Language in *The Twelfth Night*

Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed to an audience from different social classes and of varying levels of intellect. Thus they contain down-to-earth characters who appeal to the working classes, side-by-side with complexities of plot which would satisfy the appetites of the aristocrats among the audience. His contemporary status is different, and Shakespeare's plays have become a symbol of culture and education, being widely used as a subject for academic study and literary criticism. A close critical analysis of *Twelfth Night* can reveal how Shakespeare manipulates the form, structure, and language to contribute to the meaning of his plays.

**Form**

Through the form of dialogue Shakespeare conveys the relationship between characters. For example, the friendship and understanding between Olivia, and her servant Feste, the clown, is shown in their dialogue in Act I, Scene 5. In this scene Shakespeare shows that both characters are intellectuals by constructing their colloquy in prose.

Characterizing Feste, Shakespeare gives him the aphorism, Better a witty fool than a foolish wit. [Feste. Act 1, scene 5]

This line illustrates the clown's acumen; and is a delightful example of the way in which he uses language, as well as form to manifest Feste's character. Far from being a fool, the clown is erudite and sagely and able to present the audience with a higher knowledge of the plot than that presented by the other characters in the play. This witty remark is a clear indication of his aloofness from the events of the play. He can look upon the unfolding scenario with the detachment of an outsider due to his minimal involvement with the action. Feste is a roaming entertainer who has the advantage of not having to take sides; he is an observer not a participant.

Another illustration of the way in which Shakespeare uses form to give meaning is in the dialogue between Viola and the Duke Orsino in Act 2 scene 4, where one line of iambic pentameter is frequently shared by the two characters. For example:

Viola: I should your Lordship.

Orsino: ...................................... And what's her history?

Viola: ..................................... Ay, that's the theme.

The merging of the characters' half-lines into one whole line is cleverly used by Shakespeare to show that the two characters are destined to be together. This technique of linking lines, which Shakespeare uses elsewhere, for example in *Romeo and Juliet*, shows the balance that the two characters provide for each other. This is an example of how he uses the form of language to aid the actors in portraying the characters in the way he intends.

**Structure**

The structure of a Shakespeare play also contributes to its meaning. In most of his plays there is a pattern consisting of three main sections:

- **Exposition** - establishing the main character relationships in a situation involving a conflict.
- **Development** - building up the dramatic tension and moving the conflict established to its climax. (In *Twelfth Night*, increasing complications resulting from love, and mistaken identity.)
- **Denouement** - resolution of the conflict and re-establishing some form of equilibrium. (In *Twelfth Night*, the realization of the disguises and the pairing up of the characters.)

The scenes of *Twelfth Night* are carefully woven together in order to create tension and humor,
and to prepare us, almost subconsciously, for what is going to happen. We are given fragments of manageable information throughout the play so that when the complex plot unfolds we understand it by piecing together all the information given to us in previous scenes. For example, to return to the Duke and Viola, the audience is aware of the fact that she is disguised as a man, so understands more than the Duke himself does as he struggles with his feelings, believing he is falling in love with a man.

The audience is fed important information in Act 2 Scene 1 when Antonio and Sebastian meet and converse:
Sebastian: . . . some hour before you took me from the breach of the sea was my sister drowned.
Antonio: Alas the day!
Sebastian: A lady, sir, though it was said she much resembled me, was yet of many accounted beautiful.

Through these lines Shakespeare lets the audience in on the fact that Sebastian is alive, and that he believes his sister Viola to be dead, and that the two resemble one another in appearance. We also see how Sebastian feels for his sister as he talks about her so passionately. This is an important part of the development stage of the play as it prepares us for the role which mistaken identity will play in the plot, and sets up the potential for dramatic irony.

Another scene which prepares us for dramatic irony is when Maria, Sir Andrew, and Sir Toby write the letter to Malvolio, under the pretence that it is from Olivia. As we the audience are aware of this deception it sets up the dramatic irony, because Malvolio himself is not aware of it when he finds and reads the letter during Act 2, Scene 5.

Presuming the letter is for him, and from Olivia, he proceeds to embarrass himself.
The structure in which many subplots run through the play can be described as 'River Action'; actions not closely linked are moving in parallel to be integrated at the end of the play. These contrast to the single or episodic action in Macbeth, or the mirror action in King Lear where there is both a main and a sub-plot present. Shakespeare has used this structural technique to create both humor and tension. The subplots also pick up on the themes of love and mistaken identities, preparing us for the part those themes will play in the main plot.

Language
Shakespeare also supports the events and actions in the play through language, using it to convey to the audience the feelings and thoughts of the characters as they respond to events.

Language is used first and foremost for the purpose of conveying a difference in feelings or attitudes in different situations. For example Malvolio speaks in prose at the beginning of the play, showing intelligence, but near the end he speaks in verse;
Lady, you have. Pray you, pursue that letter.
You must not now deny that it is in your hand:
Write from it, if you can, in hand or phrase,
Or say 'tis not your seal, not your invention. [Act 5, Scene 1]

Here Shakespeare has distorted the rhythm so that it cannot fit the rule of iambic pentameter, thus showing that Malvolio is feeling strong emotion. His confusion and humiliation becomes apparent through the breathless manner in which he speaks.

In contrast, we have these smoothly-flowing lines from Orsino:
If music be the food of love, play on,  
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die. [Act 1, Scene 1]

By using iambic pentameter here Shakespeare defines Orsino's character to a certain degree. Iambic pentameter shows control and yet the emphasis here is on the instability and the intensity of his love for Olivia. The audience cannot help but feel pity towards his self-induced love sickness, but at the same time the situation provokes hilarity, as he has never actually met Olivia. This leads us to believe he is 'in love with being in love'.

Characters are there to instigate an emotional reaction from the audience, and when considering the characters of a Shakespeare play we may find as much characterization as in a novel, but we must also consider that the characters have a mechanical function in the scheme of the play as a whole. It can help to think of them as vehicles to carry ideas or themes; for example Orsino introduces the theme of love.

The diction Shakespeare gives to his characters contributes to their characterization. He gives characters with more intelligence a large vocabulary, where feeble-minded characters are more limited. Evidence of this in Twelfth Night is perhaps not as obvious as in other plays such as The Tempest, where Caliban has a very limited vocabulary, and struggles to find words. But characteristics of language such as imagery, metaphors, vocabulary and syntax used by Malvolio contrast for example with those used by the Clown. Although both characters are of a higher intelligence, the language chosen for each is very different; Feste, the Clown, often plays with words, uses puns and aphorisms.

Wit, and't be thy will, put me into good fooling! Those wits that think they have thee do very oft prove fools; and I that am sure I lack thee may pass for a wise man. For what says Quinapalus? 'Better a witty fool than a foolish wit.' God bless thee, lady! [Act 1, Scene 5]

He proves to be intelligent in that he is witty and wise. He also proves to be quite mysterious, seeming to know more than most, but still being observant and quiet. Malvolio is more well-spoken than witty, but he is more pompous and arrogant.

I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you! [Act 5, Scene 1]

That final line from Malvolio's is there to make the audience pity him. By using the metaphor of 'the whole pack of you' an image is immediately created of a group surrounding him. The metaphor describes how he has been made a fool of by all of them, and also signifies his isolation from the rest of the cast and how he has become a loose end of the play, as everybody else has found love or companionship with another person in the play.

After analyzing the way in which Shakespeare uses form, structure and language to shape meaning I have come to the conclusion that we are not consciously aware of these techniques when we are the audience. Directors and actors may take these factors into consideration when performing a play, to assist in conveying meaning to the audience. Different directors may interpret the text in different ways, but the play should be performed in such a way that subtle clues help the audience receive messages and understand the complexity of the developing plot, so that we are not obliged to be continually struggling to interpret the text for ourselves.

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