Twinship and Occult References in *Twelfth Night*

Kent Cartwright, University of Maryland

We think of Renaissance dramatic comedies as concluding when facts and reason dispel errors, deceptions, and misunderstandings such that all the angular pieces of the plot-as-puzzle now suddenly fit together in a generally coherent and pleasurable whole. That effect has prompted some commentators – Lorna Hutson, for example[1] – to associate English Renaissance comedy with the rise of evidentiary protocols in jurisprudence and science. Yet the frequent pairedness of elements in comedy – twin characters, mirror figures, double locales, and the like – hints at something else, a mysterious, perhaps occult dimension that lurks just below the surface of the actions.[2] In ushering the imagination towards magic, comic doubleness also ushers it towards multiplicity and surplus effects, as if the motif of pairedness made available a certain richness and pleasurable abundance of meaning. Shakespeare's great twin comedy, *Twelfth Night*, offers a perfect test case for the play of mystery against rationalism.

In *Twelfth Night*, the revelation of the twins' identities launches the climactic sorting-out of confusions and misperceptions, the movement from double vision, as it were, to single vision. Yet certain allusions operate counter to that disambiguation and insists that meanings can yet be multiplied rather than foreclosed, when associated with magic. According to Mary Floyd-Wilson, twinship assumes an occult dimension in *Twelfth Night* linked to theories of sympathetic magical attraction, especially the magnetic power of the womb, which she traces convincingly through medical and magical treatises.[3] The present essay's approach to the play's occult dimensions is more foxlike, in that it undertakes, for the last scene of *Twelfth Night*, to survey a range of occult associations around the experiences of doubleness and twinness. The multiplicity of those associations, by their collective force, creates a sense of the presence, or the possibility, of magic that cannot be dismissed by the

---

[1] Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (2007).

[2] On doubleness in comedy, see Kent Cartwright, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Enchantment* (2021), Chapter Two.

[3] Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage* (2013); on *Twelfth Night*, see 73-90. Apprehensions of magic were a part of Shakespeare's world: the late sixteenth century had seen a revival of witchcraft accusations; printed and popular discussions of magic abounded; and the comedy writers, such as John Lyly and Robert Greene, who anticipated Shakespeare had already woven magic into the form.

ending's untying of narrative knots. References to magic, moreover, turn out not only to be multiple in number but also to convey a sense of multiplicity in themselves, connecting magic to a feeling of irresistible expansiveness, an amusing sense of surplus. These examples of occult twining, by their variety and collective force, inject into the denouement the possibility of affective elements that resist closure. Occult resonances in the conclusion arise from images, first, of "natural perspective"; next, of Platonic androgynes; and, finally, of ghost figures and demonic doubles. Those resonances also pick up and amplify related linguistic patterns in the ending. Similar values occur in other of Shakespeare's comedies, as we shall see.

"A natural perspective"

Twins, observes Floyd-Wilson, share an "occult bond" that veers away from what Aristotle sees as "'the common course of Nature'" (26, 79). Orsino, awestruck by the likeness of Viola and Sebastian, says famously: "One face, one voice, one habit and two persons; / A natural perspective, that is and is not" (5.1.212-13).[4] Editors gloss "natural perspective" as the kind of image produced by a tubular, telescope-like instrument with faceted lenses – "an instrument for creating fantastical and distorted images," as Keir Elam puts it[5] – and they typically cite Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). Scot's *Discoverie* devotes a whole section to perspective glasses as "woonderous devices" that generate "miraculous sights".[6] Perspective glasses are often associated with telescopes, and Scot describes a considerable variety of them (they might have one or more convex or concave lens, be accompanied by mirrors, or function like kaleidoscopes), including types "where one image shall seem to be one hundred, . . . others, to make many similitudes; others, to make none at all" (*Discoverie*, 223). For the modern reader, the images produced may be examples of scientific manipulation, but for Scot they retain an awe-inspiring aura,

---

[4] "Natural perspective" seems to be a surprisingly specific and perhaps esoteric reference for such a critical moment. Shakespeare uses "perspective" four other times (including in the sense of painterly perspective in Sonnet 24), with *Richard II* offering an extended treatment close in spirit to that of *Twelfth Night*: "Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows / Which shows like grief itself but is not so. / For sorrow's eyes, glazed with blinding tears, / Divides one thing entire to many objects, / Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon / Show nothing but confusion—eyed awry, / Distinguish form" (2.2.12-20); *Richard II*, ed. Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (2011).
[5] Keir Elam, ed., *Twelfth Night* (2008), 5.1.213n. All quotations from *Twelfth Night* will refer to this edition.
[6] Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1651; orig. pub. 1584), 222. Scot's *Discoverie* responds to the popular upsurge of interest in magic, witchcraft, and the occult; see note 3, above.

for he associates them with the "woonderous" and the "miraculous," the mechanical taking on the affect of the occult (despite Scot's skepticism about magic). Yet editors underplay the magical vibrations of Orsino's "natural perspective": One commentary, for example, calls it merely "[a] deception or illusion produced by nature";[7] relatedly, Elam allies the phrase with "optical-mechanical," pictorial, and scenographic practice.[8] In those readings, magic goes away.

But something unusual emerges if one emphasizes the first half of the oxymoron: nature. For Orsino, where nature should give him one, he finds two. A "*natural* perspective, that is and is not*" (emphasis added) would seem to be something *preternatural*, a quasi-magical occurrence, beyond nature's journeyman workings, that manifests an apparent impossibility as miraculously real. If nature, functioning like a perspective glass, can make "one image . . . seem to be one hundred" or make "many similitudes" of another image, then it apparently possesses an unbounded power capable of all manner of multiplication.[9] Medieval theorists granted God (or Nature) the power to interfere with and alter the presumed "natural" order, as if nature was endowed with its own magical powers;[10] some Protestants held similar views. Furthermore, although biological twinness may be a natural phenomenon, cultural and social twinness, as in the pair's clothing – "one habit" – is not;[11] perhaps something similar might be said about "one voice." Elsewhere in the play, nature is imagined as something of a make-up artist: "'Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white / Nature's own sweet cunning hand laid on" (1.5.231-32), with a cosmetician's ability to alter appearance. In Orsino's phrase, nature appears to have intervened in culture in the manner of a perspective glass, as if it possessed a magical power to

---

[7] Elizabeth Story Donno, ed. *Twelfth Night* (1985), 5.1.201n.

[8] Keir Elam, "New Directions: 'Ready to distrust mine eyes': Optics and Graphics in *Twelfth Night*," in *Twelfth Night: A Critical Reader* (2014), 99-122, esp. 111-14, 121. Pictorially, Elam relates "natural perspective" to anamorphosis, but that painterly effect involves seeing two different images in sequence, neither alike, and one never visible when the other is, whereas Sebastian and Viola appear together in 5.1.

[9] According to Northrop Frye, Shakespeare sees "nature as comprising not merely an order but a power, at once supernatural and connatural, . . . controlled either by benevolent human magic or by a divine will"; *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (1965), 71.

[10] On Nature's power to intervene selectively, see Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy* (2017). "Medieval and early modern naturalists invoked an order of nature's customs rather than natural laws, defined by marvels as well as by miracles"; Lorraine Datson and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (1998), 14.

[11] "As it turns out, of course, this optical illusion is a matter not just of nature producing identical twins but of Viola costuming herself as her brother"; Francis E. Dolan, *Twelfth Night: Language and Writing* (2014), 138.

multiply the qualities of sympathetic likeness in two beings so much that their biological similarity mysteriously brings about a similarity in their social markings.

In Renaissance theories of magic, the magical agent can have a kind of infectious power, a capacity to transform other objects by resemblance or by proximity (including contact and contiguity). The magical agent suffuses its qualities into those objects, spreading them like liquid absorbed into a sponge. In sympathetic magic, not only are like things attracted to each other but also the energies of the first can saturate the second. Agrippa provides a representative example concerning medicinal liquids and balms:

> Moreover collyries [eyedrops], and unguents [body ointments] conveying the virtues of things natural, and celestial to our spirit, can multiply, transmute, transfigure, and transform it accordingly, as also transpose those virtues which are in them into it, that so it cannot act only upon its own body, but also upon that which is near it, and affect that by visible rays, charms, and by touching it, with some like quality. . . . [For] by reason of their likeness, they do the more stir up, attract, and transform the spirit.[12]

According to critics, Orsino's phrase, "natural perspective," identifies an optical illusion, but, from the standpoint of occult science, it also broaches the capacity of an active nature to work wonders by multiplying sympathetic properties, one entity or character magically spreading its valences to another, so as to "multiply, transmute, transfigure, and transform." From several angles, then, "natural perspective" connects twinness to magical abundance and a related sense of wonder.

The Androgyne

The twins' likeness also provokes comparison to the Platonic myth of the androgyne. The androgyne reference again makes for more mystery – and comedy – than editors usually acknowledge, for the figure is supercharged, magnetically irresistible, and associated with multiplication. When Antonio sees the resemblance between Viola and Sebastian, he cries, "How have you made division of yourself? / An apple cleft

---

[12] Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. James Freake, ed. Donald Tyson (1995; orig. pub. in Latin, 1533), 134.

in two is not more twin / Than these two creatures. Which is Sebastian?" (5.1.218-20). Editors gloss those lines as a reference to Aristophanes' mythic story of the origins of love in Plato's *Symposium*,[13] a foundational narrative for the notion of the uncanny double. In that myth, invented by Plato, humans were originally double-beings (androgynes) of three sexes: male-male, female-female, and (the largest group) male-female. Because of these beings' threatening nature, Zeus reduced their power by cutting the wholes in half: "[H]e cut men in two, like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling."[14] (Antonio's image comes close to that of Jowett's translation and others.) As a result, each person is partial and seeks his or her other half for re-union, whether of the same or opposite sex, with the energy of aggression displaced into the quest for completion. But, seldom noted, Viola and Sebastian are hilariously supercharged versions of attractive Platonic halves, for in their oneness (i.e. 'Cesario') they appeal man to man, woman to woman, and man to woman. Those alignments fulfill all of Aristophanes' models for possible love relationships – but they exceed that model, too, by fulfilling them all at once! They thus achieve a charmed, comic Utopia of almost overabundant love: the prospective reunion not with one missing half but paradoxically with three, a demonstration of comic multiplication and surplus.[15]

According to Floyd-Wilson, twins possess a magical irresistibility. The quality is present in Aristophanes' myth, although there the longing that the bisected being has for its counterpart is not essentially sexual:

> [T]he pair are lost in an amazement of love and friendship and intimacy . . . ; yet they could not explain what they desire of one another. For the intense yearning which each of them has towards the other does not appear to be the desire of lover's intercourse, but of something else which the soul of either evidently desires and cannot tell, and of which she has only a dark and doubtful presentiment. (*Symposium*, 26353-29312)

---

[13] See, e.g., Elam, *Twelfth Night*, 5.1.219n.

[14] *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd edn. (1892), Mobile Reference, Kindle edition, location 26327; also cited by Elam.

[15] That condition fulfills Todd McGowan's notion of comedy, which is produced by a juxtaposition of lack and excess, here first Viola's lack of love, now her excess of it; *Only a Joke Can Save Us: A Theory of Comedy* (2017).

Zeus had introduced sexual congress between the two halves to make sure that they do not remain paralyzed and sterile as they cling to each other. Love here fundamentally exceeds the capacity of the lovers to explain or understand it; it is beyond reason and generates only "amazement." In love, the Renaissance occult attractiveness of twins analyzed by Floyd-Wilson and the wondrous magnetism of the missing half imagined by Plato combine and amplify the twin's almost inexplicably entrancing allure.

The aura of magic also hovers about the androgynous Viola-as-Cesario. Viola "is not merely [Sebastian's] twin but his *doppelgänger*," observes Elam (*Twelfth Night*, 26), linking Cesario to the uncanny, here Viola presumably as the spirit double who takes on (or takes over, or is taken over by) Sebastian's personality.[16] But rather than being a Sebastian-clone, Viola offers a combination of her brother and herself, and in that sense she manifests something that includes each but differs from either, a man-woman, a mediation of the two. The speaker of Cesario's story about his sister is neither quite Viola nor the boy servant she pretends to be, according to Catherine Belsey, who sees the disrupted subjectivity as revealing a new "singularity."[17] Cognitive theory provides an analogy. "Conceptual blending," a notion developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, refers to the basic capacity of the human mind to blend imaginatively qualities from different categories of being to produce a third kind of entity, such as a talking animal; the blend is, as Amy Cook summarizes, a "projection of information from two or more input spaces to a blended space," with the effect of creating something new, a third element.[18] In this theory, conceptual categories emerge not as rigid containers but as complicated, dynamic, and labile networks of thought. Cesario is thus a blend and a "singularity," bespeaking a fungibility of conceptual values that is almost magical; indeed, for Fauconnier and Turner there is something magic-like in the imagination's capacity to produce conceptual blends.[19] In this instance, comedy, rather than violating the boundaries of

---

[16] "Mourning for her lost brother, she becomes her brother"; Michael Bristol, "Confusing Shakespeare's Characters with Real People: Reflections on Reading in Four Questions," in *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons* (2009), 32.

[17] Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies," in *Alternative Shakespeares* (2002), 190-91. Elam sees Cesario as "an unclassifiable liminal figure" who, in gender and other aspects, represents "a category crisis" (*Twelfth Night*, 28).

[18] Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (2002); Amy Cook, *Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance Through Cognitive Science* (2010), 11.

[19] See, for example, Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 44; the imagery of magic, wonder,

categories, creates new categories.

To understand further the Renaissance occult dimension of Cesario, we might turn to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*. In that work, Foucault's description of the four forms of similitude (convenience, emulation, analogy, and sympathy) leads him to signs: "[T]here must of course be some mark that will make us aware of these things . . . There are no resemblances without signatures. The world of similarity can only be a world of signs."[20] In the art of reading signs, knowledge tends towards divination, towards magic (see, e.g., 30). The sign of the resemblance between two things will not match either one exactly (32). Rather, the resemblance displaces some qualities of each, impeding the discerning of similarities, because of inexactitude and "non-coincidence" (33), and justifying the application of divination and occult practices.[21] Resemblance is neither A nor B; that is, it is neither of the two things being compared, but a third thing, the sign X, with its own material ontology, a thing that mysteriously manifests the relationship between the other two while displacing each.[22] For Viola and Sebastian, this third thing, this new blend and Belseyan "singularity," is the eunuch Cesario, the third entity that is neither of its sources. Thus, the world of material beings has expanded by one—another moment of comic surplus. Cesario constitutes, we might say, a transgendered being coming into existence. If so, part of our fascination may be in the ease of metamorphosis from one state to another, from the cisgendered to the other-gendered. Perhaps a reason why Viola has such difficulty relinquishing her disguise, or acknowledging Sebastian as her brother, or returning to her maiden's weeds is that Cesario has taken on a profound, real, albeit magical, life of his own.[23]

---

and marvel occurs throughout *The Way We Think*.

[20] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1989), 29.

[21] "But there was a necessity lying at the heart of their knowledge: they had to find an adjustment between the infinite richness of a resemblance introduced as a third term between signs and their meaning . . . . It was this same necessity that obliged knowledge to accept magic and erudition on the same level" (Foucault, *Order*, 35).

[22] For Foucault, this ternary system of knowledge becomes one of the features that distinguishes the Renaissance episteme from the binarial Enlightenment (see Foucault, *Order*, 71).

[23] Hovering in the background may also be the magic attached to the virginity of the twins, for Sebastian pointedly refers to himself as a "maid" (5.1.259).

Ghosts and Demons

A further occult association for the twins (and at a greater level of generality than the previous ones) is with ghosts. When Sebastian sees Viola, he responds, "Do I stand there? I never had a brother, / Nor can there be that deity in my nature / Of here and everywhere" (5.1.222-24). The godlike quality of being "here and everywhere" is an attribute of ghosts, as readers know from *Hamlet*, to which these lines make reference: "*Hic et ubique*," says Hamlet as the ghost of his father shifts position underground (1.5.156). *Hamlet*'s Arden editors Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor comment, "Ubiquity is traditionally a property shared by God and the devil," and allude to Sebastian's line in *Twelfth Night*.[24] Like "is and is not," "here and everywhere" suggests occultish and paradoxical doubleness. Sebastian "suspects a supernatural phenomenon or *witchcraft*" (Elam, *Twelfth Night*, 5.1.223-4n). Viola replays Sebastian's ghost language in her address to him:

> Such a Sebastian was my brother too;
> So went he suited to his watery tomb.
> If spirits can assume both form and suit,
> You come to fright us. (229-32)[25]

Elam's commentary points out the difficulty, present as well in *Hamlet*, of telling a ghost from a real person. The Duke in *The Comedy of Errors*, looking at the twin Antipholuses, likewise wonders, "which is the natural man / And which the spirit?"[26] At play in Sebastian and Viola's language is an occult, pseudo-Catholic apprehension of the spirits of the dead wandering the earth in likenesses of the departed so uncannily detailed in "form and suit" as to make the one indistinguishable from the other. The real possibility of demonic or supernatural intervention offers additional explanation for the protracted nature of Viola and Sebastian's reconciliation.[27]

But let us take a half-step back and consider the first part of Sebastian's speech: "Do I stand there?" (222). Sebastian faces what he recognizes as his own simulacrum

---

[24] Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet*, rev. edn. (2016), 1.5.156n.

[25] Viola's reference to "both form and suit" reminds us that the two characters appear in "one habit."

[26] *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. Kent Cartwright (2017), 5.1.333-34.

[27] Elam sees that protracted recognition as expressing the twins "continuing doubt that all may be an optical illusion" (*Twelfth Night*, 341, cn. 238-44); I would emphasize the doubt of each that the other might be a ghost.

opposite him, as in a mirror, and thus wonders whether he himself is here or there. The subsequent allusion to *Hamlet* has dominated commentary on Sebastian's lines, but there may be another intertextual reference at work, this one to Plautus' *Amphitruo* and, more recently, to Nicholas Udall's adaptation of it, *Jack Juggler* (pub. 1562). *Amphitruo* influenced subsequent representations of the double.[28] There Mercury assumes the exact likeness of the servant Sosia, whom he confronts and attempts to convince that he (Mercury) is himself Sosia. Sosia, experiencing a momentary identity crisis, speaks in the kind of language of which Sebastian offers a fragment: "Am I not now standing before our house? . . . Am I not talking? Am I not wide awake?"; "he is as like me as I am myself"; "Where did I lose myself? Where have I been transformed? Where have I parted with my figure? Or have I left myself behind there . . .?"[29] That language is repeated in the well-known farce *Jack Juggler*, based on *Amphitruo*, in which the demonic Vice Jack, paralleling Mercury, assumes the likeness of the irresponsible servant Jenkin Carraway, and insists to Jenkin that he (Jenkin) is not himself. Says Jenkin:

> Doo not I speake now? Is not this my hande?
> Be not these my feet that on this ground stande?
> . . . .
> Who soo in England lokethe on him stedelye
> Sall perceive plainelye that he is I.
> I have sene my selfe a thousand times in a glasse
> But soo lyke myselfe as he is, neuer was.[30]

Jenkin's sense of the hyper-reality of Jack's likeness underscores the uncanny potentialities of this business. A version of this same comic bit appears later in the "Birth of Hercules" episode in Thomas Heywood's *The Silver Age* (1613). Shakespeare knew *Amphitruo*, for he adapted the Mercury-Sosia scene in *The Comedy of Errors*.

Of course, Sebastian's "Do I stand there?" is only four monosyllabic words,

---

[28] According to theorist Alenka Zupančič, Plautus' *Amphitruo* constitutes "one of the greatest paradigmatic comedies"; *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (2008), 73.
[29] *The Comedies of Plautus*, vol. 2 of 2, trans. Henry Thomas Riley (1881), 19, 21, 22.
[30] *Jacke Jugeler*, in *Three Tudor Interludes*, ed. Marie Axton (1982), ll. 514-15, 470-73.

making the argument for an allusion speculative. But Sebastian's question does raise the issue of self-identity developed famously by the *Amphitruo* episode. The fairest approach may be to see the lines less as a direct borrowing from Plautus than as an intertextual reference to one of those generic comic devices or tropes that recur on the Renaissance stage, in the spirit of Louise George Clubb's theatergrams.[31] If so, it evokes for us again the specter of the occult, here not the walking dead but rather Vice-figures and Classical gods who have the power to transform themselves and replicate the human.

For the denouement of *Twelfth Night*, then, multiple dimensions of magic hover allusively around the doubleness of the twins, even as they themselves evoke a sense of proliferation and abundance. The dialogue of the last scene frames and enhances those associations. Its opening lines (1-45) ring out with the language of doubling and tripling: the double-action of giving and taking back (4-5); riddling oppositions (10-12); double double-negatives (19-20); "double-dealing" (a pun on the giving of a duplicate coin) (26, 31-2); "tertio," "triplex," and "one, two, three" (33, 34, 36). Any action seems to lead to its multiplication. Likewise, the language of wonder and enchantment suffuses the scene: "strange speech . . . distraction" (63-64); "witchcraft" (72, applied to 'Sebastian'); "now heaven walks on earth" (93); "beguiled," "beguile" (135, 136); "the very devil incardinate" (176-77); "strange regard" (208); "Most wonderful!" (221); "amazed" (260); "extracting frenzy" (277);[32] "this present hour / Which I have wondered at" (351-52). "Shakespeare takes pains to highlight the miraculous quality of *Twelfth Night*'s deferred denouement," summarizes Kiernan Ryan.[33]

The aura of the magical and occult that surrounds the twins is so recurrent, complex, and multi-faceted that it cannot be dispelled by the revelation of Viola and Sebastian's identities. The yeasty substratum of magical allusions, enhanced by the ending's wonder-laced language, lingers powerfully in the denouement. Various critics have emphasized the way that *Twelfth Night* opens up gender possibilities, as with the transgendered Cesario; we might add that this Shakespearean comedy, like

---

[31] Louise George Clubb, *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (1989).

[32] Olivia's phrase, "a most extracting frenzy of mine own" (with "extracting" meaning distracting), might be taken as the bookend to her earlier comment to Cesario, "After the last enchantment you did here" (4.1.110). What had been "enchantment" earlier is now recast as distraction and "frenzy," the effects of temporary madness or even demonic possession now passed, bringing her experience perhaps into some kind of parallel relationship with Malvolio's.

[33] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (2009), 262.

others, also promulgates the expansive possibilities of wonder that can underlie everyday experience. The scene's closing conundrums—the call for Viola's clothes, their possession by the captain, the captain's imprisonment by Malvolio, Malvolio's oath to be revenged—bring back the sense of open-ended extension and multiplicity with which the scene began. Howsoever we take that deferral, it conveys pleasure: we may not really want Viola to recover her women's weeds any more than Malvolio wants to give them up, for the inconclusive denouement allows Cesario (and us) to remain forever in a condition of enchanted doubleness, with the promise of resolution always just ahead. What emerges here is not that Shakespeare believed in magic or occultism but rather that he employed them as devices to put the inevitable closure in comedy in tension with its spirit of joyful expansiveness and multiplying possibility. Those shimmering, half-glimpsed potentialities, eluding the lock and key of the denouement, confer on Shakespeare's comedies depth, memorability, and affective power.

Related Effects in Other Shakespearean Comedies

Although occult doubleness registers especially vividly in *Twelfth Night*, some of the effects just discussed can be seen in other Shakespearean comedies. If Orsino's "natural perspective" appears to give nature interventionary power, a similar sense of supra-natural doubleness filters through Berowne's talk about love in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

> But love, first learned in lady's eyes,
> Lives not alone immured in the brain
> But with the motion of all elements
> Courses as swift as thought in every power
> And gives to every power a *double* power,
> Above their functions and their offices.
>
> (4.3.301-06; emphasis added)[34]

Through the "double power" of love, seeing becomes more "precious," hearing more acute, feeling "more soft and sensible," intelligence more "[s]ubtle," speaking more

---

[34] *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen (1998).

harmonious, among other effects (4.3.307, 311, 316, 319). Academic studies are slow and keep within the brain, but love courses lightening-fast through all the functions of one's being, intensifying them. "Double" in this usage does not exactly mean multiplied by two; the extravagance of Berowne's language and imagery ("Subtle as the Sphinx, as sweet and musical / As Apollo's lute" [316-17]) suggests, instead, that love might square (or more) rather than just double the powers of the lover. "Double" serves as a placeholder, indefinite, like "seven years," allowing the real, unspecifiable immensity to unfold. Besides having a multiplier effect, love's "double power" implicitly works beyond nature, since it overwhelms and supersedes the natural "functions" and "offices" of the body and gives to them preternatural and god-like agency – "Nature" thus overriding nature and generating the kind of magical abundance suggested by Orsino.[35] In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Boyet's description of the King's infatuation with the Princess – "His face's own margent did quote such amazes / That all eyes saw his eyes enchanted with gazes" (2.1.260-61) – has already established love's occultism.

The second dimension, the experience of the self as a mysterious Platonic half seeking to reunite with its counterpart and thereby to become whole (or other), also appears elsewhere in Shakespearean comedy, especially in *The Comedy of Errors*. According to Francesco Loriggio, the double constitutes the "organizing agency" of Renaissance comedy, cutting across both the orderly form and the anarchic laughter of the text.[36] Loriggio sees two actions in many Renaissance comedies, the first of the boy-wins-girl narrative, the second of the double. In the first paradigm, the narrative of eros, the love-stricken character craftily achieves his or her ends and thus "substantiates the values of the Renaissance" by "assenting to passion," by "satisfy[ing] it through cunning and intelligence," and by creating "illusion" (107). The second, intertwined paradigm is a "fabula of pathos, the story of the character searching for the look-alike brother or sister he has been separated from and whom he will find at the end of the play" (108). One might add that, in the eyes of Marsilio Ficino, this second narrative of the search of the human half-self for wholeness constitutes a pre-Christian allegory for the fall of man and his longing for reunion

---

[35] On the medieval discussions of Nature's presumed interventionary powers, see Robertson, *Nature Speaks*.

[36] Francesco Loriggio, "Prefacing Renaissance Comedy: The Double, Laughter, and Comic Structure," in *Comparative Critical Approaches to Renaissance Comedy*, ed. Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (1986), 99–118, on 106.

with the godhead.[37] Among influential sixteenth-century Italian plays that variously employ such doubleness, Loriggio cites Cardinal Bibbiena's *La calandria* (1513), Machiavelli's *La mandragola* (1518), the anonymous *Gl' ingannati* (1531), Giordano Bruno's *Candelaio* (1582), and Giambattista Della Porta's *La fantesca* (1592). This second paradigm represents the self as half, pursuing its counterpart, its missing "other," in order to become whole, as in Plato's myth of the androgyne.

In Shakespeare, that paradigm generally takes the form of the lover perceiving the beloved as another, or second, self. It can be seen, at the beginning of Shakespeare's comedy-writing career, in *The Comedy of Errors*. At the outset, Antipholus of Syracuse likens his quest to find his brother and mother, to a "drop of water" seeking "another" or "fellow" drop in the ocean (1.2.35-37). These desiring water drops are analogous to the androgyne (including their respective orb-like shapes) and imply the possibility of beings' re-merging into mystical union. The shock for Antipholus will be to find his counterpart, not in a family member, but in the beloved, Luciana. He will even apply the language of the androgyne to her: "mine own self's better part, / Mine eye's clear eye, my dear heart's dearer heart" (3.2.61-62). For Antipholus, Luciana is wondrous, "divine," "god"-like, possessing the power to "[t]ransform" him; he calls her a "mermaid" (3.2.30, 32, 39, 40, 45). Antipholus's love speech to Luciana is fairly awash with liquid imagery and, likewise, the sense of being consumed in the waters of the other (3.2.29-52). Love is here a numinous conjoining of the two Platonically separated parts with each other, a sublunar version of mystical union with God.

The narrative of the self seeking its other half echoes through Shakespeare's comedies. In the typical and well-known pattern, the male or female's sense of union with the friend-as-other-self is replaced by a desire for union with the beloved-as-other-self.[38] Thus, for example, in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine says of Proteus, "I knew him as myself" (2.4.60), but subsequently Valentine declares that "Silvia is myself" (3.1.172), and Proteus talks of losing himself unless he rejects Proteus and Julia for Silvia (2.6.19-22). Characters also speak in the related terms of substance and shadow (e.g. 4.2.120-22). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia invokes

---

[37] *Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's* Symposium, trans. Sears Reynolds Jane (1944; orig. published in Latin 1484), 154-63.

[38] On Renaissance friendship theory and its relationship to romantic love, see William C. Carroll, "Introduction," *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2004), 3-32.

the Platonic love-language of parts and wholes: "One half of me is yours, the other half yours" (3.2.16), such that her ring will become a symbol of mystical, circular union. Famously in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Helena describes Hermia and herself in girlhood friendship as "a double cherry," a "union in partition" (3.2.209-10). In *As You Like It*, Cecilia says of Rosalind "thou and I am one" (1.3.94). In *Measure for Measure*, the disguised Duke asks Juliet, "Love you the man that wronged you?," and Juliet replies, "Yes, as I love the woman that wronged him" (2.3.26-27): the beloved as oneself. That vision of love is familiar enough that it may have lost, for many modern readers, its magical aura. Shakespeare illustrates that dimension and gives it a twist when Adriana likens her inseparability from her husband to a drop of water indivisible into parts (*CE* 2.2.131-35), repeating Antipholus of Syracuse's image from earlier (although she is applying these sentiments to the wrong man).[39]

The self-as-another trope expresses what Nancy Selleck has convincingly analyzed as the "interpersonal idiom" in Renaissance concepts of identity.[40] The language of "half," "part," and "double" employs the sense of the beloved as the lover's Platonic missing bisection. According to Alenka Zupančič, love and comedy parallel each other, for each "involves a dimension of an unexpected and surprising satisfaction."[41] Love involves finding not what one was looking for but something startlingly different from, and more affecting and disorienting than, what one sought – a surplus. That surplus of love (or comedy) conveys, for Zupančič, an experience that is mysterious and transcendent, even miraculous. The inherent doubleness of love, oneself-as-another, we might say, produces joy magically multiplied into superabundance. Such extravagant joy occurs partly because, as David Schalkwyk notes, the quest for earthly love hints at a Fincino-esque quest for divine union, which means that the lover longs for something greater than just the localized object of his or her desire.[42] The mystical doubleness of love, then, might help us to understand the delirious joy that Shakespeare's comic lovers feel towards each other despite the equally evident, sometimes humorous, asymmetries that exist between them (and that have troubled criticism). They are behaving not just as individuals feeling specific

---

[39] Adriana pushes the metaphor to the point of dubiousness with the argument that her husband's stain literally stains her, too; 2.2.146-50.

[40] Nancy Selleck, *The Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare, Donne and Early Modern Culture* (2008).

[41] Zupančič, *Odd One In*, 106

[42] David Schalkwyk, *Shakespeare, Love and Service* (2008), 47-48.

mutual attraction or compatibility; they are behaving, rather, as numinous Platonic beings entering the divine mystery.

The third aspect of the occult in the denouement of *Twelfth Night*, the association of the twin/double with ghosts and demons, has a corollary in the figure of the self's "genius." In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby invokes it in relation to the gulling of Malvolio: "His very genius hath taken the infection of the device" (3.4.125-26). The standard gloss on "genius" is "guardian spirit,"[43] invoking the idea of a mysterious spiritual agent who guides the person, and thus who exists both within the self and independent of it. (The idea of the spirit-genius taking "infection" sounds occult in itself). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "genius" as an "attendant spirit" who governs one's character, determines one's fortune, and conducts one out of the world (*n*. 1a). But the term could also refer to an attendant spirit who is evil: "Either of two mutually opposed spirits imagined as accompanying a person throughout his or her life and exerting either a good or bad influence" (*OED n*. 2). Both usages were current in the Renaissance. Agrippa, the theorist of magic, applies "genius" in both senses, speaking variously of the evil genius as well as the good.[44] Marsilio Ficino describes the positive genius, or "daemon, the guardian of his life, assigned by his own personal star, which helps him to that very task to which the celestials summoned him when he was born," discussing the figure specifically in the light of Platonic doctrine.[45] Lewis Lavater uses the term in the same, affirmative sense in his *Of Ghosts and Spirits*.[46] In Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, however, both good and bad geniuses appear, the later introduced in Book 2 as a "foe of life" who creates guileful semblances to procure our destruction (2.12.48).[47] The most striking appearance of "genius" in the comedies occurs in *The Comedy of Errors*. There the Duke invokes it, as cognate with "spirit," to explain the two sets of exactly identical twins: "One of these men is genius to the other; / And so of these, which is the natural man / And which the spirit?" (5.1.332-4). Here "genius," like "spirit," is fundamentally occult and implicitly 'unnatural,' with the capacity to be either good or evil; its appearance would be a shocking manifestation of ambiguous doubles (twice over), so that the

---

[43] Elam, *Twelfth Night*, 3.4.125n.

[44] See, for example, Agrippa, *Three Books*, Book 2, Chapter xlv, 390; also Book 3, Chapter xvi, 503, n. 30; and passim.

[45] Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition*, ed. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (1998 (1989); orig. pub. in Latin, 1489), Book 3, Chapter xxiii, 371.

[46] Lewis Lavater, *Of Ghosts and Spirits, Walking by Night* (1596), 3.

[47] Edmund Spenser, *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, Book 2 (1933), 171.

Duke-actor might speak his lines with some alarm.

Those examples of nature's preternatural "double power," of the love-quest as a search for mystical wholeness, and of the unnerving occultism of "genius" suggest that *Twelfth Night* gathers up associations of doubleness with magic and multiplicity that weave generally through the comedies. Shakespeare apparently saw such effects, set in tension with rationalism, as part of the large potentiality of the comic form.

Conclusion

Scrutinizing certain references in *Twelfth Night*'s denouement, then, reveals uncanny, occult dimensions in Shakespeare's comedies that expand and deepen, gathering resonance even as the confusions of plot contract in the denouement – dimensions significant enough that Shakespeare replays them in other comedies. Shakespeare's comedies, I would argue, play a double game: Their endings rationally unfold the workings of quotidian causal forces, but they also suggest the presence of other, numinous, and less explicable forces. Comic endings both settle and unsettle. By multiplying significations, occult allusions in *Twelfth Night* and other plays work against the view of nature – or of comedy – as closed and deterministic. They unsettle, additionally, because they put theatrical immediacy in tension with prior (even readerly) knowledge, as if the comedy were giving us both imminent emotional satisfaction and an afterlife of thinking and wondering, of possibilities still open. In the examples given above, perhaps one affective dimension stands out: as occult allusions resist or break boundaries, they create access to an expanded sense of interpersonal communion and relatedness and, with it, an expansive, almost irrational, sense of pleasure, even joy. One need not believe in magic to experience the heightened, elusive joy in Shakespearean comedy; it often works at the edge of consciousness and creates the mystery of experiences that seem to exceed their causes. With such effects, Shakespeare intensifies the power of comedy as a genre.

Works Cited

Agrippa, Henry Cornelius. *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. Trans. James Freake. Ed. Donald Tyson. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1995; orig. pub. in Latin, 1533.

Belsey, Catherine. "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies." In *Alternative Shakespeares*, 2nd edn. Ed. John Drakakis. London: Routledge, 2002; orig. pub. 1985. Pp. 169-93

Bristol, Michael. "Confusing Shakespeare's Characters with Real People: Reflections on Reading in Four Questions." In *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*. Ed. Paul Yachnin and Jessica Slights. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009. Pp. 21-40.

Carroll, William C. "Introduction." In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. London: Thomson Learning, 2004.

Cartwright, Kent. *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Enchantment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Clubb, Louise George. *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time*. New Haven, CN.: Yale University Press, 1989.

Cook, Amy. *Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance Through Cognitive Science*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Datson, Lorraine and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*. New York: Zone Books, 1998.

Dolan, Francis E. *Twelfth Night: Language and Writing*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Elam, Keir. "New Directions: 'Ready to distrust mine eyes': Optics and Graphics in *Twelfth Night*." In *Twelfth Night: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Alison Findlay and Liz Oakley-Brown. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. Pp. 99-122.

Fauconnier, Giles and Mark Turner. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Ficino, Marsilio. *Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's* Symposium. Trans. Sears Reynolds Jane. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1944; orig. published in Latin 1484.

Ficino, Marsilio. *Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition*. Ed. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark. Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, [1989] 1998; orig. pub. in Latin, 1489.

Floyd-Wilson, Mary. *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge, 1989; orig. pub. in French 1966.

Frye, Northrop. *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.

Hutson, Lorna. *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Lavater, Lewis. *Of Ghosts and Spirits, Walking by Night*. London, 1596.

Loriggio, Francesco. "Prefacing Renaissance Comedy: The Double, Laughter, and Comic Structure." In *Comparative Critical Approaches to Renaissance Comedy*. Ed. Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1986. Pp. 99–118.

McGowan, Todd. *Only a Joke Can Save Us: A Theory of Comedy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017.

Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892. Kindle edition.

Plautus. *The Comedies of Plautus*. Vol. 2 of 2. Trans. Henry Thomas Riley. London: George Bell and Sons, 1881.

Robertson, Kellie. *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

Ryan, Kiernan. *Shakespeare's Comedies*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Schalkwyk, David. *Shakespeare, Love and Service*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Scot, Reginald. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. London, [1584] 1651.

Selleck, Nancy. *The Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare, Donne and Early Modern Culture*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Shakespeare, William. *The Comedy of Errors*. Ed. Kent Cartwright. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, rev. edn. Ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Bloomsbury, [2006] 2016.

Shakespeare, William. *Love's Labour's Lost*. Ed. H. R. Woudhuysen. London: Cengage Learning, 1998.

Shakespeare, William. *Richard II.* Ed. Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Ed. Elizabeth Story Donno. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Ed. Keir Elam. London: Bloomsbury, 2008.

Spenser, Edmund. *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, Book 2. Ed. Edwin Greenlaw. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933.

Udall, Nicholas. *Jacke Jugeler*. In *Three Tudor Interludes*. Ed. Marie Axton. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982.

Zupančič, Alenka. *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.