

Scripting The Outsiders in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* & *Much Ado About Nothing*

Dashini Ann J. Jeyathurai 
Carleton College
Minnesota, USA

Citation:

Dashini Ann J. Jeyathurai: Scripting The Outsiders in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* & *Much Ado About Nothing*. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2007. Volume 2 Number 1.

Much of *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing* is steeped in observation. The structural device of the play-within-the-play facilitates both the audience's and the conspirators' observation of the outsiders. Thus, Malvolio, Benedick and Beatrice are constantly policed as they transgress social norms. When the dominant culture or the insiders can no longer stomach the outsiders' transgressions, their language, which is their chief weapon, is re-scripted. As their language is re-scripted by the dominant culture, they inadvertently adopt the outward appearance of an insider, or what they perceive in their mind's eye to be the outward appearance of an insider. It is in the act of re-scripting that one sees the linguistic violence taking place against the outsiders with the hunting imagery that pervades the insider's language. In taking on this new script, the outsiders become performers themselves, acting out a role that is unnatural to them.

Shakespeare conveys the powerful notion of observation where the play-within-the-play transforms Malvolio into a specimen to be studied through the lens of a microscope. Consider the words of Maria when she says, "Observe him, for the love of mockery, for I know this letter will make a contemplative idiot of him" (II.v.15-18). The power of this line is augmented by the phrase, "for the love of mockery" which suggests that the play-within-the-play is a tool through which Malvolio becomes the lone figure that both the audience and the pseudo audience gawks at. This device is even more perverse in *Much Ado About Nothing* because it is constructed in such a way that Beatrice and Benedick are gulled into believing that it is they who are the audience, eavesdropping at the expense of the conspirators. The outsiders, Beatrice and Benedick ironically believe that they are watching the insiders. Yet, unbeknownst to them, it is they who are the gulls.

The pseudo audience in the form of Sir Andrew, Sir Toby and Fabian visually dramatize Malvolio's physical isolation by placing him center stage while they band together as both the conspirators and the audience. In doing so, Shakespeare provides a mirror of the audience on stage that boos and hisses at the actor, in this case, Malvolio. This is evident in the repeated interruptions from the audience on stage, "Pistol him, pistol him" (II.v.34) and "O for a stone-bow to hit him in the eye!" (II.v.43) While these exasperated calls for physical violence against Malvolio are humorous for the audience in the theater, it is symptomatic of his isolation. The cast themselves internalize this 'play' when Fabian unwittingly says, "Nay, patience, or we break the sinews of our plot" (II.v.71). The pun on the word "plot" is particularly interesting because on one level it refers to the scheme against Malvolio but on a second level, it refers to the fabric of a play. The internalization of the play is crucial because in doing so, every other character speaks a different 'script', one that is alien to Malvolio.

Similarly, theater and acting dominate the speeches of the conspirators in the plays-within-the-play in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Don Pedro introduces this motif of acting when he says of Beatrice, "May be she doth but counterfeit" (II.iii.92). This notion of counterfeiting dovetails neatly with the idea that Beatrice's passion is counterfeit in their collective consciousness until she is catalyzed to action by the words of Maria, Hero and Ursula. Shakespeare further maintains the verisimilitude of acting when Leonato forgets his lines and Claudio and Don Pedro step in to cover this momentary lapse. The insiders who are so familiar with the script step in easily to fill a gap in this constructed scene. Benedick's script is rewritten once he is spurred on by the assurance that comes from knowing Beatrice loves him. As Malvolio misreads Olivia's every gesture after believing that she loves him, Benedick instantaneously sees love in Beatrice's matter-of-fact call for dinner. It is almost as if the insiders give him the answer to his earlier question, "...may I be so converted and see with these eyes?" (II.iii.18). His horror at the thought of viewing the world through the lens of an insider like Claudio is quickly altered by the new script that he's given. He says, "I do spy some marks of love in her" (II.iii.199-200). What Benedick formerly saw as antagonism in Beatrice is transmuted by the conspirator's words into lovers' banter. He rescripts Beatrice's words to fit the play that the insiders have written. The audience literally sees this before their very eyes when Benedick says of Beatrice's words, ". . .there's a double meaning in that" (II.iii.209). This new script alters the realities of Benedick and Beatrice.

Yet, the seed of this reality exists within the outsiders. Once the plays-within-the-play suggest the potential of these realities, all three characters reach for the realities. Malvolio attempts to live out this reality when he acts out his fantasy. Malvolio's fantasy is one that is steeped in a desire to separate himself from the rest of the characters. Beyond having a pseudo audience to enhance Malvolio's isolation, he isolates himself by acting out this fantasy. He imagines his 'costume', "in [his] branched velvet gown" where he play-acts the role of Count Malvolio (II.v.44-45). Ironically, even within his fantasy, he does not see himself partaking in a union with Olivia. Consider the single line, "Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown, having come from a day-bed where I have left Olivia sleeping"(II.v.43-46). While he is amidst the other characters, Malvolio is never one with them. He distinguishes himself from the attendants by invoking a sense of ownership over them as if they were chattel when he uses the phrase, "my officers." Malvolio insists on isolating himself when he calls for both the physical and linguistic obsequies within his fantasy. For example, he places a physical distance between himself and Sir Toby in the lines, "Toby approaches; curtsies there to me". The use of the adverb "there" and the trappings of so-called respect in the curtsy serve to isolate Malvolio. Even the extension of Malvolio's hand that bears a semblance of communion with Sir Toby is physically weakened by the "quenching [of Malvolio's] familiar smile with an austere regard of control"(II.v.62-63). Linguistically, the act is further deflated by his play-dialogue, "Cousin Toby, my fortunes, having cast me on your niece, give me this prerogative of speech"(II.v.66-67). While the use of the title, "Cousin Toby" initially suggests that some relationship has been formed in Malvolio's fantasy, the idea is quickly dismissed. Shakespeare's insertion of the pauses within the lines add a script-like insincerity to Malvolio's words. More importantly, the pauses emphasize Malvolio's singularity above everything else. The line parts neatly into, "my fortunes", then "having cast me on your niece" and finally "give me this prerogative of speech". In each phrase, the focus is placed on "my" and "me". Thus, even in his alternate reality, he adopts the trappings of aristocracy that only intensify his isolation. The ease with which he lives out this new script reflects the dormant desire to become a part of the world of the insiders.

Malvolio is not alone in his desire to become one of the insiders. Beatrice and Benedick and uncharacteristic amount of eagerness to join the world of couples and marriage. Benedick says in his soliloquy, "I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me because I have railed so long against marriage: but doth not the appetite alter? (II.iii.226-229). Benedick even explains away the new script by suggesting that it is not wrong for one to change one's mind. Similarly, Beatrice says, "Contempt, farewell, and maiden pride, adieu! No glory lives behind the back of such" (III.i.109-110). Beatrice reasons that glory is essentially unattainable as an outsider who does not conform to social norms. Thus, the ease with which Benedick and Beatrice spout reasons for willingly accommodating this new script highlights the hint of want that has always existed in them to be insiders.

Not only do they provide the reasoning behind their change in attitude, they are willingly to manifest the new script in their physical appearance. Malvolio's physical transformation occurs when he begins to play the role of Olivia's lover that is thrust upon him by Feste and his co-conspirators. He becomes a stranger unto himself. This disjunction between his actual personality at the beginning of the play and physicality is manifested in his altered facial expression. The only element of his physiognomy that is natural and familiar to the characters around him is the conspicuous absence of a smile. Even Olivia is loosely tied to his "sad and civil" countenance (III.iv.4). Yet, by taking on this role through the play-within-the-play, Malvolio loses even that tenuous connection. By adopting this unnatural smile that John Astington calls a 'grotesque rictus', Malvolio transforms this smile into the hallmark of this new script (2004, p 26). Beyond this smile, the play-within-the-play forces him to adopt an external disguise that imprisons him in yellow stockings and cross-garters. Thus, he is mocked by exemplifying the very fool that he chastised. He no longer possesses the authority he thought he had as Olivia's steward; instead, he has been transformed into that very "barren rascal" that he despises (I.v.79). Malvolio is a mere mutation of Feste. Instead of an insider, he is rescripted as the fool's fool.

Similarly, Benedick changes physically once his role as Beatrice's lover is thrust upon him by the conspirators. Leonato says of him, "Indeed he looks younger than he did, by the loss of a beard (III.ii.36). He washes his face and applies makeup and perfume. This new script for the outsider Benedick is signaled to the audience dramatically. Cox writes of how Benedick's transformation is often signified by an extravagant costume and a melancholy air (1997, 151). When John Gielgud played Benedick, he was found shaving in his undergarments with his servant holding a mirror and towel while Roger Allam was seen wearing pink and green frills (Cox, 151). Benedick's acerbic wit dissipates into the music of the lute, a lover's prop. Thus, he adopts the costume and the language of a lover. Beatrice finds herself "out of all other tune," perhaps because she speaks an unnatural script. Yet, she manifests this new script by appearing on stage with a toothache like Benedick does. In a 1965 production of the play, Maggie Smith appears physically altered with bleary eyes, hidden in an enormous yellow quilt concealing a multi-colored nightdress (Cox, 167). The new script necessitates new costumes.

Besides the 'play within the play' that has been discussed thus far, Shakespeare's linguistic wordplay is a powerful tool in conveying Malvolio's and Beatrice and Benedick's position as outsiders in their society. From Malvolio's very first lines in the play, Shakespeare sets him at linguistic odds with the other characters. Olivia asks him, "What think you of this fool, Malvolio? Doth he not mend?"(I.v.68-69) While Olivia's use of the word "mend" connotes an improvement in Feste's style, Malvolio misconstrues her words and takes it to mean that Feste grows more foolish. This inability to read the other characters as they so adroitly read him, prepares us for the intensification of his isolation as the play progresses. What is even more ironic is that Malvolio thinks that he *can* read these other characters, in particular, Olivia. Early in the play, he assumes that he speaks for Olivia when he chastises Feste. Yet, his authority is undoubtedly shaky when Olivia herself says in response to his rebuke, "O, you are sick of self love, Malvolio" (I.v.87). Similarly, Beatrice and Benedick are at linguistic odds with the other characters when they mock social institutions like marriage with their sharp wit. While Claudio waxes lyrical about the beauty of Claudio, Benedick deflates her preciousness as a jewel by saying, "Yea, and a case to put into (I.i.135). Thus, Shakespeare sets up this linguistic wall between the outsiders and insiders.

However, this linguistic wall that divides the two factions is best seen in the hunting imagery that pervades the plays-within-the-play in both *Twelfth Night* and *Much Abo About Nothing*. Shakespeare litters the commentary of the insiders with such imagery. In doing so, Shakespeare isolates Malvolio in the position of the persecuted or the hunted. This is evident in the lines, "To anger him we'll have the bear again, and we will fool him black and blue, shall we not, Sir Andrew?"(II.v.8-9) and the lines that follow closely after, "Lie thou there, for here comes the trout that must be caught with tickling" (II.v.19-20). The conspirators stand as a pack of human predators. Malvolio is their lone victim in their sport. The allusion to the savagery of bear-baiting is a potent visual of Malvolio's isolation. Just like the bear that has had its teeth and claws

removed for the sport, Malvolio has been 'defaced' of his natural sullen complexion. Just as the lone bear is tied to the post to be set upon by the dogs, Malvolio is isolated from the rest of his society to be persecuted by the conspirators. The image of the trout furthers this notion by alluding to the act of hypnotizing the fish. Moreover, it is particularly interesting because it suggests that Malvolio desires the bait of Olivia. It is particularly sadistic for it conveys that Malvolio is lulled into this state of 'hypnosis' as the trout is, only to be viciously duped.

Similarly, the outsiders, Beatrice and Benedick who spurn love are lured into the web of romance with such relish by the conspirators. Shakespeare persists with the hunting imagery that is lavished on Malvolio by the conspirators. Don Pedro's aside, "Stalk on, stalk on, the fowl sits (II.iii.92-93) creates this scene where Benedick appears to be pursuing the conspirators to eavesdrop and yet instead, it is he who is being pursued. As Malvolio is compared to a trout in need of tickling, Claudio says of Benedick, "Bait the hook well, this fish will bite" (II.iii.109). Claudio's use of the verb "will" highlights the established patriarchy's confidence in drawing the outsider, Benedick, into their fold completely. The conspirators set up an almost symmetrical gulling scene to ensnare Beatrice when Don Pedro says, "Let there be the same net spread for her, and that must your daughter and gentle-women carry" (II.iii.206-208). Now, the task is handed over to the female insiders, Hero, Margaret and Ursula who buy into the ideas of the patriarchy and act in accordance with the rules of the game. Hero instructs Margaret, "Whisper her ear, and tell her I and Ursley/ Walk in the orchard, and our whole discourse/Is all of her" (III.i.4-6). This image of Margaret whispering into Beatrice's ears is strangely reminiscent of Claudius pouring the poisonous pestilence into King Hamlet's ear while he sits in the orchard. Interestingly enough, Beatrice says of Benedick at the very beginning of the play, "O Lord, he will hang upon him like a disease; he is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad" (I.i.82-85). Ursula says,

The pleasant'st angling is to see the fish
Cut with her golden oars the silver stream,
And greedily devour the treacherous bait:
So angle we for Beatrice, who even now
Is couched in the woodbine coverture. (III.i.26-30)

Although Ursula's words are couched in humor, her tone is undeniably sinister. These women view the very thought of trapping the outsider, Beatrice, who confounds the patriarchy, gleefully. This image of Beatrice "greedily devour[ing]" their false and to some extent, poisonous discourse returns to that image of the poisoned King Hamlet. Our vision of the poisoned Beatrice is further compounded when Hero says, "Then go we near her, that her ear lose nothing/ Of the false sweet bait that we lay for it"(III.i.32-33). It is almost as if Shakespeare is making a comment about the false sweetness of being an insider. This notion is further enhanced when Ursula says, "She's lim'd, I warrant you! We have caught her" (III.i.103). Ursula's use of the word "lim'd" because it cruelly furthers the hunting and fowling imagery where Beatrice is caught by the stickiness of the conspirator's words. Even Beatrice herself internalizes this script when she says to herself, "And, Benedick, love on, I will requite thee,/ Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand (III.i.111-112). Truly, Beatrice speaks the lines from the script that Ursula, Hero and Margaret have given her when she sees herself as a "haggard of the rock," an untamed female hawk (III.i.36). In her own mind, she moves from being the untamed outsider to the somewhat tamed lover of Benedick. The hunting imagery truly enhances the idea that the insiders merely bait Malvolio, Benedick and Beatrice with what the conspirators know they want.

Ultimately, the outsiders experience two distinctly different ends. Malvolio's physical and linguistic isolation is brought to an apex in the denouement, when Shakespeare avoids integrating him into the community. The vehemence with which he spits out his final lines, "I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you," leaves us somewhat discomfited for having partaken in his isolation (V.i.373). Malvolio, finally cognizant of his position as an outsider reminds us that he is "not of [our] element" (III.iv.124). In stark contrast, Beatrice and Benedick are forcibly integrated into the community through marriage. Their situation can be likened to Shylock who is forcibly integrated through his conversion to Christianity. One hears these external pressures of society acting inwards upon Beatrice and Benedick. Leonato says, "Come, cousin, I am sure you love the gentleman" (V.iv.84). The established couple, Hero and Claudio pull out the props that seal Beatrice and Benedick's fate. Claudio says, "For here's a paper written in his hand,/A halting sonnet of his own pure brain" (V.iv.86-87). Hero balances this by plucking out a letter stolen from Beatrice's pocket that reveals her love for Benedick. Yet, what is comforting about their union is that they still maintain some semblance of being outsiders through their banter. At some level, Malvolio, Benedick and Beatrice return to their original script and remind those around them they still remain outsiders.

About the Author

Dashini is a junior English major with a concentration in Women's & Gender Studies at Carleton College. She is from Malaysia and is a Starr Cross Cultural Studies Scholar. She plans to pursue her PhD in postcolonial literature. This paper was written for Professor James McDonnell's Shakespearean Histories and Comedies class.

References

- Astington, John. "Language in their very gesture": Shakespeare's Actors and the Body." University of Toronto. Victoria College, Northrop Frye Hall, Toronto. 7 May 2004.
- Cox, John F., ed. *Shakespeare in Production: Much Abo About Nothing*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. "Twelfth Night." *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. Ed. J.M. Lothian. Surrey: International Thomson Publishing Company, 1998. 1189-1217.
- Shakespeare, William. "Much Abo About Nothing." *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. Ed. A.R. Humphreys. Surrey: International Thomson Publishing Company, 1998. 911-939.