

Shakespeare At The Middle Temple

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WHEN the Shakespeare Guild made its annual Golden Quill award to Kenneth Branagh this year, they chose well in staging the award ceremony at the Middle Temple. There are genuine Shakespearean associations, and the Great Hall held some 500 celebrants. 'All that was most sonorous of name and title', as Evelyn Waugh wrote of another occasion, 'was there for the beano'. Place is authenticity, the experience we all yearn for. The Great Hall of the Middle Temple -- not open to the general public -- is a secular temple to Shakespeareans. There's more outside, for Shakespeare makes the pivotal scene in Part One of *Henry VI* take place in the Temple Garden (2.4). He imagines the quarrel of the roses to have started among a group of high-spirited aristocrats: 'Within the Temple Hall we were too loud;/The garden here is more convenient'. (3-4) Surely Shakespeare must have walked in the Temple Garden. But the grand association is with *Twelfth Night*.

'I delight in masques and revels sometimes altogether', says Sir Andrew Aguecheek (*Twelfth Night*, 1.3.108). It's his wistful tribute to a life of pleasure. Revels is a big word for the Elizabethans. The grind of daily life regularly exploded into festive mirth, whether determined by the calendar or a special event such as a wedding. The spirit of revelry haunts *Twelfth Night*; it's the inspiration for the subplot, the gulling of Malvolio. But which revels does the comedy aim at?

The question comes up with Shakespeare's 'occasional' plays. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was probably written for the Garter installation of April, 1597. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems to have been written with a noble wedding in mind. Philostrate is the Athenian equivalent of the Master of the Revels, and is ordered by Duke Theseus to 'Stir up the Athenian youth to merriment;/Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth'. (1.1.12) Theseus promises to wed Hippolyta 'with pomp, with triumph, and with revelling'. (1.1.19) We can't be sure of the occasion the play was written to grace: it might have been the wedding of Elizabeth Vere and the Earl of Derby (1595) or Elizabeth Carey and Thomas Berkeley (1596). And the same doubt occurs with *Twelfth Night*.

At first, this doubt seems misplaced. Surely *Twelfth Night* must have been written for a premier on Twelfth Night, January 6th? That was the argument of Leslie Hotson, who reckoned (in *The First Night of 'Twelfth Night'*) that the play was part of a gala entertainment at Court on January 6th 1601. He resurrected some remarkable diplomatic documents, including the eyewitness report of the Russian Ambassador, Grigori Mikulin, to his master, Tsar Boris Fedorovich. But none of the distinguished guests stooped to report such trifling details as the name of the play and its author. Hotson could not nail down the identification. Subsequent editors have been uniformly sceptical.

And now comes a new book, *Shakespeare and the Prince of Love: The Feast of Misrule in the Middle Temple* (Giles de la Mare Publishers, 2000). Its author, Anthony Arlidge, is a Queen's Counsel at the Middle Temple, where he is Master of the Entertainments. He is deeply versed in the archives and traditions of the Middle Temple. He puts forward a beguiling and persuasive thesis, that *Twelfth Night* had its premier in Middle Temple Hall on February 2nd, 1602.

Of a performance on that date we have sure knowledge. John Manningham was a fourth year student at the Middle Temple, one of the four Inns of Court. For February 2nd 1602 he made this entry in his diary: 'at our feast wee had a play called Twelve Night or What You Will...a

good practise in it to make the Steward believe his Lady widdowe was in Love with him by counterfeiting a letter as from his lady in generall termes...'. This has to be Shakespeare's comedy. Could it have been a first night performance?

It could, indeed, and Mr Arlidge builds up a very strong case based on circumstantial evidence. The date, February 2nd, was known to the Elizabethans as Candlemas. The feast at Candlemas was, says Anthony Arlidge, 'one of the two most important dates in the Inn calendar, when members of the Inn who had gained professional preferment were sumptuously entertained'. (p. 3) There's a strong thematic connection: Twelfth Night marked the end of the Christian festival, and exploited the mediaeval tradition of misrule. The records of student revels at the Inn showed them electing a Prince of Misrule (in the Middle Temple, the Prince of Love) whose reign ended on February 2nd. So the theme of misrule in *Twelfth Night* ('this uncivil rule', says Malvolio, 2.3.123) was apt for the Candlemas performance. A comedy of love would have suited a performance in the Kingdom of Love, ruled over by the student Prince D'Amour.

The play would have suited the commissioning authorities, too. John Shurley was Treasurer of the Middle Temple in 1602, and hoped to be made Serjeant (a well-rewarded honour). A splendid entertainment laid on by the Treasurer would impress the existing Serjeants. Shakespeare, of course, was by then known as the finest playwright in the land. A new comedy of his, put on by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, would not have come cheap. Mr Arlidge links the name of Shurley to the 'Sophy' (Shah) references in the play, for Robert and Anthony Sherley, family connections of Shurley, journeyed to Persia in 1599. Robert Sherley, 'Fencer to the Sophy', was painted by Van Dyck in 1622. Thus the 'Sophy' references are a compliment to the Treasurer and his renowned kin. It all fits together nicely.

So does the topography of the Hall. Feste has a striking description of the house in which Malvollo is imprisoned: 'Why, it hath bay windows transparent as barricadoes, and the clerestories towards the south-north are as lustrous as ebony'. (4.2.35-36) Shakespeare is clearly making an in-joke -- 'Inn-joke' is irresistible -- for his special audience. Anthony Arlidge puts it definitively: 'The building is plainly not a theatre and the description matches Middle Temple Hall, which has clerestories in the south and north walls, and bay-windows, and is exceptionally light for a building of its kind'. (p. 27) No doubt the staging kept Malvolio in some kind of shadow, so that he could not see what everyone else could. 'The joke is about a light building, and the Hall was one of the first to use new glass technology to produce a large light room'. (p. 116)

These and other allusions read as integral to the text, not bits stuck on to a pre-existent text. It does look as though Shakespeare had a particular audience very much in mind. Which would make *Twelfth Night* a custom-written, new play. There's a piece of contributory evidence here: Manningham started to write 'Mid', then crossed it out and wrote 'Twelve Night'. Was he unsure of the title of the play he had just seen? That too points towards a new play, whose title did not come automatically to the mind of the diarist.

Other allusions sound like contemporary spice, introduced to tickle legal palates. Sir William Knollys, Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household, has long been suspected to be the origin of Malvolio. They match at several points. He too was a 'Steward', and Malvolio's statement that he will quench his familiar smile 'with an austere regard of control' (2.5.55) sounds like a pun on Knollys' office. There are 'yellow stockings' allusions in a contemporary ballad mocking Knollys, who notoriously had made a fool of himself by his infatuation with Mary Fitton, a young lady at Court under his protection. He wanted to marry her, once his (much older) wife had died. But his wife remained obstinately alive, and Mary Fitton got pregnant by the Earl of Pembroke (who refused to marry her). The episode did nothing for Knollys' reputation.

Knollys = Malvolio is a set of outrageous hints, which would have been devoured by a sharp-witted audience. This is not a case, I suspect, where one leans on Fanny Trollope's great line in these matters: 'Of course, I draw from life, but I always pulp my acquaintances before serving them up. You never recognize a pig in a sausage'.

We are swimming through a shoal of allusions that would make sense to the lawyers. 'Curio' and 'Fabian', minor characters in the play, are nicknames which often occur in student satires and epigrams in the Middle Temple. That is, they were real people who would have been present at the performance. 'The lady of the Strachy married the yeoman of the wardrobe' turns out to be a clear hint at one William Strachey of Gray's Inn, who really had a business connection with the Yeoman of the Wardrobe (and whose private habits might have been satirized in 'Lady'). Heartless laughter from the audience at this point, as I guess. Shakespeare bonded with that audience. Anthony Arlidge makes the attractive suggestion that *Troilus and Cressida* (1603), a play often suspected of being written for an Inns of Court audience, makes an early strike for complicity. The Prologue says

our play

Leaps o'er the vaunt and firstlings of those broils,

'Could it be that this too is a pun? Modern lawyers refer to Inner and Middle without the addition of Temple'. (p. 111) Shakespeare never despised an easy laugh.

Beginning in the middle. It seems obvious that Shakespeare was at home with his Middle Temple audience, and that this implies a degree of familiarity, an ongoing social relationship. It might well have been nurtured at the Mermaid Tavern, by St Paul's, which was a meeting-place for literary men as well as lawyers. There was an immensely strong tradition of literary involvement at the Middle Temple: dramatists who were Middle Temple men included John Webster, John Marston, and John Ford. (Francis Beaumont was Inner Temple.) No one disputes that in 1602 the Middle Temple was at the heart of the London literary scene.

The staging of *Twelfth Night* would have taken full advantage of the Hall. One enters the Hall through one of two large doorways. These would have been the indispensable entrances to the acting space, stage right and stage left. There's a gallery above the entrance, which in principle could have been used as the upper stage (balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*, Harfleur wall in *Henry V*). But there's too much wood panneling fronting the gallery for the audience to get much of a view of the players, and anyway *Twelfth Night* does not call for an upper stage scene.

I can't altogether go along with Mr Arlidge on the staging. He believes that a stage was erected after the dinner and before the performance. This would be cumbersome and awkward, and I see no gain. Actors would have to mount up the rear steps to get on to the stage, not an ideal entrance. The audience would remain at ground level, no rake being possible. The gallery can be dismissed; the wooden screen makes it suitable only for musicians. Why not accept Peter Brook's 'empty space', and assume that the actors simply came in through the two entrances to play on a cleared space?

It all sounds like dinner theatre. A lavish feast is laid on for the worthies of the Middle Temple, with benches and tables set in the Hall. A signal is given, and the assembly breaks up, to explore the comfort zones and to see if the technology is as advanced as the glass. When people return, they find that the benches are now arranged in a horse-shoe facing the main entrances. Music is playing, up on the gallery. Orsino and his followers enter: 'If music be the food of love' -- a courtly bow here to the Prince of Love -- 'play on', and the audience applauds the compliment. They will also register 'that surfeiting,/The appetite may sicken and so die', which speaks directly to their condition. The musicians continue playing. The lawyers

settle down on their benches. 'Enough, no more./'Tis not so sweet now, as it was before', and the musicians fall silent. So do the watchers. Everything is a stage direction. The audience can now concentrate on 'O spirit of love...'. The first night of *Twelfth Night* has properly begun.

The Treasurer got his wish. Next year, under James I, he was appointed Serjeant, and knighted. I reckon he earned it.

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