Shakespeare's Veiled Advocacy of Religious Tolerance in *Twelfth Night*

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Abstract

In *Twelfth Night,* William Shakespeare cleverly integrated references to pagan deities and beliefs, thus drawing attention to religious diversity extant in his day, an era otherwise steeped in orthodox Catholic and Protestant theologies. The discussion opens with a description of the historical, political, and religious backdrop against which *Twelfth Night* was composed. The long and largely peaceful reign of Elizabeth I was thought to be approaching an end. With this prospect came anxiety that the religious conflict which Elizabeth had so expertly contained might flare into widespread social disruption once again. In this fraught atmosphere, Shakespeare arrived with his adroit use of Elizabethan pun and word-play, cleverly scoring his points for cultural diversity while evading strict accountability. In this mode, Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* made his characters invoke the Roman deities Mercury, Jove (or Jupiter), Vulcan, and Saturn, while also attributing destiny to the influence of the stars, the heavens, the gods, and fate – all notions which flew in the face of the conventional Christian theology dominant in Shakespeare's day. Running a significant risk by putting such words in the mouths of his characters, Shakespeare alluded to a popular Elizabethan era astrological belief called the doctrine of correspondences and even poked fun at his characters using this specialized language he knew his audience would recognize. Shakespeare enthusiasts who've always wanted to better understand the inside humor of the bard will find their heart's desires here, while also catching his drift about the need for a good-humored religious tolerance.

Le plaidoyer voilé de Shakespeare sur la tolérance religieuse dans « La Nuit des Rois »

Par Maureen Richmond

Résumé

Dans « La Nuit des Rois » (titre original « *The Twelfth Night* »), William Shakespeare a habilement intégré des références à des divinités et à des croyances païennes, tout en attirant l'attention sur la diversité religieuse qui existait à son époque, imprégnée des théologies traditionnelles Catholiques et Protestantes. Le dialogue débute par une description du contexte historique, politique et religieux autour duquel « La Nuit des Rois » a été composée : on devine que la fin du règne, long et essentiellement pacifique, de la Reine Elizabeth I, approche inéluctablement. Sous cette perspective, on perçoit l'appréhension que le conflit religieux, qu'Elizabeth avait si habilement contenu, pourrait exploser à nouveau en une perturbation sociale généralisée. Dans cette lourde atmosphère, Shakespeare utilise habilement des boutades et des jeux de mots pour mettre en exergue la diversité culturelle, tout en évitant d'y apparaitre directement. Dans ce style, les personnages de « La Nuit des Rois », invoquent des divinités romaines : Mercure, Jupiter, Pluton et Saturne, attribuent la destinée à l'influence des étoiles, des cieux, des dieux et du sort, ces artifices permettant d'éluder la théologie chrétienne

conventionnelle dominante à l'époque. Bien qu'il s'expose à un risque significatif en mettant de tels termes dans la bouche de ses personnages, Shakespeare fait allusion à une croyance populaire astrologique de l'époque élisabéthaine appelée la « doctrine des correspondances » alors qu'il s'amuse avec ses personnages en mettant dans leurs bouches ces expressions intrinsèques, qu'il savait que son auditoire reconnaîtrait. Les passionnés de Shakespeare qui aiment mieux comprendre l'humour intime du barde verront ici leurs désirs exaucés, tout en appréciant son allusion voilée à propos de la nécessité d'une tolérance religieuse, ici exprimée avec bonhomie.

La Defensa Velada de la Tolerancia Religiosa de Shakespeare en la *Duodécima Noche*

Maureen Richmond

Resumen

En la *Duodécima Noche*, William Shakespeare integró inteligentemente las referencias a las deidades y creencias paganas, atrayendo así la atención a la diversidad religiosa existente en su época, una era por lo demás impregnada de teologías ortodoxas Católicas y Protestantes. La discusión empieza con una descripción del contexto histórico, político y religioso en el que se compone la *Duodécima Noche*. El largo y en gran parte pacífico reinado de Isabel I se pensaba que estaba llegando a su fin. Con esta perspectiva surgió la ansiedad de que el conflicto religioso que Isabel había contenido tan hábilmente podría estallar en una ruptura social generalizada una vez más. En esta atmósfera tensa, Shakespeare llegó con su hábil uso del juego de palabras Isabelinos y palabras de doble sentido, anotando hábilmente sus puntos por la diversidad cultural mientras evadía la responsabilidad estricta. En este modo, Shakespeare en *Duodécima Noche* hizo que sus personajes invocaran a las deidades romanas Mercurio, Jove (o Júpiter), Vulcano y Saturno, a la vez que atribuían el destino a la influencia de las estrellas, los cielos, los dioses y el destino - todas las nociones que volaron en la cara de la teología Cristiana convencional dominante en los días de Shakespeare. Corriendo un riesgo significante al poner esas palabras en la boca de sus personajes, Shakespeare aludió a una creencia astrológica popular de la era Isabelina llamada doctrina de las correspondencias e incluso se burló de sus personajes usando este lenguaje especializado que sabía que su audiencia reconocería. Los entusiastas de Shakespeare quienes siempre han querido entender mejor el humor interior del bardo encontrarán aquí los deseos de su corazón, al mismo tiempo que se dan cuenta de la necesidad de una tolerancia religiosa de buen humor.

A Defesa Velada de Shakespeare sobre a Tolerância Religiosa na *Noite de Reis*

Maureen Richmond

Sumário

Na *Noite de Reis*, William Shakespeare inteligentemente integrou referências a divindades e crenças pagãs, chamando assim, a atenção para a diversidade religiosa existente em seus dias, uma época na qual estava mergulhada nas teologias católicas e protestantes ortodoxas. A discussão começa com uma descrição do cenário histórico, político e religioso em relação ao

qual a *Noite de Reis* foi composta. O longo e pacífico reinado de Elizabeth I poderia estar se aproximando de um fim. Com essa perspectiva, surgiu a ansiedade de que o conflito religioso, que Elizabeth havia contido tão habilmente, pudesse se transformar novamente em desordem social generalizada. Nessa atmosfera carregada, Shakespeare chegou com seu uso hábil do trocadilho e das palavras elisabetanas, classificando inteligentemente seus pontos para a diversidade cultural, enquanto evitava a responsabilidade estrita. Nesse modo, na *Noite de Reis*, Shakespeare fez seus personagens invocarem as deidades romanas de Mercúrio, Júpiter, Vulcano e Saturno, ao mesmo tempo em que atribuíam o destino à influência das estrelas, dos céus, dos deuses e da sorte - todas as noções que passaram na face da teologia cristã convencional dominante nos dias de Shakespeare. Correndo um risco significativo, colocando tais palavras na boca de seus personagens, Shakespeare aludiu a uma crença astrológica popular da era elisabetana chamada doutrina das correspondências, e até zombou de seus personagens usando essa linguagem especializada que ele sabia que seu público iria reconhecer. Os entusiastas de Shakespeare que sempre quiseram entender melhor o humor interno do bardo, encontrarão as respostas aqui, ao mesmo tempo em que perceberão a necessidade de uma tolerância religiosa bem-humorada.

Shakespeares verschleierte Verteidigung der religiösen Toleranz in der „*Zwölfte Nacht*“ oder „*Was Ihr wollt*“

Maureen Richmond

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Werk hat William Shakespeare Hinweise zum heidnischen Glauben und deren Gottheiten geschickt eingebunden. Auf diese Weise lenkte er die Aufmerksamkeit auf die religiöse Diversität, die in seiner Zeit noch vorhanden war, andererseits war diese Epoche durchdrungen vom konventionellen katholischen und protestantischen Glauben.
Das Gespräch fängt mit einer kurzen Beschreibung des damaligen historischen, politischen und religiösen Hintergrunds an, wobei das Werk als Reaktion dagegen geschrieben wurde. Die lange und weitgehend friedliche Herrschaft von Königin Elisabeth I ging allmählich zu Ende. Diese Zukunftsperspektive schürte die Angst, dass die religiösen Konflikte, die Königin Elisabeth I so gewandt eingegrenzt hatte, wieder in einer flächendeckenden gesellschaftlichen Spaltung ausarten könnten. Es gelang William Shakespeare dennoch in dieser angespannten Zeit, geschickt für die kulturelle Vielfalt zu punkten indem er gekonnt Witz und Wortspiel, wie es Elisabeth pflegte, nutzte aber dennoch jegliche Verantwortung umging. Auf dieser Art ließ Shakespeare seine Figuren in der *Zwölften Nacht* bzw., *Was Ihr wollt* römische Gottheiten wie Merkur, Jupiter (Jove), Vulcanus und Saturnus anrufen. Eine Bestimmung sprach er dem Einfluss der Sterne, der Himmel, der Götter und des Schicksals zu. Diese Begriffe setzten sich über die konventionelle Christliche Theologie, die in der damaligen Zeit von Shakespeare vorherrschte, hinweg. Während er seine Figuren solche Worte aussprechen ließ und daher ein erhebliches Risiko lief, spielte er auf einen in dieser Zeit populären astrologischen Glauben an: Die Lehre der Übereinstimmung. Er machte sich lustig über seine Figuren indem er diese sehr besondere Sprache anwandte, wovon er wusste, dass seine Audienz sie erkennen würde. Die Schwärmer von Shakespeare, die immer versucht haben den tieferen Humor des Dichters besser

zu verstehen, werden hier begeistert sein und werden zugleich sein Anliegen, eine religiöse Toleranz mit einem guten Portion Humor zu erzielen, entdecken.

Introduction

As this paper will demonstrate, William Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* integrated references to pagan deities and beliefs, and in so doing, drew attention to a diversity of religious interests and viewpoints existing in his day, an era otherwise steeped in Catholic and Protestant theologies. Through allusion to specific pagan deities of classical antiquity, the notion of fate, the influence of the stars, and the doctrine of correspondences, Shakespeare staged a presentation of profound religious matters, pitting the theological concepts of pagan antiquity against the expected deference to Christianity as taught by Catholicism and Protestantism in Shakespeare's time. Further, by using clever dialogue and repeated references to concepts emanating from pagan antiquity, the playwright managed to register his observations in a humorous and sometimes whimsical manner which might easily have escaped the notice of Christian zealots highly critical of the Elizabethan theatre. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* can thus be understood as an understated, tongue-in-cheek act of literary rebellion against the dominant theologies of the playwright's day.

Historical, Political, and Religious Context

Probably written in 1601, *Twelfth Night* emerged from Shakespeare's pen in the same year during which he composed the tragic *Hamlet*.[1] At this point in the career of the famed Elizabethan playwright, Shakespeare had attained virtuosity in both the comic and tragic genres.[2] Though *Twelfth Night* is often viewed as pure comedy,[3] it is important to note that this play was written during a phase of Shakespeare's creative life when the playwright was involved in writing other plays which explore profoundly serious themes, such as the collapse of feudalism and the birth of the modern nation-state.[4] As a result, it is probable that *Twelfth Night* absorbed elements of that seriousness, rendering the comic elements in *Twelfth Night* simply a light and airy tapestry covering a much darker background. In that darker background, other deeper and more contemplative themes were at work in the mind of the playwright as he devised this work, matters which concerned the religious and political situation of England.

At the time this play was written, Queen Elizabeth I had reigned over England for more than forty years, establishing a degree of civil order and stability entirely lacking in the half-century before, which had been filled with violent religious conflicts between Protestants wanting to follow the impetus of the Reformation and Catholics equally passionate about clinging to the authority of the Pope in Rome. Elizabeth had largely quelled the raging torrent of religious dissension through policies of moderation, but by the end of the sixteenth century, her advancing age alerted all to the possibility that civil disruption based on religious divisions could again loom on the horizon. This was the political, religious, and social environment in which Shakespeare conceived and composed *Twelfth Night*, a fact perhaps reflected in Shakespeare's nuanced presentation of issues bearing upon matters of religious belief. Thus, the deeper themes at work in the mind of the playwright may well have concerned the precarious situation of England, barely recovered from devastating religious conflict and possibly poised to experience

more of the same. Extremes of religious intolerance were, therefore, a potentially imminent threat once again as Shakespeare composed *Twelfth Night*.

As a result, Shakespeare used the comic aspect of *Twelfth Night* to shroud an examination of deeper issues – specifically, matters of religious belief and the presence in English society of popular beliefs and ways of speaking which suggested that Catholicism and Protestantism were not the only systems of religious belief to which the English populace ascribed. Thus, even though *Twelfth Night* is classed as a comedy and surely contains amusing antics, the religious and political environments in which *Twelfth Night* appeared were far from laughing matters. Instead, they were indicative of the underlying political realities and religious concerns of Shakespeare's time.

One of those political realities likely concerning Shakespeare's mind was the distinct prospect of losing the largess of Queen Elizabeth – a situation which would entail high stakes for all, including dramatists such as William Shakespeare. During Shakespeare's lifetime, Elizabeth had looked upon the theatre favorably, tolerating and supporting the folk festive calendar with which it was associated and officially viewing the drama as a constructive channel for the release of otherwise potentially explosive social tensions.[5] However, the religious conservatives of the Elizabethan Era viewed the theatre and all its productions with disapproval and contempt.[6] Without Elizabeth as protector, the theatre stood to be a target of criticism and censorship. Shakespeare was no doubt keenly aware of this overall political and religious situation as he penned *Twelfth Night*, giving him reason to bring to the public mind the fact that religious diversity existed in England, yet doing so in a fashion which might avoid inflaming the anger of Christian zealots.

The situation for the playwright was even more complex. Even though Elizabeth had favored the theatre, her government officials had reserved the right to regulate dramatic content.[7] This constant surveillance of theatrical content must have been for the English playwright yet another factor of consideration added to the fear of conservative Christian reaction. Shakespeare would have inevitably realized he must walk a fine line between pleasing the audience on one hand and avoiding offense to the crown and the church on the other. Shakespeare would have been acutely aware of this conundrum, for the acting company of which he was a member performed regularly at the request of the Elizabethan court, affording Shakespeare, his fellow actors, and the contents of their plays close contact with Elizabeth and her courtiers.[8] Apparently Shakespeare was indeed able to achieve the necessary balance between protecting the interests of the crown and appealing to public sentiment, for his work has been judged to remain both subversive and civil.[9] This balancing act is evident in *Twelfth Night*, which poses the question of alternative religious beliefs under the cover of madcap nonsense, drunken patter, and romantic melodrama, as will be shown, thus allowing the playwright to inoffensively question the simplistic assumption that only one religious point of view characterized English society.

Shakespeare's ability to appeal to both the tastes of the governing and the tastes of the governed may have lain in part in his unique ability to play the language game so treasured in his time. According to scholar of British literary humor Harry Nilsen, "…Elizabethans loved words and they loved word play. They delighted in puns, and they liked to use and interpret words in as many different senses as possible."[10] Artful jousting with words and humor was regarded, in the

Elizabethan Era, as a highly aristocratic skill.[11] Queen Elizabeth herself professed a marked personal love of intellectual and linguistic humor and was known to bring clever orators to her court for honor.[12] Such a fact could not have been lost on Shakespeare, himself a frequenter of the Elizabethan court as an actor. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare's plays are full of word-play and double meanings, as well as hidden and submerged meanings.[13] Using oblique communication methods of this type allowed Shakespeare to address and air the interests of many factions without appearing to commit himself to one viewpoint exclusively. As will be shown, Shakespeare used this very approach in *Twelfth Night,* a play which contains seemingly casual allusions to figures and beliefs of pagan antiquity, the implications of which are more meaningful to the dialogue between religious points of view than their comedic setting might suggest.

The Invocation of Roman Deities in *Twelfth Night*

The invocation of Roman deities is a case in point. When Shakespeare had begun to produce his earliest works, the English Renaissance was well under way. That literary movement was driven by an artistic appetite for classical pagan antiquity. In fact, it has been said that Renaissance intellectuals and artists so highly regarded the achievements of the pagan philosophers of Greece and Rome that they much preferred their musings to the complexities of Christian theologians.[14] This enthusiastic nod toward the beliefs and customs of pagan antiquity – Rome in particular – reappeared throughout *Twelfth Night*, though in a veiled fashion that many readers might simply pass over unnoticed. In fact, reference to the pagan antiquity of Rome echoed plentifully in the casual and sometimes amusing invocations of Roman deities bandied about by several of the characters in *Twelfth Night*, as will now be shown.

For example, Feste the clown finds occasion to invoke the Roman god Mercury once and Jove twice over the course of the play. First, as Feste expresses approval for Maria's thoughts (1. 5. 35-36), he utters, "Now Mercury endue thee with leasing/ for thou speakest well of fools!"[15] A few lines later (1. 5. 106-107), it is Jove which Feste invokes while in agreement with Olivia when he states, "Thou hast spoke for us, madonna, as if thy eldest son should be a fool; whose skull Jove cram with brains!" It is again to Jove that Feste returns (3. 1. 43-44), when he implores the Roman deity to provide a beard for the all-too-boyish Cesario, actually Viola in men's clothing. In invoking Roman Mercury and Jove thus, Feste the clown revives the memories of these ancient pagan deities, Mercury, the emblem of swift communication, and Jove, the supreme deity of the Roman religious pantheon.

Roman Jove continues to be the target of invocation (2. 5. 93-94) when the bogus letter written by Maria is read by Malvolio, who, mistakenly thinking the letter has been composed by his beloved Olivia, reads, "Jove knows I love. But who?" Malvolio himself subsequently calls on Jove (2. 5. 161) when, after having read the spurious letter in which Olivia is portrayed as in pursuit of Malvolio's affections, the delighted Malvolio rejoices, saying, "Jove and my stars be praised." As though this were not enough recognition for the great Roman deity and sufficient acknowledgment of the source of his surprising good fortune, Malvolio reiterates his thanks five lines onward (2. 5. 166) with a simple "Jove, I thank thee." Later in the play (3. 4. 73), it is again Malvolio who, thinking his greatest hopes are soon to be realized, calls out to the same god of antiquity, thus, "…but it is Jove's doing, Jove make me thankful." And a few lines later (3. 4.

81), Malvolio, in contemplation of what he considers his good fortune, utters, "Well, Jove, not I, is the doer of this, and he is to be thanked." Malvolio thus speaks the name of Roman Jove five times during the course of *Twelfth Night*, establishing by reiteration an emphasis upon the deity which Romans held to be the source of all blessings. Malvolio's lines suggest that he conceptualizes Jove in this same role, though the Christian assumption would be that in the context of gratitude for blessings bestowed, the word "God" should be used instead. However, Jove is again invoked by yet another character, Sir Toby Belch (4. 2. 11), when he incongruously says to Feste, dressed as a Christian minister, "Jove bless thee, Master Parson." Finally, Duke Orsino alludes to a different Roman religious deity (5. 1. 46-48), when he says of Antonio, "That face of his I do remember well;/ Yet, when I saw it last, it was besmear'd/ As black as Vulcan in the smoke of war…." Thus, Malvolio's repeated reference to Jove, Belch's comical and incongruous use of the same, and Orsino's allusion to the Roman deity Vulcan all suggest that the playwright intended to draw attention to a vision of deities and their powers which represented an alternative to the Christian monotheistic paradigm and its language.

Thus, Mercury, Jove, and Vulcan appear in the dialogue of *Twelfth Night,* not as major features, but still as repeated references to pagan antiquity. The characters who make these utterances include Feste, Maria (through the bogus letter), Malvolio, Sir Toby Belch, and Duke Orsino, thus spanning the social order from fool to servant to bumbling family member to minor royalty. No class of character, it seems, is immune to the impulse to call out to the powers of antiquity in this play. In fact, it seems that nearly all practice such invocation, for the playwright saw fit to continuously insert this feature into the dialogue. Given the Elizabethan penchant for communicating in code, it is likely that the insertion of these allusions bears meaning. At the very least, it might be seen as an acknowledgement of the fact that the cults of Jupiter, Mercury, and Vulcan had been known in England since the days of the Roman occupation.[16] At most, the repeated mention of Roman deities by all classes of characters in the play suggests that Shakespeare used this technique deliberately to draw attention to the fact that the gods of pagan antiquity were alive in the social conversation of his day, and hence in the minds of the English people. Though this notion constitutes no great surprise during an era which was artistically inspired by pagan antiquity, this revelation nonetheless suggests that there may have been more meaning to the inclusion of pagan deities in conversation than might be assumed. In fact, such utterances as made by Feste, Maria, Malvolio, Belch, and Orsino might well suggest the presence of an actual belief system based on classical paganism operating secretively alongside the Christian paradigm dominant in the Elizabethan era.

In addition to suggesting an implication that an actual belief system might have driven social conversation including reference to the deities of pagan antiquity, references to pagan deities in *Twelfth Night* also serve to introduce the characteristics traditionally associated with these deity figures into consideration. The Mercury of which Feste speaks (1. 5. 35-36) is of course the Roman god of words, wit, messages and intelligence, as well as that of commerce, traders, and even thieves or scoundrels.[17] Certainly an appropriate deity for the clever yet potentially devious Feste to invoke, the Roman god Mercury connotes all the things to which Feste might aspire, such as adept communication and a persuasive ability including the ability to fool others effectively. Shakespeare's use of this Roman deity in regard to Feste suggests that the playwright may have been drawing a parallel between the character who makes the invocation and the deity which he evokes. In this sense, Feste would appeal to clever Mercury because the observant

clown aspires to develop the same attributes. However, the principle might work differently in the case of Feste's invocation of Jove, or Jupiter (1. 5. 106-107, 3. 1. 43-44), the supreme god in Roman religion, endower of all good things and dispenser of wealth and blessings.[18] When Feste calls upon Jove, he is not referring to his own character but rather making a joke about the sublime power of the supreme Roman god to bring plentitude into manifestation, even in so small a space as a human skull or in so mundane a matter as the growth of a beard. In any case, Feste's easy reliance upon Jove instead of the Christian God suggests that Shakespeare is using Feste as an emblem for the kind of person who would turn to Roman deities. In that Feste is cast as a fool and yet one who often sees with shocking clarity into the heart of any matter, it is with mixed credibility that the invocation of Jove is presented in the case of Feste. Still, Feste gives voice to a reliance upon a deity which is in variance with the dominant Catholic and Protestant theologies of the time, yet another representation of religious diversity in *Twelfth Night*.

As the play proceeds, omnipotent Roman Jove in fact receives a fair amount of attention, invoked five times by Malvolio, once (but pointedly) by Sir Toby Belch, and once by Maria in her spurious letter. Maria's insertion (2. 5. 93-94) of the Jovian presence in her letter faked from Olivia to Malvolio would seem to suggest that Maria, as a servant to the lady Olivia, felt confident of the true religious sentiments of her employer, or enough so to anticipate how her aristocratic ladyship might express herself. In this situation, the playwright has used Maria as a mouthpiece for the servant class to make an observation about the beliefs and interests of the ruling class, of which Maria's lady Olivia is a member. Through Maria, Shakespeare tells the reader and the audience that servants may have known to what and whom the hearts and minds of their aristocratic employers were truly allied. In this case, it was, surprisingly, to a god of pagan antiquity and not the monotheistic Christian God, yet another instance suggesting that Shakespeare was pointing out the existence of belief systems other than Catholic and Protestant Christianity existing in Elizabethan England.

In this regard, Malvolio's appeal to Jove is especially intriguing, for Malvolio is typed by Maria as similar to a zealous Christian (2. 3. 129) when she says of Malvolio, "…sometimes he is a kind of puritan." Further, Shakespeare has Maria say (2. 3. 135) of Malvolio, "The dev'l a puritan that he is…" before naming what she perceives as Malvolio's numerous character faults.[19] In this way, Shakespeare implants the notion in the mind of the reader or the audience that Malvolio normally impresses his peers as behaving in the manner of a conservative Christian. Malvolio, then, might be taken as an emblem for the conservative religious point of view in the Elizabethan era. Concurring with this assessment is renowned Shakespearean scholar Victor Cahn, who holds that Malvolio belongs in the class of characters created by Shakespeare for the purpose of representing the puritanical mentality, that the playwright might poke fun at that theological position.[20] Cahn explains that the other characters of *Twelfth Night* spurn Malvolio because he disapproves of their hedonistic ways, but approbates great credit to himself for minor character accomplishments.[21] Similarly, literary analyst Elliot Kreiger writes that "…through Malvolio, Shakespeare satirically portrays a Puritan…"[22] as does anthology editor Stephen Greenblatt, who confirms that Shakespeare characterizes Malvolio as a reprehensible religious fanatic.[23] These assessments of Malvolio are important because they suggest that Shakespeare was in fact concerned with the religious issues of his day, enough so to integrate character and dialogue into *Twelfth Night* in such a manner as to make evident that fact.

Given, therefore, that Malvolio functions as an emblem of the practicing puritanical Christian, it is surprising that Shakespeare has him break ranks with conventional Christian behavior and address himself instead to the apparent acknowledgement of a god of classical antiquity – Roman Jove in particular (2. 5. 161, 2. 5. 166, 3. 4. 73, 3. 4. 81). Though some readers might regard this apparent contradiction in religious positions too trivial to matter, such a notable departure from the standard Christian reliance on the monotheistic version of God might well have been intended by the playwright for dramatic effect. When Shakespeare makes Malvolio set aside the Christian God and turn instead with what appears to be genuine reverence toward a deity of another religion, it may well be a direct statement by the playwright that a belief in the religious ways of the pagan past co-existed with Christianity in Elizabethan England. If so, then the invocation of Roman deities in *Twelfth Night*, no matter how casual, may well be significant, suggesting that an hitherto unacknowledged religious diversity existed in Elizabethan England even under the watchful gaze of the dominant Catholic and Protestant theologies.

The same could be said for the invocation of Jove by Sir Toby Belch (4. 2. 11), when Belch quips, "Jove bless thee, Master Parson." Of course, this remark is a joke created by the incongruous use of the Roman deity to bless Malvolio dressed as a Christian parson (or minister) who, if conventionally Christian, would have placed no credence in the power of the Roman Jove. Thus, Belch's attempted benediction would ring hollow to a real parson's ears, sounding more like a taunt than a heartfelt wish for happiness and longevity. Here again, the playwright used what appears to be a casual or simply playful remark to drive home a point about the embrace of theologies other than the Catholic or Protestant by the popular mind of his time, as represented by the bumbling Belch. When Belch so readily calls upon pagan Jove, it indicates by extension that this point of view was not uncommon in the English society of the time. In other words, Shakespeare hints by his use of Roman Jove in this context that the Christian viewpoint of his time was not as exclusively held as some may have believed.

Though the references to Roman deities made by the characters Feste, Maria, Malvolio, and Belch might indicate significant observations about theological positions at variance with official Catholic and Protestant beliefs, the reference to Vulcan made by Duke Orsino (5. 1. 46-48) might be of a lighter character, though still meaningful. In the process of commenting on the appearance of Antonio the sea captain near the end of the play, Orsino states that the last time he had encountered Antonio, the sea-captain was under duress in the fury of a sea battle, as if enveloped in the blackening smoke of flaming war. Orsino compares Antonio's look at that time to Vulcan, Roman god of forges, underground fires and volcanoes.[24] In so doing, Orsino reveals himself as an educated Renaissance gentleman who can call upon a colorful image drawn from pagan antiquity, should he wish to highlight his words. Orsino's reference to yet another deity of the Roman religious pantheon thus adds weight to the presence of pagan antiquity in the play, once again suggesting that the playwright employed this theme deliberately to draw attention to religious diversity existing in Elizabethan England, this time under the cover of Renaissance educational ideals.

Educated speech such as Orsino used would have been strictly in keeping with the Renaissance belief that proper preparation for life ought to include study of Greek and Roman classical literature, preferably in those languages. On this point, scholar of Renaissance poetry Isabel Rivers has written, "Because Latin and Greek literature was for so long the basis of Western

education, the pagan gods were known in the Renaissance."[25] This is precisely the Renaissance principle represented by Orsino. As a duke and therefore a member of the aristocracy, Orsino represents the literary and educational emphasis on classical antiquity cultivated by the upper echelon in the Elizabethan era. That Shakespeare has Orsino illustrate his point with reference to Roman Vulcan (5. 1. 46-48) indicates that the playwright was involved with providing an accurate depiction of the oratorical styles of his day. It was his way of recreating the culture and society of his time and of drawing the Elizabethan audience into the stage action through familiar and expected modes of speaking. Notably, these expected ways of speaking include references to religious figures the presence of which would tend to question the assumption that the dominant Catholic and Protestant theologies were the only religious concepts on the mind of the public in Shakespeare's day.

Calling upon the deities of pagan Rome by the characters in *Twelfth Night*, however, takes place in more ways other than direct reference spoken in the dialogue of the play. While Mercury, Jove, and Vulcan are all named and invoked outright, there is one more Roman deity alluded to in *Twelfth Night* only by epithet and by theme. Feste refers to this Roman deity by epithet (2. 4. 72) when he flippantly states to Orsino, "Now the melancholy god protect thee." What god might this be? The answer lies in the medieval theory of the four humors. Melancholy was, of course, one of the four medieval humors. Each of the humors was associated with a number of factors, including planetary dispositions. In Elizabethan thought, melancholy was attributed to the god and planet Saturn.[26] Accordingly, in its worst manifestations Saturn, or the god of melancholy, begat an envious, covetous, stubborn, and ill-contented demeanor.[27] By invoking Saturn as the god of melancholy and projecting this deity's supervision on Orsino, Feste of course wishes not so much joy and contentment on the duke as the opposite – in other words, all the things connected with Saturn. Hence, Feste scores an insult veiled in esoteric language, or at the very least, a vote of no confidence in Orsino, against whom Feste the clown seems to bear antipathy. All this Feste accomplishes with the mere mention (2. 4. 72) of the Roman deity Saturn through his epithet, the god of melancholy, thus rendering Saturn yet another Roman god represented in the play. In setting up the dialogue in this fashion, Shakespeare has used the mention of a Roman deity in yet another way to call attention to the presence of classical pagan thought in the society of his day. That a mention of the melancholy god should come so easily to Feste suggests that it came just as easily to mind for certain members of English society. Here is yet further suggestion that Shakespeare intended to highlight the living presence of pagan thought in the midst of an otherwise Christian world.

Though Feste's clever and educated jest using the epithet for the Roman deity Saturn speaks much in itself, the imposing presence of the Saturnian figure overshadows *Twelfth Night* in an even more comprehensive and thematic manner. As literary scholar and anthology editor Stephen Greenblatt has written, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* takes its name from the final day of the Christian Christmas season, with the Christmas season itself built upon the much earlier Roman Saturnalia, a pagan winter ritual honoring the Roman god Saturn, which existed in England long before the Christianization of the nation.[28] As Greenblatt goes on to say, even in Shakespeare's time, it was evident that the customs associated with the twelfth night or end of the Christmas season were in fact continuations of the Roman Saturnalia.[29] That Shakespeare should name his play in this fashion therefore suggests that he meant to acknowledge not only the customs associated with the Christian Christmas season, but also to tie these customs to the

much more ancient pagan Saturnalia. In thus calling attention to a more archaic pagan festival celebrated previously in Roman-occupied England, Shakespeare is again pointing to the continued presence of classical pagan beliefs in his day, even in the midst of the otherwise Catholic and Protestant society. Understanding the origin of Shakespeare's choice of title for the play in this manner reveals yet another angle from which the playwright appears to have taken pains to incorporate themes of classical pagan antiquity into his play and, as a consequence, to challenge the assumption that English society remained uniformly and exclusively Christian in his day.

Starting on December 17, the original Saturnalia featured a celebration honoring Saturn, Roman patron of harvests. The Roman Saturnalia included an exchange of gifts, the closing of businesses and government, and the sharing of meals by slaves and masters, plus the prohibition of war.[30] Long after the fall of Rome, the Saturnalia had continued to be of interest to medieval scholars, who had kept its memory alive.[31] In particular, medieval scholars retained the study of the Roman historian Macrobius, who composed a text titled "The Saturnalia."[32] The text composed by Macrobius reveals that the Roman Saturnalia was held by its devotees to have been older than the foundation of Rome and to have been based on a solar religion which included reference to the signs of the zodiac mixed with metaphysical philosophy.[33] More popularly, the Saturnalia was a time in which revelry was encouraged and all manner of role reversals allowed, such as those between masters and slaves. Thus, these are the several hidden associations tied to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night.* Taken altogether, they embody an alternative religiosity which was not part and parcel of the Catholic and Protestant theologies dominating English society in Shakespeare's time.

From the themes of the pagan Saturnalia, Shakespeare imported an emphasis on revelry to *Twelfth Night,* a fact readily evident in the drunken yet entertaining repartee carried on by Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek throughout the play. The Saturnalian theme of role-reversal likewise appears in the Viola-Cesario character in which woman becomes man, and in the reversed slave and master interactions between Maria-Olivia in which the servant drives social interactions to an extent, and in the Viola-Orsino pairing in which the hireling male eventually becomes the betrothed female partner. The more arcane thematic aspects of the Saturnalia are perhaps more difficult to pin directly to elements of *Twelfth Night*, though the astrological doctrine associated with the original Roman Saturnalia may well be enshrined in the astrological references included in the play, of which there are several (about which see more, below). All these factors contribute to the connection Shakespeare seems to have intentionally drawn between pagan antiquity and the characters of his play, reflections of the real people of the Elizabethan era.

In any case, through both epithet and Saturnalian theme, the archetype of the Roman Saturn played a role in shaping both title and dialogue in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, making Saturn the fourth Roman deity significantly represented in this play. Thus, Saturn joins Mercury, Jove, and Vulcanus as emissaries from pagan antiquity visiting the stage in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, all of them suggesting by their presence that Elizabethan society recognized and accepted them all as figures of a religiosity alternative to that of Catholicism and Protestantism.

References to Influences of the Stars, Heavens, Gods and Fate

As the previous section has demonstrated, Shakespeare clearly integrated deities from Roman religion into *Twelfth Night*, thereby implying that a religious belief system other than Catholic or Protestant theology was comprehensible to the society of his day. Shakespeare's use of pagan deities in this way invites significant questions about his position on one of the important debates of his day – the question of fate versus free will, which was actively argued in the theological circles of Shakespeare's time.[34] A belief in fate or the will of the gods was part of the Roman religion from which are drawn the deities described above, though even in classical times, there was controversy about the degree to which fate or free will dominated.[35] Whether Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* intended a pagan fate-centered belief system to shape characters and drive plot, to simply add spice, or to comment on theological conflict thus might be seen as an open question.

Shakespearean scholar Victor Cahn addresses this point in his study, *The Plays of Shakespeare: A Thematic Guide.* Cahn frames the issue in terms of the difference between classical tragedy and Shakespearean drama when he writes, "Perhaps the most important thematic difference between the tragedies of Shakespeare and those of the classical dramatists…is the freedom that individual characters possess. In Greek tragedy, the gods can ordain the outcome of events…[but] in Shakespeare's tragedies…characters are free to determine the course of their own lives."[36] Though *Twelfth Night* is generally considered a comedy and the classical pagan deities which it invokes are Roman rather than Greek, these observations remain relevant to the larger question of Shakespeare's position on the question of fate versus free will. In this vein, Cahn offers evidence in his study that this question was one with which Shakespeare tangled in many a play, including *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*.[37] It is therefore in keeping that such a theme would appear in one of the more lighthearted Shakespearean entertainments as well, making *Twelfth Night* another vehicle in which Shakespeare might examine theological positions concerning the question of fate and free will.

As a result, references to fate and the will of the gods or the heavens are peppered throughout Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night.* The references begin when Sir Tony Belch quips about the dancing ability of his friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek and its probable origin in the influence of the stars (1. 3. 123-125), saying, "I did think, by the excellent constitution of thy Leg,/ it was formed under the star of a galliard." Two scenes later (1. 5. 297), Olivia, in a moment of desperation, calls out, "Fate, show thy force." Shortly after, Sebastian remarks to Antonio (2. 1. 3-5), "My stars shine darkly over me./ The malignancy of my fate might perhaps distemper yours." Only a few lines later (2. 1. 17-18), it is again Sebastian who invokes the agency of fate under the guise of the heavens when he tells Antonio of his twin's birth in the same hour as his, and goes on to opine, "If the heavens had been pleased, would we have so ended." In the same act (2. 1. 39), the notion of gods as dispensers of fate or destiny appears in dialogue when Antonio says to Sebastian as the two friends part temporarily, "The gentleness of all the gods go with you." Four scenes later (2. 5. 135), the letter deviously written by Maria in her lady's name entertains the same matter, musing, "In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness." Only a few lines later (2. 5. 137-138), the same letter says, "Thy fates open their hands." Then, near the end of the same act and scene (2. 5. 159), Malvolio after reading the spurious letter says simply, "I thank my stars."

In the utterances just enumerated, the stars, fates, heavens and gods are all terms used in what would seem a roughly interchangeable manner, thus rendering them more or less equivalent in meaning. They all point to a belief in some type of intangible influence determining destiny. Hence, it is possible to say that in *Twelfth Night,* the characters Sir Toby Belch, Olivia, Sebastian, Antonio, Maria, and Malvolio all appear to harbor at least some conviction that the course of events rests in the hands of the stars, fate, the heavens, or the gods, but not in the hands of the one God of monotheistic Catholicism and Protestantism. To espouse such a belief is to imitate the ways of pagan antiquity to an extent, for the notion that the stars or the heavens can act spiritually and morally on humans has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome.[38] The form this belief took in classical times was an astral religion, which in time became what is now called astrology.[39] Classicist Franz Cumont judges that an astrologically-based religion in fact dominated classical antiquity.[40] Hence, in appealing to the heavens and stars as agencies of fate and the will of the gods, characters in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* revive a very ancient belief which is rooted in the historical period so revered by the Renaissance movement in England – classical pagan antiquity. Though some might argue that to speak of the stars and heavens as agencies of divine will is nothing more than a convention of speech, it can also be countered that such conventions may well have arisen from actual notions once held commonly by humanity. Thus, when Shakespeare makes his characters speak in this way, there is meaning behind the words. Specifically, when Shakespeare's characters speak in this way, they appear to embrace a religious theory of causation which differs from the Catholic and Protestant theologies still socially and politically dominant in the Elizabethan era.

Contrasting with the Catholic and Protestant theological position contending that only the one Christian God decrees destiny, the astrological doctrine popular in Shakespeare's day seized upon other factors as decisive. One of these mechanisms was called the doctrine of correspondences, which notion had evolved over time. By the day of Shakespeare, the original astrological ideas of pagan antiquity had passed through several centuries of intervening history, including the medieval period, during which time a popular form of divinatory astrology developed from that earlier form and spread throughout Europe and England. One of the central tenets of this developing astral philosophy was the doctrine of correspondences, originally inherited from classical pagan antiquity.[41] The doctrine of correspondences held that for every celestial influence such as a sign of the zodiac or a planet named for a Roman god, there was a corresponding part of the human body as well as plants and other natural substances which were of the same nature, with the terrestrial counterpart under the dominion of the celestial.[42] According to literary scholar Harry Blamires, this doctrine of correspondences was in fact ascribed to by the playwright William Shakespeare.[43] What Shakespeare might have believed in specifically can be gleaned from a 1647 publication called *Christian Astrology*, written by English astrologer William Lilly, who lived during Shakespeare's time. Lilly's work is a vast compendium of ideas forming the astrological system representative of the period. Central amongst them is the doctrine of correspondences.

References to the doctrine of correspondences appear in at least two passages of *Twelfth Night*. Sir Andrew Aguecheek says to Sir Tony Belch (1. 2. 127), "Shall we set about some revels?" and Belch replies, "What shall we do else?/Were we not born/ Under Taurus?" Interestingly, Shakespeare's application of the correspondence is correct, for in Elizabethan popular astrology, Taurus was linked with Venus, and the Venus disposition was characterized as "…loving mirth

in…words and action,…rather drinking much, prone to venery, oft entangled in love matters…[and] a company keeper."[44] The perfect description of the avid partier, these phrases tell of a personality type which would just love to set about some revels, precisely as suggested by Aguecheek and confirmed by Belch.

Continuing the references to the doctrine of correspondence, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek engage in a humorous interchange (1. 3. 128-132) which is based wholly on the medieval astrological concept of correspondences. It starts when Belch says, "What shall we do else?/ Were we not born under Taurus?" And Sir Andrew Aguecheek replies, "Taurus! That's sides and heart." Then Belch tries to correct him with "No, sir; it is legs and thighs." In this exchange, Belch leads with mention of the astrological sign Taurus. Sir Andrew then replies with a correspondence to human body parts (suggesting sides and heart), but fumbles the association of zodiacal sign and body part in a way that must have sent astute Elizabethan audience members into fits of laughter, for Sir Andrew links Taurus with the wrong anatomical location. Taurus in medieval astrology was associated not with the sides and heart, which were the province of the sign Leo, but with the throat and neck.[45] Belch then responds with a couple of more body part correspondences (suggesting legs and thighs), but these are in error as well, for these areas of the body are associated in medieval and Elizabethan astrology not with Taurus either, but with Sagittarius.[46] Hence, Shakespeare accomplished two objectives with this exchange. First, he played to the popular Elizabethan interest in astrological correspondences, and second, he used the moment to make Aguecheek and Belch appear even more inebriated, idiotic, and comic than before, for they fail to recall the correct correspondences. Indeed this amplification of comic content is significant and noted by Shakespearean scholar Harry Blamires, who writes, "We see Shakespeare's comic characterization at full maturity in the persons of Sir Toby Belch [and]… Sir Andrew Aguecheek…" in *Twelfth Night.*[47] Part of that accomplishment rests on Shakespeare's cleverly tangled use of astrological correspondences, a notion essentially handed down from classical pagan antiquity, and one which flies squarely in the face of the dominant Catholic and Protestant theological claims to exclusive divine causation.

Thus, through allusion to fate, the gods, the stars, and the doctrine of correspondences, it appears that Shakespeare has by design staged a presentation of profound theological matters debated but perhaps unresolved in his day. The fact that the playwright did so through slapstick humor in the case of Belch and Aguecheek and through melodrama in the cases of Olivia, Antonio, Sebastian, and Malvolio ably serves to veil the matter, but not to eliminate it entirely. The meaning endures under the cover of comedy. At the same time, this finely-crafted Shakespearean humor points to the overall message of the play concerning the presence in English Renaissance society of philosophical and religious viewpoints other than the dominant Catholic and Protestant paradigms.

Conclusion

Through a long and winding tour of references to classical pagan elements and related stellar concepts in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night,* this study has highlighted the role played by elements of classical pagan antiquity in this play and has suggested that they may have been incorporated in order to represent aspects of religious diversity existing in the English public during an era otherwise governed by Catholic and Protestant sensibilities. Examining the historical background

of the play, the discussion has shown that Shakespeare often composed in language with hidden or veiled meanings, due to the political and religious pressures bearing upon the Elizabethan theatre. This study has therefore applied the concept of veiled language to evaluate passages in the *Twelfth Night* dialogue which relate to pagan antiquity. Next, this study has provided an examination of the passages in dialogue which contain references to the deities of Roman pagan antiquity, and has further revealed that Shakespeare seems to have deliberately included these concepts (which are potentially disturbing to a Christian audience) in a deceptively casual and amusing manner in order to expose the existence of a perhaps unacknowledged religious diversity existing in Elizabethan England. Further, this study has demonstrated that Shakespeare's references to the antiquity-related ideas of medieval astrology were neither random nor accidental but rather informed, cogent, and clever. Finally, this study has revealed that through the inclusion of references to stars, the heavens, the gods and fate, Shakespeare has deftly built into *Twelfth Night* an echo of a significant theological issue of his day, the question of fate versus free will. Importantly, *Twelfth Night* contains no decisive answer to the question about fate and free will, a fact which suggests that Shakespeare meant to leave the issue open for his audiences to ponder. That position represents a significant departure from the authoritarian stance taken by the conventional religionists of his day, who likely would not have been satisfied to leave the issue open to contemplation. Instead, the conservative religionists of Shakespeare's day would likely have demanded a disclaimer in regard to the invocation of non-Christian deities and the articulation of any theories of causation other than their own.

It bears saying that Shakespeare took a considerable risk by using deities and concepts drawn from classical pagan antiquity while writing during a religiously conservative era. For that reason, the mention of classical pagan deities in *Twelfth Night* merits attention. In fact, study of these references may well bring to light new information on the meaning of *Twelfth Night*, a play which on the surface appears mainly whimsical. At a deeper level, however, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* contains much suggesting that the playwright meant to pass beyond mere whimsy and to strike a note for a good-humored tolerance, even in the midst of a period which threatened both the theatre and the public with the possibility of continued religious extremism.

Endnotes

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[4] Greenblatt, *Anthology*, 1168.
[5] *Ibid*., 1188.
[6] *Ibid*., 1166.
[7] *Ibid*.
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] *Ibid*., 1169.
[10] Don L. Nilsen, *Humor in British Literature, from the Middle Ages to the Restoration: A Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), 37.
[11] *Ibid*., 36.

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[19] Victor L. Cahn, *Shakespeare the Playwright: A Companion to the Complete Tragedies, Histories, Comedies, and Romances* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 671.
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[25] *Ibid*.
[26] Greenblatt, *Anthology*, 1212. William Lilly, *Christian Astrology* (www.skyscript.co.uk), 56.
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[32] Thomas Whittaker, *Macrobius; Or, Philosophy, Science and Letters in the Year 400* (Cambridge: Unknown, 1923), 15 – 56.
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[40] *Ibid*.
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[44] Lilly, *Christian Astrology*, 74, 94.

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