

A Study of William Shakespeare's Comedy *Twelfth Night* from a New Historicist Perspective

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Abstract

Until the second half of the 20th century, the framework of traditional historicism was commonly applied to the study of literary texts excluding the multiplicity of historical contexts. Hence, any kind of literary research was carried out by limiting a particular literary text to a single historical context. This approach changed after the second half of the 20th century with the emergence of such literary theories as New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and Poststructuralism. These approaches shed new light on Shakespeare's plays challenging the conventions of the Elizabethan period and reinterpreting them in accordance with contemporary history of the critic. This article aims to examine Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* from the viewpoint of New Historicism based on the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt. The research is mainly built on the concept of swerving, which Greenblatt has recently introduced within the framework of New Historicism. In this respect, the issues characterising Shakespeare's comedies, such as confused identities, cross-dressing, social mobility, Elizabethan gender and sexual norms

are under scrutiny. In addition, the role of language, at which Shakespeare excelled his contemporaries, will be dealt with to reveal and interpret the implied meanings of the particular words and expressions in the play.

Keywords

Shakespeare, Elizabethan society, conventions, confused identities, sexual confusion, class, authority, subversion

Twelfth Night is one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies. It was probably written in 1601 and first performed in early 1602 as a Twelfth Night's entertainment for the close of the Christmas season. This holiday was celebrated as a festival in which everything was turned upside down – just like the upside-down, chaotic world in the play. It is focused on the twins Viola and Sebastian, who are separated in a shipwreck in Illyria. Viola believes that her identical twin brother Sebastian drowned. She makes a decision to disguise herself as a young man, Cesario, and to seek employment at the court of the lovesick Duke Orsino. When Orsino sends Cesario to woo Olivia, a local countess, on his behalf, Olivia falls in love with Viola/Cesario (Atkin 2008, 1). There are also other characters making the play more amusing and exhilarating. They are members of Olivia's household: her rowdy drunkard uncle Sir Toby; his foolish friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who is desperately trying to court Olivia; Olivia's witty and pretty gentlewoman Maria; Feste, the clever clown of the house and Malvolio, the prudish steward of Olivia's household. Malvolio's priggishness and haughty attitude earn him the enmity of the household, particularly of Sir Toby. Thus, they play a cruel trick on him, making him believe that Olivia is in love with him. In his fantasies about marrying his mistress, he dreams of rising above his social class.

Since *Twelfth Night* is a play comprising confused identities and cross-dressing thus challenging Elizabethan gender and sexual norms, New Historicism can

be the right approach to build the theoretical framework of the study. Stephen Greenblatt, a scholar of Renaissance, may be credited with the coining of the term “new historicism.” His approach aims to reveal how a work of literature reflects its historical and socio-cultural context as well as how it is related to the context of the contemporary critic. However, rather than passively reflecting a system of political values and practices, New Historicism plays an active role in the articulation and enforcement of political and social ideology (Ford 2006, 133). While doing so, this perspective also resists the institutions of power. It insists on a multiplicity of historical contexts for literary works, for which time is a determining factor in the perception of great literature. For this, Greenblatt takes on Foucault’s ideas, which asserts that history is not the working out of “universal” ideas: “because we cannot know the governing ideas of the past or the present, we should not imagine that ‘we’ even have a ‘center’ for mapping the ‘real.’ Furthermore, history itself is a form of social oppression, told in a series of ruptures with previous ages” (Guerin 2005, 284).

One of the recent concepts introduced within the theory of New Historicism by Greenblatt is the term “swerving”. In the eponymously named book, the title and the subtitle are explained in the author’s preface. Greenblatt narrates the story that shattered the world six hundred years ago. It brought about substantial changes in the modern worldview about the creation of the universe. Greenblatt uses the idea of swerving to describe the history of the book *On the Nature of Things*, which was the last manuscript harbouring dangerous ideas concerning the universe. It was a long-lost and nearly forgotten work by the Roman poet Lucretius that was rediscovered by a book hunter in the 15th century. Lucretius was an adherent of the philosophical movement called Epicureanism that began around 300 BC. Adhering to the teachings of Epicure, Lucretius claims that the universe functions without the aid of

gods, that religious fear is damaging to human life, and that matter is made up of very small particles in eternal motion (Greenblatt 2011, 4). He calls this process swerving which occurs at no fixed place or time. Talking about the importance of the book, Greenblatt states that the recovery and translation of this ancient philosophical epic was the greatest discovery fuelling the Renaissance since at the core of the poem lay key principles of a modern understanding of the world (Greenblatt 2011, 12). It inspired artists such as Botticelli and thinkers such as Giordano Bruno; shaped the thought of Galileo and Freud, Darwin and Einstein; and had revolutionary influence on writers from Montaigne to Thomas Jefferson (Greenblatt 2011, 4). Greenblatt asserts that the reappearance of Lucretius' poem was a swerve, that is, an unforeseen deviation from the direct trajectory (2011, 13).

Furthering the concept of swerving, Greenblatt states that everything comes into being as a result of swerve, which is the source of free will (2011, 107). He metaphorically explains this process through the movement of the individual particles that makes up matter depicting them as "raindrops that at absolutely unpredictable times and places deflect slightly from their straight course to a degree that could be described as no more than a shift of movement" (2011, 107). If this infinite number of particles fell through the void in straight lines, nothing would ever exist (Greenblatt 2011, 107). Whatever exists in the universe exists because of these random collisions of minute particles (Greenblatt 2011, 107). The endless combinations and recombinations result from the collisions over a limitless span of time (Greenblatt 2011, 108). Greenblatt points to the fact that if all of motion were one long predetermined chain, there would be no possibility of freedom (2011, 107). With this book, the author makes a firm distinction between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages.

The idea of swerving that came to be known as a deviation from any prescribed

norms or conventions has been applied to the study of literary texts as well as the canonized. This approach enables the critics to reveal the socio-cultural and political developments of a particular time that were not moving in a single predetermined direction. In this respect, the concept of swerving in Greenblatt's sense can be employed to examine *Twelfth Night* as a subversive theatrical resistance to conventional definitions of gender, sexuality, class and authority. However, before embarking upon the study of the play, it would be worthwhile to understand Elizabethan ideas about heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as the theatrical conventions of Shakespeare's time.

Women did not perform on the English public stage during Shakespeare's lifetime; all the great women's roles in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, from Juliet to Lady Macbeth to the Duchess of Malfi, were written to be performed by trained adolescent boys (Greenblatt 2012, 1187). These boy actors were evidently extraordinarily skillful, and the audiences were sufficiently immersed in the conventions both of theatre and of social life in general to accept gesture, makeup, and above all, dress as a convincing representation of femininity (Greenblatt 2012, 1187). *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, written for Shakespeare's all-male company, plays brilliantly with these conventions. The comedy depends upon an actor's ability to transform himself, through costume, voice, and gesture, into a young man, Cesario. The play's delicious complications follow from the emotional tangles that these transformations engender which lead to same-sex desire and cross-class marriage (Greenblatt 2012, 1187). The idea of swerving revolves around all the main characters in the play. They deviate from the conventions ascribed to them by Elizabethan society. To begin with, when Duke Orsino decides to send Viola/Cesario to Olivia with messages of his love for her, he is addressing Viola who is disguised as Cesario as follows:

DUKE ORSINO: ...unfold the passion of my love,
 Surprise her with discourse of my dear faith.
 It shall become thee well to act my woes.
 She will attend it better in thy youth
 Than in a nuncio's of more grave aspect.
 VIOLA: I think not so, my lord.
 DUKE ORSINO: Dear lad, believe it,
 For they shall yet belie thy happy years,
 That say thou art a man. Diana's lip
 Is not more smooth and rubious. Thy small pipe
 Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
 And all is semblative a woman's part (1.4. 19-30)

It can be observed how the Duke admires Cesario's 'smooth and rubious' lip and his high voice – it is even 'semblative a woman's part'. There's quite a bit of homoeroticism here. This series of compliments is both intriguing and complicated. In praising Cesario's beauty, Orsino tells Cesario that he looks like a woman. He believes that Cesario's womanly beauty will somehow attract Olivia. At the same time, Orsino himself finds Cesario attractive as he reminds him of a beautiful young woman. Taking into consideration how conservative the Elizabethans were, this kind of desire, which is virtually all over the play, challenges Elizabethan ideas about 'heterosexual' norms. In his article, "Androgyny Seen Through Shakespeare's Disguise" Kimbrough states that during the staging of the play, boys would have played the parts of the female characters, and sexuality would not have been an issue with the Elizabethan audience (Kimbrough 1982, 22). Such thinking is almost impossible for the contemporary audience since they only notice the sexual attraction occurring between the characters. However, "the erotic atmosphere that develops would not have been fully noticed by the Elizabethan audience",

explains Kimbrough (1982, 25-27). Similar homoeroticism finds an explicit echo in the minor character of Antonio as well, who is clearly in love with his male friend, Sebastian: “If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant” (2.1.40). He accompanies Sebastian to Illyria and supplies him with money – all because of a strong love that seems to be romantic. However, Antonio’s attraction to Sebastian is never fulfilled.

“Sexual heat,” Greenblatt argues, “is not different in kind from all other heat, including that produced by the imagination. Shakespeare realized that if sexual chafing could not be presented literally onstage, it could be represented figuratively: friction could be fictionalized, chafing chastened and hence made fit for the stage by transforming it into the witty, erotically charged argument” (1997, 89). Another important point is Viola’s decision to disguise herself as a young man in order to find a job. If the play were analysed from a traditional historicist perspective, this could be explained as something that makes unprotected young woman feel safer in the strange land where she has arrived accidentally:

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid
For such disguise as haply shall become
The form of my intent. I’ll serve this duke:
Thou shall present me as a eunuch to him. (1.2.10-13-16)

However, there are various versions regarding this scene. Cesario, the male name that Viola uses to disguise herself throughout the play, means belonging to Caesar but the name Caesar itself might derive from the Latin word for ‘cut’ because he was born by what is still called ‘Caesarean section’ (Dolan 2014, 14). Alongside her male name, when she describes her plan, she asks the ship’s captain to disguise her as a eunuch. The word eunuch can also be a good excuse for Viola to conceal her female identity from both Duke Orsino and Olivia since it refers to someone who has been castrated or emasculated.

However, as the play proceeds, this part of the plan is never mentioned again and Viola presents herself as simply a delicate young man. Nevertheless, the idea of a eunuch is important to the play, since it stands as another symbol of gender uncertainty.

New Historicism emphasizes the reinforcement of the dominant power against subversion, as a result of which the dominant ideology always prevails. Therefore, the act of undermining or overthrowing the dominating system is not a real end in Shakespearean plays, just like homoerotic love is not the final option in *Twelfth Night*. As a man, Viola cannot win Orsino's love, but at the same time, as a woman, she cannot return Olivia's. Neither of these relationships can take place since heterosexual views of Elizabethan England would not have permitted it. Thus, giving herself up into the hands of fate, she says despairingly: "O time, thou must untangle this, not I / It is too hard a knot for me t'untie" (2.2.43-44).

Elizabethan and Jacobean authorities in the church and the state had their own concerns about idleness and subversion, but they generally protected and patronized both festive ritual and theatre on the ground that these provided a valuable release from tensions that might otherwise prove dangerous. However, Malvolio (in Italian, 'ill will') is explicitly linked to those among Shakespeare's contemporaries most hostile to the theatre and to such holidays as *Twelfth Night* (Greenblatt 2012, 1188). "Sometimes," says Lady Olivia's gentlewoman Maria, "he is a kind of puritan" (2.3.51). Malvolio undoubtedly embodies Puritanism, so the characters' practical jokes on him are more political than their amusement suggests (Ford 2006, 108). This might be regarded as a rebellion against Puritans, which is also one of the main concerns in Atkin's article written on Malvolio. He explains that the theatres were defended against the puritans by the Queen herself, and, of course, the playwrights and actors like Shakespeare (2008, 102). In *Twelfth Night*,

even the idiotic Sir Andrew Aguecheek makes an abusive reference to the puritans when he says to Sir Toby, “policy I hate. I had as lief be a Brownist as a politician” (3.2.84). A ‘Brownist’ was a member of an extreme puritan sect founded in 1581 by Robert Browne (c. 1550-1633) who advocated the separation of church and state (Atkin 2008, 102). Thus, the portrayal of a figure such as Malvolio can be seen as a somewhat satirical attack on the anti-theatrical puritan forces in Elizabethan society. Professor John R. Ford regards this as an insignificant political rivalry of Shakespeare’s day since only “after some forty years (in 1642) the theatres, under the auspices of the new Puritan regime, would be demolished, the playing and fooling silenced” (2006, 109). He prefers to take a new historicist approach to examine written texts with particular historical concerns. However, in the play, Shakespeare entertains the idea that even the puritanical order-loving and pleasure-hating Malvolio can betray his principles. On the one hand, Malvolio entirely objects to revelry, music and alcohol. His sharp question: “Do ye make an ale-house of my lady’s house?” disturbs Sir Toby to which he bitterly answers: “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” (2.3.50). On the other hand, the very concept of Puritanism, which has very strict moral attitudes, is challenged in the play. Malvolio’s swerving consists in his fantasy of becoming Olivia’s husband and imagining himself a wealthy nobleman. He becomes a romantic lover, opposing his puritanical views, to reach his class-related ambition. His ideas about what he will wear as an aristocrat suggest the subversion of the customary social hierarchies since in reality he does not belong to this class. Thus, *Twelfth Night* is also a play in which class distinctions break down: Malvolio imagines what it would be like to marry a noblewoman, Olivia chooses Cesario, who she thinks is only a servant over Orsino, a noble duke. In addition, at the end of the play it becomes clear that Sir Toby, a nobleman, has married Maria, who is a servant.

Even if the play is performed within the boundaries of courtly love, this tradition is also subverted and ridiculed. After all, Viola's pretty speeches do not reflect her own thoughts but instead, they belong to Cesario. On the other hand, Orsino is really more in love with himself and his own inner life rather than he is with Olivia. He suffers from a severe case of love-sickness. Ordering his musical players to "play on," he is obviously enjoying his depressed state, using the music as a metaphor for his "love." "If music be the food of love, play on / Give me excess of it..." (1.1.3-4) says Orsino. The conclusion drawn is that he is more caught up in the idea of being in love as opposed to loving someone. Furthermore, Olivia falls in love with Cesario after a few pretty speeches – but Cesario is really a woman who has herself fallen in love with Orsino. Thus, the play suggests that the characters' romantic feelings should not be taken too seriously as they come and go quickly and are not based on real attraction or emotions.

The presence of a fool in the play is also an important element included by Shakespeare to transmit particular messages concerning Elizabethan society. In fact, many noble households in the Renaissance kept a clown to amuse them and to tell them the truth when no one else would think of telling it. Thus, they had dual nature: often pretending to be simpleminded, in fact, most of them were highly intelligent. Shakespeare's fools not only evoke laughter but also surpass people of higher social standing in wit and pointed satire. Similarly, Feste is a master at wordplay and a keen observer. He is rebellious and skilfully uses language as a subversive device, thereby constituting a potential threat to authority. His ability to quote a Latin proverb reveals the depth of his learning: "Cucullus non facit monachum" (1.5.23-4). It means the hood does not make the monk. By this saying, Feste implies that what appears to be true is not always in harmony with what is true.

Challenging the conventions of Elizabethan England, Greenblatt asks:

What if Olivia has succeeded in marrying Orsino's page Cesario? And what if the scandal of a marriage were topped by a still greater scandal: the revelation that the young groom was in fact a disguised girl? Cesario is in love with 'his' master Orsino, Orsino evidently drawn toward Cesario, Antonio passionately in love with Sebastian, Olivia aroused by a page whose femininity Orsino constantly remarks. (1997, 66-7)

With this statement, Greenblatt asserts that homoeroticism is definitely an issue within *Twelfth Night*. He states that the coupling of Orsino and Cesario is an impossible coupling. Olivia and Cesario is an impossible coupling as well. Viola's disguise has not only created sexual confusion, but Elizabethan conservatism is being challenged as well. It is apparent how disguise has confused the characters. These characters are able to continue being attracted to Viola because of the disguise that she wears. As long as Viola wears the male disguise, Olivia is able to be attracted to her. Disguise changes the appearance of reality for the audience as well as for the characters (Greenblatt 1997, 145). Olivia believes that she is attracted to Cesario, and the audience is perfectly willing to allow that to happen as long as Olivia is not aware that Cesario is truly a woman (Greenblatt 1997, 147). The Elizabethan audience would not have given considerable thought to the homoerotic nature of the play. They would have been aware that Cesario was a woman in disguise, and this would destroy any serious thought regarding homoeroticism. Greenblatt continues his analysis by stating that the audience realizes that the relationship between Olivia and Cesario is set up to fail since a homosexual relationship is impossible when regarding the Elizabethan period. On the other hand, Greenblatt also entertains the idea of homoeroticism in the play asserting that "this would make some sense in a play that had continually tantalized

its audience with the spectacle of homoerotic desire” (1997, 67). Moreover, Orsino and Olivia’s attraction to Cesario may also foreshadow some complex androgynous elements leading to gender ambiguities that persist until the end of the play. At the final scene, finding out that Viola is a woman, Orsino still addresses her as “Boy”. This dubiety remains unanswered and at the end of the play, it is still unclear if Duke Orsino is attracted to Cesario or Viola.

In Act V when the play comes to its close and Viola’s goal has been successfully achieved, Sebastian comments:

Do I stand there? I never had a brother,
Nor can there be that deity in my nature
Of here and everywhere. I had a sister,
Whom the blind waves and surges have devoured. (5.1.135-38).

No sooner has Sebastian explained to Olivia that he is both a maid and man than Orsino adds: “Be not amazed, right noble is his blood” (5.1.137). This is the first mention of the twins’ nobility as previously only Cesario declared: ‘I am a gentleman’. Orsino must have relied on this knowledge settling the question of identity, that is, the name of the father. Olivia and Sebastian have been thought to be beneath Olivia’s social status. Now through the magical power of the same father, the threat to the social and sexual order turns out to be imaginary, thereby settled. Eventually, Nature triumphs sorting out sexes and pairing them correctly keeping any kind of scandals at bay.

It is obvious that swerving is one of the central and structural principles in the play. It gives way to the subversion of socially accepted norms. This is particularly true of the main character – Viola, who gets what she wants only because she is willing to submit herself to the very principle of deflection or swerving. She makes her point when she says: “I am not that I play” (1.5.30). By doing so, Viola consciously swerves customs to achieve her end. As a result of this, the play moves into dangerous and heretical definitions of gender and

homoerotic desire subverting the conventions and beliefs of the Elizabethan authorities. Nevertheless, Nature restores socially accepted norms by offering a reassuring resolution, which is made possible through marriage that provides the most stabilizing force by solving any sexual issues arising throughout the play. However, the fact that swerving is an essential component in *Twelfth Night* remains undeniable. Since it triggers subversive ideas and informs about the existence of potential threat to authority. It also functions as a tool for the characters to reach their goals, ultimately withdrawing and making room for the reestablishment of the prevalent social order.

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Öz

Willim Shakespeare'in *Onikinci Gece* Komedyasının Yeni Tarihselci Açıdan İncelenmesi

20. yüzyılın ikinci yarısına kadar geleneksel tarihselcilik çerçevesi çoğunlukla edebi metinlerin çalışmasına uygulanmıştı ve tarihsel içeriklerin çoğunluğunu dışlamıştı. Dolayısıyla, herhangi bir edebi araştırma belli bir edebi metni tek bir tarihsel içeriğe kısıtlayarak yapılmıştı. Bununla beraber, 20. yüzyılın ikinci yarısından sonra bu yaklaşım Yeni Tarihselcilik, Kültürel Materyalizm ve Post-yapısalcılık gibi edebiyat kuramlarının ortaya çıkmasıyla değişti. Bu yaklaşımlar Elizabeth döneminin geleneklerini sorgulayarak ve onları çağdaş eleştirmenin tarihiyle tekrardan yorumlayarak Shakespeare' in oyunlarına yeni bir ışık tutmuşlardır. Bu çalışma Shakespeare' in *On İkinci Gece* komedisini Stephen Greenblatt'ın edebi eleştirisine dayalı Yeni Tarihselcilik bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Araştırma ağırlıklı olarak Greenblatt'ın son zamanlarda Yeni Tarihselcilik çerçevesinde tanıttığı "swerving", yani sapma kavramı üzerine kurulmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Shakespeare komedilerini nitelendiren konular, örneğin karışmış kimlikler ve karşı cinsle ait elbiseleri giyme, sosyal hareketlilik ve Elizabeth döneminde cinsiyet incelenmektedir. Bunların yanı sıra, oyunda ima edilen belirli kelime ve ifadeleri ortaya çıkarıp anlamını açıklamak için Shakespeare' in çağdaşlarından farklı kullandığı dilin rolü de ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Shakespeare, Elizabeth toplumu, gelenekler, karışmış kimlikler, cinsel karışıklık, sınıf, otorite, yıkıcılık