

Twelfth Night

By William Shakespeare

Twelfth Night is a [romantic comedy](#) by [William Shakespeare](#) that is believed to have been written around 1601–1602 as a [Twelfth Night entertainment](#) for the close of the Christmas season. The play centres on the twins [Viola](#) and [Sebastian](#), who are separated in a shipwreck. Viola (who is disguised as Cesario) falls in love with the Duke Orsino, who in turn is in love with Countess Olivia. Upon meeting Viola, Countess Olivia falls in love with her thinking she is a man.

The play expanded on the musical interludes and riotous disorder expected of the occasion,[1] with plot elements drawn from the short story "Of Apollonius and Silla" by [Barnabe Rich](#), based on a story by [Matteo Bandello](#). The first documented public performance was on 2 February 1602, at [Candlemas](#), the formal end of [Christmastide](#) in the year's calendar. The play was not published until its inclusion in the 1623 [First Folio](#).

Play Summary

Various critics divide Twelfth Night into various types of plots and/or subplots. Regardless of the exact number of plots and subplots, however, the main thing is that they are all woven together with immense skill to ultimately compose a single pattern or tapestry. There is, first, the group centering around the ducal nobility of Illyria: this group consists of Duke Orsino and his attendants, who open the play, and the Countess Olivia, who is the main topic of discussion of the opening scene. Then there is the group of shipwrecked personages centering on Viola and Sebastian, the twins, and their friends, Viola's sea captain who fades from the action, and, more important, Antonio, who plays a significant role later in the comedy. Both Viola and Sebastian are, of course, later absorbed into the nobility of Illyria. Then there is the merry group of pranksters, gullers, and tricksters, led by Sir Toby Belch and Maria; this group also includes Sir Andrew Aguecheek (who is included because his income supports the other members of this group), Fabian, and Feste, the Clown. Through Feste, all of the groups are connected by his free movement from one group to another as he is equally at home singing for Duke Orsino, or proving Lady Olivia to be a fool for so excessively mourning for her brother, or in planning a trick with Sir Toby.

Critical Essays Major Symbols and Motifs

Explore the different symbols and motifs within William Shakespeare's comedic play, Twelfth Night. Symbols and motifs are key to understanding Twelfth Night as a play and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

Death

Although no actual deaths occur in Twelfth Night, death haunts this play throughout. At the beginning, Olivia is mourning a dead brother. Sebastian and Viola have just survived a shipwreck, and each spends the majority of the play thinking the other is dead.

Later in the play, when the plot entanglements heart up, we learn of the other near-brushes with death. Antonio, captured by Orsino's men, is threatened with death. Pranks orchestrated by Sir Toby and Sir Andrew lead them perilously close to being killed by Sebastian. Most significantly, Orsino threatens to kill Cesario, and s/he is most "willing apt" to let him. Even though all these threats come to nought, they serve as a reminder of how eros (love), in Shakespeare, can so quickly slide over into thanatos (death).

Identity and Mistaken Identity

One of the central motifs of this play is identity and mistaken identity. Identity (like so many words in this play) has a double sense. On the one hand, identity differentiates one thing from another by

noting the individuality of each. On the other hand, identity also implies likeness or resemblance. When we say two things are identical, we usually mean they are exactly the same, like identical twins. And this tension between likeness and difference generates much of the action in the comic and romantic plots.

Shakespeare's ability to reveal the unstable nature of identity itself, however, is profoundly disturbing. All the characters in this play are either taken in by another character's disguise or perpetrate a deception regarding their own identity. The subtitle, or *What your Will*, may be this play's guiding principle: What you will in this play is the basis for who you are. In Illyria, characters (like actors) take on fictive roles, and the line between being someone and playing someone is as tenuous as the line between reality and illusion.

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