



TEACHING

TWELFTH
NIGHT

by William Shakespeare

SOUTHWEST
SHAKESPEARE

COMPANY

2024

Written by Susan Willis

An Introduction to **TWELFTH NIGHT**

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It's *Twelfth Night*! Party Time!!

No one throws a party better than Shakespeare. Here in his last and perhaps greatest romantic comedy, the Bard reaches into his bag of tricks, pulls out a set of twins and a rascally drunken kinsman, and once again looks at love and the glorious foolishness of being in its clutches.

What is *Twelfth Night*?

In the English Renaissance, the last of the twelve days of Christmas was a blowout celebration like our Mardi Gras—with **drinking, noise, revelry, feasting, dancing, cross-dressing, and topsy-turvy authority, governed by a Lord of Misrule.**

Twelfth Night revelry is the primary image for the action in both plot lines of the play—the characters are inebriated with love or booze or dreams of power.

What Does This Play Involve?

Unrequited love, emotional self-indulgence, partying, vengeful tricks, and a twin brother—leading to happy weddings (and some sobering subplot truths).

Romantic Comedy

The comic form works from separation to reunion and deals with sympathy and/or ridicule (*Twelfth Night* engages both). Comedy also reflects societal values about arranged marriage.

But not in *Twelfth Night*. What then obstructs the course of true love for five acts? The lovers themselves and mistaken identity amid an unhappy love triangle. Only the subplot gives us a non-blocking, wannabe “faux father” with two Mr. Wrongs. *Because it's Twelfth Night!*



What makes these lovers tick?

The Main Plot:

Duke Orsino loves Olivia, a nearby countess, sending messengers to tell her so while he suffers unrequited love.

But **Olivia** isolates herself in grief for her father's and brother's deaths, until jester Feste restores her faith.

[*Note: her wise Fool has been gone; now the Fool, foolery, and foolishness are back.*]

A young gentlewoman, **Viola**, is shipwrecked and her twin brother presumably drowned. She seeks refuge at Orsino's—but, crucially, she disguises herself as a boy, "Cesario," a memory of her brother.

Orsino trusts this "boy," sending Cesario to woo Olivia for him—just as Viola realizes she loves Orsino. Unrequited love triangulates when Olivia falls for Cesario and woos "him." No one is happy.

But twin brother **Sebastian** has *not* drowned and is on his way to Illyria—a real guy who looks like Cesario. What could go wrong? Lots, but now we can anticipate a happy ending and enjoy getting there.



1.5: Olivia revealing her face to Cesario



Mark Rylance as Olivia at Shakespeare's Globe, London, in an "original practices" production in 2002

Was that Girl-as-Boy Disguise Convincing?

Yes, indeed, because there were no women/actresses on the English stage until the 1660s. At the Globe and all public theatres the women's parts were played by boys, the young apprentices in the all-male acting company—and it's easy to believe a boy is a boy. The challenge is *boy as girl* as boy.

Modern productions use a female Viola and Olivia. (*Note: And in Shakespeare, fraternal twins are identical!*)

So Where’s This Party? In the Subplot!

In Shakespeare’s plays, a subplot reflects and comments on aspects of the main plot, sometimes with less principled or less socially responsible characters.



Malvolio with the “fake” letter (Selous, 1830)

The Subplot—

Subplot misbehavior fully embodies the Twelfth Night spirit—raucous, boozy, and self-indulgent.

One of Olivia’s unwelcome distant relatives, **Sir Toby**, wants to help (help himself, that is) and parties while bilking money from another of Olivia’s wooers, Sir Andrew Aguecheek (a Mr. Wrong), and flirting with Olivia’s gentlewoman Maria.

After insulting Olivia’s jester **Feste**, Olivia’s sober-minded steward **Malvolio** stops the revelers’ late-night boozing, so they ally with Maria to seek revenge. Imitating Olivia’s handwriting, Maria forges a love letter to Malvolio; it sets him up to woo Olivia as his ego lets him dream of being the Count.

As Malvolio follows the letter’s outrageous requests, Olivia fears he is sick. The mean-spirited schemers then pretend he’s mad and torment him in a cell while trying to get Sir Andrew to duel with Cesario. But the jokes have gone too far.

Who can sober up this manic crew? Again, Sebastian...

How the Plots Echo and Weave Ideas

	<u>main plot</u>	<u>subplot</u>
Inebriation	love as “intoxicating”	binge drinking, partying
Deceptive appearance	twins	double-dealing, scamming letter trick (“same” writing) Feste as Sir Topas (doubling)
Twos	Olivia with 2nd “Cesario” Sebastian not “mad”	2 duels (2 nd with Sebastian) 2 visitors to “mad” Malvolio

This Production's Time and Setting

Director Amie Bjorklund is setting this Southwest Shakespeare production in 1890s America. She says, "This is the height of the Industrial Revolution, including a lot of international trade. Because of this, many people were migrating ... for different opportunities. This meant an influx of different points of view, different ways of life, and varied personalities."

In the U.S. this era is now called "the Gilded Age," but then it was known for materialistic excess and political corruption. New in 1890s: GE, AT&T, Standard Oil; street lights, streetcars, skyscrapers (thanks to elevators); social issues; Dracula.

The Fashion:

The role of women was changing in the 1890s and so was fashion. Clothing even became practical for working or sporting women, "an acknowledgement that women were becoming increasingly involved in public life outside of the traditional women's roles."

In America it was the era of the Gibson Girl, as drawn by Charles Dana Gibson. "The Gibson Girl possessed a self-assured grace and a cool confidence, dominant and independent in relations with men."



Charles Dana Gibson's Gibson Girl, c. 1895



*John Singer Sargent's 1897
Mr/Mrs I. N. Phelps Stokes*

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- **The TITLE gives essential information.**

“Much Ado about Nothing” and “As You Like It” may not be terribly informative as titles, but “Twelfth Night” is. It describes the spirit, nature, atmosphere, arc, and even action of this comedy.

TWELFTH NIGHT is the last night of England’s Twelve Days of Christmas, the night before Jan. 6, when the Wise Men got to Bethlehem.

It was celebrated as a blowout communal party, like our Mardi Gras—with drinking, noise, revelry, feasting, dancing, cross-dressing, and topsy-turvy authority, governed by a Lord of Misrule.

Twelfth Night has its own Lord of Misrule, and **Twelfth Night revelry is the primary image for the action in both plot lines of the play—the characters are inebriated with love or booze or dreams of power.**

“Many of the existing customs—such as ... the revelries associated with Twelfth Night—were blatantly raucous and ribald. Villagers let their hair down, got blind drunk, and **threatened temporary social disorder. Men dressed up as women and women as men; fools were made kings.**” (Gavin Weightman and Steve Humphries, *Christmas Past*)

“Many peoples ... observe an annual period of license ..., when the whole population give themselves up to extravagant mirth and jollity, and **when the darker passions find a vent** which would never be allowed them in the more staid and sober course of ordinary life.” (Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*)

The subplot’s **Sir Toby is certainly the play’s Lord of Misrule**—as well as its strongest, but not only, example of “darker passions find[ing] a vent” (Orsino and Malvolio also have dark moments near the end).



- Its COMIC GENRE is instructive.

It's COMEDY—romantic comedy, a genre Shakespeare does exceedingly well and with great variety. The classic conclusion of comedy is a dance, a feast, or a wedding. Here, after a wild ride across the comic spectrum, lovers are wed.

COMEDY focuses on sympathy or ridicule—laughing *with* or laughing *at*—and both abound in *Twelfth Night*. For the most part, sympathy emerges from the main plot with the lovers, while ridicule drives and enlivens the subplot, asking us to join the “fun.”

As a romantic comedy, the main plot concerns matters of the heart, matching young lovers and avoiding Mr. Wrongs. With no blocking fathers, Viola's disguise becomes the obstacle.

These young nobles can make their own match; duke with countess is socially ideal—except on “*Twelfth Night*.” So Orsino pines, Olivia mourns, and a shipwreck separates twins, each presuming the other has drowned. (Comedies often open with such seemingly tragic events.) **That both twins survive is the key to the main plot**—we sense a happy ending. Our sympathy wishes the lovers success.

Ridicule definitely pervades the rest of the action; the subplot abounds in it. Sir Toby (the embarrassing kinsman) ridicules, tricks, and bilks both Sir Andrew (a Mr. Wrong) and, with Maria's help, Malvolio (who dreams of becoming Count Malvolio, but who ends up parading around in yellow stockings, quoting a letter Olivia never wrote).



• The Plot Structure works in blocks.

Because **from 2.1 we know** there is an even number of young lovers, the love plot can and will undoubtedly succeed. **Knowing the main plot's issues and its solution, we wait for the conclusion to resolve it.**

For the intervening 2½ acts, the subplot reigns supreme in its zesty, snarky, scheming, inebriated rambunctiousness. Short scenes still give us a glimpse of Orsino or of Olivia begging Cesario for attention, but mostly we revel with the revelers as Sir Toby tries to pick Sir Andrew pockets before they all agree to demean Malvolio. Maria initially tries to keep Sir Toby's carousing in line, but then leads the effort against the steward, since her handwriting appears identical to Olivia's (it "twins" it). Plus, for "fun" Sir Toby puts poor Andrew at sword point with both Cesario *and* Sebastian. But "revels" must end.

The Scenes and Their Plotlines by ACT and SCENE

(Three longest scenes are in **bold**; underlined = other long subplot scenes)

<i>main plot:</i>	1.1	1.2		1.4	1.5	2.1	2.2		2.4	2.5	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	4.1		4.3	5.1
sub plot:			1.3		1.5			<u>2.3</u>		<u>2.5</u>	3.1	3.2		3.4	4.1	<u>4.2</u>		5.1
length:	S	S+		S	L	S	S					S+	S	L	S+		S	L

(More main plot scenes are short—under 50 lines; more subplot scenes are long.)



• And the Verse?

Yes, there's poetry! The text is: 31.4% blank verse

7.3% rhymed verse (both main plot),

and **61.3% PROSE** (mostly subplot).

Of the romantic comedies after 1596, all are predominantly prose. *Twelfth Night's* main plot scenes are verse, but its subplot revels in his inventive prose.

• The Major Conflicts



Unrequited love—Love me!?! No. A triangle of it: Orsino, Viola, Olivia, as only Viola knows.

You always have to worry until you have an even number of m/f lovers in Shakespeare. Lots of angst and emotional pain here, lots of “please” from Olivia, who is the only one who will pursue what she wants until someone finally says “yes.” (Viola also speaks her love, but abstractly.)

Authority/Order vs. Self-Indulgence—Malvolio is all for order; Sir Toby all for booze and bilking, demeaning jokes and revenge. The party group seems to triumph until the ending sobers the mood and gives them an unpleasant reality check.

• Things Renaissance



Social Status: Almost everyone involved in both plotlines is Renaissance gentry (“gentle”)—nobles or gentlemen/-women—all upper class. Orsino as duke is highest ranking; Olivia as countess is next. Her gentlewoman Maria would not be her equal, but could be noble, certainly a lady (“lady-in-waiting” denotes rank). Upon hearing who Sebastian’s father is, Orsino assures Olivia “right noble is his blood.” Malvolio, as steward, would also be a gentleman, again gentry. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are knights, non-inheritable titles awarded for service to the monarch (though we cannot fathom what).

Female Roles on Stage: ...were played by boy apprentices in the all-male English acting companies (there were already actresses on the Continent, but only after 1660 in England).

So Viola can succeed as Cesario because “she’s” already a boy; the trick is boy actor *as girl* as boy. On stage now an actress plays the role, and for centuries when fashion had women in long skirts, the emphasis was on showing off her legs (her *femaleness*, not her “disguise”).



• More Things Renaissance

Marriage and the Renaissance Idea(l) of Friendship: Because upper class marriages were arranged by fathers as social/financial alliances, English Renaissance newlyweds sometimes first met at the altar. Love was not considered requisite; in fact, it was seen as far too unstable an emotion on which to base so important an alliance as marriage. Only middle- and lower-class couples could have a say in their marriages. So the only soul-mate bond a Renaissance gentleman could choose was a friend, and a friend was a soul-mate, absolutely trusted. In *Twelfth Night*, both twins have such a bond as Orsino befriends and trusts Cesario/Viola, and Antonio follows and defends Sebastian.

Renaissance Images of Being in Love (Love Sickness): Orsino's love agony matches how Renaissance poets describe love's paradoxes. In the Italian Renaissance, Petrarch invented the sonnet form to express his love for Laura (a woman he may have seen but never met) and also introduced the dominant images for the contradictions of love. In the 1520s, Sir Thomas Wyatt translated some of Petrarch's sonnets into English and began the English sonnet craze.

<u>"I Find No Peace"</u> by Sir Thomas Wyatt	(Italian form)
I find no peace and all my war is done,	a
I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice,	b
I fly above the wind, yet can I not arise,	b
And naught I have and all the world I seize on;	a
That [which] looseth nor locketh holdeth me in prison,	a
And holdeth me not, yet can I [e]scape nowise;	b
Nor letteth me live nor die at my devise,	b
And yet of death it giveth me occasion.	<u>a</u>
Without eyes I see; and without tongue I [com]plain;	c
I desire to perish, and yet I ask health;	d
I love another, and thus I hate myself;	d
I feed me in sorrow, and laugh in all my pain.	c
Likewise displeaseth me both death and life,	e
And my delight is causer of this strife.	e



• One More Thing Renaissance

The Wise Fool: Our world is filled with standup comics, late-night hosts, and political ironists. The Renaissance had its Fools—a high-class profession. They had talents and great mental acuity, entertaining kings and lords as singers, dancers, jugglers, commentators, jokesters, always insightful and aware, hence the “wise.” They could display others’ folly, but had none themselves.

Shakespeare only began writing a Fool character in 1599 with *As You Like It*'s Touchstone. Feste is his second “allowed Fool,” followed by *All's Well's* Lavache and then *Lear's* less fortunate but ever insightful Fool. Prior to 1599, Shakespeare wrote a very different kind of comic lead—the clown or rustic, the specialty of his leading comic actor, Will Kempe. When Kempe left the acting company, they hired Robert Armin, whose specialties were ideal for the Fool's role.

In *Twelfth Night*, Feste has been absent from Olivia's mourning household, but now he's back—and so is folly. The presence of a professional Fool simply prompts us to recognize the real folly everywhere else.

The Fool's typical garb was motley—a mixed-color or patchwork woolen fabric, something only fools wore. Fools also wore a three-pointed, multicolored hat with bells and carried a short wand with a bauble to show their privileged status (as a king has a crown and scepter).



Robert Armin



• “If Music Be the Food of Love...”: The Play’s Music

Just as we do, the English Renaissance liked their theatres filled with music. Shakespeare is both playwright and songsmith, crafting his lyrics for the stage moment. (Many of the original tunes are extant.)

Feste’s first song, in 2.3 for the late-night drinkers, has a carpe diem theme fit for their hedonistic lives—and also fit for the play’s action.

“O Mistress Mine”

O mistress mine, where are you roaming?
O stay and hear, your true love’s coming,
That can sing both high and low.
Trip no further, pretty sweeting;
Journeys end in lovers meeting,
Every wise man’s son doth know.

The first verse also seems aimed at the main plot action (sing high = Viola; sing low=Sebastian), its journeys and meetings.

What is love? ‘Tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What’s to come is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty,
Then come and kiss me, sweet and twenty,
Youth’s a stuff will not endure.

The second verse includes those present and expresses their modus vivendi, though none may be young.

Following that mellow mood Toby, Andrew, and Feste break into a boisterous rendition of the round “Hold Thy Peace, Thou Knave,” which brings Malvolio and his wrath down upon them (it’s returned).

Moving from Olivia’s household follies to Orsino’s with ease, Feste in 2.4 sings the duke an apt song for his paradoxical emotional state, echoing his 1.1 emotion. **“Come Away, Death”** begins with:

Come away, come away, death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid.
Fly away, fly away, breath,
I am slain by a fair cruel maid...

Unrequited love hurts mortally for Orsino, who does not recognize the true love sitting by his side.



Feste can also choose his song to barb its hearer with truth, as he does the “imprisoned madman,” Malvolio, in 4.2:

“Hey, Robin”

Hey, Robin, jolly Robin,
Tell me how thy lady does.
My lady is unkind, perdy,
Alas, why is she so?
She loves another

Feste sings Malvolio the bald truth. Though Olivia has not locked him up, he doesn't know that, nor yet that she loves another. He soon will.

Once the twins have discovered each other and lovers have embraced, once those who cannot be part of the final reunion and unions are excluded, Feste offers the audience a wistful, almost bittersweet life-cycle song about the real world that maturity, romance, and the audience must now re-enter

“When That I Was And-a Little Tiny Boy”

When that I was and-a little tiny boy,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
A foolish thing was but a toy,
For the rain it raineth every day....

Bonus Comment! *If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die.*

The **opening line of the play**, “If music be the food of love, play on,” is also its most misconstrued. It’s always quoted as if it were a complete thought, but it’s only the start of a longer sentence that actually expresses the love sickness Orsino feels is killing him. He doesn’t *want* to feed the love; he wants to get rid of it—“may sicken and so die”—but he can’t. (Three lines later he mentions violets, associated with both death and love, and also the meaning of Viola’s name.)



• Main plot characters:

Orsino — trapped in his love-longing for a woman he's only seen.

Olivia — trapped in her grief. Once freed, life and love tackle her hard and she goes on offense, determined to win both.

Viola — grieving her lost twin, then trapped in her disguise and her "impossible" love for Orsino. She tries to serve him honestly, to win him the woman he wants (though the way she first checks out Olivia, the competition, in 1.5 is very entertaining. When she admits Olivia is lovely, she gives up and starts doing her job, only to be trapped again by Olivia's response.)

Sebastian — grieving his twin's loss at sea. Befriends the man who saved him. Mistaken for Cesario, which turns out to be fine with him!

Antonio — the merchantman who saved Sebastian after shipwreck, who befriends and protects him.

• Subplot characters:

Feste — the wise Fool, that is, an entertainer/singer/wit/commentator/truthteller. He is anything but a fool.

Sir Toby Belch — Olivia's kinsman. The life of the party—and later a mean drunk. When Olivia sees him tipsy in the morning in 1.5, she asks, "What's a drunken man like, Fool?" "Like a drowned man, a fool, and a madman. One draft above heat makes him a fool, the second mads him, and a third drowns him." [note that we have a fool, a madman, and a drowned man in the play]

Sir Andrew Aguecheek —a Mr. Wrong looking to marry a countess and a fortune, a guileless follower who just keeps wanting to go home.

Maria — Olivia's gentlewoman. Sharp, quick-witted, loyal to Olivia, and willing to marry Sir Toby (do we understand why?)

Malvolio — a loyal steward, but a man with ambition. Perhaps in love with Olivia but far more in love with the idea of power and status, of owning what he now serves and runs.

Fabian — a servant happy to get back at those in power, i.e. Malvolio