***Twelfth Night***

Summing up professional criticism of *Twelfth Night*:

1. There is general agreement about the oppositions that begin the play: Viola’s sorrowful acceptance of a brother’s presumed death opposes Olivia’s willful refusal to accept a brother’s death; Orsino denies himself by accepting Olivia’s rejection of his love, as opposed to Viola, who fulfills herself by accepting Orsino’s ignorance of her love. Viola is generally regarded as the corrective measure for the other two, teaching Olivia how to love men and Orsino how women love.
2. There is general agreement about the rightness of the resolution for the two couples, although critics disagree about whether it is “romantic” (i.e., not “realistic”) in essence or merely in form.
   1. In the *Riverside Shakespeare*’s introduction to the play, Anne Barton claims the lovers “escape from death and time” – that would be a romantic interpretation.
   2. In *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, Walter N. King says the lovers submit to “the rhythms of human fertility and what it implies for psychic and moral health” – a realistic reading.
3. There is a tradition of disagreement about Malvolio and about his treatment; does he get his just deserts, or is he much abused?
4. There is a fairly general admiration for Maria, except by Malvolio’s fans; Sir Toby is rarely admired; Sir Andrew is never admired. Therefore, there is general agreement about the rightness of their endings, but disagreement as to whether they are merely corrected, disciplined, and set in order OR punished, cast down, and even cast out.
5. Porter Williams, Jr., in King’s *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, distinguishes between two kinds of mistakes made by the characters: Antonio, Sebastian, Orsino, Viola, Olivia, and the Captain who befriends Viola practice “uncalculating generosity” and follow “spontaneous impulses,” whereas Malvolio, Sir Toby, and Sir Andrew do not. The former get their hearts’ desires, while the latter, as “injured parties . . . come to see the cause of their miseries, their own foolish errors. Sir Andrew experiences the limitations of a shallow friendship, Malvolio the end of an egotistical dream, and Sir Toby the end of at least one foolish jest and his irresponsible bachelorhood” (p. 43).
6. Also in King is part of C. L. Barber’s chapter on this play in *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy*: “As in *The Merchant of Venice* the story of a prodigal is the occasion for an exploration of the use and abuse of wealth, so here we get an exhibition of the use and abuse of social liberty” (p. 45). Courtesy, which observes “The quality of persons and the time,” as Viola says of Feste [III.i.70], is the characteristic shared by those who know how to use social liberty rightly, such as Maria: “she moves within it [Olivia’s house] with perfectly selfless tact” (p. 49). Barber sees Viola and Feste as sharing mastery of courtesy, Orsino and Olivia as sharing appreciation of and reward for it; he sees not Sir Toby but Sir Andrew and Malvolio as opposite kinds of abusers of it.
7. According to Hollander, in Kernan, “It is the Appetite, not the whole Self, however, which is surfeited: the Self will emerge at the conclusion of the action from where it has been hidden.” He cites lines in I.i (esp. 1-3, 24-32, 37-39) as analyzing this aspect of the play in advance. Later, he comments that Malvolio “alone is not possessed of a craving directed outward, towards some object on which it can surfeit and die; he alone cannot morally benefit from a period of self-indulgence.” (Feste, on the other hand, he has described as “unmotivated by any appetite.”) On this subject of appetite, consider the following: I.iii is a parody of I.i; there is a reproof at I.v.85-86 and thematic statements at II.iii.9-12 and II.iv.92-100. Olivia, Toby (see IV.ii.66-67 and his marriage), and Orsino (see V.i.111-163) recover from misdirected appetites that have been surfeited and have died.

My own notes and discussion questions:

The displacement of desire is possible because the lovers are apparently interchangeable: Viola and Sebastian because they’re twins, Viola and Olivia because they’re near-anagrams. If the characters are stock stereotypes, then they’re naturally interchangeable, but the characters in romantic comedy derive from romance (not from farcical comedy), so they tend to change enough to be somewhat more realistic individuals. Lovers are intrinsically comical to those who aren’t in love, especially because they claim their beloveds are unique and superlative to unrealistic extents, but audience members who have been in love may be sympathetic to them even while laughing at the extremes to which they go.

As the play opens, Orsino is saying, “If music be the food of love, play on,/ Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,/ The appetite may sicken, and so die.” He claims that getting more than enough of what you want causes you to stop wanting it. Is that how the characters lose their inappropriate desires? Discuss whether Orsino’s love of Olivia, Olivia’s grief, Toby’s revelry, and Malvolio’s ambition are cured by being excessively indulged.

Although the subplot is basically a farce, it can be interpreted as a satire about the degeneration of the knightly code / ideal / institution; find the evidence and argue for or against such an interpretation.