

Discuss the character and role of Feste.

Feste, or the Clown is by profession the jester to Olivia. He is a Fool in Shakespeare's comedy Twelfth Night. Throughout the play he is mentioned as a fool, but in the stage directions and the list of characters he is mentioned as the Clown. Only once in Iliv he is named as Feste by Curio, an attendant gentleman of Duke Orsino. Orsino's question requires him to have a personal name. Feste seems to frequent Olivia and Orsino's household rather too frequently for a servant. Feste earns his living by being generally witty, making pointed jokes, singing old songs and offering good advice under the layer of a cloak of foolishness. In spite of being a professional Fool, he often seems one of the wisest characters in the play (Shakespeare's Fools generally are, for example Lear's Fool). Under the cloak of foolishness, they are the wisest characters in the plays where they appear.

Feste is Olivia's licensed Fool, which means he literally has the license to say whatever he wants to say about anything or anyone. In fact, being licensed, he utters truths which look like foolery. He is a professional entertainer. As literary critics often point out, he seems to embody the spirit of Twelfth Night festivities, which are all about having a merry time. Feste has a genius for words, and has a knack for punning, witty repartee and word-play which he puts to good use in Twelfth Night. When Olivia chides him for his long absence, she says; 'Take the fool away.' The Clown immediately replies; 'Do you not hear, fellows? Take away the lady.' (Iv 36-37) What he implies is that the lady Olivia is a fool. He points out that Olivia's excessive mourning for his dead brother is foolish self-indulgence (leaving out the practical fact that she does this to avoid Orsino's courtship). As Cesario (the disguised Viola, another intelligent character) points out, even though Feste is a fool, he is the wisest person in Illyria: "This fellow is wise enough to play the fool"(III i 61). Actually, playing the comic role of a clown requires a lot of intelligence, skill and wit.

Feste's inclination for quickly analysing characters and situations, puts him in the position to point out the follies of those around him, while earning him laughter and money at the same time. In Ilv he notes Duke Orsino's extreme moodiness when he says 'thy mind is a very opal'. He compares the Duke's mind to the opal, which is of various colours; as does Orsino's moodiness. Even when he fools around with the rowdy Sir Toby, he also provides some shrewd comments on Sir Toby's excessive rowdiness which verges on being dangerous to himself. This seems to place Feste both inside and outside the play-world. He is very much a part of Twelfth Night's rowdy sub-plot activities. But he is also able to stand outside the make-believe world of Illyria: looking in as a detached observer. In this way, Feste seems to mediate between the audience and the characters on stage.

The Fool is a stock character in many Elizabethan comedies. But Twelfth Night Shakespeare deviates from the typical character of the jester to create Feste, a man who is more than just a Fool. Feste, the licensed Fool in Olivia's household, is wiser than most of the other characters of the play: and under the license of fooling comments wittily on the follies of those around him. Taking his remarks as mere tomfoolery, they pay no attention to what he says. But under the facade of fooling around, he provides keen analysis of characters (like Orsino, Olivia, Sir Toby) and of human life in general. In the play-world of Illyria, his only intelligent match is Viola, who can properly assess his character. Feste is an individual who cannot be simply categorised like other characters. He speaks wise words

under the guise of fooling, but can also cater to the demands of the major characters. For example, when Orsino asks for melancholy love songs, Feste sings the song 'Come away, come away death'. He has no fear of pointing out Olivia's folly to her face, engages himself in bantering word-play with the rowdy sub-plot characters, specially Sir Toby and Maria. Feste exists in some undefined way outside the boundary and frame of the idyllic world of Illyria. He enters scenes to observe, comment on and interact with the other inhabitants of the play-world. But ultimately, Feste is the only one who remains unaffected by the play's typically romantic-comic 'happy ending'. Rather, his ending song with its refrain 'For the rain it raineth every day' is a reminder of the negative aspects of life. He and Malvolio are the only two characters in the play who remain untouched by the happy atmosphere of Illyria: Feste for his wisdom, Malvolio for his excessive self-importance. Feste's ending song, touched with melancholy, signals the ending of Shakespeare's happy, romantic comedy phase. Geoffrey Bush proposes that the reason, in general, of the Fool remaining unaffected by the happy comic ending of a romantic comedy, is because the Fool is not in progress towards self-knowledge. Having full self-knowledge, the Fool is a static character. He preserves what he is, by ignoring a world rushing headlong towards weddings.

Bush, therefore, suggests that Feste remains in a state of perpetual stasis. He is caught in a position of immobility: where he must observe others continuing on with their lives, and developing their characters, which he himself does not need. But Bush does not take into account that such stasis might be crippling for a Fool like Feste. Trapped in a life that never changes, his words might begin to be touched by hints of bitterness, melancholy and dark undertones, that result from the loneliness of being confined in a cage of perpetual static selfhood. We will sum up with the short survey of the criticism of Feste's character in 20th century. The sentimentalism of Feste began in the 20th century. Middleton Murry compared his final loneliness on stage to that of the old servant Firs in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* quoting Adams's words in *As You Like It*: 'And unregarded age in corners thrown'. This attitude neglects Feste's primary dramatic significance; that of the professional Fool. As a licensed jester, he taunts the principal characters; as when he tells Orsino 'Now the melancholy gods protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta'. (Changeable taffeta means shot silk, its contrasting colours of warp and woof producing an effect of changing colour with the light falling on it. Changeable/shot silk is associated with love and its associated fickleness of mind.) Feste here is commenting on Orsino's self-indulgent love, melancholy, and fickleness of mind. Again, we must not forget his Sir Topas scene with Malvolio. But again, 20th century attitude to Feste and the overall view of *Twelfth Night* as Shakespeare's 'Farewell to Comedy' have helped us to distinguish another important aspect of Feste's character. Feste sets the tone of the play of a general overall movement from folly to potential wisdom; he highlights the negative aspects of life with its illness, sorrow and death through the recurrent 'wind and the rain'. His song 'come away death' and the final song with its reiterated 'the wind and the rain' bring us back from the Illyrian fantasy world of romance to the harsh life of everyday reality. This is the comic movement from romance to reality.