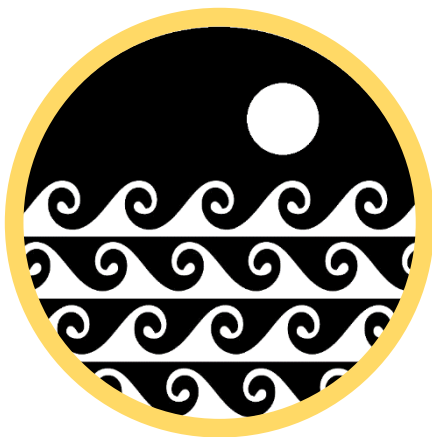


A Guide to TWELFTH NIGHT

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *Twelfth Night* in or around 1601. He was in his mid-thirties, a successful dramatist and actor, and a member – and shareholder – of the most prestigious theatre company in London.

Right from the start, *Twelfth Night* seems to have been a great success with audiences. The notebook of a young lawyer, written in 1602 and still in existence, records how much he enjoyed a performance of the play, which had been staged at his law school by Shakespeare's company. The play was chosen a number of times by King James I's Master of the Revels for performance at the royal court.

Fifty years after Shakespeare's death, when Shakespearean comedy was generally unfashionable, *Twelfth Night* remained popular, mainly in the form of adaptations – frequently set to music – by other authors. By 1750, Shakespeare's own play, rather than these reworked versions, was established again as a favourite, and has remained so ever since.

Twelfth Night, with its lyrical poetry, its boisterous humour and its deep seriousness, is regarded by many as representing the peak of Shakespeare's achievement in comedy. The play is often linked to *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*, the other great comedies from this period in Shakespeare's life; the three are often referred to as the 'mature' comedies, or sometimes as the 'romantic' or 'festive' comedies. *Twelfth Night* is the last and most profound of the three.

Although Shakespeare continued to write comedies after *Twelfth Night*, these were much darker and more problematic works, and his attention was increasingly turning to tragedy. *Hamlet* was already under way, and the other great tragedies were to follow over the next few years.

"If the light playing on As You Like It is that of the morning sun, the sun in Twelfth Night is now mellow and later, afternoon sunshine with a hint of sunset in its quality ... in the distance we hear the sadder notes underlying the romantic ... the golden moment passed, and Shakespeare was not to write this kind of play again."

David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*

Unrequited love, grief ...

Orsino, Duke of Illyria, is hopelessly in love with the Countess Olivia.

She, however, has no interest in him or his feelings; her brother died recently, and she wishes to be left alone, to mourn him in total seclusion.

... and calamity at sea

Off the coast of Illyria, a ship has been torn apart in a storm. Among the passengers were two twins, Viola and Sebastian.

There have been few survivors.

Curtain up

A true romantic

I, i

Duke Orsino is preoccupied with love. His passion for Olivia is all he can think of, and its intensity is almost unbearable. He is restless and dissatisfied, but at the same time is enjoying the sense of vitality that comes with being in love.

Music is playing, and Orsino is listening intently. He wants the music to sweep over him and soothe the hungry yearning of his love for Olivia:

Duke: If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,¹
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again, it had a dying fall:
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour.

¹ *over-indulging*

The music continues, Orsino luxuriating in its sweetness and sadness.

But Orsino quickly tires of the music. Love is so powerful, he muses, that it swallows up all other experiences and soon renders them worthless; being in love means being condemned to a state of continual craving.

When a courtier tries to distract him, it only serves to remind him of his own plight:

Curio: Will you go hunt, my lord?

Duke: What, Curio?

Curio: The hart.

Duke: Why so I do, the noblest that I have.
O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first,
Methought she purg'd¹ the air of pestilence;
That instant was I turned into a hart,
And my desires, like fell² and cruel hounds,
E'er since pursue me.

¹ *cleansed, purified*

² *fierce, terrible*

“From the very first lines everything in Twelfth Night is ambiguous. The hunt is for Olivia. But the hunter has been hunted down himself.”

Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 1965

In January 1601, Shakespeare's company of players – the Chamberlain's Men – was commissioned to put on a play for Queen Elizabeth I and her guest of honour, a 28-year-old Italian Duke. It is not known which play was performed, but it is likely to have been one of Shakespeare's: the Duke's own description of the play, which he mentioned approvingly in a letter to his wife, suggests it may have been *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Shakespeare would almost certainly have acted in the play, and seen – and perhaps met – the young Duke, who cut a gallant, attractive figure in the Queen's court. For whatever reason, it seems that Shakespeare chose to borrow the name of the guest – Duke Virginio Orsino of Bracciano – for the romantic ruler of Illyria in *Twelfth Night*, the play he was to complete later in the year.

Olivia is resolute

A messenger sent by Orsino to Olivia returns. He was not even allowed to speak to her, he tells Orsino. She is still mourning her brother, and has resolved to cut herself off from the outside world for seven years:

Valentine: ... like a cloistress¹ she will veiled walk,
And water once a day her chamber round
With eye-offending brine: all this to season²
A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh
And lasting, in her sad remembrance.

¹ *nun*

² *preserve*

Orsino is not discouraged by the news; in fact, it only convinces him of her true, loving nature, and makes him all the more eager to win her heart.

His spirits raised, the Duke leaves, keen to carry on revelling in the pleasures of love. This time it will be nature, rather than music, which provides the setting:

Duke: Away before me to sweet beds of flowers!
Love-thoughts lie rich when canopied with bowers.

Viola's sea-voyage is cut short

I, ii

A few survivors from a shipwreck have managed to reach the shores of Illyria. Among them are the vessel's captain and Viola. The fate of Viola's twin brother Sebastian is unknown: he had tied himself to a piece of wreckage which, when last seen, was floating out at sea.

The captain, who knows Illyria, tells Viola about Orsino, his love for Olivia, and her mourning and desire for solitude. Olivia's situation strikes a chord with Viola; the idea of withdrawing from the outside world to come to terms with the sudden, drastic change in her life appeals to her. She even thinks of trying to join Olivia's household. However, as the captain points out, Olivia does not want company. Instead, Viola decides to get to know Duke Orsino. She asks the captain to help her gain entry into Orsino's court. She wants him to accompany her and provide her with a disguise:

Viola: I prithee (and I'll pay thee bounteously)
Conceal me what I am, and be my aid
For such disguise as haply shall become
The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke ...

The captain agrees to go along with her plan, and they set off for Duke Orsino's court.

Disorder in Olivia's household

I, iii

Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle, does not share the general sympathy with her bereavement.

Sir Toby: What a plague means my niece to take the death of her brother thus? I am sure care's an enemy to life.

Maria, Olivia's maidservant, scolds Sir Toby for his noisy, drunken revelry, which frequently continues into the small hours, much to Olivia's annoyance. He is at his worst, says Maria, in the company of a certain knight, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who – with Sir Toby's encouragement – is keen to marry Olivia.

Sir Toby is unrepentant. Sir Andrew, he assures Maria, is wealthy, valiant and cultured; and when they drink, it is to the health of his niece Olivia.

Sir Toby: ... I'll drink to her as long as there is a passage in my throat, and drink in Illyria: he's a coward and a coistrel¹ that will not drink to my niece till his brains turn o' th' toe, like a parish top.

¹ *knave*

"... a man once drunk with wine or strong drink rather resembleth a brute than a Christian man. For do not his eyes begin to stare and to be red, fiery and bleared ... Doth he not froth and foam at the mouth like a boar? Are not his wits and spirits, as it were, drowned? Is not his understanding altogether decayed? ... The drunkard, in his drunkenness, killeth his friend, revileth his lover, discloseth secrets, and regardeth no man."

Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses*, 1583

Sir Andrew now arrives. He does not live up to Sir Toby's description. As soon as he meets Maria, his tenuous grasp of the English language becomes obvious:

Sir Andrew: Bless you, fair shrew.

Maria: And you too, sir.

Sir Toby: Accost, Sir Andrew, accost.

Sir Andrew: What's that?

Sir Toby: My niece's chambermaid.

Sir Andrew: Good mistress Accost, I desire better acquaintance ...

Sir Toby: ... You mistake, knight. 'Accost' is front her, board her, woo her, assail her.

Sir Andrew: By my troth, I would not undertake her in this company. Is that the meaning of 'accost'?

Maria, whose opinion of Sir Andrew as a slow-witted ignoramus is quickly confirmed, takes her leave.

Sir Toby delights in teasing Sir Andrew and taking advantage of his obtuseness. In one brief but gruesome image, he pictures Sir Andrew with a prostitute, trapped in the works of an unstoppable sexual machine, being operated relentlessly like a spinning wheel, his lank hair falling out from exhaustion and disease in the process:

Sir Andrew: I would I had bestowed that time in the tongues that I have in fencing, dancing and bear-baiting. O, had I but followed the arts!

Sir Toby: Then hadst thou had an excellent head of hair.

Sir Andrew: Why, would that have mended my hair?

Sir Toby: Past question, for thou seest it will not curl by nature.

Sir Andrew: But it becomes me well enough, does't not?

Sir Toby: Excellent, it hangs like flax on a distaff; and I hope to see a housewife take thee between her legs, and spin it off.

Sir Andrew is unsure of his chances with Olivia, and is inclined to go home. However, he is quickly persuaded to stay, and, egged on by Sir Toby, joins him in his drunken revelry.

Cesario is sent on a mission

I, iv

Viola has disguised herself as a man, and, calling herself Cesario, has managed to get into Duke Orsino's court. The Duke has taken to the young newcomer at once, finding him a sensitive and trustworthy companion.

Orsino has a job for Cesario. He wants the youth to gain access to Olivia, refusing to take no for an answer, and spell out how much Orsino is in love with her. Orsino urges Cesario to make the declaration as theatrical as possible; he may succeed where others have failed.

Duke: ... unfold the passion of my love,
Surprise her with discourse of my dear faith;
It shall become thee well to act my woes:
She will attend it better in thy youth,
Than in a nuncio's¹ of more grave aspect.

¹ *messenger*

Cesario agrees to do his best. But beneath the disguise, Viola finds herself in an agonising situation: she must go to Olivia to declare Orsino's love, but she herself has fallen in love with Orsino.

Viola: ... yet, a barful strife!¹
Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife.

¹ *a conflict that makes the task difficult*

She sets off, reluctantly, for Olivia's house.

An 'allowed fool'

I, v

Feste is the jester of Olivia's household, at liberty to comment on anyone and anything. He has been away for a long time – he tends to wander freely from place to place – and Maria is scolding him for his long absence.

As they argue, Olivia enters. She is accompanied by Malvolio, the dour senior steward of her household. As Maria predicted, Olivia is displeased with Feste: however, he soon manages to work his way back into her favour.

The character of Feste is not just a theatrical invention. The old tradition of keeping fools was very much alive in Shakespeare's day. The fool – often someone with a physical or mental disability – was expected to be a continual source of entertainment, and was allowed to make fun of anyone, regardless of status. Fools were not only kept for amusement: they were also believed to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck.

Fools were employed in establishments of all sorts, ranging from the court of Elizabeth I to private households, taverns and brothels. The tradition did not die out until well into the 18th century.

Although his mistress is fond of the fool, Malvolio does not have a good word to say about him. He disapproves both of fools and of people who laugh at them. As far as he is concerned, foolery is no more than childish attention-seeking, and Feste does not deserve the interest he arouses:

Malvolio: I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal: I saw him put down the other day with an ordinary fool,¹ that has no more brain than a stone. Look you now, he's out of his guard already: unless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged.

¹ *tavern comedian*

Olivia observes that it is Malvolio, not the fool, who is being self-centred. He would do well, she advises him, not to take everything so personally:

Olivia: O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite. To be generous, guiltless, and of free disposition, is to take those things for bird-bolts¹ that you deem cannon-bullets. There is no slander in an allowed fool ...

¹ *blunt arrows*

Feste is delighted with Olivia's judgement.

Is Malvolio the only character who is 'sick of self-love'?

"... the same charge may be brought against both Olivia and Orsino, but the action is to show that while their sickness is curable, Malvolio's is not."

Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare: A Dramatic Life*, 1994

A visitor for Olivia

Maria brings news of a young gentleman at the gate. Olivia sends Malvolio to deal with him: if he is another messenger from Orsino, Malvolio is to invent some excuse or other to get rid of him.

Sir Toby, who has been talking to the visitor, wanders in drunkenly: but Olivia cannot get any sense out of him. He staggers out again, and Feste is sent out to look after him.

Malvolio returns. The visitor, he tells Olivia, insists on seeing her, and refuses to accept any excuses. Malvolio is baffled by the visitor's assertiveness, but struck by his youthful appearance:

Malvolio: 'Tis with him in standing water,¹ between boy and man. He is very well-favoured, and he speaks very shrewishly. One would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him.

¹ *at the turn of the tide*

Olivia's curiosity is aroused, and she decides to allow the young man in. Before he comes in, she covers her face with her mourning veil.

Cesario makes an impression

The visitor is Cesario – Viola in her male disguise – who has been sent by Orsino. Cesario starts by asking pointedly which of the present company is the lady of the house. When this is established, he launches into his speech with a distinct lack of ceremony:

Viola: Most radiant, exquisite, and unmatchable beauty – I pray you tell me if this be the lady of the house, for I never saw her. I would be loath to cast away my speech: for besides that it is excellently well penned, I have taken great pains to con it.¹

¹ *learn it by heart*

Olivia is puzzled by the young stranger who is so determined to wade through his prepared speech, and she starts to become impatient with him. Undeterred, Cesario assures Olivia that he will come to the point, and tells her he would rather speak to her on her own.

Viola: It alone concerns your ear ... I hold the olive in my hand: my words are as full of peace, as matter.

Olivia: Yet you began rudely. What are you? What would you?

Viola: The rudeness that hath appeared in me have I learned from my entertainment.

Olivia is amused by Cesario's self-assurance, and she tells her attendants to leave them on their own. She relaxes and draws back her veil, and they talk of Orsino. She assures Cesario that, although she respects Orsino, she does not love him.

As they talk, Olivia finds herself more and more attracted to the young messenger, even though he accuses her of pride and cruelty. When he leaves, she hints that Cesario might come back another time to tell her how Orsino takes her rejection.

As soon as Cesario has gone, Olivia realises that she is falling in love with him:

Olivia: How now?
Even so quickly may one catch the plague?
Methinks I feel this youth's perfections
With an invisible and subtle stealth
To creep in at mine eyes. Well, let it be.

She decides immediately that she must see him again.

Even so quickly may one catch the plague?

The plague is mentioned a few times in *Twelfth Night*. Outbreaks of bubonic plague were a regular occurrence in England, and particularly in London, at the time.

When a severe epidemic occurred in London – defined as more than 30 deaths a week – the theatres were closed down by the authorities who believed, probably correctly, that large public assemblies helped to spread the disease. Unfortunately for the theatres, epidemics tended to happen during the summer, when the theatres – which had no lighting or heating – did most of their business.

At the time of *Twelfth Night*, there had not been a major epidemic for several years. The plague was far from over, however, and was to afflict the London theatres throughout Shakespeare's career. References to the plague are fairly light-hearted in *Twelfth Night*; in later plays, any mentions of the disease tend to be more sombre and menacing.