

Twelfth Night: Plot Summary

In the kingdom of Illyria, a nobleman named Orsino lies around listening to music, pining away for the love of Lady Olivia. He cannot have her because she is in mourning for her dead brother and refuses to entertain any proposals of marriage. Meanwhile, off the coast, a storm has caused a terrible shipwreck. A young, aristocratic-born woman named Viola is swept onto the Illyrian shore. Finding herself alone in a strange land, she assumes that her twin brother, Sebastian, has been drowned in the wreck, and tries to figure out what sort of work she can do. A friendly sea captain tells her about Orsino's courtship of Olivia, and Viola says that she wishes she could go to work in Olivia's home. But since Lady Olivia refuses to talk with any strangers, Viola decides that she cannot look for work with her. Instead, she decides to disguise herself as a man, taking on the name of Cesario, and goes to work in the household of Duke Orsino.

Viola (disguised as Cesario) quickly becomes a favorite of Orsino, who makes Cesario his page. Viola finds herself falling in love with Orsino—a difficult love to pursue, as Orsino believes her to be a man. But when Orsino sends Cesario to deliver Orsino's love messages to the disdainful Olivia, Olivia herself falls for the beautiful young Cesario, believing her to be a man. The love triangle is complete: Viola loves Orsino, Orsino loves Olivia, and Olivia loves Cesario—and everyone is miserable.

Meanwhile, we meet the other members of Olivia's household: her rowdy drunkard of an uncle, Sir Toby; his foolish friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who is trying in his hopeless way to court Olivia; Olivia's witty and pretty waiting-gentlewoman, Maria; Feste, the clever clown of the house; and Malvolio, the dour, prudish steward of Olivia's household. When Sir Toby and the others take offense at Malvolio's constant efforts to spoil their fun, Maria engineers a

practical joke to make Malvolio think that Olivia is in love with him. She forges a letter, supposedly from Olivia, addressed to her beloved (whose name is signified by the letters M.O.A.I.), telling him that if he wants to earn her favor, he should dress in yellow stockings and crossed garters, act haughtily, smile constantly, and refuse to explain himself to anyone. Malvolio finds the letter, assumes that it is addressed to him, and, filled with dreams of marrying Olivia and becoming noble himself, happily follows its commands. He behaves so strangely that Olivia comes to think that he is mad.

Meanwhile, Sebastian, who is still alive after all but believes his sister Viola to be dead, arrives in Illyria along with his friend and protector, Antonio. Antonio has cared for Sebastian since the shipwreck and is passionately (and perhaps sexually) attached to the young man—so much so that he follows him to Orsino's domain, in spite of the fact that he and Orsino are old enemies.

Sir Andrew, observing Olivia's attraction to Cesario (still Viola in disguise), challenges Cesario to a duel. Sir Toby, who sees the prospective duel as entertaining fun, eggs Sir Andrew on. However, when Sebastian—who looks just like the disguised Viola—appears on the scene, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby end up coming to blows with Sebastian, thinking that he is Cesario. Olivia enters amid the confusion. Encountering Sebastian and thinking that he is Cesario, she asks him to marry her. He is baffled, since he has never seen her before. He sees, however, that she is wealthy and beautiful, and he is therefore more than willing to go along with her. Meanwhile, Antonio has been arrested by Orsino's officers and now begs Cesario for help, mistaking him for Sebastian. Viola denies knowing Antonio, and Antonio is dragged off, crying out that Sebastian has betrayed him. Suddenly, Viola has newfound hope that her brother may be alive.

Malvolio's supposed madness has allowed the gleeful Maria, Toby, and the rest to lock Malvolio into a small, dark room for his treatment, and they torment him at will. Feste dresses up as "Sir Topas," a priest, and pretends to examine Malvolio, declaring him definitely insane in spite of his protests. However, Sir Toby begins to think better of the joke, and they allow Malvolio to send a letter to Olivia, in which he asks to be released.

Eventually, Viola (still disguised as Cesario) and Orsino make their way to Olivia's house, where Olivia welcomes Cesario as her new husband, thinking him to be Sebastian, whom she has just married. Orsino is furious, but then Sebastian himself appears on the scene, and all is revealed. The siblings are joyfully reunited, and Orsino realizes that he loves Viola, now that he knows she is a woman, and asks her to marry him. We discover that Sir Toby and Maria have also been married privately. Finally, someone remembers Malvolio and lets him out of the dark room. The trick is revealed in full, and the embittered Malvolio storms off, leaving the happy couples to their celebration.

Major Themes of the Play:

Love as a Cause of Suffering:

Twelfth Night is a romantic comedy, and romantic love is the play's main focus. Despite the fact that the play offers a happy ending, in which the various lovers find one another and achieve wedded bliss, Shakespeare shows that love can cause pain. Many of the characters seem to view love as a kind of curse, a feeling that attacks its victims suddenly and disruptively. Various characters claim to suffer painfully from being in love, or, rather, from the pangs of unrequited love. At one point, Orsino depicts love dolefully as an "appetite" that he wants to satisfy and cannot (I.i.1-3); at another point, he calls his desires "fell and cruel hounds" (I.i.21). Olivia more bluntly describes love as a "plague" from which she

suffers terribly (I.v.265). These metaphors contain an element of violence, further painting the love-struck as victims of some random force in the universe. Even the less melodramatic Viola sighs unhappily that “My state is desperate for my master’s love” (II.ii.35). This desperation has the potential to result in violence—as in Act V, scene i, when Orsino threatens to kill Cesario because he thinks that -Cesario has forsaken him to become Olivia’s lover.

Love is also exclusionary: some people achieve romantic happiness, while others do not. At the end of the play, as the happy lovers rejoice, both Malvolio and Antonio are prevented from having the objects of their desire. Malvolio, who has pursued Olivia, must ultimately face the realization that he is a fool, socially unworthy of his noble mistress. Antonio is in a more difficult situation, as social norms do not allow for the gratification of his apparently sexual attraction to Sebastian. Love, thus, cannot conquer all obstacles, and those whose desires go unfulfilled remain no less in love but feel the sting of its absence all the more severely.

The Uncertainty of Gender:

Gender is one of the most obvious and much-discussed topics in the play. *Twelfth Night* is one of Shakespeare’s so-called transvestite comedies, in which a female character—in this case, Viola—disguises herself as a man. This situation creates a sexual mess: Viola falls in love with Orsino but cannot tell him, because he thinks she is a man, while Olivia, the object of Orsino’s affection, falls for Viola in her guise as Cesario. There is a clear homoerotic subtext here: Olivia is in love with a woman, even if she thinks he is a man, and Orsino often remarks on Cesario’s beauty, suggesting that he is attracted to Viola even before her male disguise is removed. This latent homoeroticism finds an explicit echo in the minor character of Antonio, who is clearly in love with his male friend, Sebastian. But Antonio’s desires cannot be satisfied, while Orsino and Olivia both find tidy

heterosexual gratification once the sexual ambiguities and deceptions are straightened out.

Yet, even at the play's close, Shakespeare leaves things somewhat murky, especially in the Orsino-Viola relationship. Orsino's declaration of love to Viola suggests that he enjoys prolonging the pretense of Viola's masculinity. Even after he knows that Viola is a woman, Orsino says to her, "Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times / Thou never should'st love woman like to me" (V.i.260–261). Similarly, in his last lines, Orsino declares, "Cesario, come— / For so you shall be while you are a man; / But when in other habits you are seen, / Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen" (V.i.372–375). Even once everything is revealed, Orsino continues to address Viola by her male name. We can thus only wonder whether Orsino is truly in love with Viola, or if he is more enamoured of her male persona.

The Folly of Ambition:

The problem of social ambition works itself out largely through the character of Malvolio, the steward, who seems to be a competent servant, if prudish and dour, but proves to be, in fact, a supreme egotist, with tremendous ambitions to rise out of his social class. Maria plays on these ambitions when she forges a letter from Olivia that makes Malvolio believe that Olivia is in love with him and wishes to marry him. Sir Toby and the others find this fantasy hysterically funny, of course—not only because of Malvolio's unattractive personality but also because Malvolio is not of noble blood. In the class system of Shakespeare's time, a noblewoman would generally not sully her reputation by marrying a man of lower social status.

Yet the atmosphere of the play may render Malvolio's aspirations less unreasonable than they initially seem. The feast of Twelfth Night, from which the play takes its name, was a time when social hierarchies were turned upside down. That same spirit is alive in Illyria: indeed, Malvolio's antagonist, Maria, is able

to increase her social standing by marrying Sir Toby. But it seems that Maria's success may be due to her willingness to accept and promote the anarchy that Sir Toby and the others embrace. This Twelfth Night spirit, then, seems to pass by Malvolio, who doesn't wholeheartedly embrace the upending of order and decorum but rather wants to blur class lines for himself alone.

Twelfth Night as a Romantic Comedy:

Introduction: William Shakespeare is a great playwright. *Twelfth Night* is one of the best romantic comedies by him. It can be compared with the Merchant of Venice, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *As you Like It*. It deals with the light and trivial incidents of life. It combines romantic elements with comic elements. It has a happy ending. Happiness through Marriages: *Twelfth Night* possesses certain features which are common to all romantic comedies of Shakespeare. It is based on love leading to marriage. Almost all the characters are the patients of the same disease - love. The fifth act brings them all happiness through marriage. The Duke gets Viola, Olivia gets Sebastian and Sir Toby feels content with Maria. The entire fifth act echoes with the wedding bells and offers a happy ending.

Female Dominance: In Shakespearean romantic comedies female characters play important role. This predominance gives the play an air of romance. In this play the entire story revolves round the two female characters named Viola and Olivia. Even the chief male characters find their significance due to them. Like Rosalind and Celia, Viola and Olivia dominate the whole plot.

Mirth and Laughter: The atmosphere of the *Twelfth Night* is full of mirth and laughter. From the beginning to the end the play presents a beautiful love story. When the play opens we find a Duke who is panting for Olivia. Viola in the guise of a boy gets a job with the Duke. She has fallen in love with him, though she keeps it a secret. Since the Duke has a great love for Olivia, he sends Viola to her

to plead for him. Viola is good looking and charming. She wins the heart of Olivia. This triangular love makes this play interesting and romantic.

Happy Ending:

The fifth and final act of the play shows the happy ending. In this act we find Sebastian, the twin brother of Viola. He is very smart. His arrival solves the problem. All mysteries are exposed and almost all the characters get their due share of cheerfulness. This happy ending makes the play highly romantic.

Happy Blending of Fact and Fiction:

A happy blending of fact and fiction is a very important characteristic of the Twelfth Night. The person and the places, the plot and the setting are all imaginary. They have been given romantic touch by William Shakespeare. Some characters like Fest, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Malvolio are humorous characters. They provoke laughter and create a romantic atmosphere in the play.

Music and Song:

Music and song play important role in the comedies of William Shakespeare. They are the keynote of the Twelfth Night. The whole body of the play is studded with songs. In short, the song and music of the play provide this comedy an excellent romantic atmosphere.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Twelfth Night is the purest and merriest comedy that Shakespeare wrote ever. Dowden has rightly called this play 'Joyous, refined and romantic.'