Many Shakespeareans rankled at the final scene of the motion picture *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Having lost his Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow) to Lord Wessex (Colin Firth), young Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) sets quill to paper to capture her spirit in a new play. Here’s how Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard wrote the scene:\footnote{1}:

**INT. WILL’S ROOM. DAY.**
A blank page. A hand is writing: **TWELFTH NIGHT.** We see WILL sitting at his table.

**WILL (VO)**
My story starts at sea … a perilous voyage to an unknown land … a shipwreck

**EXT. UNDERWATER. DAY.**
Two figures plunge into the water.

**WILL (VO)**
the wild waters roar and heave … the brave vessel is dashed all to pieces, and all the helpless souls within her drowned.

**INT. WILL’S ROOM. DAY.**
WILL at his table writing.

**WILL (VO)**
all save one … a lady

**EXT. UNDERWATER. DAY.**
**VIOLA** in the water.

**WILL (VO)**
whose soul is greater than the ocean … and her spirit stronger than the sea’s embrace … not for her watery end, but a new life beginning on a stranger shore.
BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

EXT. BEACH. DAY.
VIOLA is walking up a vast and empty beach.

WILL (VO)
It will be a love story ... or she will be my heroine for all time

INT. WILL'S ROOM. DAY.
WILL looks up from the table.

WILL (VO)
and her name will be ... Viola.
He looks down at the paper, and writes: 'Viola'
Then: 'What country friends is this?'

EXT. BEACH. DAY.
DISSOLVE slowly to VIOLA, walking away up the beach towards her brave new world.

THE END

The sources of scholarly opprobrium were twofold. First, this scene follows shortly after the first performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, written circa 1593 and published in 1597 – whereas *Twelfth Night* must have been written after the visit of Virginio Orsini to London and before its first performance before Elizabeth on 27 December 1601. Secondly, everyone knows *Twelfth Night* begins 'If music be the food of love' not 'What country, friends, is this?'

Stoppard, no slouch as a Shakespearean – remember his devilish deconstruction of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildernstern are Dead* (1966) – should have known better. Then again, Stoppard's Fiennes-Shakespeare was just starting his first draft; on mature consideration, into a subsequent draft he might have inserted the scene in Orsino's court as 1.1. That scene expresses a governing idea of the play – unrequited love – and, by the way, takes advantage of the presence of musicians playing as the audience settle in their seats. On the other hand, in 1.2 – Viola's arrival in Illyria – her Captain expresses an even more pungent governing idea:

I saw your brother,
Most provident in peril, bind himself,
Courage and hope both teaching him the practise,
To a strong mast that lived upon the sea;
Where, like Arion on the dolphin's back,
I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves
So long as I could see. (10–16)
Here is the hope of resurrection, complete with a cruciform mast and a glance at Arion, the Greek poet tossed into the sea by pirates but miraculously redeemed by a passing dolphin. Stoppard may have been sufficiently informed to know that from at least the early nineteenth century some performances of *Twelfth Night* began, ‘What country (Friends) is this?’ In their Arden Series 2 edition (1975), Lothian and Craik didn’t think much of this innovation: ‘This production of Kemble’s [1815] was the first [on record] to reverse the order of the first two scenes, a regrettable change often made since, and occasionally found even today.’ The editors cite three reasons why the scenes might have been rudely disordered: ‘One is the desire to improve on Shakespeare’s dramatic art. A second is the need to get late-comers seated without their or other spectators’ missing, or suffering distraction from, the first appearances of the more important characters […] … A third is the fact that, in the nineteenth-century theatre, relatively unlocalized scenes were presented before a lowered front curtain, which was afterwards raised to disclose a representational stage-set’ such as Orsino’s palace.\(^2\)

But was Kemble’s sequencing an innovation? Or was it, perhaps, a throwback?

Though what I am about to suggest may seem near-heresy, my hunch is that Stoppard got it right and Shakespeare’s manuscript began with Viola addressing her question not only to her fellow actors but to Queen and Court at Whitehall. I have three reasons – quite apart from any suggested by Lothian and Craik – for embracing this heretical view: one geographical, one structural, one mathematical.

**Why 1.2 was 1.1: geography**

In Elizabeth’s time, prior to the construction of the Victoria Embankment (1865–70), Whitehall stood adjacent to the west bank of the Thames. In the winter of 1598–99 Shakespeare’s company had relocated, timbers and all, from The Theatre in Shoreditch to its new Bankside Globe in Southwark, south of city and river.\(^3\) Anyone travelling from Southwark to Whitehall in 1602 would row west across the Thames. The alternative was to go east to the only bridge – London Bridge – and then along the north bank from Eastcheap to Westminster, a journey of four miles. If we consider a map of contemporary London (Figure 5) we can see that travelling
from (1) Southwark to (2) Whitehall or (3) the Inns of Court via (4) London Bridge was certainly taking the long way round.

On the Julian 27 December 1601 it seems likely that Shakespeare’s playing company crossed from Southwark to Whitehall by boat. And boating accidents on the river were common as crackers. So there’s a certain aesthetic elegance and geographical verisimilitude in Viola and her troupe of seafarers stumbling through the doors at Whitehall to greet their audience with her demand, ‘What country, friends, is this?’ The same opening gambit would have worked equally well for performance at (3) the Inns of Court; the Middle Temple Gatehouse and Inner Temple Gardens sat on the bank of the Thames opposite Southwark.

Why 1.2 was 1.1: structure

Opening *Twelfth Night* with scene 1.2 would also be a great boon to those hearing the play for the first time. When Viola asks ‘Who governs here?’ her Captain replies:

A noble duke, in nature as in name.

_Vio._ What is the name?
There is absolutely no point in Viola telling the Captain that Orsino is a bachelor if we’ve already watched a scene in which he proclaims his so-far-unrequited love for Olivia. We would have deduced that he must be a bachelor (or a bounder). And it’s equally inconceivable that Viola mentions Orsino’s bachelorhood because she’s already thinking of matching herself to a nobleman far above her station. The only function of Viola telling us Orsino is a bachelor is to justify his sighing after Olivia in the scene which begins, ‘If music be the food of love …’.

If we’d already heard Orsino pining for Olivia, the Captain also would be telling us things we already know in 1.2 when he says,

For but a month ago I went from hence,
And then ’twas fresh in murmur – as, you know,
What great ones do the less will prattle of, –
That he did seek the love of fair Olivia. (28–31)

But if this is 1.1, the mention of Olivia’s name serves a useful purpose. When we hear Orsino mention the same name we know that the Captain is a reliable reporter and Orsino is not fickle, as were Romeo or Proteus.

Viola’s interest now turns to the identity of Olivia. She asks, ‘What’s she?’ and the Captain replies

A virtuous maid, the daughter of a count
That died some twelvemonth since, then leaving her
In the protection of his son, her brother,
Who shortly also died: for whose dear love,
They say, she hath abjured the company
And sight of men. (33–8)

This sets us up for Curio’s ‘The element itself, till seven years’ heat, Shall not behold her face at ample view’ (25–6).

With 1.2 played as the opening scene, in a handful of lines Shakespeare has provided us with two women, Viola and Olivia, both mourning lost brothers. From this springboard he sets his plot afoot. Viola declares, ‘O that I served that lady And might not be delivered to the world, Till I had made mine own occasion mellow’
(38–41). But the playwright immediately introduces a complication; his Captain tells Viola, ‘That were hard to compass; Because she will admit no kind of suit, No, not the duke’s.’ Her initial impulse stymied, Viola determines to present herself as a eunuch and offer her services to Orsino. With this scene played, we have been brought to the appropriate moment to meet Orsino, hear his lovesick whine, and learn that he has been sending servants to woo Olivia in his name.

Rereading now the play’s traditional opening scene as its second scene will be a useful exercise.

_Duke_. If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again! it had a dying fall:
O, it came o’er my ear like the sweet sound,
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour! Enough; no more:
’Tis not so sweet now as it was before ...

_Cu._ Will you go hunt, my lord?
_Du._ What, Curio?
_Cu._ The hart.
_Du._ Why, so I do, the noblest that I
O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first,
Methought she purged the air of pestilence!
That instant was I turn’d into a hart;
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
e’er since pursue me.
Enter Valentine
How now! what news from her? (1.1.1–22)

Note that if this scene is played first we have no idea who is the Olivia to whom Orsino refers. But hearing this after the Captain’s description of the mourning Countess lends much more colour and depth to Orsino’s lament. Valentine now reports the failure of his emissary:

So please my lord, I might not be admitted;
But from her handmaid do return this answer:
The element itself, till seven years’ heat,
Shall not behold her face at ample view;
But, like a cloistress, she will veiled walk
And water once a day her chamber round
With eye-offending brine: all this to season
A brother’s dead love, which she would keep fresh
And lasting in her sad remembrance. (1.1.23–31)

Having heard the Captain’s litany of Olivia’s losses we can understand the depth of her mourning.

Now imagine that you are seeing Twelfth Night for the first time. You have no inkling of the circumstances in which we meet these characters at rise, not even their names. Which sequence of scenes is more informative, motivating and, therefore, more engrossing? Surely the scene which begins ‘What country, friends, is this?’ was written to precede ‘If music be the food of love’.

Why 1.2 was 1.1: the maths have it

There is a third, and perhaps more important, mathematical reason to believe Shakespeare’s manuscript began with Viola’s arrival at Illyria. We do not know the date of the shipwreck or Viola’s coming ashore. But in 5.1 Shakespeare gives us an unusually precise accounting of the time elapsed during the action of the play. Antonio declares:

To-day, my lord; and for three months before,
No interim, not a minute’s vacancy,
Both day and night did we [Sebastian and I] keep company.
Enter Olivia and Attendants

_Du._ Here comes the countess: now heaven walks on earth.
But for thee, fellow; fellow, thy words are madness:
Three months this youth hath tended upon me.
(90–5, my emphasis)

So Antonio rescued Sebastian from the sea _one day_ before Viola entered Orsino’s employ. We also know that Viola has been employed for _three days_ before Orsino sends her to court Olivia in his name. Valentine tells Viola (and us), ‘If the duke continue these favours towards you, Cesario, you are like to be much advanced: he hath known you but _three days_, and already you are no stranger’ (1.4.1–4). _Whenever Shakespeare is so specific about time he is inviting us – challenging us – to read him very closely._
If Orsino has already known Viola-Cesario for three days, his order that she court Olivia in his name must be given on the fourth day of her employment. She visits Olivia and, as their meeting ends, Olivia sends Malvolio after Viola with a ring, saying, ‘If that youth will come this way tomorrow’ (1.5.298, my emphasis). Sure enough, on her fifth day in Orsino’s employ Viola returns and greets Olivia most memorably: ‘Most excellent accomplished lady, the heavens rain odours on you!’ (3.1.82–3). Andrew, overhearing, snorts: ‘That youth’s a rare courtier – “rain odours” – well.’ A moment later, he repeats the curious words: ‘odours’, ‘pregnant’, ‘vouchsafed’. ‘I’ll get ’em all three ready’ (3.1.88–9). The treble repetition of ‘odours’ suggests that Shakespeare does not want us to overlook Viola’s peculiar salutation.

This crux is so obscure that no commentator has attempted it. However, if we bear in mind that Shakespeare frequented Shoreditch as an actor, playwright, and sometime resident – and if we remember that the parish church of Shoreditch was St Leonard’s – we can recognize Viola’s strange salutation as a calendrical marker for the date on which Shakespeare imagined this scene taking place.

**Shakespeare’s calendar-play**

St Leonard (fl. ca. 500) was known as the ‘sweet-smelling’. In *The Golden Legend*, that immensely popular gazetteer of saints, Jacobus de Voragine parsed Leonard’s name this way: ‘Leonardus means the perfume of the people, from leos, people, and nardus, which is a sweet-smelling herb; and Leonard drew people to himself by the sweet odor of his good renown.’ Sweet-smelling Leonard’s feast day was 6 November. Viola greets Olivia with a wink at *Leonardus* on his feast day.

Though obscure to us, Leonard’s feast was noted in English calendars of Shakespeare’s time. *Figure 6* shows a portion of the November table in the Book of Common Prayer (1599). St Leonard’s Day, 6 November, is conspicuous between All Saints, 1 November, and the Feast of St Martin, 11 November. Certainly, Leonard’s feast day was alive in the minds of many Elizabethans, particularly sometime parishioners of St Leonard’s Church, Shoreditch – including William Shakespeare. Traditionally, the church was decked with flowers on the sweet saint’s day, 6 November.
Once we recognize that Shakespeare set Viola’s second visit to Olivia on St Leonard’s Day – that is, day five of her employ is 6 November – we can reconstruct the internal calendar that the playwright imagined for his play. If Viola has been in Orsino’s employ three days before her first visit to Olivia on 5 November, she must have begun her employment on 2 November, and was in his service during 2, 3, and 4 November. Small wonder that directors Peter Brook and Trevor Nunn report having felt an ‘autumnal’ atmosphere in *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare’s internal calendar is quite simple and, doubtless, was transparent to some first auditors. From Antonio’s ‘three months and one day’ we know that the shipwreck, Sebastian’s rescue, and Viola’s arrival on Illyria took place on 1 November. This sorts remarkably well with her mourning for a brother deemed lost at sea; November was the Elizabethans’ month of the dead. 1 November is All Saints’ Day, which Elizabethans called All Hallows or Hallowmas, the commemoration of all deceased believers.\(^5\) *Figure 7* shows Shakespeare’s internal calendar for the first acts of *Twelfth Night*. According to Shakespeare’s calendar, Antonio rescued Sebastian on 1 November, the same day Viola arrived in Illyria and one day before she entered Orsino’s service on 2 November. Having served Orsino for three days, Viola visits Olivia on 5 November and returns to court her on the 6th, the Feast of St Leonard.
Shakespeare’s calendar *demands* that 1.2 must be the opening scene of the play. If 1.1 is played first, any length of time, even a month, might have elapsed between the Duke sighing for Olivia and Viola making landfall, in which case the chronology provided by the Duke and Antonio in 5.1 will make no sense. But, of course, the key question is: *why did Shakespeare settle on three months?* Why not four? Or two or six?

Because if we take Orsino at his word – that he has known Viola for precisely three months – the date of the twins’ reunion in 5.1 must be *three months after her entering his employ on 2 November* – that is, *2 February, Candlemas*, the date of the play’s performance at the Inns of Court – and the *anniversary of the christening of Shakespeare’s twins on 2 February 1585*.

This is further proof that Shakespeare had this performance in mind as he penned his play. We don’t know the cause of Hamnet’s death, but he was buried on 11 August, the height of summer; did he drown while swimming in the River Avon?

Recovering the link between the reunion of Viola with a brother believed dead and the anniversary of the christening of the playwright’s own twins casts a patina of bereavement over the conclusion of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* that crystallizes in Feste’s song. Shakespeare’s airy, seemingly care-free comedy contains a nugget of ineffable pain as it embodies the playwright’s hope for another reunion in heaven.
Elizabeth’s special day

We can recover one more significant date in the play: the night when Toby, Andrew, and Feste held the conversation that Andrew remembers in 2.3: ‘In sooth, thou wast in very gracious fooling last night, when thou spokest of Pigrogronitus …’ (20–1). We now recognize that Shakespeare’s Feste brought Good News to Illyria as St Paul did. This time it was news of the Gregorian reform. And Feste’s attempt to explain it to Toby and Andrew accounts for Andrew’s hazy recollection of Pontifex Grigorius and the Pavians ratifying the Equinoctial Rule of Eusebius.

Since their drinking bout takes place on the night of Viola’s first visit to Olivia (5 November), Andrew’s reference to ‘last night’ suggests that their conversation took place on the night of 4 November, the eve of the Feast of St Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and Queen Elizabeth’s name day.

Like Toby and Andrew, the vast majority of Elizabeth’s courtiers must have been absolutely baffled by the debate over the new calendar. They had certainly been told that Gregory’s calendar was correct. But why that was so surely eluded many courtiers – as it would Lord Chesterfield when he proposed England’s eleven-day calendar reform before the House of Lords in 1751. But England’s canny Queen who had battled her bishops for calendar reform understood it.

In sum, what Shakespeare has done in framing Twelfth Night, or What You Will is to knit together secular and sacred sources (Gl’ingannati, Riche, Nashe, St Paul), friends and enemies (Nashe, Harvey), minor saints (Fabian, Sebastian, Leonard), bitter loss (Hamnet), and his own hope for an Elysian reunion – all served up in a text peppered with anagrams, wordplay and snatches of Scripture – and bubbling with topicality. To top this off, Shakespeare gave his play a title which recognized (and celebrated) a decisive Queen and the power of her will. It is a dazzling coup de théâtre.

In the final chapter I will examine some of the personal tributes which dot Shakespeare’s plays, perhaps less elaborate than his celebration of Marlowe in As You Like It, but no less deeply felt.
Notes

3 Though twenty-four bridges now span the Thames, in 1602 the only cart and foot crossing was London Bridge, which was first constructed during the Roman occupation, its wooden structure being rebuilt in stone in 1209. Westminster Bridge, which connects Whitehall to the south bank, opened in 1750.
5 2 November was the Catholic feast of All Souls, which commemorates all the departed; though suppressed during the Reformation, the holy day was still bright in living memory.

N.B. If, as I suggest, 1.2 was the opening scene in Shakespeare’s original draft of the play, how does it happen that this scene was placed second in the First Folio, our earliest and authoritative text? While it is impossible (at the moment) to answer that question with conviction, one must remember that any play – even a Shakespeare play – was and is a work-in-progress in perpetuity; to this day, directors are trimming, cutting, shuffling scenes, time-shifting, and heap ing on physical business to evoke new meanings from his texts. If, as we’re told, the house musicians would play while the auditors entered the theatre and found their places, one can see how a seamless segue into 1.1 was possible if the musicians played the ‘dying fall’ as Orsino and company took the stage. Some bright mind may have suggested this alteration – it worked – and it made its way into the Folio. In any case, Shakespeare was deceased seven years before the (revised) text made its appearance in print.