

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Twelfth Night, Or What You Will* presented at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 24 May  
2014.**

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Directed by: Wayne Jordan. With Lloyd Cooney (Fabian), Muiris Crowley (Captain/Priest), Nick Dunning (Sir Toby Belch), Elaine Fox (Valentine), Gavin Fullam (Sebastian), Ger Kelly (Feste), Mark Lambert (Sir Andrew Aguecheek), Conor Madden (Antonio), Ruth McGill (Maria), Barry John O'Connor (Orsino), Mark O'Halloran (Malvolio), Alex Petcu (Musician), Natalie Radmall-Quirke (Olivia), Sophie Robinson (Viola).

The Abbey Theatre's *Twelfth Night* opened by jolting its audience with a blast of chaotic music – think of something like melodic static – from several enormous speakers wheeled on stage by a harassed-looking Valentine (Elaine Fox). When Orsino (a moustachioed Barry John O'Connor) arrived clad in gold lamé skinny jeans and ecstatically writhing and playing an electric mandolin, it was even more evident that this would be unlike any of the Abbey's recent productions of Shakespeare.

Channelling his inner Freddie Mercury, Barry John O'Connor exuberantly strutted, posed, and suffered for love; poised between rock-god and martyred Christ, this Orsino was self-consciously theatrical and revelled in his role as tortured lover. For instance, when Orsino saw a messenger approach from Olivia, he flamboyantly donned a cloak and assumed a pose of abject dejection in order to receive the letter. From the beginning then, music was at the heart of this production, but so too were comedy and unrequited love central. In acting as stagehand and playing the role of servant to an impulsive lord, Elaine Fox's Valentine looked permanently harried. Her comical exasperation was compounded by the fact that Valentine was clearly infatuated with Orsino, who remained steadfastly blind to her diligence and her desire. The cross-gender casting of

Fox also added humour; as the other characters repeatedly referred to Valentine as ‘Sir’, she would look affronted, glance down at her 80s attire, and question indignantly, ‘Sir?’. In a play where gender identity is frequently unclear and confused, the casting of Valentine added another delightful layer to the gender-blending and convoluted networks of desire.

For Viola’s transformation into Cesario (Sophie Robinson) the production borrowed from the cross-dressing in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998); the Captain bound Viola’s breasts and she donned a sailor outfit to emerge as a boy before our eyes. Throughout, Cesario and Sebastian were remarkably alike in matching sailor outfits – navy skinny jeans, a loose jumper – and with matching hairstyles, so much so in fact that the twins were indistinguishable unless they were facing the audience. Sophie Robinson’s comedic skills shone through as she repeatedly had to manoeuvre around the awkwardness of loving her master – who was clearly attracted to his young page – and fending off the ardent Olivia. Cesario’s gradual realisation that Olivia had fallen in love with him/her was a notable moment of hilarity.

The Abbey’s production also embraced any hint of homoeroticism in the play. For the entrance of Sebastian (Gavin Fullam) and Antonio (Conor Madden), the stage lighting was gradually raised to reveal the two men, undressed and asleep on a mattress. However, although it was evident that Sebastian had some affection for his companion, he was content to use his circumstances as an excuse to extricate himself from the affair. In contrast, while Antonio was attired like a modern, rakish pirate (tight white vest, gold eye-patch) his loyalty to and passionate love for Sebastian was sincere. While it came about due to Sebastian’s choice to marry, the permanent separation of these two lovers at the finale was one of the play’s most poignant moments.

Against the flighty youth of the twins and the melodramatics of Orsino, Natalie Radmall-Quirke’s Olivia was a woman of substance and maturity. The production highlighted the litany of difficulties that Olivia faces; she has lost her father and her brother, she must contend with two unwanted suitors, run a household of staff who are often at odds with one another (and which include an absentee clown and priggish steward), and deal with an alcoholic uncle. In a tender exchange with Feste, Olivia clearly appreciated his comforting words that Toby was not yet lost, that he is merely mad and not ‘drowned’. Olivia’s meeting Cesario was a transformative experience; after all her troubles, the possibility of happiness seemed to derail Olivia’s restrained demeanour and, in all their dealings, she comically veered between awkwardness, elation, and audacity.

When he got his own way, Nick Dunning's Sir Toby was a benevolent rogue and lovable prankster. However, in his darker moments, he was a malicious agitator and an outright nasty drunk. His moods swung violently from delight (sharing a can of beer and dancing on a table with Sir Andrew) to sneering resentment (his encounter with Malvolio). While music was 'the food of love' that dominated Orsino's home, it was also used as a means of protest. In a superb barbershop rendition of The Prodigy's 'Firestarter', Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste disturbed Olivia's household and declared their love of troublemaking. While Feste (Ger Kelly) had an impressively sweet voice and a quick wit, his appearance hinted at his darker side; with his broad shoulders and heavy beard, black kilt and woollen jumper, he was an intimidating figure and, at the play's finale, he loomed threateningly over the defeated Malvolio.

In many productions of *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio has emerged as the star of the show; the Abbey's production was no different. Mark O'Halloran's Malvolio was wiry and precise; fastidiously dressed, with oiled hair and thick-rimmed glasses, he was the perfect antidote to the loutish bravado of Sir Toby. Throughout, Malvolio was a sympathetic character: although strict, he was human, and his class aspirations were played as comical, but not ridiculous. On several occasions, the audience were encouraged to identify with Malvolio. For instance, he deciphered the fake 'MOAI' letter using a massive whiteboard with the effect that the audience worked through his logic/illogic with him. When imprisoned, Malvolio looked terribly vulnerable and it seemed possible that he might be driven into madness. In this scene, still wearing the yellow spandex bodysock which he had worn to impress Olivia, Malvolio thrashed helplessly in the lighted Perspex box that was his jail and his tear-stained face was painfully evident.

At the play's finale, the disclosures of true identities were not a cause for celebration; rather they prompted a coming of age for the assembled lovers. Orsino, for instance, visibly changed as Viola's identity and Olivia's secret marriage were revealed; he grew solemn as if he realised that a serious reality lay beneath the good-humoured antics and that someone must assume responsibility. Marriage now appeared to be a burden that closed off play and possibilities; Orsino reluctantly took Cesario's hand but could barely meet her eye, Olivia gazed longingly at Cesario but could only look at Sebastian with horror and eventually a resigned acceptance, Sebastian and Antonio shared a look of intense regret before going their separate ways, and Valentine was openly heartbroken.

In a closing dance, the play's web of attractions were re-enacted for the audience. Dressed only in white underwear, the entire cast performed a beautiful balletic summary

of the characters' shifting attractions before congregating under a shower. Under the deluge, the group became a melange of bodies, the various objects of desire seemed interchangeable, and gender boundaries appeared fluid. Altogether then, the Abbey's production maintained the humour of *Twelfth Night* but it did not shy away from its ambiguities and complexities; balancing the nuanced and conflicting tones of this play was a real accomplishment and the production succeeded, triumphantly, in showcasing the richness of this melancholy comedy.