

Orsino and Viola: Are the Names of Serious Characters in *Twelfth Night* Meaningful?

WINFRIED SCHLEINER

AFTER THE SHIPWRECK on the coast of Illyria, Viola asks her captain "Who governs here?" and receives the answer "A noble duke, in nature as in name." Naturally she pursues, "What is that name?" and is informed that the duke is called Orsino. While there can be no question as to the general meaning of nobility "in nature" in this context, there seem to be two meanings for nobility "in name": the captain may mean the good reputation of the Orsino family, or he may find the name "Orsino," the "little bear," particularly noble; for special respect for bears is attested, especially in Germanic cultures, in many a myth, heraldic sign or emblem, and family tree. In fact, it was a Renaissance commonplace that the Danish kings were derived, or considered themselves derived, from bears (*a congressu ursi cum puella*).¹ Of course, the captain may consider the duke noble "in name" for both these reasons.

If we grant the possibility that the cited passage may indicate the playwright's general interest in Orsino's name, we should ask further whether this name has a more specific connotation that Shakespeare possibly intended to bring to resonance in the play. According to a tradition evidenced by the author of *Mundus alter et idem*, who mentions many medieval and Renaissance commonplaces, the bear is *animal vere melancholicum*, "a truly melancholic animal," because, as the same writer explains, it lies all through the winter in the darkest cave and lives by licking its feet.² For this reason the anonymous author of the *Mundus* (presumably Bishop Hall) treats the bear in his chapter satirizing melancholy, a chapter peopled with cases of melancholics (we would say psychotics) culled from medical authors going back as far as Galen. The lovelorn duke's name could carry such a suggestion of melancholy.

That the serious characters in *Twelfth Night* have meaningful names has been denied, however, by the formidable authority of Kemp Malone. Malone points out that for Sir Toby Belch and Sir Anthony Aguecheek, names have a characterizing function, whereas "the serious characters of the play do not have meaningful names."³ Taken by itself my observation about Orsino's name may not be considered conclusive; in isolation its importance is minor. But matters would be different if it could be proved that the name of Orsino's

counterpart Viola is meaningful. If the name of this spirited lady, who will cure Orsino and others of melancholy, indicates her function in the play, this fact will illuminate the play's thematic center and thus show what the characters are "in nature as in name."

Shakespeare seems to be entirely responsible for choosing her name: it does not appear in this form in any of the close sources and analogues that Geoffrey Bullough and others have collected to illuminate *Twelfth Night*. The heroine of *Gl' Ingannati* (1537), a play by the Academy of the Intronati at Siena, is called Lelia; her equivalent in Nicolo Secchi's *Gl' Inganni* (1547) is Ginevra. Then there is Silla of Barnaby Riche's "Apolonius and Silla" (published in his *Farewell to Military Profession* [1581]), a character with whom Viola has, of course, much in common. Under a separate category of "possible source" Bullough lists the only related story that has a "Violetta," Emanuel Forde's *Famous History of Parismus* (1578). Although Forde's plot is quite different from Shakespeare's, it may be helpful to summarize the fortunes of Violetta, a merchant's daughter: the noble Parismus overhears an assignation given by Violetta to her lover and decides to supplant him that night. His trick works perfectly and Violetta loses her virginity. When her first love appears and she realizes what has happened, she sends him away vowing to love only Parismus. Then a third man, Pollipus, falls in love with Violetta, and Parismus, in the meantime married to a princess, woos her for him, but in vain. Violetta dresses as a young page, changes her name, and manages to enter Parismus' service. The most memorable of their adventures together is her prevention of the grieving Parismus' attempted suicide after pirates have carried off his wife. Disguised as a male page she also has the opportunity to observe Pollipus' melancholy sighs and lovesick lamentations day and night, which finally persuade her of his sincerity and make her reveal her identity and cure him of his lovesickness by vowing to become his bride.⁴

Although differences between this plot and Shakespeare's are salient, it is not impossible that Shakespeare in calling his heroine Viola had in mind this Violetta, who, disguised as a male page, soothes her intended husband's melancholy and dejection. Viola is the Latin word for the flower violet, and in the Renaissance violets were generally considered a medication against melancholy. In his *Luminare matius* (Venice, 1553), Johannes Jacobus de Manliis has a recipe for an ointment that includes oil of violets (*oleum violaceum*) as its main ingredient (fol. 88). "The violet is a flower sufficiently known," the author continues, and adds some advice on how to dry it while preserving its color and smell. Jacques Houillier (Hollerius) similarly mentions a syrup made from violets.⁵ In a chapter entitled "Medications through which *atra bilis* is tamed" (bk. v, cap. 6), Jean Fernel explains that the violet by its

humidity “tempers, calms, and overcomes burning and bitter humors, and lulls to sleep the dry and burnt bile and the pains of the head arising from it, induces sleep and drives away the weariness (*taedia*) of the heart.”⁶ *Bilis exusta*, burned bile, is, of course, another term for *melancholia adusta*, the result of an overheating of the melancholy humor or, according to some physicians, of the burning of any of the four humors. Fernel further explains that the juices distilled from violets are indicated “for hypochondriacal melancholy, mania, palpitation of the heart, and other sicknesses resulting from the black bile.”⁷

Fernel or Fernelius was a well-known name in the Renaissance, indeed, in that period his work was the most widely known book of simples, used not only by the medically trained. If any more proof is needed that this is not poking around in an obscure corner of Renaissance lore, we may point to Ficino, in whose *De vita* the (pseudo-) Aristotelian thoughts on melancholic genius, together with Neoplatonic notions and astrology, form a nexus so potent that he has been seen as the prime influence behind the Renaissance vogue of melancholy, in studies of England called the “Elizabethan Malady.”⁸ In *De sanitate tuenda* (*De vita*, bk. I), ch. xix, Ficino, too, mentions violets among the ingredients of syrups by which the “melancholic humor will be softened, digested and dissolved, by which the spirits will be sharpened and cleared and *ingenium* will be enhanced.”⁹ The index to Della Porta’s *Phytognomonica* (Naples, 1588), also a well-known collection, of which for instance Robert Burton, the anatomist of melancholy, owned a copy, states concisely: *viola contra atra bilem*.

These quotations are instances of a strong medical tradition that persisted through the seventeenth century and beyond. In his essay entitled “De melancholiae indicationibus prognosticis et curatione,” the German Johannes Joachimus mentions among other medications *flores violarum* and borrows from the well-known physician Guainerius the recipe for a syrup he calls “delectable and very useful.”¹⁰ As one would expect, Hercules of Saxonia, author of a well-known treatise on melancholy, also mentions violets in his chapter on the cure of melancholy.¹¹ The use of violets for medical purposes, particularly as purgatives, continued into the eighteenth century, as is evidenced by Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* (1765), which still reports this use, although with some critical distance: “One usually takes from these flowers their calices, which are considered to have a rather considerable purgative quality, but with rather little justification.” The encyclopedia also points out that the Greek had two varieties of the violet (ἰον): *μελανιον* and *λευκοιον*, and given the importance of etymology and color symbolism in earlier periods, it is quite possible that the term *μελανιον* (black or dark ἰον) contributed to the asso-

ciation of the flower with the black bile. Its medical use in antiquity is outlined in Pauly's *Realencyclopädie* (see "Veilchen").

Of course violets were used by Shakespeare and other poets in a variety of scenes and with different meanings. While it cannot be my aim to do for the Renaissance what Pauly and Wissowa did in their elaborate article on the violet for antiquity,¹² it may be important to point out that some of these meanings are consonant with the one I am observing here. In sonnets 12 and 99, Shakespeare refers to the flower (in Latin called *viola odorata*) for its distinctive sweet smell, a characteristic also pointed out by the devoted seventeenth-century collector of emblems Picinelli as one of the violet's meaningful traits. In *Venus and Adonis* (ll. 125–26) and in Donne's "Ecstasy" the violet is part of a *locus amoenus*, the topical description of the place where lovers meet. Since violets also show the new life that grows out of a grave, we have Marina strewing violets on her mistress's grave in *Pericles* (Riverside ed., IV.i.15–16) and Laertes declaring in *Hamlet* that from Ophelia's "fair and unpolluted flesh shall violets springs" (V.i.239–40). According to Picinelli's *Mundus symbolicus*, the violet is also the symbol of a person's devotion to only one lover (*amans unius solius*), or of a person living removed from the world or in exile.¹³

The violet's association with melancholy makes Viola's name particularly appropriate for Shakespeare's play. More immediately and effectively than any other play, *Twelfth Night* establishes the mood of melancholy in the very first lines. Curiously the duplicity of music which by "humoring" the melancholic's dark mood can cure him, as Robert Burton was to explain at length,¹⁴ is associated with the sweet smell of violets when the lovelorn Duke Orsino muses:

If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it: that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again, it had a dying fall;
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odor.

(I.i.1–7)

It would perhaps be overingenious to claim that the reference to the pleasurable-ness of music in terms of violets is a premonition of Viola's role in the play (Olivia will later associate Viola's voice with music [V.i.109]). But the moody melancholy of the opening has struck the critics and particularly those

who have worked with the sources Shakespeare used: "At once an atmosphere of moody melancholy and lovesickness is created with the aid of music and the Duke's capricious dwelling on his own emotions."¹⁵ Of course Viola has to tackle not only Orsino's melancholy but also that of Olivia, who for an entire year has "abjur'd the company / And sight of men" (I.ii.39–40) after the death of her brother; and Viola does so brilliantly. Olivia's name, incidentally, appears to be chosen primarily as a foil for, and near anagram of, Viola—although it certainly adds to the names' symmetry that both are botanical and that both possibly refer to purgatives. (Medieval associations with the olive—Roland and Oliver standing for *fortitudo* and *sapientia*—are out of place.)

It is true that Viola wins people's hearts precipitously under the name of "Caesario," an allusion perhaps to the Roman conqueror of whom any school-boy used to know that he "came, saw, and conquered," and that she reigns in Olivia's heart under that assumed name through much of the play; but ultimately (unless we believe in a form of sexuality unlikely to be intended on the Elizabethan stage) she can heal Orsino only because she is in reality Viola—as the spectators have known all along.

This indirection and subtlety in the application of Viola's name agrees well with the subtlety of Viola's veiled self-reference of sitting like patience on a monument, a passage whose iconographic background William Heckscher has analyzed learnedly and brilliantly.¹⁶ Viola says there of her father's daughter that when hopelessly in love, "With a green and yellow melancholy / She sate like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief" (II.iv.113–18). Heckscher has shown, on the one hand, how patience in scholastic thinking is allied to *fortitudo* and *sapientia*, which were practically indistinguishable, and, on the other, how *patientia* could become a check against *tristitia* (and its allied conditions of melancholy, *acedia*, and despair). We might say that the icon Viola chooses is not only a veiled and painful-pleasurable self-revelation of a woman in love, but an emblem of patience with which she puts in check a distraught and even foolish lover. Indeed, in no scene is the contrast between Orsino's nobility in name as well as nature and his foolish pretense to a nobility in love more marked than in the one that immediately precedes Viola's witty remark: as so often in Shakespeare's plays, the noble character has traded places with the fool, who appears to notice that Orsino's melancholy is a self-indulgence: "Now the melancholy god protect thee . . ." (II.iv.73). Orsino then sends Cesario-Viola once more to Olivia to tell her that his love is "more noble than the world" (II.iv.81), but in the same breath rather conceitedly and foolishly opines that his love surpasses any woman's love and is therefore

irresistible. Since in his self-indulgent melancholy he cannot take a "no" for an answer ("I cannot be so answer'd" [II.iv.88]), the patience invoked by Viola is indeed antithetical to his melancholy.

Perhaps she is more truly a healer than Helen in *All's Well*, who has learned skills from her physician father. The end of *Twelfth Night* is certainly more satisfying than the conclusion of that play which programmatically "ends well." Duke Orsino, the noble Little Bear, has been cured of his melancholy and is looking forward to a "golden time" (V.i.382). Healed of the melancholic withdrawal in which he first was presented, he expresses his happiness in a limited social action as he asks his retainers to entreat Malvolio "to a peace" (V.i.380). The person primarily responsible for this change of events is Viola, in nature and in name a healer of melancholics.

Notes:

- 1 Marcello Donati, *De medica historia mirabili* (Mantua, 1586), fol. 32v. For a modern account of the importance of such characters as Beowulf (Bear) and Bjarki (Little Bear) in Scandinavian legend, see Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts, and Heroes* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), particularly the section entitled "The Bear's Son," pp. 123-43.
- 2 *Mundus alter et idem*, bk. 3, ch. 4, sect. 3: "Ursus, animal vere melancholicum, per hyemem totam in obscurissima cavea delitescit; pedesque sibi lambendo, vivit." In Joseph Hall, *Works*, ed. Josiah Pratt (London: Whittingham, 1808), X, 189.
- 3 Kemp Malone, "Meaningful Fictive Names in English Literature," *Names*, 5 (1957), 8.
- 4 *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. II (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), 344-71.
- 5 Houillier, *De morbis internis libri duo* (Lyons, 1578), fol. 65r.
- 6 Fernel, *Universa medicina* (Paris, 1567), p. 448: "Viola . . . fervidos acresque humores temperat, lenit atque subducit, siccum exustamque bilem et qui ab hac fiunt capitis dolores consopit, somnumque accersit, cordis taedia depellit."
- 7 Fernel, p. 449: "ad hypochondriacam melancholiam, ad maniam, ad cordis palpitationem et caeteros ex atra bile affectus."
- 8 Standard works on the subject are Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London: Nelson, 1964); Lawrence Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951); and Bridget Gellert Lyons, *Voices of Melancholy* (London: Routledge, 1971).
- 9 Ficino, *Opera omnia* (Basel, 1561), I, 505: "melancholicus humor mollitur et digeritur atque solvitur, spiritus acuuntur, et illustrantur, fovetur ingenium."
- 10 "De melancholiae indicationibus prognosticis, et curatione," in *Dissertationes physicae-medicae*, ed. Tobias Tandler ([Wittenberg], 1613), p. 144 and p. 147: "delectabilis et valde utilis."

-
- 11 Hercules of Saxonia (Ercole Sassonia), *De melancholia* (Venice, 1620), p. 31 and p. 33.
 - 12 Their nine-column article on "Veilchen" mentions the use of a tea made from *viola tricolor* as a remedy for epilepsy, which in the Renaissance was generally considered a variety of melancholy. Guy de Tervarent, *Attributs et symboles dans l'art profane, 1450-1600* (Genève: Droz, 1958), unfortunately has no entry on the flower.
 - 13 Filippo Picinelli, *Mundus symbolicus* (Cologne, 1694), bk. ix, ch. 20, p. 677.
 - 14 *Anatomy of Melancholy*, pt. 2, sect. 2, mem. 6, subs. 3, entitled "Musick a Remedy."
 - 15 Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, III, 279.
 - 16 William S. Heckscher, "Shakespeare in His Relationship to the Visual Arts: A Study in Paradox," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 13-14 (1970-71), 5-71, particularly pp. 41-42. See also the unpublished paper by Mark A. Anderson, "Patience, Actaeon, and Emblematic Characterization in *Twelfth Night*," World Shakespeare Congress, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1981.

