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Immersion dans *La Nuit des rois*

The sound and the break: Immersion and its recoil in *Twelfth Night*

Immersion émotionnelle

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that *Twelfth Night* employs a distinctive formal mechanism, *emotional recoil*, to repeatedly engage and disrupt the audience's immersion. By referencing shipwreck and survival imagery, I distinguish submersion (complete overwhelm) from immersion (moving forward within a medium). The play creates immersive tension through sound, rhetoric, and the anticipation of recognition, only to break it before sustained absorption can occur. I analyse this pattern – the interplay of sound and interruption – in four key scenes: Orsino's opening speech, the shoreline scene, Sebastian's return, and the recognition scene. Referencing Trevor Nunn's 1996 film adaptation, I illustrate how the play trains viewers to experience affective oscillation, maintaining suspension rather than settling into a fixed mood. Comparing the play to both the Jonsonian concept of comic purgation and theological ideas of Epiphany and baptism, the essay presents emotional recoil as a guiding formal principle that manages the audience's absorption from start to finish.

KEYWORDS

Twelfth Night, emotional recoil, submersion, affective oscillation, sound and break, absorption, Trevor Nunn, Epiphany, baptism, shipwreck

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse comment *La Nuit des rois* met en œuvre un mécanisme formel distinct, le recul émotionnel, par lequel l'immersion du spectateur est suscitée, modulée et suspendue. À partir de l'imagerie du naufrage et de la survie, l'étude distingue la submersion, entendue comme un engloutissement total, de l'immersion, définie comme une entrée dans un milieu qui porte et entraîne. La pièce génère une tension immersive par le son, la rhétorique et l'anticipation de la reconnaissance, avant d'en suspendre l'effet afin d'empêcher une absorption prolongée. Ce processus est analysé à quatre moments clés : le discours d'ouverture d'Orsino, la scène du rivage, le retour de Sebastian et la scène de reconnaissance. L'adaptation de Trevor Nunn (1996) montre comment la pièce entraîne le spectateur dans une oscillation affective. En confrontant la pièce à la purge comique de Jonson, à l'Épiphanie et au baptême, l'article présente le recul émotionnel comme principe formel directeur.

MOTS-CLÉS

La nuit des rois ou *ce que vous voudrez*, recul émotionnel, submersion, oscillation affective, Son et rupture, absorption, Trevor Nunn, Épiphanie, baptême, naufrage

Twelfth Night opens with Orsino already affectively immersed and, at the scene's close, he makes a deliberate choice to carry that immersion outdoors, into his gardens. While he walks off to immerse himself further in the luxury of the palace grounds and his moods of love, a shipwreck nearly claims the twins – nearly, but not quite. In Act 1, Scene 2, Viola is ashore, disoriented but unmistakably a fortunate survivor. By Act 2, scene 1, Sebastian stands before us, alive. The opening scenes thus furnish the play with a lexicon that implies two states of being in a medium: submersion and immersion. Submersion – from *submergere*, to plunge under, to disappear from sight, but also to be overwhelmed or “whelmed,” that is, to sink beyond retrieve – is a state the twins escape. Immersion – from *immergere*, to plunge, dip into or yield to a medium or state of action or thought that carries the subject along – is the state they enter. Viola commits to Orsino's service (1.2.52), and Sebastian to his journey to court (2.1.38-39).

The term *immersion* has, in recent decades, accrued a theoretical weight beyond this local, figurative sense. Across cognitive poetics, phenomenologies of theatrical presence, and immersive theatre studies¹, it describes a sense of transport: spectators are carried into a fictional world and held there, their critical distance dissolved. Marie-Laure Ryan gives the model its canonical form: immersion is “the state of being mentally transported to the world of the story... a state that results from the temporary loss of awareness of one's actual environment.”² What unites these accounts, for all their differences, is the assumption that absorption³ – the spectator's full uptake by the fictional world – is something to be secured and maintained – a condition the work builds and the audience enters. The question *Twelfth Night* poses is whether immersion must be understood on these terms. Is immersion a normative state that characters and spectators fail to achieve, or a formal operation the play deliberately performs and then curtails? This essay argues for the latter.

Immersion, one might expect, would occupy a central place in the critical readings of *Twelfth Night*. Yet the term is seldom invoked, and when it is, as in Karen Greif's essay on “Plays and Playing in *Twelfth Night*”, it is framed as failure. The plot against Malvolio, she argues, fails to produce its expected effect:

Malvolio's enforced immersion in the world of make-believe in no way reforms him, nor does it enable him to gain a more positive understanding of either his own identity or the ties that bind him to his fellow men. What is more, the mockers who have seen their own follies reflected in Malvolio's comic performance are no more altered by the experience than he is.⁴

Greif situates this failure against a Jonsonian model of comedy as theatrical capture that purges folly through absorption – immersion as transformation. To speak of Malvolio's “enforced immersion” is to bring into focus a tension both conceptual and dramatic. Malvolio moves within the fiction of the letter without ever fully inhabiting it. The script is carefully engineered to draw him in with a sense of inevitability: “Thou canst not choose but know who I am” (2.5.169). Yet Malvolio labours to make its signs conform to his own image, attempting to “crush ... a little” the letters “M.O.A.I.” into submission so that they may “bow” (2.5.137) to him. Rather than dissolving into the role, he resists and would still consolidate himself within it, remaining the very figure the fiction was meant to transform. Though he enters the fiction of the letter – and in Act 3 will yield to the request to smile and wear yellow stockings – the cryptic acronym remains,

in his eyes, a “simulation” (2.5.136), a false and deceitful mirroring rather than a metamorphosis. While participation is achieved, immersion remains in tension.

What “fails” in Greif’s account, then, is not immersion as a dramatic operation but a particular model of it: one that assumes absorption must culminate in transformation. *Twelfth Night*, I argue, does something else. The play builds affective alignment repeatedly – through sound, through rhetoric, through the promise of recognition – and then, with equal regularity, it breaks that alignment before it can settle. The play does not reject immersion, but neither does it allow it to settle into a terminal state that would overwhelm the subject. What it offers is a rhythm: advance, then withdrawal; pressure built, then released. This patterned curtailment is what I term *emotional recoil*: a formal mechanism that draws the character or spectator towards absorption, then pushes back. What emerges is a distinctive rhythm, designated here as *the sound and the break*. The advance through a musical “strain” (1.1.4), the mode of consolation, a surge of wonder, or an investment in a fictional identity is followed by the break. Each pattern of interruption and reappraisal marks a displacement, a shift in tone, posture or viewpoint. In fact, immersion, neither refused nor fulfilled, is represented as a state of affective oscillation. Rather than carrying the spectators into a stable mood, the play draws them in, while simultaneously striving to awaken a sense of disconnect.

This experience assumes a particular prominence in *Twelfth Night*, a late comedy noted for its affective restlessness and resistance to festive closure. The following analysis traces this rhythm through four episodes that sit uneasily in performance and are frequently cut or displaced: Orsino’s opening speech, where musical surfeit converts lyric absorption into recoil; the shoreline scene, where the Captain’s consolatory rhetoric regulates Viola’s grief; Sebastian’s return in Act 2, scene 1, where drowning survives as language, tears, and comic dilution; and the recognition scene, where the twins’ apparent absorption is unsettled by the procedural testing of identity and where, I will argue, the play invokes the theological logic of Epiphany and baptism only to decline its transformative promise. Two of these episodes, Orsino’s speech and Sebastian’s return, are especially vulnerable to cutting in performance; their formal resistance to sustained mood has been felt, if not theorised, by theatrical practitioners. Throughout, I attend to how sound, rhetoric, and the conditions of staging generate emotional alignments that become perceptible precisely as they break. Trevor Nunn’s 1996 film adaptation provides a sharp test case: its capacity for close-up, aural layering, and editorial rhythm makes the recoil mechanism newly visible, allowing us to see what the text structurally prescribes. The pattern that emerges is one of immersion repeatedly brought towards saturation, then broken: a “dying fall” after the “sweet south,” chance after lament, “eye-offending brine” after drowning, circumstance after wonder.

Setting the template for the rhythm of surfeit and recoil: Orsino’s speech

From the opening scene, *Twelfth Night* sets the rhythm of the sound and the break. Orsino, already immersed in the language of desire, calls for music to feed the appetite it stirs. Yet the appetite he invokes is self-consuming. Excess passes into surfeit, surfeit into sickness, and sickness into death. What the opening lines establish, in miniature, is the rhythm the speech will

repeatedly enact, in different keys:⁵ immersion as an unstable force, a push towards saturation that carries within it the movement towards its own depletion.

The first three lines formally express that pressure: "If music be the food of love, play on, / Give me excess of it, that surfeiting / The appetite may sicken and so die" (1.1.1–3). The conditional opening holds the line in suspension, a hypothesis awaiting completion, which arrives with the imperative "play on". The line begins in conjecture, then turns into a demand. This movement gives the speech its first surge: a suspended condition released as a command. The next imperative, "Give me," intensifies this effect, renewing the pressure and directing it towards "excess".

The syntax expands under the pressure of "excess", only for the run-on line to give way to a figure of decline – "to sicken and so die". This effect is also reflected rhythmically. The opening line unfolds in standard iambic pentameter, but ends with a strong stress cluster – "play on" – that almost functions as a spondee. The following line begins with a similar weight of stress – "Give me". These local intensifications briefly stiffen the metrical flow, as though the line were gathering momentum before release. The pattern has a musical correlative. Orsino behaves as a conductor or "time-beater", adopting a two-part *tactus*⁶ of the kind described by Andreas Ornithoparchus: "a successiue motion in singing, directing the equalitie of the measure... a certain motion, made by the hand of the chiefe singer, according to the nature of the marks, which directs a Song according to Measured."⁷ The spondaic weight of "play on" and "Give me" functions as the raised hand, the *arsis*; the release into "to sicken and so die" is the lowered hand, the *thesis*. More than a metaphor for desire, music, for Orsino, is a technique for regulating it, a way of beating time through affect.

The following line then repeats its opening movement in altered measure, compressing the same pattern of excitation and release. The music is recalled – "That strain again, it had a dying fall" (1.1.4) – and the affective and rhythmic figure reappears in diminished form. At the level of sound, the line registers this shift: the earlier peak is now carried by the diphthongs of "strain" and "dying", while the open vowel of "fall" prolongs and releases the subsiding. Read in this light, the pattern acquires a distinctly erotic inflection: a surge of desire, cast as appetite, rises to a peak of intensity only to "die". The conflation of sex and death is a frequent motif in early modern literature, most clearly marked when "to die" euphemistically means orgasm. What the speech describes is a closed loop of self-excitation: appetite aroused, intensified, and released – only to return, already diminished. Orsino's relationship with desire, here and throughout the scene, is recursive and self-reinforcing, feeding on its own rhythms rather than advancing towards an object.

Orsino's speech is not monochord but tonal, moving through successive modulations of the same figure: each return restates the rhythm of intensification and release, though in altered measure. The structure is musical, almost a theme and variation. Yet the variation is also rhetorical. As the speech moves from the imperatives of appetite to the Petrarchan and euphuistic idiom of the middle movement, it tests whether a change of key can stabilise the pressure it has exposed as unstable. Orsino adopts the trope George Puttenham, in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), calls "the Ouer reacher" – the hyperbole, "when we speake ... beyond the limites of credit".⁸ As Keir Elam observes, this "figure of excess *par excellence*... is at times used in earnest" in the play, and Orsino begins in earnest with each new metaphor he uses to translate his mood. "More often than not", Elam remarks, "the hyperbolic mode in the play is

pushed towards the verge of parody.”⁹ Hyperbole, by definition, speaks beyond the limits of credit. The question it raises is not whether it can be believed, but how long it can be sustained before the credit runs out. Orsino’s similes test precisely this limit. Each figure – music as food, love as appetite, the beloved as a bank of violets – reaches further than the last, borrowing against a credibility that is never quite secured. The “sweet south” simile is the most extravagant of these borrowings, and it is here that the hyperbolic mode begins to tip. The image is so densely layered – sound becoming wind, wind becoming breath, breath becoming scent – that it strains against its own coherence. The figure does not break, but it bends. What Elam calls the “verge of parody” is precisely this bending point: the moment at which excess becomes legible as performance rather than passion. Orsino shows, through this repeated rhetorical exercise, how “excess” enables him to explore not only the highs and lows of his emotions but also the dramatic and comic registers of his own speech. What emerges from the opening lines, then, is a pattern that does not settle.

The speech now turns to a sensorial landscape of Petrarchan love, immersing himself in a medium of scent and sound:

O, it came o’er my ear like the sweet south
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour. (1.1.5-7)

The simile appeals to multiple senses at once. Sound “breathes” and “steals and gives odour”; music is almost a body, exhaling on his skin. The “bank of violets” foreshadows the end of the play, when the violets of the opening become the bed that will receive Viola. Shakespeare fractures the expected “sweet violet” (*viola odorata*) into “sweet south” and “a bank of violets,” a subtle instance of hypallage in which the adjective detaches from the flower and attaches itself to the mild wind. The sweetness that properly belongs to the violets is transferred to the south¹⁰, so desire no longer fixes on an object but resonates in the atmosphere. Orsino imagines himself enveloped in a flowing medium of sweetness, an image of immersion. The violet, like Viola, is never directly called “sweet,” though Orsino’s desire unwittingly drifts towards Viola rather than Olivia. This misalignment is borne out in performance. In Braham Murray’s 1988 production¹¹, Orsino delivers the speech “while circumnavigating Viola’s washed-up body but totally ignoring her.”¹² The language immerses us in a mood while keeping the object of love slightly out of focus. An anticipatory metaphor that cannot quite name “Viola” but circulates her scent already hints at the instability of the immersion it proposes.



Fig. 1 : Trevor Nunn. *Twelfth Night*. 1996. “that dying fall” (1.1.4) [00:11:50]

The affective and sensory experience reaches its height here. Orsino imagines himself bathed, scented, enveloped. Then the recoil: “Enough, no more, / ‘Tis not so sweet now as it was before” (1.1.7-8). In performance, the turn is brutally fast, almost post-coital in its bluntness. In Trevor Nunn’s 1996 production, Toby Stephens delivers these lines by turning to the camera with a sidelong, amused glance. The knowing, conspiratorial expression – a half-smile of complicity, slightly ironic, slightly detached – acknowledges the excess that has just been performed. The actor rises from his languid posture and turns toward the camera; it is as if the character were stepping momentarily outside the mood he has just conjured. The recoil thus becomes legible not as a failure of immersion, but as the self-conscious exposure of mood as performance.

The complicity, however, is unevenly distributed. While the audience is drawn into this knowing aside, Cesario remains absorbed at the piano, caught within the very affect that Orsino has just abandoned. The break, moreover, is already prepared within the scene. Even in Nunn’s picturesque setting, Orsino’s immersion remains curiously private. The surrounding courtiers stand stock-still, their rigid, silent presence registering a visible indifference. A rhetoric of excess unfolds before an audience that does not participate in it. Nunn’s staging sharpens this rupture: the glance toward the camera does not simply break the mood; it reframes it, exposing the excess just performed as something already exhausted.



Fig. 2 : Trevor Nunn. *Twelfth Night*, 1996. “Enough, no more” (1.1.7) [00:12:27]

What briefly takes shape is a mode of performance that recalls an earlier aesthetic, one that still exerts a certain charm, but no longer fully commands belief. The speech entertains; its musicality and excess carry us along. Yet the effect is fleeting. The fascination wanes almost as soon as it is established, as if the form itself could no longer quite sustain its own appeal. Orsino’s rhetoric resembles the revival of a past mode whose conditions of reception have shifted. It returns as a palimpsest: not entirely obsolete, but no longer able to “pass” without remainder. The pleasure it offers is inseparable from an awareness of belonging to a fashion that has already had its moment. His emotional recoil, explicitly registered by his expletive, “Enough, no more” (1.1.7), also marks the point at which the form begins to exhaust itself, as if acknowledging that the idiom it inhabits can no longer quite carry the affect it promises. The speech, in passing, exposes the historical limits of its own rhetorical mode. The euphuistic style had become old-fashioned by 1602, the date of the play’s Middle Temple performance. Nunn’s staging sharpens this point. His courtiers stand like a crowd of bored spectators, their mounting tedium a visible index of the speech’s fading hold. The scene becomes self-aware: it tests the audience’s absorption and questions our readiness – so encouraged by an Edwardian-Victorian culture – to indulge a prince’s mood.



Fig. 3 : Trevor Nunn. *Twelfth Night*. 1996. Act 1. scene1. The Palace. [00:10:38]

Orsino's lyricism now collapses into a more modern register, one in which his discourse operates like a system of speculative valuation. The turn is not only rhetorical but historically situated. In 1602, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) established the first joint-stock structure with permanent capital, allowing investors to subscribe to a venture whose value could fluctuate over time rather than be settled at the end of a single voyage.¹³ Investment was no longer tied to a finite expedition but entered a system of circulation, exposure, and risk. What follows offers a sharper, more disenchanted inflection of the lover's complaint. The sea, invoked moments earlier as a medium of immersion, is recast in economic terms: its "capacity" begins to resemble not depth but limit, a threshold against which value is measured, while love itself behaves like a volatile stock, liable to sudden depreciation. Courtship is stripped of its lyric idealism and subjected to a rude awakening through the logic of return: the unrequited lover demands value, a yield on his investment. Orsino's language shifts accordingly. He speaks like a broker – "notwithstanding thy capacity" (1.1.10), "naught enters there" (1.1.11), "validity and pitch" (1.1.12) – only for all to "fall into abatement and low price / Even in a minute" (1.1.13). The temporality is decisive: value is no longer realised at the end of a venture, but fluctuates continuously, exposed to rapid loss. It is not simply that affect is recast in terms of gain and loss. The shift from musical intoxication to economic calculation is itself a recoil: the speech breaks the immersion it has just built, replacing the language of excess with the harder, economic idiom of investment and loss that would capture the imagination of a turn-of-the-century English audience. The conditions of immersion, the speech seems to acknowledge, are as volatile as the market they now resemble.

Once again, there is a change in key. Orsino turns from the object of his desire to the operations of his own imagination: "So full of shapes is fancy / That it alone is fantastical" (1.1.14-15). The speech has become avowedly metatheatrical, with a comment on the generative capacity of "fancy" itself – its ability to multiply forms and sustain the very movement that has just been exposed as unstable.¹⁴ If Orsino's speech is concerned with voicing desire, it also reflects on the faculty that produces it, registering its volatility as a function of imaginative excess. He is ultimately absorbed less by his beloved than by the proliferation of figures through which desire is articulated. This self-reflexive turn is itself a form of recoil, breaking the illusion of romantic absorption by exposing the machinery that produces it.

From palace to shoreline: regulating grief with the Captain

Orsino treats immersion as a self-enclosed aesthetic experience – viable only within the realm of imagination. The play immediately tests that premise in literal terms. The fantasy of being carried away gives way to the aftermath of a shipwreck: from the perfumed bank of flowers to a wrecked coastline, and from orchestral lovesickness to Viola's distress at the possibility that her brother has drowned.

In Act 1, scene 2, Viola seems poised to enter a tragic script, believing her brother has drowned. This scene could easily descend into prolonged mourning and has often been staged that way. For example, in Henry Irving's 1884 production at the Lyceum, Viola's "sorrow for the loss of Sebastian took the form of dejection" and was rendered with "a plaintive wail in the delivery of the lines" (*New York Times*, 19 November). Similarly, Bill Alexander's 1987 promptbook depicts her on the ground, crying and holding Sebastian's jacket.¹⁵ These choices heighten the emotional impact, letting her sadness deepen into emotional saturation. Elizabeth Schafer observes that nineteenth-century aesthetics — echoed in Trevor Nunn's 1996 film — tend to emphasize grief as spectacle, a cult of mourning.¹⁶ What such productions seek is precisely the sustained absorption that the play, I argue, works to curtail.



Fig. 4 : Trevor Nunn, *Twelfth Night*, 1996. The drowning twins hold hands [00:03:08]

The moment of immersion approaches its limit, nearly becoming submersion. The twins almost drown; their bodies suspended in a shared medium as they reach towards each other. However, the sea, as the medium itself, disrupts their gesture, causing their clasp to fail. Viola then recoils, swimming upwards to break the surface and catch her breath, pulling the viewer out of the underwater scene. Meanwhile, Sebastian is last seen struggling beneath the surface, his costume belt strapped around his eyes.



Fig. 5 : Trevor Nunn. *Twelfth Night*. 1996. Sebastian is drowning, entangled. [00:03:46]

Submersion is halted, as it seems poised to fully consume. Viola manages to escape; the audience remains uncertain about Sebastian's fate. What could have been a shared moment of destiny is reshaped into a separation that leaves without closure, maintaining ambiguity instead of confirming tragedy. Viola's statement, "My brother he is in Elysium" (1.2.3), does not definitively confirm his death but shifts it into a mythological context, leaving open the possibility of life beyond. As a result, "perchance" both tempers and leaves the tragic narrative inherently unstable.

Shakespeare's text counters tragic immersion by introducing the Captain as a structural moderator. Confronted with Viola's fear, he redirects her focus to her own survival: "It is perchance you yourself were saved" (1.2.5). When she laments, "O my poor brother!" (1.2.6), he prompts her to view her situation through a reflective lens: "to comfort you with chance, / Assure yourself" (1.2.7-8). The transition from Viola's "perchance" to the Captain's "chance" signifies a subtle, yet decisive, recalibration. Initial hopeful speculation ("perchance" meaning "perhaps") evolves into a logic of contingency ("chance", from the Vulgar Latin *cadentia*, meaning "that which falls out"), framing events as potential outcomes rather than certainties. The Captain's speech creates a space where grief exists within a framework of probability and perspective, containing its intensity by relating it to what might still occur. He dismisses the idea of drowning with his own report: Sebastian was seen holding onto a mast, "Most provident in peril" (1.2.11). His account operates within this scope: Sebastian, observed from afar, "So long as I could see" (1.2.15-16), remains vulnerable yet within reach of survival. The length of the Captain's sight becomes the measure of his claim – not affirming survival as a fact but as a remaining possibility, based on what could be observed and therefore imagined to endure. In this setup, Sebastian's fate remains uncertain. The scene's emotional tone is thus moderated: grief circulates without solidifying, staying understandable without overwhelming. The Captain only partly aligns with the Stoic-Senecan tradition of consolation. Instead of projecting worst-case scenarios to control them, his speech navigates uncertainty, allowing emotion to be guided by reason and judgment rather than suppressed. Pathos, such as Sebastian's act of anchoring himself to the mast "like Arion on the dolphin's back" (1.2.14), is acknowledged but only in the service of hope. The Captain's authority is both epistemic and emotional: "thy speech serves for authority" (1.2.18). Ultimately, the Captain establishes a controlled response, whereby grief is kept from turning into outright lament.

This dynamic persists in Trevor Nunn's film even without the comforting speech. The Captain's calming role shifts to the visual elements. Sitting beside Viola, he stabilizes the scene with stillness. The composition offers reassurance: the wooded enclosure places the figures in a space where immersion no longer risks overwhelming them. Yet this containment is provisional. Viola's reaction – "O that I served that lady" (1.2.38) – indicates a renewed pull towards grief, now projected onto Olivia's mourning. The tendency to become immersed in emotion continues, but it is redirected rather than resolved. The Captain once again intervenes, restraining that impulse – "That were hard to compass" (1.2.41) – before the scene shifts definitively to action: "I'll serve this duke" (1.2.52). The scene progresses as a pattern of modulation, with feelings repeatedly intensified and redistributed. Viola's despair transforms into disguise; Olivia's mourning grows into an exaggerated display. *Twelfth Night* guides us to the edge of emotional depth, then pulls us back. It keeps the audience – like the characters – in constant motion, preventing them from settling.

Drowning without depth. Sebastian

Act 2, scene 1, confirms this resistance to tragic immersion. Sebastian is introduced to us, rescinding the very immersive fate he names. He expresses gratitude to Antonio for having altered what looked like a fatal script: "But you, sir, altered that; for some hour before / You took me from the breach of the sea / Was my sister drowned" (2.1.19-21). Drowning¹⁷ is stated as a fact, but the syntax keeps it at a distance, through the passive construction, as though Sebastian were reporting a rumour rather than a loss.

Instead of pure catharsis, the audience encounters a softer experience: grief that is kept at bay, shaped by rhetoric. Sebastian appears unscathed, and what could be a tragic shipwreck is instead turned into wordplay. When he remarks about Viola, "[s]he is drowned already, sir, with salt water, though I seem to drown her remembrance again with more" (2.1.28-29), he visualizes grief as a second drowning – and manages to contain it. The exaggeration is subtly humorous. His concern isn't just that he might forget Viola again, but that he could fall into the same depressive state as Olivia, whom Valentine describes as "like a cloistress" who will "water once a day her chamber round / With eye-offending brine" (1.1.27-29). The play depicts tearfulness as "offending" – not only to the eyes that cry but also to those forced to witness. The text captures the audience's unease and suggests that excessive grief should be avoided.

Nunn's Sebastian, played by Steve Mackintosh, goes against the grain of the text: he is dramatic, he weeps, and he sheds real tears. His language and Mackintosh's performance would be more appropriate if he were playing Laertes's refusal to weep for Ophelia – "Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia, / And therefore I forbid my tears" (*Hamlet*, 4.7.183-84).



Fig. 6 : Trevor Nunn. *Twelfth Night*. Sebastain remembers his sister, drowned. [00:39:05]

Shakespeare's Sebastian, by contrast, holds grief at a rhetorical distance. *Twelfth Night* drains that pathos into something more ironic. Keir Elam notes that Sebastian's sorrow for his "drowned" sister mirrors Viola's concern for her lost brother¹⁸; however, the mirroring mainly underlines how briefly the play remains in the depths. The sea, which might have functioned as a site of emotional submersion, becomes a threshold instead. The twins are plunged into it and emerge with their fates altered – but what kind of alteration this is, remains unsettled. As early as 1856, William Watkiss Lloyd connected the play's title to the feast of the Epiphany and, through it, to the ritual logic of baptism and revelation. Lloyd traces the feast back beyond Christianity, to Egyptian monuments depicting "the celebration of the discovery and re-appearance of Osiris" – a myth of death and return that the Eastern Church absorbed into the commemoration of Christ's revelation to John the Baptist "by the descent of the dove," and that the Western Church fixed upon the Epiphany, the "[m]anifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, as represented in the star guided Magi." He explains that in the Middle Ages, the Magi became kings – Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar – and from this, "by various descent," derived the custom of "selecting a king and queen by lot, with attendant court, and drawing characters, as the peculiar amusement of *Twelfth Night*."¹⁹

Lloyd interprets the play's title as symbolizing a sudden elevation in theology: "[t]he prizes of the play are given by fortune." Sebastian lights "by merest hap" upon a wife, and Viola quickly becomes "Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen" after a brief chance meeting. Baptism represents the core idea of the play – an immersion meant to transform the self through grace, chance, or revelation. However, I argue that *Twelfth Night* enhances the sense of immersion – be it in water, grief, or love – only to challenge it. The recognition scene, which the play builds towards, highlights this tension most clearly. Here, the drowning motif reappears exactly when the play seems to deliver its most fulfilling moment – and, as I will show, this pattern of withdrawal peaks.

“Most wonderful”: Womb, *absorption*, and the ruptured reunion

Sebastian and Viola finally spot each other, and for a few lines they are locked in a fixed gaze, as if no one – and nothing – else were there. This is the play’s single “most wonderful” (5.1.221) moment, and it seems designed to hold spectators as captivated as the twins themselves. In Tim Carroll’s 2002 Globe production, Elizabeth Schafer notes, “the reunited twins sat gazing at each other for ages, so rapt, that they were oblivious of the subsequent action featuring Malvolio.”²⁰ The staging captures what the text suggests: a concentration of vision so intense that the rest of the stage falls away.

The recognition scene promises to deliver the immersive force that earlier moments have deferred. Its language brings together sea, death, birth, and recognition. Sebastian first imagines his sister as one “whom the blind waves and surges have devoured” (5.1.224-25), while Viola recalls the “watery tomb” to which she believes her brother has gone. The sea returns as the imagined place of loss until Sebastian’s reference to the “womb” in which the twins “did participate” (5.1.239) alters the scene’s complexion. The body supposedly swallowed by water is recalled through another enclosing medium: a space shared before birth, before separation, and before the shipwreck. In Shakespeare’s text, these two media – the marine and the maternal – remain distinct, held apart by the language that names them. The recognition, therefore, draws its emotional force from the proximity of tomb and womb – Viola’s word and Sebastian’s – drowning and origin drawn together. For a moment, the play appears to convert the threat of submersion into the promise of reunion.

The theatrical history of the passage suggests how difficult that promise is to sustain. These lines are often cut, whether in Irving’s 1884 production or in Branagh’s 1988 version, as though the scene’s fullest verbal account of shared origin placed too much pressure on the ending’s momentum. Nunn’s film makes a different choice. It does not simply omit Sebastian’s speech; it displaces part of its function into the film’s visual memory. At the beginning of the film, the twins look at a family photograph together before they are thrown into the sea. The image supplies, in advance, what the later recognition scene will struggle to recover: a common past, a shared parentage, and a sibling identity held in a single frame. When the shipwreck follows, that image of familial coherence is broken by water. Yet with the shipwreck, the twins fall into another enclosing medium, marine rather than maternal, and their struggle to resurface becomes a visual rebirth as well as an escape from drowning. The sea becomes the womb: the drowning is the rebirth, and the shipwreck is the origin that the twins must pass through to be restored to each other. The semantic mirroring of tomb and womb, loss and origin, is weakened when Sebastian’s verbal recollection disappears, but that is because the film has transferred part of the scene’s immersive power from speech to image, from remembered language to remembered framing.

Nunn’s recognition scene is therefore haunted by an image referenced earlier in the play. The shared origin has already been established for the camera. The dialogue from Act 5 no longer has to evoke that memory alone; it is answered by a visual archive already lodged in the spectator’s mind. Recognition becomes less a matter of language recovered between the twins than of an image returned to the spectator.



Fig. 7 : Trevor Nunn. *Twelfth Night*. Renaissance Films. 1996. Family photo. [00.2:19]

This displacement also prepares the theological logic that Lloyd traces in the play: Epiphany as revelation, baptism as transformation. The twins have passed through water and stand before each other, alive, altered, and newly legible. Nunn makes this logic visible by staging, early in the film, the body that the recognition scene will later seek to recover. Viola's near-drowning becomes a proleptic baptismal image: the body submerged, suspended, almost lost, then returned to breath, speech, and identity. In Act 5, the recovered image becomes a revelation. The lost sibling appears; the name Viola is restored; the body imagined as drowned is refigured as a body reborn. Yet the baptismal force of the scene remains precarious. Viola delays touch until "each circumstance / Of place, time, fortune do cohere and jump / That I am Viola" (5.1.247-49). The language of sacramental emergence gives way to the language of proof. Recognition must pass through circumstance; identity must be made coherent before it can be publicly accepted. The scene's theological pattern reaches a peak and then bends into theatrical procedure. What should be an Epiphany becomes a cross-examination. The dove hovers, then withdraws. Michael Fried's notion of absorption helps to clarify what this scene fashions and then breaks. For Fried, absorption depends on a structural exclusion: depicted figures appear "so deeply absorbed as to be altogether unaware of the beholder's presence," producing what he calls "the ontological illusion that the beholder did not exist."²¹ The twins' reunion briefly approaches that condition. Viola and Sebastian test one another's memories, recover the father's mole, the day of his death, the shared signs of origin; for a few moments, the surrounding court recedes. The scene appears to close around them, producing the illusion of a private encounter staged in public. This is the closest *Twelfth Night* comes to fulfilling the promise of immersion it has repeatedly raised.



Fig. 8 : Trevor Nunn. *The Recognition*. [1:54:45]

Nunn's camera registers that promise while exposing its fragility. The recognition is organised through alternating close-ups and shot/reverse-shot patterns that bind the twins through eyeline and response while keeping them visually apart. The film withholds the stable two-shot that would fully restore them to a single image; when they do finally share the frame, they first remain placed at its edges, joined by recognition yet separated by composition and the setting of an English Heritage. The visual grammar performs the scene's central tension: language draws the twins towards shared identity, while framing delays their complete visual reunion as the twins takes nearly a whole minute to pass from standing apart, each on either side of the frame, to falling into each other's arms. Absorption is offered as an effect of recognition, which lasts under a minute before the frame is cut by the onlookers, prompting the twins to turn and smile.

The womb speech is therefore a peak of emotional intensity and a point of rupture. To linger there would be to hold the audience inside a recovered origin, yet the play is already moving elsewhere: towards proof, circumstance, restored names, future marriages – and then, jarringly, the unresolved return of Malvolio. The reunion scene may complete the movement from shipwreck to restoration, yet it also reveals how briefly such completion can be inhabited before theatrical procedure breaks it. Immersion reaches its fullest force here, at the very point where the play exposes the conditions that prevent it from settling into absorption.



Fig. 9 : Trevor Nunn. Drowned Viola. [2:48]

Conclusion

This essay has argued that *Twelfth Night* develops a distinctive formal technique called emotional recoil, in which immersion is repeatedly initiated and then curtailed. This exploration of four episodes reveals how Orsino's music builds toward surfeit, then breaks. Viola's grief is raised, then regulated. Sebastian's near drowning is intimated, then rescinded. The recognition scene offers absorption, then cross-examines it. What the play composes is a rhythm in which feeling is brought to the point of overflow and then folded back. The play inherits the theological logic of Epiphany: baptism promises transformation. The twins emerge from the sea altered; the "womb" speech invokes revelation. Then the play withdraws the promise. Viola withholds embrace and insists on proof; Malvolio exits vowing revenge. Immersion, in *Twelfth Night*, is deliberately held in suspension. Emotional recoil is the breaking of an affective pressure that the play has just built. Each time the audience approaches rapture, grief, or recognition, the text introduces a countermovement: irony within pathos, commerce within lyric, procedure within wonder. The comedy lies in this repeated lesson: the invitation to feel, the jolt that disrupts feeling, and the strange, unstable clarity that follows.

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Notes

¹ For cognitive-poetic accounts of immersion as sustained absorption, see Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2020, esp. chaps. 2 and 7; and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, p. 10-14. For phenomenological approaches to theatrical presence

and absorption, see Erika T. Lin, *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, chap. 1; and Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 1997, chap. 4. For the theorisation of immersion in contemporary immersive theatre, see Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, introduction and chap. 2; and Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, chap. 3.

- ² Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 98.
- ³ I borrow the concept of absorption from Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980, where it denotes a state of self-forgetting contemplation and describes figures held rapt by a central protagonist who is, himself, absorbed.
- ⁴ Karen Greif, "Plays and Playing in *Twelfth Night*", p. 261-277 in *Twelfth Night: Critical Essays*. Edited by Stanley Wells. Coll. Shakespearean Criticism vol. 9, London & New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group (1986) 2015, p. 269-70.
- ⁵ As Theseus, who tells Hippolyta: "But I will wed thee in another key" (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.19).
- ⁶ See Elam Rotem, Tim Brathwaite and Lisandro Abadie, eds., Early Music Sources.com, September 2023, "Conducting in the 16th-18th centuries" Footnote 2: "[1:03] The concept of tactus appears under different guises in Renaissance musical sources, both theoretical and practical. Ruth DeFord differentiates between three different theoretical types of tactus: 1.) the performance tactus, the level on which the performance is organised metrically; 2.) the compositional tactus, the level on which the composition operates contrapuntally; 3.) and the theoretical tactus, the time-unit indicated typically by mensuration signs. One of the most important theoretical shifts in the later fifteenth century is the transition from the single 'mensura', typically embodied by a single tap, to a two-part 'tactus', which consists of both an arsis and thesis. This shift is significant both in terms of performance practices and theoretical understandings of proportions and tempo relationships. For more details see Ruth DeFord, *Tactus, Mensuration and Rhythm in Renaissance Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Alexander Blachly, "Mensura versus Tactus," in *Quellen und Studien zur Musiktheorie des Mittelalters* 3, ed. Michael Bernhard, Veröffentlichungen der Musikhistorischen Kommission 15 (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2001), p. 445."
- ⁷ John Downland, transl., *Andreas Ornithoparcus his Micrologus, or Introduction: containing the art of singing Digested into foure bookes*. [...] London: Printed [by Thomas Snodham] for Thomas Adams, 1609. See Andreas Ornithoparcus, *Musicae activae micrologus*, Leipzig, 1517, Bk 2, ch.6. fol. Fiii^r: "Vnde Tactus est motio successiua in cantu, mesure equalitate[m] dirigens. Uel est quidam motus, manu precentoris signorum indicio formatus, cantum dirigens mensuraliter."
- ⁸ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007, p. 159.

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- ⁹ Keir Elam, ed., "Introduction," in *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series London: Bloomsbury (2008), reprint 2014, p. 83.
- ¹⁰ As Keir Elam remarks, "Other possible misreadings have given rise to editorial debate and speculation: 'south', possibly for 'sound' (9, 1.1.5)", p. 368. This is notably an emendation adopted by Pope (see Elam, p. 162 & 376).
- ¹¹ Braham Murray, 12 May 1988, at the Manchester Royal Exchange.
- ¹² *Daily Telegraph* 14th May 1988, quoted in Schafer, *Twelfth Night*, p. 83.
- ¹³ See Lodewijk Petram, *The World's First Stock Exchange*, translated by Lynne Richards, New York, Chichester, West Sussex, Columbia University Press, 2014.
- ¹⁴ Bruce R. Smith investigates the function of "fancy" as it articulates the relations between to imagination, love and sexuality by drawing on Renaissance medical and scholastic psychological texts, in "'His fancy's queen': Sensing sexual strangeness in *Twelfth Night*" in James Schiffer, ed., *Twelfth Night. New Critical Essays*. Shakespeare Criticism Volume 34, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, chapter 3, p. 65-80.
- ¹⁵ Both quoted in Schafer, p. 90, notes 3 & 4.
- ¹⁶ Schafer, p. 30.
- ¹⁷ *OED*, s.v. "drown, v.," senses 1, 2, and 4. Etymologically, "to drown" (from Old English *druncnian* and Middle English *druncnen*) means "to be swallowed up by water," originally of ships as well as living beings. From the fourteenth century onwards, it also comes to mean "to suffocate by immersion in water or other fluid," and in Shakespeare it acquires a figurative sense: to be overwhelmed "as by a flood." *Twelfth Night* skirts that edge without crossing it.
- ¹⁸ Keir Elam, ed., *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, p. 206, n. 18-21.
- ¹⁹ William Watkiss Lloyd, "Critical Essay on *Twelfth Night*," in *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. Samuel Weller Singer, 10 vols. (London, 1856), vol. III, 477-90. The quoted passage appears on the opening pages of the essay, as quoted in James Schiffer, ed. *Twelfth Night, or What You Will, Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition*. The Arden Shakespeare, London, New York and Dublin, Bloomsbury, 2025, chapter 20, p. 123-129; p. 123-4.
- ²⁰ Schafer, p. 214.
- ²¹ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 21.

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