

Divining Paul in Shakespeare's Comedies

In Shakespeare's last formal comedy, *Measure for Measure*, that hypocritical "virtuous man" Angelo speaks of the law which, awake under his rule, "Takes note of what is done, and like a prophet / Looks in a glass that shows . . . future evils" (2.2.94-95).¹ Shakespeare often uses a mirror reference to forge an ironic link between magic and St. Paul, he who wrote in explicit condemnation of magic. The earlier comedies expose false magicians and false prophets, men frequently shaded—like Angelo—in puritan colors. But while suspicious of both, Shakespeare is also drawn to Paul and to magic as rich sources of transformative metaphor. He plays out his attraction to and repulsion from each and both, Magus and Apostle to the Gentiles, in comedy after comedy, perhaps finding only in that genre the dispensation he needs to transmute lead into gold.

Working out the intricacies of how Pauline texts and magic relate to each other and to the Shakespearean text is a lengthy project which could provide a fresh perspective on each topic—Elizabethan magic and the Elizabethan St. Paul. Here I would simply like to suggest how observing the pattern of mutual occurrence can, at minimum, help us locate veins of Pauline thought and instances of magical lore which, precisely because of their overlap, deserve particular attention. Paul can be used to dowse for magic, and magic for Paul.

Moreover, performing this interpretive act invites the play of reader's intuition, a skill that has—and may it ever be so—defied codification. Following the trail of mirrors, magic, and Pauline echoes requires that we search downward through the layers of Shakespeare's comic texts till we hit the substratum of his first, *The Comedy of Errors*. It seems especially appropriate to begin with *Twelfth Night*. Not only is that play the last of the "golden" comedies, but in many ways it also reconsiders Shakespeare's first

comedy of lost twins. Even more importantly, *Twelfth Night* is a text that has long tempted to the cliffs of intuition critics as outside the circle of respectability as Leslie Hotson and as well-vetted as the *New Variorum* editor, H. H. Furness. Neither, however, follows through on an intuition that there may be magic in the text if not the air of Illyria.

Hotson long ago observed that the word "element" appears more often in *Twelfth Night* than in any other Shakespearean play. For him, this observation helps make sense of Feste's odd comment to Viola that she is "out of my welkin—I might say 'element,' but the word is overworn" (3.1.57-59). Hotson next tempts us to decode the cypher M. O. A. I. as alphabetical elements of Mare, Orbis, Aer, and Ignis.² He stops there. But let us speculate: If Hotson is right, is Malvolio being mocked not only by Maria and company, but also by Shakespeare, as both an ill-willed steward and also an inept magus, one who can no more manipulate the elements than he can marry Olivia? Throughout the play, he will also be mocked for his resemblance to those puritans who condemn the kind of revelry Toby and Maria—and Shakespeare—indulge in. But even if Malvolio is no more a magus than he is a puritan, there are other curious references that should keep us alert to an evolving pattern.

Furness, in the *Variorum* notes to *Twelfth Night*, almost connects the dots when he stumbles over another mirror reference. Late in the play, Orsino considers the "natural magic" that is not magic at all—the presence on stage of two Cesarios: "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is, and is not" (5.1.216-17). Furness locates for us the many commentators who document Orsino's reference to a "perspective" as an allusion to perspective art, such as Holbein's anamorphic painting of "The French Ambassadors," the very picture which Stephen Greenblatt has made an icon of late twentieth-century Renaissance studies. Furness, moreover, quotes Douce, who quotes Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* as bringing together the many mirrors and optical tubes used to "read" anamorphic mirrors.

But Furness does not stop there. Something about this play, about this moment in the play, and about his own scholarly excavation pushes him onward. He tells us that "the passage in Scot's *Discoverie* . . . is quite curious enough to reprint." Reprint it he does, in a page of dense single-spaced *Variorum* prose. He concludes the citation with Scot's observation:

Finally, the thing most worthie of admiration concerning these glasses, is, that the lesser glass dooth lessen the shape: but how big so ever it be, it maketh the shape no bigger than it is. And therefore Augustine thinketh some hidden mysterie to be therein . . . I think not but Pharos magicians had better experience than I for those and such like devices. And (as Pompanaciuss saith) it is most true, that some of these feats have been accounted saints, some other witches. And therefore I saie, that the pope maketh rich witches, saints; and burneth the poore witches.³

Having pointed toward what we would now call a resonant moment in the text, Furness steps away from his intuition: "For my part, it is quite sufficient to assume that by 'natural perspective,' Orsino means that an effect has been produced by nature which is usually produced by art." This is a safe conclusion which in no way contradicts the details of the evidence he has just set forth—it simply robs the text of the vibrations we now sense coming from the historical details and actual artifacts that give rise to metaphor and analog. Long after Furness wrote his note, Roland Mushat Frye's discussion of actual mirrors⁴ and John Greenwood's analysis of sixteenth-century anamorphic art⁵ would confirm Furness's much earlier intuition that mirrors lead to magic and magic to matters of religion in *Twelfth Night*. Those matters of religion bring us to St. Paul.

From the title onward, where there's an echo of Biblical text in *Twelfth Night*, there's a whiff of magic. So far, critics have handled, if not well, at least often, the issue of religion in a play named for the feast of the Epiphany. The Christian "elements" in this play—especially echoes of St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians—have been discussed to the point where they too are "overworn." But scholars have all but ignored the parallel (and

equally secularized) strains of Hermetic lore which may reanimate Pauline citations.

Epiphany is indeed the feast of the Magi, and as Barbara Traisier has pointed out, no moment of Biblical exegesis pressed the Church Fathers to greater ingenuity than did explaining how the Magi should not be considered magicians.⁶ It would be against church teachings for holy men, even before the end of the apostolic era, to "look into the glass" or at the stars and predict the Messiah's birth. *Twelfth Night*, with its complex and multiple puns on wise men and fools draws us back to that story of three who could read the heavens, placing special emphasis on the seeker's need to interpret signs.⁷

Hearing the reference to Magus as well as to revealed God in Shakespeare's provocative title points us beyond *1 Corinthians* to Paul's letter to the *Romans*, a text not usually considered in relation to this play. In *Romans*, as in *1 Corinthians*, Paul also condemns the folly of those wise in the ways of this world, while recommending the "folly of the cross." But as John S. Mebane notes, *Romans*, with its explicit condemnation of pagan magic, caused the Italian Hermeticist Ficino particular difficulty as he struggled in vain to reconcile divination and Christian precept.⁸

Shakespeare's comedy neither promotes nor attacks either Ficino or Paul, though it may mock both—may use one to mock the other—in a play which ultimately seeks not a sacred but a comic dispensation to make fun of all that we take seriously. *Twelfth Night* persistently mocks the "wisdom" of the power-mad: men like Orsino (who may or may not be invoking Orphic music at the opening of this play; his mind is such an opal, it is quite hard to read) and Malvolio, who may see himself, like Paul, as a steward "of the mysteries of God" (*1 Corinthians* 4:1), but who is really, as Maria would put it, "an affection'd ass" (2.3.148).

In the complex, chastening parody of this play, false magic is used to purge false religion. The metaphoric, if not the factual

truth both of magic and religion may be rescued in the process. In 4.2, Feste, disguised as Sir Topas, performs an "exorcism" of Malvolio, who has been falsely accused of madness and placed in a metaphorically literal "hell," that space beneath an Elizabethan stage, the place into which Malvolio appears to have been "cast down."

Consider how unnatural *this* perspective already has become. Exorcism is being parodied—and yet used as an effective tool for lancing Malvolio's ego. Sanctioned church doctrines are being tweaked. Hell is and is not hell. And the terms of priestly Topas's inquisition (this is Feste's second "catechism"; the first is in his interview with Olivia in 1.3) form a DNA spiral of orthodoxy and Egyptian lore. He proclaims that Malvolio must accept as truth the Pythagorean notion that "the soul of our grandam might happily inhabit a bird" (4.2.52-53) before he will be freed from the devil's darkness.

Once back in his own body, the spirit of Feste takes pity on Malvolio, and he agrees to provide the steward with implements for writing a letter. An epistle, actually. Of all the many letters which appear in Shakespeare's plays, early and late, there are only two which are called "epistles." Both are in *Twelfth Night*. Somehow, that fact seems to lend substance to the now accepted notion that Feste's epilogue ("When that I was and a little tine boy") has *something* to do with *1 Corinthians* and St. Paul's assurance that he has put away "childish things." But that *something* is buried in an earlier text, one in which magic and Paul meet on different ground: the pagan woods outside of Athens.

The evident magic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would not challenge political or religious orthodoxy. No human exerts magical power over either nature or others, though magic there clearly is. Perhaps as a result, this play has tempted little by way of intuitive response in relation to magic as fact, though there have been many fine readings of magic as metaphor. The very theatricality of magic in *Midsummer*, more even than the "pagan"

setting, seems to neutralize its facticity. Vehicle becomes tenor, right before our eyes, through artistic legerdemain.

Dislocated in time, St. Paul undergoes a rougher metamorphosis. But there he is, inhabiting the body of a man who recently wore a donkey's head. Bottom's soliloquy on what the ear cannot see and the eye cannot taste (4.1.211-14 and *1 Corinthians* 2:9) all but blasphemously mocks the anti-sensualist Apostle who advocates that the Corinthians marry rather than burn. He would never make Puck's mistake about why unwed young lovers lie apart in the woods. But our need to trace down such echoes forces us to travel in time as well. We must remember the context of this passage ripped from *1 Corinthians*, the same Epistle which floats up in time to form the context of Feste's song on putting away childish things. Shakespeare uses magic in his comedy to liberate that other Paul, the lyricist who assures us that:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.
(*1 Corinthians* 13:1-2)

Parody in the mature comedies seems to be Shakespeare's way of reminding us—and Paul—of the charity the apostle did not seem inclined to share with either playwrights or magicians, makers of false idols. Early in his career, however, Shakespeare seems more tempted to use magic and Paul to cancel each other out. In fact, *The Comedy of Errors* sets forth certain relations to magic and St. Paul which Shakespeare will not completely renegotiate until *Twelfth Night*, the play it most foreshadows and ultimately least resembles. Shakespeare's first comedy introduces twins who, like Viola and Sebastian, have been separated and then washed up on alien shores. But this is very much a man's play, and so we have two sets of male twins. And in a play so lean that its Plautine

skeleton shows straight through, so too does Shakespeare's public commitment to the party line on matters of magic and religion.

Shakespeare most tellingly shifts the scene of his play from the Epidamnus of Plautus to Paul's Ephesus, the land he chastised for its idolatrous ways, whose people he urged to renounce "the Prince of the power of the air" (*Ephesians* 2:2). Antipholus of Syracuse (who we are repeatedly told grew up in Corinth) finds Ephesus a land full of sorcerers, conjurers, witches. And yet, though magic is condemned as evil in this play, it also provides one of its few lyrical passages. Antipholus of Syracuse, though mistaken by all for his twin, falls in love with his brother's sister-in-law Luciana. Confused by her rebuffs, he begs her:

Teach me, dear creature, how to think and speak:
Lay open to my earthy gross conceit,
Smoth'red in errors, feeble, shallow, weak,
The folded meaning of your words' deceit.
Against my soul's pure truth why labor you,
To make it wander in an unknown field?
Are you a god? Would you create me new?
Transform me then, and to your pow'r I'll yield.

(3.2.33-40)

The Pauline Antipholus is on dangerous ground here; he not only attributes to Luciana a magician's powers, but also invites her to initiate him into that "unknown field." Before he has to plead poetic license, Antipholus recants, declaring to his servant that Luciana "Hath almost made me traitor to myself; / But lest myself be guilty to self-wrong, / I'll stop mine ears against the mermaid's song" (3.2.162-64). But Antipholus is making a fool of himself, for the facts of the play demonstrate that the people of Ephesus are just superstitious, not empowered by some dark potentate. No real magic ever occurs in Ephesus. The town's chief conjurer, Dr. Pinch, is the mere butt of jokes and abuse. And thus the witch-fearing Antipholus flees love. And he is wrong to do so.

Antipholus' (temporary) rejection of Luciana is deeply ironic, for Luciana's only "folded meaning" comes, fittingly enough, not

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from Egypt but from Rome. Echoing Paul's other advice to the Ephesians ("Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the Husband is the head of the wife"; *Ephesians* 5:22-23), she lectures her sister, Adriana:

There's nothing situate under heaven's eye
But hath his bound in earth, in sea, in sky.
The beasts, the fishes, and the winged fowls
Are their males' subjects and at their controls:
Man, more divine, the master of all these,
Lord of the wide world and wild wat'ry seas,
Indu'd with intellectual sense and souls,
Of more pre-eminence than fish and fowls,
Are masters to their females, and their lords:
Then let your will attend on their accords.

(2.1.16-25)

Such rigidity does not go unchallenged by Adriana, who warns the inexperienced Luciana, "If thou live to see like right bereft, / This fool-begg'd patience in thee will be left" (2.1.40-41). But that is as close as the young Shakespeare comes to challenging Paul's authority. It is as if, in robbing Ephesus of the magic Paul found there, Shakespeare deprived himself of the power to transform Paul.

Paul's own power over the Elizabethan imagination should not be underestimated. He served as the basis for innumerable English sermons about both God's charity and the sins of the flesh. Any Stratford schoolboy would have heard Paul read on a regular basis and known that he spoke, even in the Geneva translation, with the tongue of an angel. But Paul's fire and brimstone appealed especially to the rising English Puritans, who in turn saw the theater as a particularly dangerous place of fleshly temptation. Shakespeare's rising ambivalence towards Paul is thus understandable. But what of his ambivalence towards magic? In addition to now commonplace thoughts on Shakespeare and Elizabethan political correctness, one source of that ambivalence may again be Paul.

In addition to condemning the "Potentate of the air," Paul speaks repeatedly of magical gifts bestowed by God on holy men, like the gift of prophecy. Though the Roman Church argued that the age of miracles closed with the death of John the Apostle, certain sects of Puritans, like the Anabaptists, claimed Paul to justify their own interest in magic, to the chagrin of many a Hermeticist. In mocking Paul and/or magic, Shakespeare may simply be rebelling, like Feste, against those who threaten his life, physical and spiritual, by assailing his livelihood.

At the end of his career, in an effort that will rescue comedy itself from the Jacobean sourness of plays like *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare seems ready to offer comic charity to magician and apostle alike. That may be the grace note of rendering Paul as Paulina and allowing "her" *perhaps* to animate a statue in *The Winter's Tale*. The "perhaps" will always remain important when responding intuitively to a text.

NOTES

¹Text and references for Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

²Leslie Hotson, *The First Night of "Twelfth Night"* (New York: Macmillan, 1954) 165-66.

³Horace Howard Furness, ed., *"Twelfth Night or, What you Will," by William Shakespeare: A New Variorum Edition* (New York: Dover, 1964) 299.

⁴Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 282-89.

⁵John Greenwood, *Shifting Perspectives and the Stylist Style* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

⁶Barbara Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: Magicians in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1984) 4.

⁷See Barbara Lewalski, "Thematic Patterns in *Twelfth Night*," *Shakespeare Studies* 1 (1965) 168-98.

⁸John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition of Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) pp. 32-33.