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Practice exam question

‘Wise enough to play the fool’

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Guidance for the question on p. 8 of the magazine.

The opening of an answer

The role of Feste lies at the heart of *Twelfth Night* and is central to establishing its genre as a ‘feel-uneasy’ rather than a ‘feel-good’ comedy. The play’s success in the theatre relies upon the audience confronting Feste’s sharp and satirical words, while also enjoying the turmoil he helps to create. Considering his number of lines alone, Feste cannot be considered a minor character: he has 306 lines — only Olivia (314), Viola (335) and Sir Toby Belch (343) have more. His role is pivotal to the plot — he moves between the two households with ease, and through Robert Armin’s quickfire dialogue transforms Olivia from an inward-turning recluse, furious at her Fool’s absence, to an articulate and challenging mistress, ready for love (1.5.27–80). He banters with Viola/Cesario and shares much with the ambiguous nature of the heroine, who identifies the qualities needed by a Fool, perhaps recognising in the burden of this role her own dilemma (‘This is a practice/ As full of labour as a wise man’s art’, 3.1.55–56). This is most apparent in Viola’s veiled conversation with Orsino about her ‘sister’, prompted by Feste’s song ‘Come away, come away, death’ (2.4).

Feste’s songs give the play its mercurial moods — sometimes leading a catch, as with ‘Hold thy peace’ (2.3), at other times capturing Orsino’s mood or expressing Viola/Cesario’s hidden love (2.4). Quite unlike the physical fooling of Will Kempe, his predecessor in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Armin’s obscure and witty kind of fooling, as Charlotte Moore points out, gives Feste the power to ‘explore and exploit the boundary between sanity and madness’. This is seen most painfully in Act 4 Scene 2 when he torments Malvolio, imprisoned in a dark room. Shakespeare gives Feste the final song, as he exists in the ‘liminal space between the rest of the cast and the audience’ (Moore). By collaborating with Robert Armin, Shakespeare creates a cruel and riddling Fool, freeing the role to encompass revenge and alienation.

In structural terms, Feste is crucial to the play’s success. As Emma Smith suggests in her trick of finding the exact middle of a Shakespeare play to discover how its genre is negotiated, the opening of Act 3 Scene 1 — the conversation between Feste and Viola — although not crucial to the plot, allows the audience to see how this comedy is not about resolving muddle and confusion (as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) but about recognising how language can be played upon to mean conflicting things. As Feste declares: ‘To see this age! A sentence is but a chervil glove to a good wit — how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!’ (3.1.9–11). His absences also point to a play less about plot coherence than about game-playing and deception. As Moore notes, although Maria plans to have Feste join the on-stage audience to watch the effect of her forged letter on Malvolio (2.3.146), Shakespeare replaces him with Fabian; ‘[Feste’s] absence is mysterious; [he] doesn’t have to explain his actions.’

Feste is the chorus figure who delivers the play's bitter conclusion directly to the audience, a role that confirms his importance to the play's complexity and, ultimately, to its enduring success in performance. Analysing the placing and mood of his key scenes helps to chart the way the play veers into disturbing, rather than festive, territory. For example, his song 'Come away, come away, death,/ In sad cypress let me be laid' in Act 2 Scene 4 expresses the pain of Viola/Cesario's isolation and fear of oblivion, as she tells Orsino her 'sister's' history is 'A blank, my lord. She never told her love,/ But let concealment like a worm i'th' bud/ Feed on her damask cheek' (2.4.106–8). Another shift of mood, that twists the knife even more sharply than Sir Toby and Maria's imprisonment of Malvolio, is Feste's invented to-and-fro dialogue between himself (as the Fool) and a mimicked judgemental Sir Topas: 'Maintain no words with him, good fellow' (4.2.84). Feste's debate with Malvolio about sanity — Malvolio: 'I am as well in my wits, fool, as thou art.' Feste: 'But as well? Then you are mad indeed…' (4.2.73–76) — turns what could have been a funny scene into a tormenting one.

Although Shakespeare has Armin/Feste sing a ditty on leaving that references the harmless old Vice, a character from morality plays who carried not a real sword but one of flimsy wood, there is threat in the analogy with the devil, perhaps reminding the audience of the comic but also alarming sub-plot of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (1589–92). The paper he fetches for Malvolio to write to Olivia leads directly to Feste's revenge and Malvolio's impotent and embittered exit from the play: 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!' (5.1.335). Feste's final song sends the audience back into the real-life world of 'the wind and the rain', offering no solace at any stage of life. 'That's all one', the catchphrase that marks the play's final moment, signals a comedy in which 'what you will' (meaning desire) is a dangerous, painful subtitle rather than a festive free-for-all — underlining why Feste is far from a minor character and is central to the play's impact and success.

Commentary

This part-answer establishes a perceptive and confident engagement with the debate set up by the question firmly from the outset, fulfilling the assured command of argument needed for a mark in Band 5. Appropriately for this paper, it focuses on the genre of comedy and argues persuasively for Feste's centrality in reading *Twelfth Night* as an uneasy comedy that does not convince the audience by its apparently paired up, resolved ending. It uses Charlotte Moore's article 'Wise enough to play the fool' with skill, focusing on what Robert Armin brought to this part and how the staging of the Fool changed after Kempe left the company. The answer uses this material with a light touch, freeing the student to illuminate Feste's role in the comedy, rather than getting drawn into Armin's *Fool Upon Fools*.

The part-answer also addresses the 'far from being a minor character' aspect of the question by using the number of Feste's lines to establish his dominance. This approach is backed up by an exploration of how Feste establishes the mood of the play through his songs. The close attention to how meanings are shaped in literary texts enables the response to demonstrate the perception and sensitivity for a Band 5 mark. Rather than relegating the songs to entertainment, expected in a festive comedy, it explores their focus on death and how love is bound up with loss, as in the line from 'O Mistress mine' in Act 3 Scene 2 — 'Journeys end in lovers meeting' — as well as in the painful song discussed in the answer in Act 2 Scene 4.

By tackling Feste's role through an analysis of the structure of the comedy, the student can develop their argument across the whole text, a requirement for a high-band response. The answer refers to and analyses scenes from every act of the play to support its thesis that it is Feste who drives the plot (an unusual claim), and how his shifts of tone — as with Armin's mix of 'obscure, riddling and often preachy' fooling (Van Es, quoted in Moore) — also sends the genre into a disturbing, cruel kind of

comedy. The close reading of the Sir Topas scene allows the student to reflect on this argument in detail, as it establishes the connection between this moment in Act 4 and the final minutes of the play when Feste triumphs over Malvolio: 'Thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges' (5.1.353–54). The use of Emma Smith's 'trick' helps to establish the way the central (apparently incidental) scene between Viola and Feste signals the kind of play we are watching.

This part-answer is sophisticated and assured when it discusses the significance and influence of the contexts in which the play was first written and performed. This is evident not only in its confident handling of the significance of Robert Armin's role in collaborating with Shakespeare on Feste's part but also in the suggestion of how the role of Feste in *Twelfth Night* might have reminded Jacobean audiences of other plays, such as the role of the old Vice in popular morality plays, and the reference to the comic subplot of *Dr Faustus*. These references give the answer depth and authority.

What marks this part-answer out is how it responds to the central argument imaginatively. A more straightforward answer might have taken the examiner chronologically through Feste's journey or set up an argument that sees him as an entertainer rather than a central player. The approach of this student allows the answer to develop its thesis, supported by tightly-focused close readings of key scenes. It might have gone on to develop an analysis of the antagonism between Malvolio and Feste that starts with Olivia's question to her steward — 'What think you of this fool, Malvolio? Doth he not mend?' (1.5.60) — and ends with Feste's triumphant quoting of Malvolio's attack: 'But do you remember — "Madam, why laugh you at such a barren rascal, and you smile not, he's gagged?"' (5.1.352–54). This line of argument would have reinforced the thesis of this answer that Feste is indeed crucial to the success of the comedy. The Viola/Feste parallel that is mentioned in the introduction might also be worth a paragraph later in the answer.

Above all, the part-answer is mature and perceptive in its handling of the argument and shows an informed personal and creative response to the question, with assured use of terminology — for example, the way it sees Feste as a chorus figure — and its sophisticated engagement with the genre of comedy.