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**Laughing Through The Tears: Melancholy In Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will***

In his 1996 film *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will*, Trevor Nunn takes several stylistic liberties, such as the change to a late Victorian Era setting, in an attempt to bring new life to Shakespeare's original play and make it more appealing to modern audiences. Every film has its criticisms however, and many critics have voiced negative opinions of these changes. One such review is by Kevin Jackson, who says Nunn's addition of the shipwreck scene fails to add any additional context for the audience (Jackson). Another such criticism was made by Tom Shone, who said that Nunn's adaptation took the renowned comedy and turned it downright depressing (Shone). I disagree with these critics, however. I believe that these stylistic changes add an emotional depth that the original play lacks. Rather than keeping to surface-level comedy, Trevor Nunn's 1996 film *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will* uses the characters and their stories to place a greater emphasis on the undertones of melancholy that are present in the original play.

Nunn immediately begins incorporating a sense of melancholy at the film's beginning. Rather than opening with Orsino's scene in which he describes his love for Olivia, Nunn chooses to open with the shipwreck in which Sebastian allegedly drowned. Nunn uses this scene to open the film with a feeling of grief and sadness by emphasizing Viola's distress over losing her brother. In the original play, Viola says "My brother, he is in Elysium / Perchance he is not drowned" (1.1.3-4) but Sebastian is not further mentioned in the scene. In Nunn's film, however, instead of immediately moving forward to create a plan to disguise herself, the film

lingers on her grief. Viola, played by Imogen Stubbs, can be seen running back to the sea and collapsing to her knees, as she sobs for her brother. By including this aspect of the scene, Nunn creates a heart-wrenching tone, allowing the audience to fully absorb the extent of her grief and distress.

As well as using the shipwreck scene to emphasize the overall melancholic tone, Nunn also uses the characterization of Viola as vulnerable and emotional, rather than the resilient and practical version of her that we see in the original play. By portraying Viola this way, it elaborates on the longing and sadness of her relationship with Orsino. For example, Stubbs' portrayal of Viola's willow cabin speech adds a layer of emotional intensity that the original play does not contain. In Nunn's film, when Viola says "Hallow your name to the reverberate hills/And make the babbling gossip of the air/Cry out 'Olivia!'" (1.5.225-227), Stubbs uses wild and erratic gesturing and an exclamatory tone of voice, which gives tenacity and intensity to the speech. The emotional intensity behind this delivery suggests that Viola is speaking from the heart and projecting her love and longing for Orsino onto her speech. This is further supported by Viola's facial expressions. Even at the beginning of the speech, longing is painted on Viola's face, and her eyes seem to nearly fill with tears as she says "Make me a willow cabin at your gate/And call upon my soul within the house" (1.5.222-223). Creating this intense expression of love and longing that Viola has for Orsino allows the audience to see the deep emotion that she harbors for Orsino. And by revealing this emotional depth of Viola, it gives the overall scene a wistful tone that greatly contrasts the playful and witty tone of the original play.

Another character that Nunn uses to emphasize the melancholic tone is Feste, who is played by Ben Kingsley. In the original play, Feste is a witty, lighthearted fool, but Nunn's film paints him in a different light. In the film, Nunn uses Feste to bridge the gap between comedy and tragedy, making him an isolated and empathetic character. One way Nunn does this is through Feste's songs, especially "Come Away, Death". Ben Kingsley performs this song with a slow and mournful tone, his voice measured. When he sings "I am slain by a fair and cruel

maid" (2.4.52) Feste's brow furrows, and he looks off into the distance, giving the impression that these lines have an emotional impact on him. This delivery makes it seem as though Feste has indeed experienced the loss and heartbreak that he sings about, making it a stark contrast to the original play in which he sang for Orsino's entertainment, rather than contemplate his own experiences with love.

Nunn also uses Feste's realization of the effect of his role in Malvolio's humiliation to portray him as a Melancholy figure. When Feste reveals to Malvolio that he had a part in his humiliation, he says "I was one sir, in this interlude, one Sir Topas... do you remember, 'Madam, why laugh you at such a barren rascal, an you smile not, he's gagged'" (5.1.353-354), recalling Malvolio's own words about him. Rather than these words being filled with vengeance like you would expect them to be, Kingsley portrays Feste as regretful of the events that have transpired to the extent that Feste struggles to meet Malvolio's eyes as he says "and thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges." (5.1.354-355 Feste recognizes the hurt that has been caused to Malvolio and realizes the emotional repercussions of what began as a prank. This creates a melancholic tone by forcing the audience to realize the same; there is a level of suffering and emotional turmoil in what is supposed to be a comedic moment.

Another way that Nunn emphasizes the melancholic tone is through Malvolio's humiliation and emotional turmoil. The comedic subplot of the prank on Malvolio, played by Nigel Hawthorne, quickly turns to cruelty when he is locked away under the guise of madness. In the original play, Malvolio has a discussion with Feste, disguised as Sir Topas, before they all exit, leaving him locked up. However, in the film, Nunn made the decision to cut this part of the scene out. Instead, as the others are preparing to exit, Malvolio says "I am no more mad than you are", his voice strained and barely able to get the words out through his sobs as he calls out for Master Topas to free him. Hawthorne's execution of this scene takes the underlying tragedy and expands upon it, turning what was supposed to be a comedic scene into one of visible

distress and desperation. This creates a melancholic tone by reminding the audience of the cruelty of what is going on unnoticed while happier events are taking place simultaneously.

Malvolio's isolation following the events of his humiliation is also used to create a melancholic tone at the end of the film. The film ends with a joyous celebration of love; Olivia and Sebastian are married and Orsino and Viola are united. However, Malvolio is excluded from this joy and celebration. While all the other characters have found resolution and happiness by the end, Malvolio is left with bitterness and isolation. Instead of being included in the festivities, he can be seen leaving Olivia's house alone and with a downcast expression, the suitcase in his hand further emphasizing his isolation from the other characters. This short scene showcases the tragedy of what has happened to him, and his downfall as a respected member of Olivia's household. Nunn uses this scene to give a glimpse of sadness before continuing on to the celebration, showing that not all endings are happy ones.

In short, by emphasizing these melancholic undertones throughout his film, Nunn is able to create more relatable experiences and emotions for the audience. He makes it possible for the audience to feel for themselves the longing of Viola, the loneliness of Malvolio, and the heartbreak of Feste, while at the same time enjoying the celebration of the couples and the humor of Sir Toby and Andrew's antics. Through all of these characters and their experiences, Nunn works with the melancholic undertones that are already available to him through the original play and elaborates on them to create a film with incredible emotional depth, while still staying true to the play's comedic purpose.

## Works Cited

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