Marriage in the Middle

If some of Shakespeare's romantic comedies ostensibly hold out marriage as a comic closure and then in fact fail to provide it, others of them more seriously disrupt the expected pattern by having it take place too long before the end to provide a proper termination of events. Very early marriages can be found in *All's Well that Ends Well*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice* and in *Twelfth Night* (Olivia and Sebastian, and, although we are not aware of it, Maria and Sir Toby too are married well before the end); and in each case, form is tied closely to content as Shakespeare uses the unconventional structure of the play to mirror the unconventionality of the relationships he depicts in them. In two further plays, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Comedy of Errors*, marriage can be said to provide formal closure without being the main focus of emotional release, since in each case it is a subsidiary couple who marry at the end rather than one of the character-groupings on whom our main interest has been focused.

**TWELFTH NIGHT**

Formal unconventionality is perhaps most blatantly apparent in *Twelfth Night*. When Olivia proposes to Sebastian she not only inverts the normal gender roles which, as Helena reminds Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, require female passivity and male initiative; she also makes a nonsense of the whole issue of consent, so crucial in sixteenth-century marriage theory, when she marries a man about whose identity she is mistaken. When we first see Olivia, on Viola's initial visit to her, she is veiled; now it is Sebastian who is, metaphorically, veiled, concealed behind the fictive, sketchily developed (in Olivia's eyes, at least) persona of Cesario. The legality of the ceremony is stressed – Olivia, unlike Rosalind, provides a priest and a chantry (Juliet Dusinberre suggests that 'Shakespeare smiles at Olivia, wedding in the chapel she...
used for mourning’), and the priest is careful to point out the unquestionable legitimacy of the proceedings:

    A contract of eternal bond of love,
    Confirm’d by mutual joinder of your hands,
    Attested by the holy close of lips,
    Strengthen’d by interchangement of your rings,
    And all the ceremony of this compact
    Seal’d in my function, by my testimony…

Nevertheless, this, perhaps the most pointedly proper and complete marriage ceremony in the Shakespearean canon, sits oddly alongside the confusions and uncertainties surrounding the actual identities of the participants, never mind their motivations and the extent of their commitment.

Olivia, already anomalous in exercising sole rule over a household containing men who are awkwardly and unhappily dependent on her, becomes doubly so when she explicitly defines Orsino as the ideal of Renaissance manhood but enfolds her very eulogy within a double rejection of this paragon:

    Your lord does know my mind, I cannot love him.
    Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble,
    Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth;
    In voices well divulg’d, free, learn’d, and valiant,
    And in dimension, and the shape of nature,
    A gracious person. But yet I cannot love him.

(I.V.261–6)

She finds herself, instead, attracted to the androgynous figure of Viola-as-Cesario, of whom Orsino has so recently offered a word-picture of his own:

    For they shall yet belie thy happy years,
    That say thou art a man; Diana’s lip
    Is not more smooth and rubious: thy small pipe
    Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,
    And all is semblative a woman’s part.

(I. IV.30–4)