

Richmond Shakespeare

Play Guide

TWELFTH

NIGHT

OR

WHAT YOU WILL

By William Shakespeare

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By William Shakespeare

Prepared by

Richmond Shakespeare Educational Outreach

Pre-performance

Sources and history of *Twelfth Night*

Twelfth Night is the last festive Shakespearean comedy, and it was written immediately before the period of the great tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*). The title is notable for being the only play by Shakespeare to have a subtitle: "What You Will." In Elizabethan English the word "will" means desire, particularly irrational amorous desire. In the world of the play, anything goes--people fall instantly in love or pursue the objects of their affections in the most ridiculous ways possible.

The meaning of the main title of the play also may not be immediately clear to modern American audiences. Twelfth Night is the Christian feast of the Epiphany, which commemorates the coming of the Magi to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem and brings the Christmas holiday to a festive conclusion. In Shakespeare's time, the holiday was still associated with the medieval Feast of Fools and pagan Saturnalia, which were celebrated as occasions to mock and subvert the normal rules of social conduct by poking fun at authorities and by abandoning oneself to sensual indulgence. In Elizabethan England, the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany were a time in which noblemen sponsored plays, banquets and all kinds of parties. No school was in session. In this rule-bound society, this was the only time when those of lesser status could "get back" at their betters (all in the spirit of fun, of course!).

The first recorded performance of *Twelfth Night* took place on February 2, 1602, in Middle Temple Hall in London--an indoor venue. This building stands today, and is one of the few Renaissance buildings to survive the Great Fire of 1666. In all likelihood Richard Burbage, the leading actor of the Lord Chamberlain's Men played Malvolio, while Robert Armin probably played Feste. *Twelfth Night* could have been written as early as 1599.

There is no single source for *Twelfth Night*. The play is based on several plays and stories in English, French, and Italian that are adaptations of an Italian play that Shakespeare may or may not have known called *Gl'Ingannati* ("The Deceived Ones," performed 1531, published 1537), which involves mistaken identity among a disguised heroine and a sister and brother separated from each other.

But Shakespeare contributed much to the source material, including Feste, a professional fool, who (as his name suggests) embodies the spirit of festivity in *Twelfth Night*. His presence in the play opposes the excessive pomposity and seriousness of Malvolio, who represents the rise of

Puritanism in Elizabethan England.

Twelfth Night teaches us to savor the pleasures of life while we are young, something that the two major characters, Olivia and Orsino, are unable to do. Though perfect for each other, they are both too wrapped in their own posturing. But when Viola arrives on the scene, she becomes a foil for both characters. Because she is disguised as a boy she is able to make observations and comments, and do things that she was unable to do as a woman, such as getting close to Orsino and lecturing Olivia. Of course, this all backfires. Viola's honesty is refreshing to convention-bound Olivia, who falls in love with "him." And when Viola falls in love with Orsino, her disguise makes it impossible for her to reveal her feelings. She does, however, win Orsino's friendship, something that as a romantic interest she would never have been able to do, and because of this she is able to tell him how women really think. In another vein, the friendship of Sebastian and Antonio gives us another insight into the ambiguous boundaries between love and friendship.

On either side of Olivia are the polar opposites of Feste and Malvolio. Malvolio dresses somberly and maintains order. Feste, as we have seen, is a model of disorder and impropriety. He makes Olivia laugh by showing her how her conventional ways of thinking and speaking are illogical and silly. Feste is allowed to get away with this because of his status as a professional fool--a common kind of entertainer found in most Renaissance royal courts. And his mischief is abetted by Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who contribute to the spirit of unrestrained festivity and disorder in the play.

The play's more disorderly characters are at odds with Malvolio, Olivia's steward, who insists on maintaining order in the household. But by forcing his rigid moral code upon the others, he becomes an object of their cruel tricks, and his own pretensions about transgressing social boundaries lead to his downfall.

The mix-up of the characters are to who is the fool and who is the wise man encapsulates the idea of reversal in the celebration of *Twelfth Night*.

What makes it great?

Twelfth Night exemplifies Shakespeare's masterful use of the English language. He uses a variety of linguistic and poetic techniques, and he uses them in ways that amplify themes in the play, or help us to understand the thoughts and motives of characters.

In Shakespeare, characters who speak in prose are generally more pragmatic, and often represent lower social classes. Characters from the upper classes tend to speak in verse, though Shakespeare also uses verse to indicate heightened emotions and elevated ideas.

Sometimes a character will change how he or she speaks. A pragmatic character that suddenly switches to verse (poetry) might be experiencing a mood change. Characters that are in disguise will also change speaking patterns to reflect the "part" they are playing at any given moment.

The Elizabethan Playhouse

The Globe, the theater most commonly associated with Shakespeare, was not the only theater in London, but it is the most famous. Others include the Rose and the Curtain (both mentioned in *Shakespeare in Love*) and the Swan. The Blackfriars was an indoor "private" theater used by Shakespeare's company (known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, then later as the King's Men) that was generally frequented by playgoers of higher social ranks. The public theaters were all open to the sky in order to take advantage of the natural lighting.

All of the open theaters had arena-style stages (with the audience on three sides), with the poorer audience members (the groundlings) standing on the ground right next to the stage, and the more wealthy audience members sitting in galleries in a circular fashion all around the yard (the open area where the groundlings stood). The atmosphere was fairly raucous (more like NASCAR or WWE wrestling), with people constantly moving around, throwing hazelnut shells on the ground and talking--UNLESS they were intrigued by what was going on onstage. We think that with Shakespeare's plays the audience would have been pretty attentive.

Because the plays took place in the early afternoon and the players (actors) could see the audience and vice versa, it is thought by many scholars that Shakespeare intended for the audience to be involved in the play itself. An actor might refer to an audience member to make some reference to a character not on stage, and this interaction with the audience contributes to the performance's humor and excitement.

People often ask how long Elizabethan performances of Shakespeare's plays were. The plays certainly seem long when we read them. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Prologue alludes to "the two hours traffic of our stage." If the actors really meant that, there would be a very fast pace-- no long pauses or slow exits and entrances. This makes sense if you consider that the normal groundling had the attention span of today's average five-year-old child and liked to throw things.

Synopsis

Act I

- a) Duke Orsino is in love and bemoans the fact that his beloved, Olivia, doesn't return his love. He vows to get her, no matter what.
- b) On the coast, Viola is washed ashore after her ship has wrecked, and she thinks that her twin brother, Sebastian, has drowned. She decides to disguise herself as a boy and call herself Cesario. She makes a deal with the sea captain to keep her secret and her woman's clothing.
- c) The often-inebriated Sir Toby Belch (Olivia's Uncle), and Sir Andrew Aguecheek (a friend of Toby's) endeavor to find a way for Sir Andrew to win Olivia's hand in marriage.
- d) Viola (now Cesario), gains employment as an aide to Orsino, and promises to help him woo Olivia.
- e) Feste, Olivia's fool, tries to cheer her up when "Cesario" shows up, bringing Olivia yet another message from Orsino. Olivia instantly falls in love with--"Cesario"! She sends Malvolio chasing after "Cesario" with a ring that "Cesario" supposedly left behind.

Act II

f) On the coast, Viola's twin brother, Sebastian, washes up with Antonio. Sebastian does not know his sister is alive. He and Antonio split up; Sebastian thinks he's too sad for anyone's company. Antonio decides to go with him out of love.

g) Malvolio tries to hand off the ring. "Cesario" won't take it so Malvolio throws it in the street. Viola is dismayed to realize this means Olivia is in love with him/her.

h) The late-night partying of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Maria (Olivia's maid) and Feste the Fool wakes the puritanical Malvolio, who castigates them and leaves. Desperate for a way to get even with him, the group turns to Maria. She determines to make a complete fool of Malvolio by tricking him into believing that Olivia (his boss) is madly in love with him by composing a love letter to him that appears to have been written by Olivia.

i) Back at the palace, "Cesario" and Orsino are talking about women and love. Feste comes in to entertain. He sings and then leaves. Things get a little uncomfortable.

j) Maria hides with Fabian, Sir Andrew, and Sir Toby, and they wait for Malvolio to find the "letter." He does so and falls for the trick.

Act III

h) Feste and "Cesario" exchange witticisms (he's catching on to her) when they run into Toby and Sir Andrew, who invite "Cesario" into the house. Olivia flirts with "Cesario." Sir Andrew gets jealous.

i) Toby incenses Andrew against "Cesario" and urges him to challenge "him" to a duel. Andrew agrees. In comes Maria who says that Malvolio is doing every silly thing the letter suggested and they should go and see him. They do.

j) Sebastian and Antonio are wandering the city. Antonio says he's a wanted man here, so he gives money to Sebastian and goes to the inn.

j) Malvolio comes in dressed strangely and smiling outrageously and accosts Olivia. She thinks he's crazy and instructs Maria to get Toby to help take care of him. Olivia leaves. In come Toby, Maria and Fabian; they make fun of Malvolio, who stalks off. Andrew arrives with his challenge. Toby says he'll deliver it. In comes "Cesario." Toby delivers the challenge. "Cesario" is confused. Meanwhile, Fabian is pumping Andrew up for a fight. They put the two together and set them off, though neither fights very well. Antonio (Sebastian's friend) shows up and intervenes, thinking it's Sebastian. Sir Toby steps in and he and Antonio start to fight. They are stopped by some officers, who arrest Antonio. Antonio asks "Cesario" for his money (to pay his fines--or to bribe the officer). "Cesario" doesn't know what he's talking about. Antonio, thinking himself betrayed, is led off by the officers in despair..

Act IV

k) Feste runs into Sebastian and, thinking he is "Cesario," tries to make him go to Olivia's. Sebastian refuses. Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian arrive and try to re-start the fight. Sebastian knocks Andrew down, thinking everyone is crazy. Olivia shows up, yells at Toby and takes Sebastian away. He goes.

l) Malvolio is locked up. Feste, disguised as a curate, tries to make Malvolio think he's gone crazy.

m) Sebastian and Olivia go to get married.

Act V

n) Everybody meets at Olivia's estate. The twins are discovered, identities are sorted out, and the proper lovers are paired together: Viola with Orsino, with whom she has fallen in love, and Olivia with Sebastian. Antonio shows up and is amazed by the twins. Fabian tells the story of the duped Malvolio (since Toby and Maria have run away to get married). Malvolio comes in, demands to know why Olivia has led him on, discovers that he has been duped, vows revenge against them all, and leaves in a huff.

Post-performance

People in the play

Multiple Choice

1. Which person is not in this play?

a) Sir Andrew Aguecheek b) Mercutio c) Viola d) Sir Toby Belch

2) Who wears yellow stockings later in the show?

a) Olivia b) Sebastian c) Sir Toby Belch d) Malvolio

3) Which character dresses like a man, even though she's a woman?

a) Maria b) Olivia c) Viola d) Feste

4) Who has a twin brother?

a) Maria b) Olivia c) Sir Toby Belch d) Malvolio

5) What does she think has happened to him?

a) been eaten by bears b) drowned in the ocean c) back home d) off fighting in the war

6) Who does the Count Orsino love?

a) Malvolio b) Olivia c) Viola d) Feste

7) Who thinks he's better than everybody else?

a) Malvolio b) Maria c) Orsino d) Sir Toby Belch

8) Who is in mourning at the beginning of the show?

a) Feste b) Viola c) Olivia d) Sir Andrew Aguecheek

9) Olivia is supposed to love Orsino. With whom does she fall in love?

a) Sir Andrew Aguecheek b) Feste c) Viola, dressed as a boy d) Malvolio

10) For whom does Malvolio work ?

a) Orsino b) Sir Toby Belch c) Olivia d) Sir Andrew Aguecheek

Matching (match the character with a phrase that is spoken by him)

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 1). Orsino _____ | a) "I shall never begin if I hold my peace." |
| 2) Olivia _____ | b)"Nay, by my troth I know not: but I know, to be up late, is to be up late." |
| 3) Sir Toby Belch _____ | c)"some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them" |
| 4) Sir Andrew Aguecheek _____ | d)"O thou dissembling cub." |
| 5) Sebastian _____ | e) "After him I love, More than I love these eyes, more than my life," |
| 6) Malvolio _____ | f)"This is the air, that is the Glorious Sun," |
| 7) Antonio _____ | g)"Take the fool away." |
| 8) Feste _____ | h) "Now sir, I pray you, bring your hand to the buttry-barre, and let it drink." |
| 9) Maria _____ | i) "Lechery, I defy Lechery: there's one at the gate." |
| 10) Viola _____ | j) "I am bound to your Niece, sir, I mean she is the list of my voyage." |
| | k) "One sir, that for his love dares yet do more Than you have heard him brag to you he will." |
| | l)" 'M., O., A., I. doth sway my life' " Nay, but first, let me see, let me see." |

Cool stuff to think or write about for *Twelfth Night*

- 1). Neither servant nor master is spared the foolishness of love. What is the difference between how the "upstairs" lovers and those "downstairs" view and act, especially in matters of love?
- 2). Several characters' names contain or are near anagrams of the word "volio," which in Italian means "will" or "desire." How does the derivation of Malvolio's name fit his character?
- 3). What does it mean to "gull" somebody? Who is gulled in this play? What modern adjective is derived from this?
- 4). Compare Malvolio's view of the world and how it should work with Sir Toby Belch's.
- 5). What is meant when it is said that *Twelfth Night* is a "dark" comedy?

- 6) What is the difference between a clown and a fool? Are both represented in this play?
- 7) Where does Sir Toby live, and what is his place there? How does he seem to spend most of his time?
- 8) What's Viola's dilemma once Orsino starts confiding in him/her?
- 9) How, exactly, is the trick supposed to work on Malvolio, and who is its author? Why does Olivia then think he's mad?
- 10) What is the big gag that Shakespeare put at the end of the play?
- 11) Shakespeare's comedies frequently require a suspension of disbelief--name some instances of this, especially the biggest one, in this play.
- 12) How are Olivia and Orsino alike at the beginning of the play?
- 13) Shakespeare's later comedies often end with one person dissatisfied and somewhat outcast--who is it in this play? What about him/her led him/her to this end?

Special Richmond Shakespeare Trademarks

Shakespeare's primary company probably had about fifteen actors per show, but we know that in the evenings some of the company went on tour. Playing for patrons in their homes, this smaller troupe of players often had only five or six actors.

Richmond Shakespeare is proud to carry on this tradition. Have a look at *Twelfth Night's* cast of **characters**. How would you cast the show with just five people? How would you cast it with fifteen?

For our summer Richmond Shakespeare Festival at Agecroft Hall, we often play with ten to fifteen. Why not come see us in the summer? Visit www.richmondshakespeare.com for more information.