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"My masters, are you mad? Or what are you?": Discourses of Incivility and Madness in Twelfth Night

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I would like to begin this essay by discussing what the word "civility" might have meant to the early modern dramatist. Throughout the sixteenth century the two meanings of the word as given in the *OED* seem to have coalesced: the first was "good breeding, culture, refinement"; the second was made up of a cluster of meanings centering on "good polity, orderly state (of a country), social order, as distinct from anarchy and disorder, good citizenship". Erasmus' popular conduct book *De Civilitate* helped civility replace the medieval concept of courtesy, which had applied especially to behaviour at court, although the rising middle classes were already appropriating courtesy codes in the late Middle Ages. The passage from medieval to Renaissance conceptions of ideal behavior was marked by the rift developing between blind religious faith and reason. The way in which an educated university elite and a rising merchant class conceived of man's place in the universe paved the way for notions of civility that were less theological, more secular and person-oriented. As Benet Devetian has pointed out (p. 52) Rabelais's dictum, "Fay ce que vouldras [do what you will]" (*Gargantua*, p. 423 [bk. 1, chap. 57]) seems to have heralded the replacement of rules of elaborate conduct by an intuitive sense of right and wrong, by a natural civility based on a sense of personal honour that did not rely exclusively upon theological

dogma. Devetian's definition of courtesy and civility as "the extent to which citizens of a given culture speak and act in ways that demonstrate a caring for the welfare of others as well as the welfare of the culture they share in common" (p. 9) provides a workable framework that enables us to point out what he has termed "the system of interaction that posits no contradiction between loyalty to the well-being of the self and loyalty to the well-being of other selves" (p. 8).

As for what a sixteenth-century dramatist's understanding of the word "madness" comprised, it should be remembered that in Elizabethan England, people commonly attributed madness to supernatural causes, as in the Bible, but also to natural causes of a physical nature based on the theory of humours. For the Elizabethans these categories were not contradictory. The Bible favoured supernatural interpretations; the classics condoned both natural *and* supernatural explanations, beginning with Plato in the *Phaedrus*, who describes "two kinds of madness: one brought on by mortal maladies, the other arising from a supernatural release from the conventions of life" (p. 54 [265A]). (He proceeds to subdivide the latter kind into several varieties ascribed to different deities.)

OED entries testify to the fact that from the Middle Ages onwards, madness (or its synonym "woodness") was often conflated with folly, and that melancholy, too, appeared as a cognate term. Shakespeare certainly assimilates the three to the point where they seem interchangeable. So, explicitly, does Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: "Folly, melancholy, madness, are but one disease, delirium is a common name to all." Taking up the perspective of Erasmus, Burton sees folly as universal: "all the world is mad, … is melancholy, dotes" (I: 39). Apart from physiological palliatives, Burton's universal remedy, however unconvincingly applied, is the classical moral one of self-control, that is, the subordination, by the exercise of the will, of inevitable passions to the moderation of right reason, according to the Aristotelian *via media*, duly Christianised in terms of following the divine will.

What further interests me in this essay is the fact that the madness/folly/melancholy amalgam also connoted anger, one of the traditional Seven Deadly Sins, which in the Renaissance was increasingly associated with incivility. The extension of focus to the social and political sphere already evident in the late treatments of such raging tyrants as Herod and Nebuchadnezzar developed to include sociability in human relations generally. Witness the application of a still-current Latin proverb by Shakespeare's Timon in rebuking Apemantus:

Fie, thou'rt a churl; y'have got a humour there
Does not become a man; 'tis much to blame.
They say, my lords, *Ira furor brevis est*,
But yond man is very angry.
Go, let him have a table by himself,
For he does neither affect company,
Nor is he fit for't, indeed. (*Tim.*, I.ii.26-32)

Indeed, Alexander Barclay, in his free translation of Sebastian Brandt's *Ship of Fools* (1509), gives the angry man aboard that vessel long, drooping ass's ears as a badge of office:

Assys erys for our folys a lyuray is
And he that wyll be wroth for a thynge of nought
Of the same leuray is nat worthy to mys. (cited by Goldsmith, p. 2)

Anger, of course, is only one manifestation of socially disruptive mad or foolish conduct. Shakespeare's plays are full of instances illustrating the principle, standard at least since Erasmus, that, while moderate pleasure is to be esteemed—what John Redford in the late morality play, *Wit and Science*, personifies as Honest Recreation—excessive indulgence of the passions and senses is pernicious and may be measured by forms of aberrant behaviour. The latter may include, moreover, any uncomely, immodest or indecorous practices, even when these have become so widespread as to pass for fashionable: hence the innumerable condemnations in the period's satire of affectations of dress, speech, or carriage. Such outward extravagances are infallible signs of inward deformity, notably self-love and presumption—a point amply illustrated, again, by Barclay, translating Brandt, who specifically and generally mounts attacks against "ye Courters and Galants disgised, / Ye counterfayt caytifs, that ar nat content / As God hath you made" (cited by Pompen, p. 231). Barclay adds a praise of his monarch, Henry VII, as a model of moral decency signified by outward decorum:

Beholde unto your Prynce;
Consyder his sadnes, his honestye devyse;
His clothynge expressyth his inwarde prudence;
Ye se no example of suche inconvenyence
In his Hyghnes, but godly wyt and gravyte. (cited by Pompen, p. 236)

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare uses such words as "mad" and "madness" more often than in any other of his plays. The quotation that figures in my title, "My masters, are you mad? Or what are you?" (II.iii.75), occurs when Malvolio rebukes Sir Toby and Sir Andrew for making too much noise at a late hour. Malvolio continues:

> Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady's house, that ye squeak out your coziers' catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you? (75-79)

Shakespeare hereby seems to invite his audience to reflect on relationships that exist between madness and incivility. The disorder created by the revelers is not madness in the strict sense of the term, but indecorous behaviour, especially in Malvolio's eyes. The play offers no clear-cut definitions of "mad" or "madness", but provides a panoply of the different forms as evoked in discourses on the subject that were circulating at the time. The satiric commentators in the play, namely Feste and Maria, serve to guide the audience though the carnivalesque parade—up to the point where they themselves become part of the display. Even Sir Toby, perpetually drunk, does the same with respect to Sir Andrew, whom he clearly imagines as a controllable and exploitable commodity, infinitely capable of being egged on because so far beneath him in intelligence.

In Act One, Scene Three, where we first encounter Sir Toby, it is Maria who reminds him that he "must confine [himself] within the modest limits of order" (I.iii.6-7). Maria also refers to the "foolish knight" (12), Sir Andrew, whom she will directly expose and treat as a fool when she first meets him (54-55). Yet it is Maria who initiates the plot against Malvolio, provoked most immediately by his threat to inform Olivia about Maria's encouragement of "this uncivil rule" (II.iii.104). Her revenge, on behalf of all the roisterers, aims at making him "a common recreation" (115) and certainly gains the appreciation of the audience. This is also, however, to set in motion an interrogation of the meanings of madness and incivility beyond Malvolio's certitudes or her own.

Without a doubt, Malvolio is the classic *agelast* who would suppress all pleasure, and who, in exceeding his authority to restore order when he threatens Sir Toby with ejection from "my lady's house", amply reveals the self-love and presumption which Maria attributes to him, denying him even the sincerity he might claim as a puritan, a man of "godly wyt and gravyte", to recall Barclay's words quoted above:

> The devil a puritan that he is, or anything constantly but a time-pleaser, an affectioned ass, that cons state without book and utters it by great swarths. The best persuaded of himself: so crammed (as he thinks) with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him; and on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work. (II.iii.124-29)

Shakespeare subsequently, in Act Two, Scene Five, treats his audience to a concentrated enactment of the effects of "imagination" (II.v.37), as Fabian points out. Even before finding Maria's letter, Malvolio projects himself verbally and physically into fantasies of greatness centred on a marriage with his mistress, so that his absurd efforts to construe the text accordingly seem a natural extension of his deluded state of mind. The semiotics of dress, bizarre mannerisms, affected speech—all are called into play in ways recognisable from contemporary treatises. To those is added, when Maria prepares Olivia, expecting a servant "sad and civil" (III.iv.5), to witness her steward's transformation, the element of religious melancholy—"He is sure possessed, madam" (8-9)—shortly to be developed in the encounter with Sir Toby, then pushed to an extreme through Feste's intervention as Sir Topas.

In sum, Malvolio is constructed, with his own unwitting connivance, as an impossibly overdetermined quintessence of all signs of mad incivility, his self-image turned inside-out and turned against him. And he is ultimately confined and bound in a dark enclosure, conventionally played as involving the "hell" of the space beneath the stage. Despite, or in part because of, all the fun enjoyed in complicit fashion by on- and offstage audiences, this effect may come to seem a sort of scape-goating, a purging of qualities that are reflected, beneath the civil courtly surfaces, by the characters marked out as wise and sane. In this context, the threat of vengeance launched by the "notoriously abused" (V.i.356) Malvolio at the conclusion, ambiguously recognised by Olivia as a "poor fool" (348), does not merely comment with ironic obliqueness on the artificial harmony of the ending, like Jaques' opting out of the dance in *As You Like It*, but insists on a recycling of human follies consistent with the "whirligig of time" (354). The latter is, of course, the vision of Feste, the spokesman for universal, contagious, vagabond folly, and it contrasts with the linear progression towards denouement in which Viola, aligned with the comic trajectory, puts her faith: "O time, thou must untangle this, not I; / It is too hard a knot for me t'untie" (II.ii.37-38).

Feste's advocacy of folly may echo the Erasmian idea of its ubiquity, but he is specifically attached, however loosely, to the two main poles of the love dynamic, the households of Orsino and Olivia, whose relations are only superfi-

cially civil from beginning to end (witness Orsino's injunction to Cesario, "leap all civil bounds" [I.iv.20]). The ostentatious exorcism of self-love in Malvolio has, as its counterpart, the intimation that the love of both these figures is just as intensely, if not as grotesquely, solipsistic. Orsino's opening words ("If music be the food of love …" [I.i.1 ff.]) convey the sense that he savours the sensual pain of unsatisfied love, while his insistence to Cesario that women lack men's capacity for love likewise turns in on itself and separates him from women in general:

> There is no woman's sides
> Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
> As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart
> So big, to hold so much. They lack retention.
> Alas, their love may be called appetite,
> No motion of the liver, but the palate,
> That suffers surfeit, cloyment, and revolt. (II.iv.89-95)

There is here an obvious ironic reprise of his own desires as described in his first speech, but also an echo of the treatises on love-sickness, such as that of André Du Laurens (1595; trans. 1599), who writes a chapter "Of another kinde of melancholie which commeth by the extremitie of love" (cited by Neely, p. 101).

Just previously Feste has put his finger on the pulse of Orsino's narcissistic passion when the Count offers to pay him for his song:

> Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal. I would have men of such constancy put to sea, that their business might be everything and their intent everywhere, for that's it that always makes a good voyage of nothing. (II.iv.70-74)

Would an audience have seen Feste as suggesting that he embark on the Ship of Fools?

Orsino delivers his affirmation of the male monopoly of love, ironically, in the presence of a woman who chooses, for no clear reason, to disguise herself and projects her own passion in the distanced form of an imagined sister. Distancing is, indeed, the operative mode for both, as Orsino hides himself behind a smokescreen of futile embassies.

For her part, Olivia screens herself, not just behind a veil, in the scene of Cesario's first embassy, but behind an imagined grief for a brother seven-years dead. Again, Feste points out the illogical premise of her immoderate sorrow when he obtains Olivia's consent to let him "prove" her a "fool" (I.v.47):

Feste. Good madonna, why mourn'st thou?
Olivia. Good fool, for my brother's death.
Feste. I think his soul is in hell, madonna.
Olivia. I know his soul is in heaven, fool.
Feste. The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul being in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen. (54-59)

Later, Olivia is herself capable of seeing Malvolio's distracted condition as a foil to her own: "I am as mad as he / If sad and merry madness equal be" (III.iv.14-15). She stops short, however, of suspecting an admixture of self-love in her passion for Cesario, whereas we recognise this dimension of her impulse to possess, which is especially clear in her imposition of herself on Sebastian: "Nay, come, I prithee; would thou'dst be ruled by me!" (IV.i.57). The object of this unaccountable passion naturally suspects her or his own madness:

… I am ready to distrust mine eyes,
And wrangle with my reason that persuades me
To any other trust but that I am mad,
Or else the lady's mad; yet, if 'twere so,
She could not sway her house, command her followers. (IV.iii.13-17)

The lines turn back on themselves by way of our knowledge that there are several followers that Olivia cannot thoroughly command, beginning with Sir Toby, including Maria, and most recently and notoriously Malvolio.

Not surprisingly, the incivility of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew towards Sebastian likewise seems to him redolent of madness. And this takes us back to the function of anger in the play, suggesting that while such *furor brevis* is usually a negative force, it may in special circumstances conduce to revelation, discovery and comic denouement. Orsino's outburst against Cesario—"I'll sacrifice the lamb that I do love, / To spite a raven's heart within a dove" (V.i.119-20)—performs a similar function. But we are not allowed to forget that the solutions thus offered to these hard knots are Gordian ones, dependent on the eligible matches the playwright conjures up, like doves from a magician's hat, not on the operations of vagabond folly left to its own relentless devices in a world where "the rain it raineth every day" (V.i.369, 373, 377, 381).

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