



## Mariangela Tempera and Keir Elam (eds.), *Twelfth Night, dal testo alla scena*

(Bologna, Emil, 2017, 285 pp. ISBN 978-88-6680-226-6)

by Giuliana Iannaccaro

When I set about writing this review, I soon realized I needed a large-format white sheet of paper and a pencil, and that I had to forget about the linearity of the process of writing for a while. Actually, I felt a need to produce a sort of diagram of the volume's contents in order to visualise them simultaneously, as a 'constellation', rather than engaging straight away with the linear order of the table of contents, which mainly follows the thematic/chronological progression of the issues debated in the various chapters. Only after producing my own version of the book's universe, which helped me to see correspondences and fractures, could I finally proceed with the re-ordering of ideas on the page. It is even too easy to say that this is what usually happens in a comedy: the disruption of the – 'natural', 'traditional', 'transcendental', 'social' or ... *what you will* – order of things, and its final re-establishment, albeit in a different form.

*Twelfth Night*, apart from being one of the most popular and beloved Shakespearean comedies, is also a complex representative of its kind, both for the intricate structure of its plot and for the issues it raises. *Twelfth Night*, as a title, suggests an association with carnival and the subversion of rules, as many of the contributions in this volume point out; *What You Will* (the second part of the comedy's



title) takes audiences and readers into the realm of semantic, structural, and linguistic indeterminacy, all inescapable features of what turns out to be an exhilaratingly labyrinthine play. Questions regarding personal identity, the meaning of 'truth' and 'authenticity', the issue of moral responsibility concerning both characters and audience, and the challenge of an excessive and destabilising dramatic language, all have to do with the "What You Will" part of the title, which is the privileged perspective from which the contributors to the volume look at the play.

A double title, a pair of twins, a double-couple of intersecting lovers, the constant migration between the two genders, a double mode (romance and farce), a double plot (the love-stories and the *burla*), the pervasive duplicity of language: a dialectical principle seems to rule over the play and to mould its very structure, down to the most minute detail. And yet, there is much more than duplicity-dichotomy-antinomy in this comedy, which is now four-hundred years old (it was first performed at the dawn of the seventeenth century). To proceed in the exploration of the play, let us go back to the 'constellation' diagram mentioned at the beginning; let us put our trust in *Twelfth Night, dal testo alla scena* as a guide through the multiple, intersecting paths of the text and its performances.

If there is something that cannot be reduced to a binary principle, it's music. A symphony, in particular, is the very symbol of harmony in multiplicity. The reading of *Twelfth Night* as a "metaphoric symphony" belongs to Rocco Coronato (72), and it paves the way to my reading of the volume *Dal testo alla scena*, both for the identification of the underlying motif in the different chapters – which is both music itself and the idea of music, as we shall see – and for the notion of complexity that the use of the word 'symphony' implies. Rocco Coronato studies the distribution of metaphors in the play from a "humanist [and a] digital" perspective (51), and shows us how to progress from the notion of a 'net of metaphors' to that of a 'network of metaphors', without foregoing any aspect of the inquiry, and instead profiting from a synergic approach to the literary text. If he finds the challenge posed by the rich and elusive figurative language of the play particularly exciting, he is in very good company: the comedy's instability, fluidity, and indeterminacy captivate the attention of all the contributors to the volume, and each of them tends to read *Twelfth Night* much more as a 'symphony' than as a well-planned dramatic device revolving round doubleness.

Rosy Colombo's contribution opens the volume on the note of the double nature of the play, which is introduced by the title itself and appears at many levels of the comedy's dialectic between opposites. If antithesis and specularity are unquestionably at the heart of the plot, Colombo nevertheless remarks that the frontier between 'what is' and 'what is not' is fluid and mutable: the presence of water and music dissolve whatever neat boundaries the comedy may seem to set forth. Music, in particular, is one of the privileged access-keys of the play, although its traditional harmonising role (the reconciliation of opposites) is lost, and its very presence alerts the audience to the impending threat of dissonance and disillusion.



Subversion and permeability are key-concepts in Maurizio Ascari's chapter on the nature of human relationships in *Twelfth Night*. In his view, the comedy exploits the binary opposition between the two poles of love and friendship in order to overcome it in the end, by unsettling the very notion of gender roles and proposing a less specular, much more integrated concept of love *as* (also) friendship. This is achieved by the help of the seductive power of music, which suggests hermeneutic complexity as opposed to a simplistic and schematic approach to the nature of human bonding. Similarly, Josmary Santoro's discussion of the questions of "genre, gender and sexuality" in *Twelfth Night* refers to cross-dressing as a complex semiotic aspect of the play, which is crucial to demystify received notions of fixed social roles and to provide daring alternatives. Eluding binarism, the comedy capitalises upon indefiniteness, ultimately an element of freedom.

Semantic instability is discussed in Valeria Tirabasso's chapter, which draws on iconography as a means of interpreting the play through history; Tirabasso highlights the creative power of both visual artists and onlookers in the hermeneutic process. In many figurative reinterpretations of the comedy, the motives of folly, disguise and of the evocative power of music have played a pivotal role in the iconographic rendering of some scenes throughout the centuries. As far as music is concerned, some artists drew on the various songs present in the text to invent alternative figurative subplots, that combine word, image and music in a highly creative exploitation of the complex texture of *Twelfth Night*.

Both Alessandra Petrina and Luca Bocchetti engage with the literary and intellectual sources of the play; both argue that the comedy's subtext is based on a much more complex cultural tradition than a simple dramatic love plot. Petrina focuses on the sixteenth-century Italian *novella* and its connection with romance to track down the narrative origins of the play, and identifies Matteo Bandello's *Novella II.36* (1554) as a possible *analogue* of *Twelfth Night* (35). The Italian literary tradition is also investigated by Luca Bocchetti, who draws on Giordano Bruno's works to explore the symbolic value of the metaphor of hunting employed by Orsino at the very beginning of the play (Act I, Scene 1). Bocchetti discusses several literary references, both to the notorious Ovidian figure of Actaeon and to ritual deer hunting, to foreground what he identifies as the religious subtext of the play: the association between the act of love and the cognitive process that allows humans to attain knowledge of the divine.

There is a whole section of the volume dedicated to the play's legacy from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Nicoletta Caputo provides an excursus of the female actresses who played Viola in eighteenth-century British adaptations of *Twelfth Night*. Caputo draws our attention to the increasing importance of the character of Viola, and to the players' artistic qualities that bewitched different audiences at different times (among which, the melodious timbre of the voice of these performers). Fernando Cioni explores the alterations, cuts, omissions and additions to the nineteenth-century versions of the play, in a period in which William Shakespeare had already been canonised by the "rise of Bardolatry" (183). Cioni argues that the very flexibility of *Twelfth Night* allowed for even radical reinterpretations, which often had



to do more with “reinventing”, than with representing Shakespeare. It is ultimately with flexibility and indeterminacy that Cristina Paravano’s chapter is concerned: her discussion of the recent performances of *Twelfth Night* by an all-male British company, the Propellers (in 2012-13), enhances not only the ambiguity of the play itself, but also the need for the actors to assume a fluid identity in order to be true to the ‘essence’ of their characters, that is precisely an anti-essentialist combination of opposites. Paravano closes her contribution by discussing the musical research that underlies the Propellers’ theatrical inventiveness; Roberta Mullini, among other things, discusses the role of dance and music in the New Globe production of *Twelfth Night* (2013), filtered by its recorded version in DVD. Fabio Ciambella’s chapter on the 2013-2014 American “dumb dance show” concludes my walk through the volume, since the transposition of *Twelfth Night* to a dumb musical performance by the Synetic Theater (Arlington, Virginia) constitutes a kind of ‘apotheosis’ of the musical element in the play, which accompanies my reading of *Twelfth Night, dal testo alla scena*.

And now, briefly, to the Editors. Keir Elam is an ‘old offender’ as far as *Twelfth Night* is concerned; his Arden edition of the play (2014, first ed. 2008) is a refined and thoroughly researched literary source, chosen as reference text by the majority of the contributors to the volume *Dal testo alla scena*. This collection of essays stems from his commitment to bring to completion what Mariangela Tempera could not achieve, since she passed away prematurely on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2015. Mariangela’s Ferrara seminars – called “Shakespeare dal testo alla scena” and each devoted to a different Shakespearean play – gathered and set in motion the intellectual energies of the academic community and local bodies (secondary school students, their teachers, local theatres and the municipality). One of the ‘products’ of these events was the publication of a series of volumes which collected the fruits of research on the play at hand; the *Twelfth Night* seminar, as Keir Elam explains in his introduction, was held in May 2015. Elam took it upon himself to gather and edit the various contributions, and he also added, at the very end of the book, Mariangela’s own notes on the essay she had in mind to write for the volume, concerning quotations and allusions to *Twelfth Night* in movies and TV productions.

Mariangela Tempera left us much more than a few notes for a volume to come: she bequeathed an astounding intellectual legacy of research and ideas, collected in paper and digital recordings; an extensive library and digital collection on a topic we might affectionately call “Shakespeare, or what you will”; a network of people sharing her passion and enthusiasm, ready to go on working together; finally – and this really came ‘out of the blue’ – a financial legacy that gives the academic community the possibility to carry on future projects on ‘Shakespeare and/in our world’ with the full participation of young researchers, which is what we believe she would have done.



*À la mode* of Mariangela, let us conclude these few lines on a light-hearted note: the character of Maria, in *Twelfth Night*, is the principal source of action in the playful trick on Malvolio; it is she who actually moves people and situations, supervising the overall performance. I love to think of our friend's all-embracing legacy in a similar way: Maria-Mariangela – our Mistress of the Revels.

---

**Giuliana Iannaccaro**

Università degli Studi di Milano

[giuliana.iannaccaro@unimi.it](mailto:giuliana.iannaccaro@unimi.it)

*I raccomandati/Los recomendados/Les recommandés/Highly recommended*  
Will forever young! Shakespeare & Contemporary Culture – 11/2017