

Plot Overview

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.

Analysis of Major Characters

Viola

Like most of Shakespeare's heroines, Viola is a tremendously likable figure. She has no serious faults, and we can easily discount the peculiarity of her decision to dress as a man, since it sets the entire plot in motion. She is the character whose love seems the purest. The other characters' passions are fickle: Orsino jumps from Olivia to Viola, Olivia jumps from Viola to Sebastian, and Sir Toby and Maria's marriage seems more a matter of whim than an expression of deep and abiding passion. Only Viola seems to be truly, passionately *in love* as opposed to being self-indulgently lovesick. As she says to Orsino, describing herself and her love for him:

*She pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?*

(II.iv.111–114)

The audience, like Orsino, can only answer with an emphatic *yes*.

Viola's chief problem throughout the play is one of identity. Because of her disguise, she must be both herself and Cesario. This mounting identity crisis culminates in the final scene, when Viola finds herself surrounded by people who each have a different idea of who she is and are unaware of who she *actually* is. Were *Twelfth Night* not a comedy, this pressure might cause Viola to break down. Sebastian's appearance at this point, however, effectively saves Viola by allowing her to be herself again. Sebastian, who independent of his sister is not much of a character, takes over the aspects of Viola's disguise that she no longer wishes to maintain. Thus liberated by her brother, Viola is free to shed the roles that she has accumulated throughout the play, and she can return to being Viola, the woman who has loved and won Orsino.

Orsino and Olivia

Orsino and Olivia are worth discussing together, because they have similar personalities. Both claim to be buffeted by strong emotions, but both ultimately seem to be self-indulgent individuals who enjoy melodrama and self-involvement more than anything. When we first meet them, Orsino is pining away for love of Olivia, while Olivia pines away for her dead brother. They show no interest in relating to the outside world, preferring to lock themselves up with their sorrows and mope around their homes.

Viola's arrival begins to break both characters out of their self-involved shells, but neither undergoes a clear-cut change. Orsino relates to Viola in a way that he never has to Olivia, diminishing his self-involvement and making him more likable. Yet he persists in his belief that he is in love with Olivia until the final scene, in spite of the fact that he never once speaks to her during the course of the play. Olivia, meanwhile, sets aside her grief when Viola (disguised as Cesario) comes to see her. But Olivia takes up her own fantasy of lovesickness, in which she pines away—with a self-indulgence that mirrors Orsino's—for a man who is really a woman. Ultimately, Orsino and Olivia seem to be out of touch with real emotion, as demonstrated by the ease with which they shift their affections in the final

scene—Orsino from Olivia to Viola, and Olivia from Cesario to Sebastian. The similarity between Orsino and Olivia does not diminish with the end of the play, since the audience realizes that by marrying Viola and Sebastian, respectively, Orsino and Olivia are essentially marrying female and male versions of the same person.

Malvolio

Malvolio initially seems to be a minor character, and his humiliation seems little more than an amusing subplot to the Viola-Olivia-Orsino- love triangle. But he becomes more interesting as the play progresses, and most critics have judged him one of the most complex and fascinating characters in *Twelfth Night*. When we first meet Malvolio, he seems to be a simple type—a puritan, a stiff and proper servant who likes nothing better than to spoil other people’s fun. It is this dour, fun-despising side that earns him the enmity of the zany, drunken Sir Toby and the clever Maria, who together engineer his downfall. But they do so by playing on a side of Malvolio that might have otherwise remained hidden—his self-regard and his remarkable ambitions, which extend to marrying Olivia and becoming, as he puts it, “Count Malvolio” (II.v.30).

When he finds the forged letter from Olivia (actually penned by Maria) that seems to offer hope to his ambitions, Malvolio undergoes his first transformation—from a stiff and wooden embodiment of priggish propriety into an personification of the power of self-delusion. He is ridiculous in these scenes, as he capers around in the yellow stockings and crossed garters that he thinks will please Olivia, but he also becomes pitiable. He may deserve his come-uppance, but there is an uncomfortable universality to his experience. Malvolio’s misfortune is a cautionary tale of ambition overcoming good sense, and the audience winces at the way he adapts every event—including Olivia’s confused assumption that he must be mad—to fit his rosy picture of his glorious future as a nobleman. Earlier, he embodies stiff joylessness; now he is joyful, but in pursuit of a dream that everyone, except him, knows is false.

Our pity for Malvolio only increases when the vindictive Maria and Toby confine him to a dark room in Act IV. As he desperately protests that he is *not* mad, Malvolio begins to seem more of a victim than a victimizer. It is as if the unfortunate steward, as the embodiment of order and sobriety, must be sacrificed so that the rest of the characters can indulge in the hearty spirit that suffuses *Twelfth Night*. As he is sacrificed, Malvolio begins to earn our respect. It is too much to call him a tragic figure, however—after all, he is only being asked to endure a single night in darkness, hardly a fate comparable to the sufferings of King Lear or Hamlet. But there is a kind of nobility, however limited, in the way that the deluded steward stubbornly clings to his sanity, even in the face of Feste’s insistence that he is mad. Malvolio remains true to himself, despite everything: he *knows* that he is sane, and he will not allow anything to destroy this knowledge.

Malvolio (and the audience) must be content with this self-knowledge, because the play allows Malvolio no real recompense for his sufferings. At the close of the play, he is brought out of the darkness into a celebration in which he has no part, and where no one seems willing to offer him a real apology. “I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you,” he snarls, stalking out of the festivities (V.i.365). His exit strikes a jarring note in an otherwise joyful comedy. Malvolio has no real place in the anarchic world of *Twelfth Night*, except to suggest that, even in the best of worlds, someone must suffer while everyone else is happy.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

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.

Motifs

Letters, Messages, and Tokens

Twelfth Night features a great variety of messages sent from one character to another—sometimes as letters and other times in the form of tokens. Such messages are used both for purposes of communication and miscommunication—sometimes deliberate and sometimes accidental. Maria's letter to Malvolio, which purports to be from Olivia, is a deliberate (and successful) attempt to trick the steward. Sir Andrew's letter demanding a duel with Cesario, meanwhile, is meant seriously, but because it is so appallingly stupid, Sir Toby does not deliver it, rendering it extraneous. Malvolio's missive, sent by way of Feste from the dark room in which he is imprisoned, ultimately works to undo the confusion caused by Maria's forged letter and to free Malvolio from his imprisonment. But letters are not the only kind of messages that characters employ to communicate with one another. Individuals can be employed in the place of written communication—Orsino repeatedly sends Cesario, for instance, to deliver messages to Olivia. Objects can function as messages between people as well: Olivia sends Malvolio after Cesario with a ring, to tell the page that she loves him, and follows the ring up with further gifts, which symbolize her romantic attachment. Messages can convey important information, but they also create the potential for miscommunication and confusion—especially with characters like Maria and Sir Toby manipulating the information.

Madness

No one is truly insane in *Twelfth Night*, yet a number of characters are accused of being mad, and a current of insanity or zaniness runs through the action of the play. After Sir Toby and Maria dupe Malvolio into believing that Olivia loves him, Malvolio behaves so bizarrely that he is assumed to be mad and is locked away in a dark room. Malvolio himself knows that he is sane, and he accuses everyone around him of being mad. Meanwhile, when Antonio encounters Viola (disguised as Cesario), he mistakes her for Sebastian, and his angry insistence that she recognize him leads people to assume that *he* is mad. All of these incidents feed into the general atmosphere of the play, in which normal life is thrown topsy-turvy, and everyone must confront a reality that is somehow fractured.

Disguises

Many characters in *Twelfth Night* assume disguises, beginning with Viola, who puts on male attire and makes everyone else believe that she is a man. By dressing his protagonist in male garments, Shakespeare creates endless sexual confusion with the Olivia-Viola--Orsino love triangle. Other characters in disguise include Malvolio, who puts on crossed garters and yellow stockings in the hope of winning Olivia, and Feste, who dresses up as a priest—Sir Topas—when he speaks to Malvolio after the steward has been locked in a dark room. Feste puts on the disguise even though Malvolio will not be able to see him, since the room is so dark, suggesting that the importance of clothing is not just in the eye of the beholder. For Feste, the disguise completes his assumption of a new identity—in order to be Sir Topas, he must look like Sir Topas. Viola puts on new clothes and changes her gender, while Feste and Malvolio put on new garments either to impersonate a nobleman

(Feste) or in the hopes of becoming a nobleman (Malvolio). Through these disguises, the play raises questions about what makes us who we are, compelling the audience to wonder if things like gender and class are set in stone, or if they can be altered with a change of clothing.

Mistaken Identity

The instances of mistaken identity are related to the prevalence of disguises in the play, as Viola's male clothing leads to her being mistaken for her brother, Sebastian, and vice versa. Sebastian is mistaken for Viola (or rather, Cesario) by Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, and then by Olivia, who promptly marries him. Meanwhile, Antonio mistakes Viola for Sebastian, and thinks that his friend has betrayed him when Viola claims to not know him. These cases of mistaken identity, common in Shakespeare's comedies, create the tangled situation that can be resolved only when Viola and Sebastian appear together, helping everyone to understand what has happened.

Symbols

Olivia's Gifts

When Olivia wants to let Cesario know that she loves him, she sends him a ring by way of Malvolio. Later, when she mistakes Sebastian for Cesario, she gives him a precious pearl. In each case, the jewel serves as a token of her love—a physical symbol of her romantic attachment to a man who is really a woman. The gifts are more than symbols, though. “Youth is bought more oft than begged or borrowed,” Olivia says at one point, suggesting that the jewels are intended almost as bribes—that she means to buy Cesario's love if she cannot win it (III.iv.3).

The Darkness of Malvolio's Prison

When Sir Toby and Maria pretend that Malvolio is mad, they confine him in a pitch-black chamber. Darkness becomes a symbol of his supposed insanity, as they tell him that the room is filled with light and his inability to see is a sign of his madness. Malvolio reverses the symbolism. “I say this house is as dark as ignorance, though ignorance were as dark as hell; and I say there was never man thus abused” (IV.ii.40–42). In other words, the darkness—meaning madness—is not in the room with him, but outside, with Sir Toby and Feste and Maria, who have unjustly imprisoned him.

Changes of Clothing

Clothes are powerful in *Twelfth Night*. They can symbolize changes in gender—Viola puts on male clothes to be taken for a male—as well as class distinctions. When Malvolio fantasizes about becoming a nobleman, he imagines the new clothes that he will have. When Feste impersonates Sir Topas, he puts on a nobleman's garb, even though Malvolio, whom he is fooling, cannot see him, suggesting that clothes have a power that transcends their physical function.