

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

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SHARING MASTERWORKS OF ART

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Twelfth Night: An Introduction

Twelfth Night dates from 1600 or 1601, which means that Shakespeare wrote this, his last Elizabethan comedy, at around the same time he wrote *Hamlet*. In terms of Shakespeare's total output as a dramatist, both plays fall well into the second half of his canon. If, however, one considers his playwriting to have begun around 1590 and ended in 1611, *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night* occupy a central position, having been created just after the halfway point of his career.

In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare employs many of the same themes and conventions he used in the nine comedies which predate it. However, a certain mellowness and undercurrent of melancholy differentiate it from the earlier plays with happy endings.

With its faraway setting, marvelous plot resolution and hint of a kindly Providence that rules over human affairs, *Twelfth Night* also anticipates Shakespeare's final four dramas, the romances *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*.

The connection between the two types of Shakespearean comedy is most apparent at the end of Act III of *Twelfth Night* in Viola's renewed hope, upon hearing her twin brother's name, that Sebastian still lives: "O, if it prove,/Tempests are kind and salt waves fresh in love" (III. iv. 383–84).

Little does Viola know that in addition to being reunited with her brother, she will find a husband as a result of the shipwreck. The poetry of this romantic comedy, like that of the romances, celebrates the transforming power of the sea as well as an otherworldly ordering of events.

Twelfth Night is a favorite with theater audiences, likely because of its successful blend of lyrical romance, wit and broad comedy. It is as rich in beauty and as deep in emotion as it is hilarious, and it is graced with beautiful language in every part.

Framed by the story of a twin brother and sister who are separated in a shipwreck, the plot hinges on disguise and mistaken identity, which produce all manner of confusion and comic woes for two pairs of lovers.



"One face, one voice, and two persons": The twins Sebastian and Viola, played by Benjamin Nicholas and Jessica Bowers, are the linchpin in Shakespeare's plot for *Twelfth Night*.

Mistakes and blunders of this sort are, in Shakespearean comedy, outward indications of inner turmoil. Orsino luxuriates in melancholy because Olivia rejects his love, and Olivia wallows in grief for her deceased brother. Both are deeply attracted to one who represents their emotional antithesis, the resourceful, witty, down-to-earth Viola in men's clothing.

The title of an anonymous Italian play from 1531, the earliest known version of the main plot, well sums up Shakespeare's characterization of the lovelorn duke and his grief-stricken countess, Orsino and Olivia: *The Deceived Ones*.

A parody of the misdirected passions of Illyria's affected aristocrats, the subplot features the hijinks of two foolish knights and their spirited cohorts. Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek

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Setting and Title

Although Shakespeare locates the action of *Twelfth Night* in Illyria, his own company played the script on an unlocalized stage—one with no sets. Illyria is an antique name for an area of the Adriatic coastline that is today Croatia. In Shakespeare's day the region consisted of a number of city-states governed by the Venetian republic.

The term “Illyria” also suggests any land distant in time or space. As such, Illyria is the perfect setting for Shakespeare's enchanting, romantic story of love and foolishness.

The title *Twelfth Night* implies that the time setting for the play is Epiphany, or January 6, a holiday observed in Elizabethan England as a mid-winter romp when all rules were suspended, secret loves confessed and wrongs avenged.

The twelfth night after Christmas was celebrated on the church calendar as the time at which the Magi arrived with their gifts for the Christ Child. These Wise Men from the East traveled to Bethlehem, following a star, to pay homage to the infant Jesus. They are usually reckoned to be three in number because the Scripture refers to the three gifts they gave to the Baby: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

In many parts of Europe, January 6 is still known as King's Day, a day of gift-giving. Since the Wise Men were not of the Jewish culture into which Christ was born, their arrival in Bethlehem is said to constitute Christ's introduction to the Gentile world, or those outside Judaism.

By Shakespeare's day Twelfth Night, or Epiphany, was not primarily a religious holiday. As the end of the Christmas

season—the final opportunity to be free from responsibilities and enjoy merrymaking—Twelfth Night had become instead a Feast of Fools, a time when all rules of conduct were suspended and confusion reigned. Such folly in Shakespeare's comedy borders on madness.

Aside from the title for *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare does not specify any seasonal setting for the play, which has a fictional time span of three months. He employs the idea of a period of “misrule” in subtler, more symbolic ways, however, particularly in the disorderly revelry presided over by Sir Toby Belch in the subplot.

Many modern directors consider Shakespeare's title more distracting than illuminating in terms of the overall mood of *Twelfth Night*, which is often described as “autumnal” because the play juxtaposes happiness and sadness, light and shade. It is not likely that Shakespeare's own company would have regarded the play as autumnal, however.

The title may be explained by the fact that on Twelfth Night in 1601 Shakespeare's company gave a private performance of an unspecified drama before Queen Elizabeth and an Italian duke who was visiting her court, Don Virginio Orsino. In all likelihood either *Twelfth Night* was the play performed then or the occasion itself influenced the later writing of *Twelfth Night*.

Twelfth Night is the only Shakespearean play that has an alternate title: *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. Given the form of the title, *What You Will* cannot be properly considered a subtitle because it is preceded by a comma. The phrase was a common one in Shakespeare's day. Will means “want” or “desire,” so “What You Will” means “Whatever Pleases You, the Audience.” By using this phrase in the title, Shakespeare seems to say, “In this play you'll find every delightful form of entertainment that you can ever imagine or want. Call it What You Will.” ♪



Viola and Orsino (Jessica Bowers and Sterling Street)

Twelfth Night

Plot: The Short of It

A shipwreck casts Viola ashore in a remote country called Illyria. She presumes that Sebastian, her twin brother and mirror image, has drowned.

For protection in a hostile land, Viola assumes a male identity under the name Cesario and finds employment as a page to Orsino, Duke of Illyria.

Orsino sends Cesario to plead on his behalf with the woman who disdains his love, Olivia. She instead falls head over heels for the page Cesario. Viola also begins to love her master, and Orsino finds himself strangely attracted to his page.

Music, Clowns and Fools in *Twelfth Night*

Feste is both a professional fool or court jester and the principal singer in a play that is full of song. His part includes three songs, all of them among the best-known in Shakespeare's plays: "O, mistress mine," "Come away, come away, death," and "When that I was and a tiny little boy."

Shakespeare was not a composer, so the music in his plays is not to his credit. In most cases neither are the lyrics of the songs. He generally incorporated pieces already well-known to his audiences, adapting them in some cases to the dramatic situation at hand.

As a jester, Feste is a wise fool, one who alerts the audience to the follies of the other characters in *Twelfth Night* with his jokes and sharp-tongued barbs. He is able to penetrate through appearance to reality, to read everyone's mind. For example, he points up the absurdity of Orsino's melancholy, and he employs syllogisms to inform Olivia that her grief is excessive and foolish.

With his ingenious jokes and harmless teasing, Feste is one of Shakespeare's merriest jesters. Yet when he approaches the "insane" Malvolio as the priest Sir Topas, Feste demonstrates that he can be both esoteric and stinging in his rebukes.

In addition to the professional fool Feste, *Twelfth Night* introduces audiences to the intellectually obtuse Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who is described as "a very fool and a prodigal." With his linguistic gaffes (called malapropisms) and misunderstandings, Aguecheek is an inane dolt who resembles

the figure known on the Renaissance stage as a clown, or a humorously ignorant country bumpkin. Some critics classify Sir Andrew as a natural fool, but he does not quite fit that category either, for he lacks the intuitive wisdom of Lear's Fool.

The clown creates comedy unintentionally, whereas the fool possesses a sharp wit. Interestingly, the speech prefixes for Feste designate him "Clown," but he certainly is not one.

In spite of his wit, Sir Toby Belch is also sometimes called generically a clown. Like Feste, he sings and jokes and carries on a variety of comic tricks. He displays some less admirable behavior as well, including drinking, carousing, cheating Sir Andrew and cruelly abusing Malvolio. Thus in the end of the play Sir Toby gets his comeuppance. He cannot be considered a complete scoundrel, however, because he also gains the hand of the delightful Maria in marriage.

Malvolio, whose name means "ill will," is, in Olivia's words, a "poor fool." Because of his sense of his own importance, Maria also refers to him as an affected and stupid person. He is neither a fool nor a clown in the strict sense of those theatrical terms, however, but a gull or dupe, one who is easily deceived like Aguecheek.

Although Malvolio is somber and austere, he is not Shakespeare's portrait of a Puritan. Maria makes the point that "sometimes he is a kind of Puritan" to refer to his contempt for mirth in others. But she quickly retracts the term, saying, "He's not a Puritan 'or any thing constantly.'"

Shakespeare's derision of Malvolio carries no broad religious implications. There is none of the typical Puritan in him. His besetting sin is physical vanity, and he dreams of worldly possessions and titles rather than disdaining them. Maria's revenge against Malvolio is aimed at his pride and self-love. When it is complete, he is a thorough fool indeed. ♪



At the same time, Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's parasitic uncle who overindulges in drink and revelry, promises to make a match between his foolish friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek and his rich niece. Belch and Aguecheek are joined by Olivia's gentlewoman, Maria, and the wise fool Feste in teasing and tormenting Malvolio, Olivia's self-important steward who has no sense of humor.

The confusion over Viola's male disguise is compounded by a love letter, a frantic duel and the arrival of Sebastian.

In the end three couples have great cause for celebration. ♪



Viola and Sebastian (Jessica Bowers and Benjamin Nicholas)

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and Maria are among Shakespeare's jolliest and most durable comic characters. With the help of the wise fool Feste, they play a practical joke on Malvolio, a prudish fussy budget of a household manager who would stifle their revelry.

In Shakespeare's merry ending, brother and sister are reunited, false love is cast aside and the four lovers plan a double wedding.

Shakespeare not only tells a good story in *Twelfth Night*; he connects it to fascinating truths about human nature. The play is profoundly concerned with human relationships, particularly various sorts of love, both genuine and counterfeit. In addition to romantic love, the playwright depicts family love and male friendship.

The play suggests that in its genuine manifestations, true love is always self-effacing. Its counterfeits, on the other hand, are self-centered, excessive and unnatural. They are expressed in terms of pride, jealousy and fickleness. Orsino, Olivia, Aguecheek and Malvolio are all victims of self-deception concerning the nature of love.

Shakespeare depicts false love in *Twelfth Night* as a fanciful, purely imaginary love, based on errors of judgment one makes about himself and others. In the resolution to the plot, the main characters ultimately understand the truth about themselves and their own false notions. Thus the play has been called Shakespeare's most perfect "comedy of identity."

Twins in Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare uses twin characters to complicate the plots of two of his plays. In *The Comedy of Errors* (1590–94) he employs two sets of male twins to drive a series of comic errors resulting from mistaken identity. Several years later for the romantic comedy *Twelfth Night* (1601–02), he created a brother and sister pair of twins, Sebastian and Viola. When Viola, who believes Sebastian to be dead, disguises herself as a male servant, instances of mistaken identity similar to those in *The Comedy* ensue.

Shakespeare was himself the father of twins, a girl named Judith and a boy named Hamnet, born in 1585. Although Shakespeare's plays are not autobiographical, it is hard to imagine that his experiences as the father of twins did not give him special interest in the twin relationship. He must have also been influenced by the death of Hamnet in 1596, an event that occurred between his writing of *The Comedy* and *Twelfth Night*. Such a heart-wrenching experience might well have given him special insight into the emotional predicament of twin bereavement.

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In addition to exploring the psychology of love, *Twelfth Night* introduces several types of fools and foolishness. Together these timeless themes and characters not only offer hilarious diversion but also give us a true picture of ourselves and our own follies.

Feste, Olivia's jester, is the main critic of both love and foolishness in *Twelfth Night*. As a consummate musician, he is also responsible for three well-known songs in a drama in which music plays a vital dramatic function. The instrumental music at Orsino's court, Feste's songs and the popular pieces sung by Sir Toby and crew—all give an added dimension to the pleasure audiences derive from a performance of *Twelfth Night*.

With its balanced presentation of romance, emotional poignancy and delightful humor, *Twelfth Night* is one of theater's finest comedies. Its artistry and entertainment value are inseparable. It offers playgoers a rich exposure to the playwright's timeless art.

With *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare had reached perfection in the dramatic form known as romantic comedy. From this vantage point of variety and balance, he would move on to the so-called problem comedies, great tragedies and romances. ♪



Shawn MacDonald and Brad Payne in the 2006 *Classic Players* production of *Twelfth Night*

It is also interesting to note that Shakespeare's boy-girl twins were christened on Candlemas Day, February 2, 1585. The first documented performance of *Twelfth Night* was on Candlemas Day in 1602 at London's Middle Temple Hall.

As various characters mistake Sebastian for Cesario, confusion multiplies and tensions mount.

Feste, in the guise of the clergyman Sir Topas, torments the "insane" Malvolio with a mock exorcism.

When the twins at last come face to face and true identities are revealed, genuine love is also recognized. As a result, two couples declare their intentions to wed and a third marriage is announced. ♪