines are insightful, honest criticisms that serve to better the other characters by having them think about things, just like the body of lines put together by a playwright. Indeed, as Viola notes, Feste is "wise enough to play the fool / and to do that well craves a kind of wit" (3. 1. 53-54), much like the wit embodied by the playwright himself.