

# *Twelfth Night* and the Annunciation

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One of the most theologically resonant passages in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* concerns Viola's first visit as Cesario to withdrawn Olivia. Once admitted by Malvolio to Olivia's presence, Viola announces, "I am a messenger"

*Olivia* Sure you have some hideous matter to deliver, when the courtesy of it is so fearful. Speak your office.

*Viola* It alone concerns your ear. I bring no overture of war, no taxation of homage, I hold the olive in my hand; my words are full of peace as matter.

*Olivia* Yet you began rudely. What are you? What would you?

*Viola* The rudeness that hath appeared in me have I learned from my entertainment. What I am, and what I would, are as secret as maidenhead: to your ears, divinity, to any other's, profanation.

*Olivia* Give us the place alone; we will hear this divinity.<sup>1</sup>

[1.5 207–22]

If the passage's details are considered in relation to one another, this dialogue can be seen to recreate the Annunciation as the biblical event was portrayed in miracle drama and medieval and Renaissance painting.

The relevance of the Annunciation for *Twelfth Night* 1.5 207–22 has not been noted by critics and editors of this popular romantic comedy. The key detail justifying the interpretation of the dialogue in terms of the Annunciation involves the olive branch which Viola figuratively holds in her hand. As a general metaphor for peace, the olive possesses a punning aptness for an anxious woman named Olivia. Specifically, R. Chris Hassel, citing scripture, has suggested that "the association of Olivia's name with the

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<sup>1</sup>Quotations from *Twelfth Night* are taken from the New Arden edition, ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975).

olive branch could have been identified with three metaphoric equivalents, potential fruitfulness, successful grafting, and the body of Christian believers”<sup>2</sup> Hassel’s application of symbolic biblical references to Olivia’s character, however, ignores the religious context of Viola’s imagined offering of the olive branch. Medieval and Renaissance painters of the Annunciation sometimes depicted the archangel Gabriel presenting an olive branch rather than a lily stalk to the Virgin Mary, who was about to hear that God had chosen her to conceive and bear the Christ child.<sup>3</sup> While the majority of Italian painters of this religious episode portrayed Gabriel holding a lily stalk, typifying the Virgin’s purity, the Si-  
 enese school began representing the angel with an olive branch because the lily was the civic flower of Siena’s traditional enemy, Florence.<sup>4</sup> As an icon in paintings of the Annunciation, the olive conveys both the peacefulness of Gabriel’s visit as well as the ultimate peace promised by the savior whom Mary would bear. While many members of Shakespeare’s original audience may have been unacquainted with this visual symbolism, the nine repeated references to Olivia as madonna earlier in the scene make both Renaissance and modern playgoers receptive (especially once other features of the passage are considered) to placing the virgin Olivia in a venerable tableau.<sup>5</sup>

These symbolic associations permit an interpretation of Shakespeare’s dialogue in terms of certain details of the Annunciation appearing in the Lucan Gospel (1:26–38) and English miracle drama. When Mary saw the angel Gabriel, according to Luke “she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was” (1:29). Likewise, as a messenger, Viola/Gabriel appears to have “some hideous matter” to deliver to a virgin who has been called madonna.<sup>6</sup> Viola then comforts Olivia

<sup>2</sup>R. Chris Hassel, *Faith and Folly in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980) 158–60.

<sup>3</sup>For the olive branch as one of Gabriel’s symbolic attributes, see Englebert Kirschbaum, *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, 8 vols. (Rome: Herder, 1968–) 2:75. Illustrative Annunciations include those of Simone Martini (1333, 1339–42) and Francesco Di Giorgio (1470).

<sup>4</sup>James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper, 1974) 19.

<sup>5</sup>In “Viola, Antonio, and Epiphany in *Twelfth Night*,” *Essays in Literature* 13 (1986), Cynthia Lewis remarks that “Feste’s ‘madonna,’ which no other fool uses, communicates both the clown’s affectionate respect for his mistress and misguided religious devotion her excessive grief entails” (193).

<sup>6</sup>Olivia deduces Viola’s supposed “hideous matter” from her visitor’s reported rudeness.

by stating that she symbolically holds the olive of peace in her hand. Many Renaissance artists, including Leonardo, rendered the Annunciation occurring in a garden, the *hortus conclusus* signifying Mary's virginity. "Let the garden door be shut, and leave me to my hearing" (3.1.94–95), Olivia commands at the beginning of Viola's second visit. Shakespeare reinforces overtones of the Annunciation in *Twelfth Night* by staging Viola and Olivia's subsequent conversation in a Marian garden. Gabriel's purpose of course involved telling Mary, "you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus" (Luke 1.31). Viola's message that "alone concerns [Olivia's] ear" (1.5.211) pertains to Orsino's wooing of the lady, a plea which, if granted, would result in marriage and (presumably) eventual conception and childbirth. When Mary, betrothed to Joseph, questions how a virgin can conceive, Gabriel simply states, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you" (Luke 1.35). The Fathers of the Church, however, were more specific about the virgin conception. In their sermons, both Augustine and Bernard developed the idea of *conceptio per aurem*—conception through Mary's ear. "*Deus per angelum loquebatur, et virgo auribus impregnabatur*" "God spoke through an angel," Augustine wrote in an appendix to a sermon entitled "*In Natali Domini*," "and a virgin was impregnated through her ears."<sup>7</sup> For the Church Fathers, Gabriel's word became the vehicle for the Holy Ghost, entering Mary's ear and eventually her womb. By their specification of Gabriel's vague answer (the Holy Ghost will "overshadow" Mary), Augustine and Bernard may have meant no more than that, to the faithful ear (like Mary's), nothing is impossible for God. Nonetheless, the Johannine doctrine of the divinely creative word may have given the Church Fathers' rereading of

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at her park gates (1.5.198). It must be acknowledged that Gabriel's troubling of Mary did not proceed from the angel's rudeness. Viola's sauciness has been provoked by Sir Toby's and Malvolio's discourtesy, Orsino's messenger argues that "the rudeness that hath appeared in me have I learned from my entertainment." On the plane of symbolic drama, Viola's rudeness informs Olivia (but more important the theater audience) of the extent and consequences of Olivia's irresponsible misrule of her household and—ultimately—of herself. Still, on the level of dialogue, Shakespeare translates this motif into a phrase ("hideous matter") consonant with his gradual recreation of the Annunciation.

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, 221 vols. (Paris: Sirou-Vrayet, 1841–79) 39:1991, 183:399–400, 39:1988 for the quotation.

the Lucan Annunciation a literal dimension God's Word, spoken through Gabriel, entered Mary's ear and became the savior Word in the flesh<sup>8</sup>

The widespread currency of the notion *conceptio per aurem* among Anglo-Saxon and medieval English writers, including Lydgate and religious lyricists of the fourteenth century, has been demonstrated by Joannes Vriend in *The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Medieval Drama of England*<sup>9</sup> Of importance to Shakespeare is the appearance of the idea in English miracle drama In the Towneley *Annunciation*, God tells Gabriel,

Of my behalfe thou shall hyr grete,  
I have hyr chosen, that madyn swete,  
She shall conceyf my derlyng,  
Through thy word and hyr heryng

Moreover, Jesus, in the York *Assumption* at one point says,

Nowe maiden meke and modir myne,  
Itt was full mekill myrthe to thee,  
That I schulde ligge in wombe of thine,  
Thurgh gretying of an aungell free<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, the doctrine of *conceptio per aurem* extended into the sixteenth century in English primers for layfolk<sup>11</sup>

"What I am, and what I would, are as secret as maidenhead," Viola/Gabriel announces to Olivia—"to your ears divinity, to any other's, profanation" As has been shown, Gabriel's message was regarded as literal divinity for Mary's ear, like his announcement,

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<sup>8</sup>Such an interpretation is strengthened by Mary's final words to Gabriel—"Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38)—as well as by two suggestions embedded in the subsequent biblical episode "And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe [John the Baptist] leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41) "For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy" (Luke 1:44)

<sup>9</sup>Joannes Vriend, *The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Medieval Drama of England* (Purmerend, Holland: Muusses, 1928) 150–60

<sup>10</sup>*The Towneley Plays*, ed. George England and Alfred W. Pollard, Early English Text Society 71 (London: Oxford UP, 1897) 87–88; *York Mystery Plays*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1885) 494

<sup>11</sup>Vriend illustrates the idea of *conceptio per aurem* in a 1538 English primer (153) Kirschbaum explains that painters of the Annunciation alluded to the doctrine by portraying a beam of light, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, proceeding from the mouth of God to one of Mary's ears (usually the right one) (4:430)

Viola's words are as "full of peace as matter" Viola's simile for the status of her message—"as secret as maidenhead"—focuses the basic mystery of the Annunciation informing the dialogue—a virgin would conceive Like Mary, Olivia finally acquiesces "Give us the place alone we will hear this divinity" And yet, of course, linking Olivia with Mary creates not so much a comparison as a contrast Viola speaks ironically to an Olivia who loves herself so much that she still considers herself "madonna" It is profane for Olivia to take her ears, or Viola's words, as those of divinity Any doubts about Shakespeare's ironic recollection of *conceptio per aurem* are dispelled by Viola's remark at the beginning of their second interview "My matter hath no voice, lady," Viola exclaims, "but to your own most pregnant and vouchsafed ear" (3 1 90–91)

What place does a secular evocation of the Annunciation find within the dramatic design of *Twelfth Night*? Generally, an allusion to the Annunciation has relevance for the religious celebration signified by the play's primary title On the twelfth day of Christmastide (January 6th), the Feast of Epiphany was held chiefly in honor of the manifestation of the Christ child's divinity to the Magi<sup>12</sup> This showing forth (*epiphany*) was conclusive evidence of the Incarnation The importance of this idea for interpretations of *Twelfth Night* has been described by a growing number of critics<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare's allusion to the well-known spiritual event by which divinity was infused into mortal flesh reinforces the significance of the Epiphany for the play Moreover, R. Chris Hassel notes that "Twelfth Day was the traditional time for the consecration of virgins since the festival celebrated the adoration of the Virgin Mary as well as her child"<sup>14</sup> In this respect, it is worth recalling that the first surviving record of a performance of *Twelfth Night*, appearing in the diary of John Manningham, reveals a staging at the Middle Temple on the Feast of Candlemas,

<sup>12</sup>R. Chris Hassel, *Renaissance Drama and the English Church Year* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1979) 55–57

<sup>13</sup>In addition to Lewis's study cited above, see John Hollander, "Twelfth Night and the Morality of Indulgence," *Sewanee Review* 67 (1959) 234, Barbara K. Lewalski, "Thematic Patterns in *Twelfth Night*," *Shakespeare Studies* 1 (1965) 177–78, Marion B. Smith, *Dualities in Shakespeare* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1966) 111–12, 119–20, Richard Henze, "Twelfth Night: Free Disposition on the Sea of Love," *Sewanee Review* 83 (1975) 267–68, and Hassel, *Renaissance Drama* 77–86

<sup>14</sup>Hassel, *Renaissance Drama* 87

2 February, 1602<sup>15</sup> Candlemas celebrates the purification of the Virgin Mary Hassel has shown how certain dramatic elements of *Twelfth Night* reflect details of this festival, though to a lesser degree than those of the Epiphany<sup>16</sup> In keeping with this spiritual context, the recollection of Mary inherent in the Annunciation is fitting

Specifically, the Annunciation, through its profound meaning, functions to parody and thus satirize character traits of the posturing Olivia and Orsino Unlike Gabriel's supernatural message, Viola's communication of Orsino's saccharine Petrarchan love scarcely amounts to divinity In this respect, Shakespeare's reference to Olivia's "pregnant" ear is ironic As an expression of Orsino's flaccid personality, his message via Viola is sterile Barren in this respect, Viola's words for Olivia's ear participate in the larger motif of barren speech, a motif later condensed by Viola and Feste's dialogue at 3.1.1–37 There, Feste, whose jests have often seemed sterile to his auditors, calls himself a "corrupter of words" (3.1.37) In this scene, a sentence to Viola and Feste "is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit—how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward" (3.1.11–13) "They that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton" (3.1.14–15), Viola jokes

*Clown* I would therefore my sister had had no name, sir

*Viola* Why, man?

*Clown* Why, sir, her name's a word, and to dally with that word might make my sister wanton But indeed, words are very rascals, since bonds disgraced them<sup>17</sup>

[3.1.16–21]

In one sense, Feste and Viola's dialogue parodies the sexual intentions of Orsino, more in love with the idea of being in love than with Olivia, he in fact goes no further than dallying with her name in his intentions, repeating it in his moonstruck protestations Consequently the extension of his word through Viola to Olivia's ear can scarcely be fertile By previously reminding his viewers of the one occasion on which words were miraculously fertile,

<sup>15</sup>Lothian and Craik xxvi-xxviii, Lewalski 168

<sup>16</sup>Hassel, *Renaissance Drama* 94–101

<sup>17</sup>For a full discussion of the linguistic implications of this passage, see Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968) 22–46

Shakespeare places the Clown's remark "her name's a word, and to dally with that word might make my sister wanton" in comic perspective. As a rule, the speech of Illyria's citizens lacks breeding possibilities, it usually represents the language of isolated characters humorously bent on fantasizing their various prisons of the soul—at least words do so until the epiphany of Sebastian.

Unlike modest Mary, Olivia blindly suffers from a pride in her physical beauty, especially the lovely face which she vainly praises when she lifts her veil for Viola (1.5.233–55). The madonna of *Twelfth Night*, vowing to remain a "cloistress" while mourning her dead brother (1.1.25–32), plans to retain her maidenhead unnaturally for at least seven years. During the play's opening acts, she contrasts with faithful Mary when she categorically resists having "greatness" (an Elizabethan cant term for pregnancy) thrust upon her (2.5.144–46).<sup>18</sup> Olivia's egoistical vow of protracted grief and abstinence detects her participation in the comedy's major vice—retentive self-love. Mary's admirable faith in the truth of the angel's astonishing announcement throws into relief this madonna's vain reasons for refusing to "leave the world no copy" of her beauty in the form of a child (1.5.244–46). The allusion to the Annunciation in 1.5.244–46 comically suggests that, early in the play, the only way proud Olivia would consent to conceive Orsino's (or any man's) child would involve somehow retaining her vainly prized virginity. In other words, the reference to the Annunciation indicates, by contrast, the degree of faith in the miracle of new-born life (her own as well as that of another) that Olivia has yet to develop.

Eventually, of course, she does acquire such faith. Her comic haste in getting Sebastian to the church door—and then presumably to bed—reveals that her passion for Cesario has not been entirely fruitless. Heard as Orsino's message, Viola's words have been barren, apprehended as Cesario's utterance, they have stimulated Olivia's fantasy. Viola's speech humorously provokes Olivia's imagination, causing it to create a grand passion. The sudden appearance of Sebastian crystallizes this imaginative growth, making Olivia's procreation of her beauty a dramatic probability.

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<sup>18</sup>Refer to the OED 1B entry for "greatness," which includes Cooper's definition of *granditas* in his *Thesaurus* (1565) "greatnesse with childe, or with yonge."

Judged in retrospect, Shakespeare's recreation of the Annunciation in act 1 of *Twelfth Night* is not entirely parodic. In terms of the present analysis, it retrospectively predicts Olivia's growth toward marriage and its fertile possibilities—a "swelling" of character that remains secular but nevertheless blessed for Olivia herself (and, because it frees Orsino for marriage, for Viola too).

The allusion to Mary entailed in Shakespeare's reprising of the Annunciation in *Twelfth Night* complements his evocations of her in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*, comedies most likely written within three years of the composing of Shakespeare's Illyrian masterpiece. Robert Grams Hunter has clarified Helena's association with the Virgin Mary as intercessor, while Roy W. Battenhouse has identified the aptly named Mariana's spiritual roots and divine intermediary role in Shakespeare's Vienna.<sup>19</sup> Compared to the plays of his major contemporaries, Shakespeare's drama reveals a surprisingly high number of Christian allusions. *Twelfth Night* and the Annunciation can be added to the growing list.

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<sup>19</sup>Robert Grams Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (New York: Columbia UP, 1965) 129–30, Roy W. Battenhouse, "Measure for Measure and Christian Doctrine of the Atonement," *PMLA* 61 (1946): 1035.

