# SHAKESPEARE'S SIGNIOR FABIAN

Fabian is a minor character in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night.* He is onstage in four scenes (II.v, III.ii, III.iv, V.i) where he is mostly grouped together with Sir Toby Belch. Their dialogue presents a number of difficulties, and Fabian's dramatic identity seems to be in need of clarification. His function is chiefly that of confidant and provider of cues for the merrymakers of the subplot, Sir Toby, Feste and Mistress Maria. But Fabian's part is more comprehensive; it includes his gleeful participation in the plot against the steward Malvolio as well as in the mock-duel of Sir Andrew and 'Master Cesario' (i.e. Viola). So Fabian's dramatic profile, barely intelligible though it may be, is more detailed than that of an absolutely subsidiary dramatic functionary. Editors and directors tend to find it convenient to make him a member of Countess Olivia's household (and sometimes turn him into a kind of errand-boy in act V). John Draper, who has examined Fabian's role in his *The 'Twelfth Night' of Shakespeare's Audience* (1950, pp. 160-4), describes him as Olivia's 'serving-man', i.e. her armed retainer and 'gentleman-in-waiting'. Draper's analysis is vastly knowledgeable, but unfortunately not founded on textual evidence. I would like to argue that Fabian seems to be conceived of predominantly as an elderly landed gentleman or esquire, probably a Justice of the Peace.

Fabian's form of address is throughout 'signior' and 'master' (II.v.1, III.iv.261, V.i.2 — New Arden Edition, eds. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, 1975). These are the usual titles for the members of the 'lesser nobility', for gentlemen or esquires. In the presence of the duke and countess Fabian speaks unhesitatingly and skilfully, casually juxtaposing 'myself and Toby' (V.i.358). This again qualifies him indubitably as 'gentle'. He addresses the two knights, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, in the polite plural form of 'you', not 'thou', as is proper for one a little lower on the social scale, but in conversing with them he is clearly at his ease and among his near-equals. The 'gentleman' Malvolio, a rising court official, obviously with no family tradition, is treated by Fabian with scornful superiority ('How is't with you, man?', III.iv.89). Fabian is once called 'sirrah' by the countess (V.i.30); I take this, however, to be no social disparagement but an indication of her impatience or disfavour (cf. II.v.7). (For the scope of 'sirrah', compare, e.g., *1 Henry IV*, I.ii.173 and I.iii.118; Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, V.i.10; Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, I.i.27-157.)

All this points to the rank of esquire or independent landed gentleman. There is one passage in the text which could be understood to characterize Fabian as being part of Olivia's household, a piece of dialogue between Duke Orsino, Fabian and Feste:

> *Duke.* Belong you to the Lady Olivia, friends?
> *Clown.* Ay, sir, we are some of her trappings. (V.i.7-8)

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This, however, does not inevitably make Fabian a servingman. If his role is what I argue it to be, namely that of a member of the gentry of Olivia's county, who is responsible for certain administrative duties inherent in that position and who spends certain 'seasons' of the year in the city and at her court, he would be subject to her rule without necessarily being a retained servant. Master Fabian's part is of course not fully explained; but I hope to demonstrate that my suggestion fits the textual evidence best.

Fabian's individual characterization contains chiefly two dimensions. On the one hand, he delights in practical jokes and humorous intrigues, mostly directed against Malvolio, who on an occasion to be discussed later caused Fabian's disfavour with the countess (II.v.6-8). On the other hand, Signior Fabian is judicious and level-headed, especially in his final words to the aristocrats (V.i.354-67). This succinct and sane attempt at peacemaking unravels the plot against Malvolio and prevents further complications. In the cosmos of Shakespeare's plays, these two character traits, mirth and circumspection, each in its proper place, point to an advanced rather than youthful age. Dignified greybeards plot merry conspiracies in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and there is a ludicrous threesome of elderly gentlemen — funnier even than Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Signior Fabian — in *2 Henry IV*, in the comparable characters of Sir John Falstaff, knight, Master Silence, JP, and Robert Shallow, Esq., JP. Fabian is once called 'lad' by Sir Toby (III.ii.52), but this address can also mean 'boon companion, brother-in-arms, comrade' and need not necessarily denote a youthful person. (See, e.g., *1 Henry IV*, I.ii.120; *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.iv.25; *Merry Wives of Windsor*, I.iii.36; etc.)

So by his age, rank and individual characteristics, Fabian is discernible as a common social type and dramatic stock character: the humorous gentleman of the old school who treats affected social climbers and busibodies like Malvolio — or also Sir Andrew, the typical 'cokes' (rich simpleton), newly knighted 'on carpet consideration' (III.iv.238) — with amused but resentful contempt. Fabian is only too ready to help Sir Toby with his gross pranks which are apt to show conceited upstarts their proper place. In this context, Fabian's friendship with Sir Toby and Feste the jester acquires additional social meaning. All three belong to the old world of traditional gentry, anarcho-feudal knighthood and baronial court fools. All three are at war with the new social forces (new wealth, puritanism, *noblesse de robe*) which endanger their position and render it gradually obsolete. The practical joke played against Malvolio belongs to the customary world of 'shame culture' ('some notable shame', II.v.5), which corrects deviant members of the community by Skimmington rides, rough music, mocking ceremonies or other institutions of popular justice and retribution.

Fabian's dramatic identity can perhaps be more narrowly defined by considering two pieces of dialogue which seem to have been misread so far. I cannot prove this beyond all doubt, but I would like to suggest that Fabian's role is most coherent when understood as that of a Justice of the Peace. Chief evidence for this hypothesis is an utterance of Sir Toby's in act III, in an exchange with Maria and Fabian:

> *Sir Toby.* Come, we'll have him [sc. Malvolio] in a dark room and bound. My niece is already in the belief that he's mad: we may carry it thus for our pleasure, and his penance, till our very pastime, tired out of breath, prompt us to have mercy on him; at which time we will bring the device to the bar, and crown thee for a finder of madmen. (III.iv.136-42)

The phrase 'crown thee for a finder of madmen' has so far been thought to be addressed to Maria; but in the context of the justice's 'bar' it seems to make better sense when understood as being directed to the investigating magistrate himself: to Signior Fabian. Maria would only be a witness in that hearing, not a 'finder' of madness.

The second passage to be considered has, as far as I am aware, never been satisfactorily explained. I refer to Sir Toby's enigmatic remark about the 'grand-jurymen' in III.ii.14:

> *Sir Andrew.* 'Slight! will you make an ass o' me?
> *Fabian.* I will prove it legitimate, sir, upon the oaths of judgment and reason.
> *Sir Toby.* And they have been grand-jurymen since before Noah was a sailor. (III.ii.11-15)

The accepted meaning of 'grand-jurymen' used to be allegorical: judgment and reason are personified as witnesses under oath before a court of justice, and are apparently therefore called grand-jurymen. Upon closer consideration, however, this understanding is ruled out by the simple fact that the members of the Grand Jury of a county were not witnesses, but specially appointed Justices of the Peace. The passage becomes more meaningful when the remark 'They have been grand-jurymen' is understood to refer to Fabian and his ancestors. Sir Toby's words would then corroborate the elaborate humbug Fabian is telling Sir Andrew by hinting at Master Fabian's impressive magisterial family tradition. Incidentally, there is again an analogy with fatuous Master Robert Shallow, esquire and JP in the county of Gloucestershire, as Master Slender in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* tells the Parson Hugh Evans:

> *Slender* --- and a gentleman born, Master Parson, who writes himself 'Armigero' in any bill, warrant, quittance, or obligation — 'Armigero'.
> *Shallow.* Ay, that I do, and have done any time these three hundred years. (I.i.8-13)

Once this context of Fabian's part is established, his special idiom falls into a pattern, too. He likes to spice his talk with hunting metaphors (II.v.124-5, II.v.128-9) and concerns himself very much with duelling and gallant behaviour. All this seems quite appropriate to a landed gentleman or esquire who is also at times a courtier and man-about-town. Especially striking, however, is the juridical note of Fabian's dialogue: 'I will prove it legitimate' (III.ii.12), 'even to a mortal arbitrement' (III.iv.265), 'circumstance' (III.iv.266), 'recompense' (V.i.363), 'if that the injuries be justly weigh'd' (V.i.366). He advises Sir Andrew how to keep within legal bounds in duelling (III.iv.155, III.iv.165) and offers to make up a quarrel among gentlemen (III.iv.273-4). Olivia's words to

Malvolio, 'Thou shalt be both the plaintiff and the judge / Of thine own cause' (V.i.353-4), are Fabian's cue for his final short oration. It may plausibly be assumed that in dealing with Fabian's part, legal terms and phrases forced themselves upon the author because this character had initially been designed as a Justice of the Peace; in the extant text, however, this original conception survives — for reasons unknown — but in a blurred and fragmentary form.

Another remarkable bit of dialogue remains to be considered. The first thing we learn about Fabian is his disfavour with the countess and the event by which it was occasioned:

> *Sir Toby.* Would'st thou not be glad to have the niggardly rascally sheep-biter come by some notable shame?
> *Fabian.* I would exult, man: you know he brought me out o' favour with my lady, about a bear-baiting here. (II.v.4-8)

Characteristically enough, the 'Puritan' and *homo novus* Malvolio opposes the popular entertainment of bear-baitings and similar spectacles, whereas Fabian seems to have been involved in one of them. Again, this is in keeping with a magistrate whose office it was to give permission to all kinds of public shows and performances.

Objectively, a Justice of the Peace is of a fairly high social rank. One need not be amazed, however, at Shakespeare's negligence in sketching such a character. In many of his plays, the social gamut virtually begins with the gentry, and this class very often provides for the 'low' comedy of the subplots, as may be seen from Falstaff (knight, captain), Shallow (squire, JP), Lucio (gentleman) or Parolles (gentleman, captain). In *Measure for Measure* (II.i), we witness the proceedings in a court of justice; and whereas the 'supervising' aristocrats Lord Angelo and Lord Escalus are fully particularized, the presiding Justice of the Peace remains altogether shadowy. This may be an instance of textual corruption, but it could also be one of Shakespeare's subtle ironies: the worthy magistrate is probably so dumbfounded by his exalted visitors (and their arrogance) that he stays all but mute during the whole session.

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