

# Amusing Effects of Speech Acts: An Interpretation of Maria's Marriage in *Twelfth Night*

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## Introduction

Shakespearean dramas have been performed in different ways and studied from different angles for hundreds of years. A massive amount of research has been done on the language of Shakespeare and the research has given better understanding, for example, of the various kinds of figure of speech, puns and malapropism. This has provided further clarity of the text and spurred further research. There are traditional and convincing interpretations for each scene of each play. However, for the modern stage, it seems that more and different interpretations can be found. A Pragmatic approach is one of the effective ways to analyze the text with a fresh eye. It not only can give objectivity to the interpretation, but reading the text as 'dialogue,' paying attention to the speech acts, politeness or turn taking, allows us to infer the meaning of the utterances and imagine what could be happening between the characters on the stage. This paper presents a pragmatic analysis, especially applying speech act theory to the dialogue from *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, written around 1601–1602.

## 1. Speech Act and Drama

Speech Act Theory, developed and introduced by J. L. Austin in his book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), and further developed by J. R. Searle and others, have been applied to literature, including Shakespearean dramas. As Mick Short states in his explanation that 'What works for the real world also works for the fictional world of the play' (Short, 1996:195), this theory allows us to pay more attention to the relationship between the speaker and the hearer and also what the utterance means, rather than the meaning of the words. His brief example about *King Lear* (1607?) shows how effectively speech act theory can explain what is happening in a dramatic world: 'The intended perlocutionary effects of Lear's utterances at the very beginning of the play are almost always the same as the actual effects. But by the end

of Act II there is almost no match at all between his intended and actual perlocutionary effects' (Short, 1996:197). This confirms that a mismatch between the intended and actual perlocutionary effects could be tragic in a very serious situation, especially in a drama.

The analyses of *Twelfth Night* conducted in this paper attempt to demonstrate that in a comical setting, a mismatch between the intended and actual perlocutionary effects of a speech act can produce an entertaining outcome. Focusing on the words of Sir Toby and his speech acts, this paper will highlight amusing effects of speech acts in two different cases: one is when the actual perlocutionary effect is more powerful than the intended perlocutionary effect, and the other is when an accidental hearer reacts to the speech act more quickly than the intended hearer.

## **2. *Twelfth Night***

This play is undoubtedly a romantic comedy, which ends with the happy marriages of the main characters, between Countess Olivia and the twin brother Sebastian, and Duke Orsino and the twin sister Viola. However, Malvolio's final state is controversial; after being humiliated, mocked and losing what he has treasured, he leaves the stage alone before the celebration of the multiple weddings starts. Often his final state is compared to that of Shylock's in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-98?), but the crucial difference is that unlike Shylock, Malvolio leaves the stage at the end of the play with words of threat, 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!' (5.1.371).<sup>1</sup> This utterance is ambiguous: it could be a speech act of threatening, or only the grumbling of a loser, or another kind of speech act. In any event, such words can leave a considerable degree of bitterness that may ruin the festive spirit.

Another important issue discussed in this paper is the marriage between Maria and Sir Toby. Maria is Countess Olivia's waiting-gentlewoman. She is extremely sensible and faithful to her mistress, but behind her back, Maria is the one who initiates the scheme to play a prank on the arrogant steward Malvolio. Since her marriage to Sir Toby is mentioned only once in the final act by the words of Fabian, a member of Olivia's household, it can be interpreted as his fabrication. In fact, The Globe's 2012 production, directed by Tim Carroll, emphasized the doubtfulness of Fabian's words. Paul Chahidi's Maria, who hears Fabian's words about her marriage, shows an expression of complete surprise. It is an entertaining direction; however, since Maria is on the stage, Malvolio's final remark at his exit sounds real with bitterness and desperateness.

The following analyses will illuminate the fact that Sir Toby is head over heels in love with Maria, and they end up getting married. Fabian's speech, which reports their marriage, will also be examined carefully. The final interpretation of this paper will allow Maria to be gone with Sir Toby before the denouement, dodging the meeting of Malvolio's anger.

### 3. Maria's Challenge

In Shakespearean plays, it is extremely rare for the characters to be called by more than one name. Maria's name is mentioned in the dialogue all together 10 times with two minor variations. In official situations, people call her 'Maria,' she introduces herself as 'Mary,' and only Sir Toby refers to her 'Marian,' probably with some sort of affection. In Act 2, Scene 3, Sir Toby asks for the same thing twice: first time he says 'Marian, I say, a stoup of wine' (2.3.13), and next time 'A stoup of wine, Maria' (2.3.17). Then right after this, Malvolio calls the same person 'Mistress Mary' (2.1.18). Such a confusion is obviously entertaining and artificial. This paper suggests that her names are designed to point to the sound which is associated with the words 'merry,' and 'marry,' emphasizing the importance of her happy marriage.

Sir Toby Belch, the other key character of this paper, is a drunkard, as his name implies, and jobless bachelor who is staying in Olivia's house. He always calls Olivia 'my niece' (10 times), and Olivia always calls Sir Toby 'my cousin' (4 times including 'my coz'). This suggests that Sir Toby is indeed Olivia's uncle, but most probably, Olivia holds a solid belief that she need not treat him as her senior because of his irrational behavior and undisciplined lifestyle.

The relationship between Maria and Sir Toby is first mentioned by Feste, Olivia's jester, in Act 1, Scene 5. After enjoying a witty conversation with Maria, the jester abruptly and casually says to her, 'If Sir Toby would leave drinking, thou wert as witty a piece of Eve's flesh as any in Illyria' (1.5.24-26). The subjunctive mood is used to indicate doubt or unlikelihood, and in this case, it signifies unlikelihood. Although Sir Toby is a kinsman of Countess Olivia, he is a habitual drunk: to whom Maria warns that 'That quaffing and drinking will undo you' (1.3.13), and who answers that 'I'll drink to [my niece] as long as there is a passage in my throat and drink in Illyria' (1.3.36-38). So, even if Feste finds Maria and Sir Toby would make a good match, it is natural for him to imagine that Sir Toby would not leave drinking easily.

Maria's response to Feste's words is 'Peace, you rogue, no more o' that' (1.3.27). Then, Olivia and

Malvolio's entrance leads them to change their topic quickly. In such a manner, this exchange is independent of the rest of the dialogue, and makes it hard to infer what kind of speech act Feste performs, and to see its effect on Maria at that time. However, the words Feste employs are telling. The word 'witty' could fire up Maria's self-esteem as a woman of intelligence, and the word 'Eve' could evoke an image of a fatal bond between a man and a woman, and the word 'flesh' could open her eyes to her physical attractiveness. Accordingly, this paper suggests that the speech act Feste performs in this scene is that of challenging; a challenge for Maria to give full scope to her ability to be the wife of Sir Toby. Although she replies brusquely, she is probably too embarrassed to comprehend the purpose of Feste's utterance, which is not simply to make a joke. Maria's actions after this incident lucidly explain that Feste's speech act has achieved a profound effect on her. To be more precise, this paper interprets that Maria purposefully echoes Sir Toby's complaints and initiates the plot of scourging Malvolio, in order to display her wits and talents and gain the love of Sir Toby. In other words, the aim of the scheme against Malvolio is much more complicated than it appears. Feste does not mention their relationship again, but fully cooperates with Maria and Sir Toby on their plot. Moreover, he reminds Malvolio how he has treated the jest with contempt and gives the reason why the arrogant steward was teased that 'the whirligig of time brings in his revenges' (5.1.369-70), separating the couple from Olivia's reproach. Probably he could be the one who is most surprised and pleased to see how Sir Toby is charmed by Maria in the process of their prank.

#### **4. Sir Toby's Challenge**

When Sir Toby and Maria first appear together on the stage, they talk at cross-purposes. On behalf of her Lady Olivia, Maria asks him to 'confine [him]self within the modest limits of order' (1.3.7-8), but Sir Toby does not take her words seriously. He makes puns on the word 'confine' for 'dress up,' and professes to keep on drinking. However, after Maria openly shows her displeasure with Malvolio and comes up with a prank on him, Sir Toby's passionate admiration for her begins.

He calls out to Maria, who is going back to her room, with an extraordinary expression, 'Good night, Penthesilea' (2.3.172). Since 'Penthesilea' is the name of the Queen of the Amazon, adversary of Achilles in the Trojan wars in a Greek myth, his intention seems to admire her aggressive spirit. Next time when he finds her, he says, 'Here comes the little villain. How now, my metal of India?' (2.5.11-12). The adjective 'little' is often used to convey an appealing diminutiveness or express condescending attitude or 'an

affectionate,' and 'the villain' in a play is the main bad character, which is powerful and essential. Dropping these hints, he continues to call her 'My metal of India,' which is almost the same as telling her that she is 'my gold from the bountiful mines of India.'<sup>2</sup> In addition, when he is asked to follow her to 'see the fruits of the sport' (2.5.190), he answers, 'To the gates of Tartar, thou most excellent devil of wit' (2.5.199-200). One of the meanings of 'devil' is 'fighting spirit,' so the expression 'most excellent devil of wit' could be the highest compliment for a brilliant tactician like Maria. Employing such distinctive and bombastic expressions, Sir Toby is not simply playing with words or flirting with Maria, but presumably performing a speech act of promising, telling her that he would treat her like a legendary queen and bright gold. Although actual effect cannot be observed instantly because she doesn't respond verbally, taking into consideration that his speech act moves on to the next stage, and that they finally get married, this paper suggests that all the effects of Sir Toby's speech acts are saved for a greater dramatic effect.

Having no reaction from Maria, Sir Toby utters even more passionate and direct words. When he is watching how Malvolio falls for Maria's trick with Fabian and Sir Andrew, he says 'I could marry this wench for this device-' (2.5.176). Considering a marriage of the time, it is an eccentric idea that a noble man wants to marry an employee of a house. However, as Keir Elam notes that 'This is virtually a declaration of intent by Sir Toby, who will indeed marry Maria at the end of the play' (249), this is a speech act of declaration. His following words prove that he really means it: 'And ask no other dowry with her but such another jest' (2.5.178-79). This is amazing, given the examples of Petruccio in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1592?) or Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* (1594?), who strive to marry a woman of great wealth in order to avoid total bankruptcy. Sir Toby should be considered as the poorest among these men, having not even a house of his own. His next utterance, 'Wilt thou set thy foot o'my neck?' (2.5.182) is a sensual expression, and together with the following one, 'Shall I play my freedom at tray-trip and become thy bonds slave?' (2.5.184-85), Sir Toby appears to be inviting Maria passionately for a relation between a man and a woman, a real marriage, although his expressions might sound like jokes. This paper insists that Sir Toby means exactly what he says, and that he is performing a speech act of proposing in the unique way.

## **5. A Hinderance to His Speech Acts**

As discussed in the previous section, Sir Toby performs speech acts aiming to catch Maria's

attention. Unlike ordinary situations, Maria does not do or say anything responding directly to his speech acts. Consequently, actual effects caused by the acts can only be confirmed much later than expected. There are two causes which can be conjectured: firstly, Maria's actions are motivated by the words of Feste to intoxicate Sir Toby not by alcohol but by something else to keep him sober, and let him marry her. Therefore, she restrains herself from showing her emotions and feelings toward him. Secondly, there is almost always someone who opens his mouth before she does. This section attempts to clarify how amusingly Sir Toby's speech acts fail in the context.

After dropping a cleverly forged letter as Olivia's in the way of Malvolio, Maria leaves the place. The conversation takes place right after the exit of Malvolio, who believes that the letter is from Olivia to show her love to him. He is not suspicious at all about the contents of the letter either, which encourages him to be openly hostile to her kinsman and servants; moreover, to wear yellow stockings, cross-gartered, and a smile for her. Sir Toby, Fabian, and Sir Andrew are crowing like roosters, witnessing the great success of the scheme of the counterfeit letter to tease Malvolio.

FABIAN. I will not give my part of this sport for a pension  
of thousands to be paid from the Sophy. 175

SIR TOBY. I could marry this wench for this device-

SIR ANDREW. So could I too.

SIR TOBY. And ask no other dowry with her but such  
another jest.

*Enter Maria.*

SIR ANDREW. Nor I neither. 180

FABIAN. Here comes my noble gull-catcher.

SIR TOBY. [*to Maria*] Wilt thou set thy foot o'my neck?

SIR ANDREW. Or o'mine either?

SIR TOBY. Shall I play my freedom at tray-trip and become  
thy bondslave? 185

SIR ANDREW. I'faith, or I either?

SIR TOBY. Why, thou hast put him in such a dream that  
when the image of it leaves him he must run mad. (2.5.174-88)

The utterance of Fabian in lines 174 and 175 is overblown, emphasizing the pleasure he can enjoy from playing a prank on the vain Malvolio. Sir Toby also shows intense excitement, but his words 'I could marry this wench for this device-' are irrelevant to Fabian's bombastic remark. It reveals that the focus of Sir Toby is not on the 'sport or teasing' but the schemer Maria.<sup>3</sup> Since the words of Sir Toby is completely unconnected to Fabian's, and Maria is not present, it should be natural to interpret his utterance as a speech act of stating or declaring, not intending his direct hearer/hearers to take an action. However, his drinking companion, Sir Andrew Aguecheek responds to it saying 'So could I too' (2.5.177). This statement is extremely ridiculous because Sir Andrew is staying in Olivia's house with an aim to woo the lady. Ignoring his words, Sir Toby continues, 'And ask no other dowry with her but such another jest' (2.5.178-79). Again, Sir Andrew responds immediately, 'Nor I neither' (2.5.180). Although Sir Toby knows well that Sir Andrew lacks intelligence, there is little possibility for him not to be irritated by such absurd statements. It is highly probably that the articulate talker would begin to rebuke the witless if Maria does not appear on the stage. The moment Sir Toby notices her, he utters, 'Wilt thou set thy foot o'my neck?' (2.5.182). Undoubtedly, it is not a kind of question a decent woman expects a man to ask. Maria might need some time to comprehend what it means and how to react. However, in no time, Sir Andrew utters 'Or o'mine either?' (2.5.183). Even if she does not take much notice of what he says, his utterance can produce an effect to deflect her attention away from the words and intention of Sir Toby. If she notices the absurdity of his words and the situation, she may turn all her attention to Sir Andrew from Sir Toby's approach. The next utterance of Sir Toby 'Shall I play my freedom at tray-trip and become thy bonds slave?' (2.5.184-85) is a unique one, but again Sir Andrew takes the credit for himself, saying 'I' faith, or I either?' (2.5.186). As a result, in lines 186 and 187, Sir Toby switches his topic to the scheme against Malvolio, without seeing any response from Maria to his passionate speech acts.

As observed above, Sir Toby's speech act causes not his intended hearer but his companion, the witless Sir Andrew, to respond immediately with completely nonsensical agreement. The totally unexpected responses not only reduce the effect of Sir Toby's speech act, but force him to speak even more hyperbolically. Although any perceptible effects can be observed from the words Maria utters, they end up with marriage, as the result of Feste's challenge, allowing Sir Toby to say 'I hate a drunken rogue' (5.1.197) before his final exit.

## 6. The Complex Plea of Fabian

There is no line to describe how Maria and Sir Toby end up. Sir Toby makes a boisterous exit in Act 5, Scene 1, being drunk and injured and snarling at Sir Andrew who offers his help. It is immediately prior to the scene in which twins stand on the stage together for the first time, and all the tricks and misunderstandings begin to be cleared up. On that account, Sir Toby is not on the stage when his mischievous prank on Malvolio is brought to light. As for Maria, her last exit is, in the modern editions, marked in the middle of Act 4, Scene 2, immediately after Sir Toby utters ‘Come by and by to my chamber’ (4.2.70). From that point forward, she does not speak even a single word, and on top of that there is no apparent sign of her existence among the characters; therefore, it is natural to interpret that she does not appear on the stage again. As seen from the above, both Maria and Sir Toby disappear from the play before the denouement.

There is an incident which changes the relationship between Olivia and Sir Toby drastically in Act 4, Scene 1. Olivia becomes infuriated over her uncle who is fighting with a bare sword against Sebastian, mistakenly believing the young man for her dear Cesario.

OLIVIA. Hold, Toby! On thy life I charge thee hold.

SIR TOBY. Madam.

45

OLIVIA. Will it be ever thus? Ungracious wretch,

Fit for the mountains and the barbarous caves,

Where manners ne’er were preached. Out of my sight! (4.1.44-48)

Olivia orders her uncle to hold, calling him ‘Toby’ without any honorific title. Her use of ‘thy’ and ‘thee’ in line 44 also suggests that she ceases to treat him with tolerance. Overwhelmed by her rage, Sir Toby answers ‘Madam,’ which is the expression he uses only in this situation. However, it does not help her to calm down, and allows her to continue to fume with rage until she shouts ‘Out of my sight!’ (4.1.48).

There is no description to make Olivia’s real intention inferable, but the words of Sir Toby in Act 4 explain that he has taken her words seriously. In this scene, Maria asks Feste to disguise himself as a priest to tease Malvolio, and calls Sir Toby. He enjoys Feste’s acting and Malvolio’s reactions, and then expansively praises Feste in his usual style. However, the following words of Sir Toby shows that he is not



as boisterous as he used to be.

SIR TOBY [*to Feste*] To him in thine own voice, and bring 65  
me word how thou find'st him. I would we were well  
rid of this knavery. If he may be conveniently delivered,  
I would he were, for I am now so far in offence with my  
niece that I cannot pursue with any safety this sport to  
the upshot. Come by and by to my chamber. (4.2.66-71) 70  
*Exit [with MARIA]*

Sir Toby gives instruction to Feste, expressing his wish to discontinue teasing Malvolio inoffensively. Then he tells the reason why he cannot continue to see the outcome of the sport in lines 68 and 69 that 'I am now so far in offence with my niece.' It suggests that he finds himself being not in the position to do whatever he pleases in Olivia's house anymore, and more importantly that he is preparing for a change. Finally, he utters 'Come by and by to my chamber' and exits with Maria.

This utterance of Sir Toby is controversial in terms of whether he addresses to Feste or Maria. Elam mentions the strong influence of 1969 RSC production which followed the interpretation of the 1920 Cambridge edition, that the utterance of Sir Toby is an indication that the couple are already married, although his interpretation is different. He affirms in his note that 'it is surely more plausible for Sir Toby to tell Feste himself to bring him word how he finds Malvolio, after which he goes off with Maria (whose exit is not marked in F but who fails to speak again), leaving the clown to go about his task' (312).

Roger Warren states similar idea that 'This is surely addressed to Feste, like the rest of the speech: he is to report back to Sir Toby in his room' (195), but his following statement is questionable.

It has been conjectured that the words are spoken to Maria, either because they are already married, or because they are to be married there; and this strained interpretation has been given currency through John Barton's long-running and influential 1969-71 RSC staging, in which an ageing Maria, after hanging around during the play hoping for attention from a boorish Sir Toby, was at last given the invitation she had been waiting for. (195)



Such an utterance of Fabian could be a surprise for everyone. He suddenly interrupts Olivia even sharing her line, and moreover, speaks in verse. It is most unusual for a servant's conduct; therefore, it indicates that he is in an urgent and critical situation. He begins very politely, calling Olivia 'good madam' and asking her to listen to him. In *Twelfth Night*, the expression 'good madam' is used only three times, and the other two are uttered by Cesario (Viola) in weighty situations for Olivia. The first one, 'Good madam, let me see your face' (1.5.188), causes Olivia to unveil herself and allows Cesario (Viola) to gaze fixedly at her, resulting in her falling in love with him (her). The second one, 'And so, adieu, good madam; never more / Will I my master's tears to you deplore' (3.1.146-7) makes her so seriously upset that she sends her servant after him (her), gives him (her) a jewel with her picture, and begs him (her) twice to 'come again tomorrow' (3.4.177, 183). Thus, although 'good madam' is a common phrase, it is probable that it functions as a signal for Olivia to have some more shocking words which may change her world.

The reason for his speech is explained in lines 351 and 352 that he does not wish to spoil the 'pleasant hour' by a fight or quarrel; however, he must have a different reason because the letter which trapped Malvolio was just determined to have been written by Maria. Together with Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste, Fabian has enjoyed teasing Malvolio. In the situation that only Maria is about to be accused, what Fabian says sound natural but is amazing. First, he 'confesses' that he and Sir Toby set the device against Malvolio, which is not true because the plotters are Maria and Sir Toby. Second, he 'confesses' the reason that they had borne a grudge against him for his obstinate and uncivil qualities, which is verisimilar. Next, 'Maria writ / The letter' (5.1.356-57) is true, but 'at Sir Toby's great importance' (5.1.357) is not. Maria took the initiative in counterfeiting Olivia's handwriting to tease Malvolio. Then in line 358, he adds 'In recompense whereof he hath married her.' This utterance is thus problematic. Since the reason why Maria wrote the letter is not 'at Sir Toby's great importance' (5.1.357), 'In recompense whereof' does not hold true. Therefore, it can be said that the rest of the line is also not true: the marriage between Maria and Sir Toby is a fabrication of Fabian. Or, it is also reasonable to interpret that the twists in Fabian's words, which are probably intended to direct Malvolio's anger toward himself, do not necessarily suggest that the rest of the line is also an invention. Line 359 is also confusing. The expression 'sportful malice' is an oxymoron; the conjunction of two contradictory terms does not deliver a clear meaning. Moreover, 'it was followed' implies that Sir Toby married Maria before they carry their plan through, which is also a new piece of information. The last three lines, from 360 to 362, emphasizes that what they

have done to Malvolio is as bad as he has done to them. As seen from the above, the purpose of his speech is unquestionably to soften up Olivia's heart so that she would not allow Malvolio to inflict revenge on Maria and others, including himself. In other words, he is performing a speech act of pleading. In this situation, an actual perlocutionary effect can be observed because Olivia turns to Malvolio and says, 'Alas, poor fool, how have they baffled thee!' (5.1.363), which displays her pity for him, rather than her anger against those who gulled him.

Thus, the information about the marriage between Sir Toby and Maria appears to be used to save the situation, but the analyses conducted in this paper strongly stress that their marriage should happen, following their active endeavors to attract attention and gain love from the other. Their relationship is a real romance in this comedy, unlike protagonists', who get married by mistake or a chain of events. In addition, the analyses encourage an interpretation in which Maria is absent from the stage at the end. The utterance of Malvolio 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!' (5.1.371) appeals strongly, so whether his chief enemy is there, or has gone somewhere with her loved one, can make a considerable difference, affecting the overall impression about the seriousness of the play. Maria's absence can reduce the effectiveness of Malvolio's final words, and enable to interpret them as a speech act of exclaiming, rather than threatening.

## **Conclusion**

This paper attempted to highlight the amusing effects of speech acts observed in William Shakespeare's comedy, *Twelfth Night*. A speech act, like any other act, does not always achieve its intended effect, but usually the speaker can receive a response of some kind from the intended hearer. In this play; however, Sir Toby cannot perceive any effects from his intended hearer Maria after performing speech acts. The analyses proved two main causes that she does not give any verbal reply, and that his companion's nonsensical repetition of his words hinder his communication with Maria. Fortunately for Sir Toby, his constant efforts come to fruition before the play ends. In other words, his intended and actual perlocutionary effects match only later. Therefore, it may be important to expect to see the effects of speech acts not only the time of utterances, especially in a play like Shakespeare's in which many characters undergo great changes throughout the play. This paper also revealed that when different kinds of speech acts are performed by different people one after another, highly amusing effects can be expected.

## Notes

1. Dialogues from *Twelfth Night* are quoted from 2008 version of Arden Shakespeare, edited by Keir Elam.
2. In *1 Henry IV* (1598?), Mortimer describes Glyndwr 'as bountiful /As mines of India' (3.1.164-65).
3. A similar incident can be observed when Malvolio is reading the letter written by Maria aloud: Fabian says 'A fustian riddle,' then Sir Toby mutters 'Excellent wench, say I.' (2.5.107-8)

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