

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO SHAKESPEARE'S



TWELFTH
NIGHT

“Connell Guides open up the world of literature and
make it more accessible and exciting.
I recommend them thoroughly.”

ROBERT HARRIS

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by David Schalkwyk

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to
Shakespeare's*

Twelfth Night

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Contents

Introduction	4	Who does Orsino want to kill?	103
A summary of the plot	6	Where does Shakespeare leave us at the end of <i>Twelfth Night</i> ?	114
What is <i>Twelfth Night</i> about?	9		
What does <i>Twelfth Night</i> tell us about love?	20		
Is Orsino a “narcissistic fool”?	29		
What makes Viola so beguiling?	36		
What makes the scene between Olivia and Viola so powerful and moving?	45		
What does <i>Twelfth Night</i> tell us about the nature of identity?	59		
What should we make of Antonio’s relationship with Sebastian?	72		
Why does the taunting of Malvolio make us uncomfortable?	79		
Does Feste embody the spirit of <i>Twelfth Night</i> ?	90		

		<u>NOTES</u>	
		<i>Sources</i>	10
		<i>The title</i>	14
		<i>Music</i>	23
		<i>Narcissus</i>	30
		<i>Desire</i>	34
		<i>Illyria</i>	38
		<i>Twins</i>	42
		<i>Two sonnets</i>	48
		<i>Ten facts about Twelfth Night</i>	60
		<i>Clothes</i>	66
		<i>Sir Andrew</i>	84
		<i>Fools</i>	94
		<i>Word play</i>	100
		<i>Death and disease</i>	110
		<i>Bibliography</i>	120

Introduction

Twelfth Night was my first Shakespeare play. I saw it at school when I was nine. I was mesmerised by the figure of Malvolio in yellow cross-garters appearing before a deep blue cyclorama and especially enjoyed Fabian's admonition to Sir Andrew Aguecheek: "you are now sailed into the north of my lady's opinion, where you will hang like an icicle on a Dutchman's beard, unless you do redeem it by some laudable attempt either of valor or policy" (2.3). Why these lines? I don't know. I found them very funny, and walked around the school saying them to all and sundry until one of the older boys told me to put a sock in it. I knew nothing about Renaissance theories of love, or household economies, or social hierarchies, but as a young South African boy I had intimations of the relations between masters and servants and the spoilsport rigours of Puritan attitudes to playing and revelry.

Today *Twelfth Night* is considered to be Shakespeare's greatest romantic comedy, the culmination of a series of works that includes *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*. Written at roughly the same time as *Hamlet* (1600), it draws from its comic predecessors in clearly identifiable ways, but it also looks forward to the more sombre,

emotionally troubled and troubling "problem plays": *Measure for Measure* (1602), *All's Well That Ends Well* (1604) and *Hamlet* itself. There is no evidence that *Twelfth Night* was especially popular in Shakespeare's day, or in the 18th century. Dr Johnson complained that it rendered "no just picture of life", though he conceded it to be "exquisitely humorous". William Hazlitt, however, thought it Shakespeare's consummate, quintessential comedy, as did the Victorian editor, James Halliwell, who called it "the chief monument of the author's genius for Comedy, and the most perfect composition of its kind in the English or any other language". Many modern critics agree. "*Twelfth Night* is surely the greatest of all Shakespeare's pure comedies," says Harold Bloom, while another American academic, Stephen Booth, judges it to be "one of the most beautiful man-made things in the world". In it, claims Mary Beth Rose, Shakespeare "completely masters and exhausts this form of drama".

The mastery and the exhaustion are equally important. With *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare achieved an unmatched blend of plot and subplot, erotic lyricism and festive laughter, edgy satire and romantic melancholy. But he also suggests that the social and personal tensions that comedy is supposed to resolve cannot easily be dispatched in a "happy ending". With its main plot involving unrequited desire and loss of identity, and its

parallel sub-plot of household jealousy and cruel gulling, *Twelfth Night* is as multi-faceted as any well-cut jewel. It is no wonder critics have disagreed about it so vehemently.

A summary of the plot

Act One

Duke Orsino has convinced himself that he is in love with the Countess Olivia, whose father and brother have both recently died. Meanwhile, Viola is shipwrecked on the coast of Illyria but, with the help of the ship's captain, makes it to the shore. Her twin brother, Sebastian, has disappeared. She believes him to be dead. Disguising herself as a young man named Cesario, and with the captain's help, she joins Orsino's household as a servant. Olivia refuses to see the duke – she says she will see no suitor for seven years while she mourns the loss of her brother. Orsino asks 'Cesario' to go and see Olivia on his behalf, and tell her of his passionate love.

Viola goes, though unwillingly because she herself has already fallen in love – at first sight – with the duke. Olivia agrees to see Cesario and hear what "he" has to say. Not realising Cesario is a girl in disguise, she too falls in love – with her messenger.

Act Two

Sebastian, the twin brother Viola feared was lost at sea, has also survived the shipwreck. Antonio, the sea captain who rescues him, decides he will follow his new friend to Orsino's court despite the fact that he has enemies there.

In Olivia's household, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a silly squire and friend of Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby Belch, is considering trying to woo Olivia. He needs money and the plan suits Sir Toby, who also needs money and thinks he can fleece Sir Andrew. So he encourages Sir Andrew to pursue his niece. While the two men are carousing with Olivia's servants, Maria and Fabian, and her fool, Feste, they are interrupted by the pompous steward, Malvolio, who accuses them of disturbing the peace of the household with their late-night revelry. Sir Toby famously retorts: "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?"

Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Maria decide to take their revenge on Malvolio. They convince him that Olivia is secretly in love with him by planting a love letter, written by Maria in Olivia's hand. It asks Malvolio to wear yellow stockings cross-gartered, to be rude to the rest of the servants, and to smile constantly in the presence of Olivia. Malvolio finds the letter and reacts in surprised delight.

Act Three

Sebastian and Antonio arrive in Illyria. Sebastian decides to look around but Antonio, fearful of his

enemies, heads for a lodging house called “The Elephant”. Antonio gives Sebastian his purse and the two part. In Olivia’s household, Malvolio behaves exactly as the letter instructs him and makes a fool of himself in front of his mistress. Olivia is shocked by the change in him and leaves him to his tormentors. Sir Andrew, meanwhile – after seeing Olivia showing affection to Cesario – is persuaded to challenge Cesario to a duel. They get as far as drawing their weapons on each other, but then Antonio arrives, prepared to fight on Cesario’s behalf. (Confused by the disguise, he thinks Cesario is his friend Sebastian.) The fight is stopped but the officers who stop it recognise Antonio and take him into custody. Antonio asks Cesario for his purse back, still thinking Cesario is Sebastian. When Cesario can’t oblige, Antonio thinks he has been betrayed.

Act IV

The confusion continues when Olivia meets Sebastian. Fooled, like Antonio, by the similarity of the two she takes him for Cesario and proposes to him. Sebastian is astonished by the proposal – coming, as it does, from a woman he has never met – but the two agree to a secret marriage. Malvolio, now in a darkened room, is teased mercilessly by Feste, disguised as a priest, who tries to persuade the steward that he is mad. Sir Toby, worried that he will only get into deeper trouble with Olivia, eventually puts a stop to the teasing.

Act V

In the final act, just one scene, Orsino confronts Antonio, whom he accuses of piracy. Antonio in turn accuses Cesario (still thinking Cesario is Sebastian) of betraying him by refusing to return his purse. The confusion becomes deeper when Olivia enters. She also mistakes Cesario for Sebastian, her new husband, and accuses Cesario of betraying her too. Olivia once again rejects Orsino, who rages against her and then directs his rage at Viola, still disguised as Cesario. Viola immediately says she is prepared to die for Orsino and declares her love for him.

The confusion is resolved when Sebastian himself enters. The duke asks Cesario, now revealed as Viola, to marry him. We learn that Sir Toby has married the servant, Maria. Antonio is left without a partner as Sebastian is reconciled with his new wife, Olivia. Malvolio exits, swearing revenge on his tormentors but Orsino sends Fabian to console him.

What is *Twelfth Night* about?

In the first recorded response to the play, after a performance at the Inns of Court in London in 1602, John Manningham, a law student in his late twenties, noted the play’s historical, generic debts to the Roman dramatist Plautus and the Italian

Renaissance comedy of sexual deception, *Gl'Ingannati*. To modern eyes, what is strange about Manningham's view is that it ignores the romantic love plot entirely and records the gulling of Malvolio as the play's most memorable feature:

A good practice in it to make the steward believe his lady-widow was in love with him... telling him what she likes best in him and prescribing his gesture, in smiling, his apparel, etc. and then, when he came to practice, making him believe they took him to be mad.

By the middle of the 18th century attention had shifted to the romantic plot, even though some regarded its resolution as "highly improbable", especially the play's defiance of differences of rank and station.

If we regard *Twelfth Night* as being primarily



SOURCES

The most immediate and direct source was probably a story by Barnaby Riche published 20 years earlier. *Riche his Farewell to Military Profession* is also about

twins though they are not identical: a shipwrecked girl serves a young duke disguised as a boy and courts, on his behalf, a noble lady. The lady falls in love with the girl and then marries his twin brother by mistake. Riche's narrative sets out to show how lovers drink from "the cup of error":

for to love them that hate us, to follow them that fly from us, to fawn on them

about love, and more particularly about the curious way in which we "fall" for other people while knowing virtually nothing about them, we will have grasped the central dramatic issue, though reducing the play to a simple formula fails to do justice to its richly complex mood and tone. Bruce Smith, one of *Twelfth Night's* best critics, argues that it above all engages our imagination: "[It] is replete with moments in which visual sensation and sounds hover between sensuous numinousness and semantic specificity." What we experience indistinctly with our senses or through our imaginations when we watch and listen to it lies beyond the power of words fully to explain. As its sub-title – *What you will* – suggests, the play concerns the desires or fantasies or wills of its various characters and also invites the audience to participate freely in it by following their own fancies.

that frown on us, to curry favour with them that disdain us... who will not confess this to be an erroneous love, neither grounded upon wit nor reason?

It has been suggested this sentence may have inspired Shakespeare: Olivia echoes its phrasing in her declaration of love for Cesario: "Nor wit nor reason can my passion

hide" (3.1).

Barnaby Riche's story is based in turn on two Italian comedies called *Gl'Inganni* ("The Mistakes") which in turn derive from an anonymous Italian play, *Gl'Ingannati* ("The Deceived") first performed at Siena in 1531. All three of these comedies contain the central story Riche used in his version and Shakespeare dramatised in *Twelfth Night* ■