

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Twelfth Night 1602 Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

Background. The play is based on the text, 'Of Apollonius and Silla' by Barnabe Rich, based on a Renaissance story by Matteo Bandello. The play was created for celebration of the end of the Christmas Season, a time of festivity marked in the calendar, and honored by a generally high mood in the theater going public.

Convolutions. The play itself revolves around the destinies of two twins, Viola and Sebastian, whom a violent ship wreck separates, and in particular around the plot turns provided by Viola's guise as a man, and the peripeties this involves for her and others. Viola (Cesario) is given employment by the Duke Orsino, who thinks Viola is a man—she is dressed that way—and who later falls hopelessly in love with him (her)—while at the same time, and this blends the familiar Shakespearian mix—Viola—who serves as an emissary to Olivia, of the Duke's own love-- has fallen in love with Duke Orsino who does not return the affection because he is in this point still in love with Countess Olivia, and of course because he believes Viola to be the man as which she dresses.

As it happens. In the end, when Viola/Cesario had revealed out as a woman, she feels the freedom to bond with Duke Orsino, whom she has loved all along. At about the same time, Olivia falls for Viola's brother Sebastian, who though shipwrecked has also make his way to Illyria. The love triangle, consequently, is resolved in two different ways—Orsino-Viola; Sebastian-Olivia. The play, be it noted, is remarkable also for its collateral humors, its locals, mad folk, jokers and wits, as much as for its 'All's well that ends well' type promises.

CHARACTERS

Viola is one of the two shipwrecked twins—the other is Sebastian—who wash up, separated from one another, on the shore of Illyria. She ends up marrying Duke Orsino.

Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, shipwrecked at the same time as her. In the end he marries Olivia.

Duke Orsino, duke of Illyria, employer and eventually lover and mate of Viola/Sebastian.

Olivia. A well to do countess who falls in love with Viola, while he/she is bringing her messages, from Duke Orsino, declaring his love. She is also preoccupied with rejecting the proposals which Viola/Sebastian brings her from the Duke.

Malvolio. Steward in Olivia's household, and more or less ridiculously the wooer of his mistress, who finds him quite clownish.

Maria. Olivia's maid around the house, and general bawdy wit.

Sir Toby Belch. Olivia's uncle. For him cakes and ale come first.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a friend of Sir Toby, and his partner is self-indulgent carousals.

Fabian. A servant in Olivia's household.

Feste. A servant to Olivia; a clown.

STORY

Shipwreck. Viola comes to shore on the coast of Illyria, where she and her twin brother have been shipwrecked; she has no idea of the fate of her brother, and her only ally is the captain who was shipwrecked with her. He helps her to find employment—disguised as a man, Cesario—and lodging, with the prominent Duke Orsino. It happens that the Duke believes himself in love with the Countess Olivia, and to further that love he sends constant messages to the lady, through Cesario; but nothing prevails, because Olivia, who has recently suffered the loss of dear relatives, has absolutely sworn off men for seven years.

Triangle. Love has its way in this complex situation. Olivia falls in love with Viola, whom she takes to be a man. Duke Orsino continues to woo Olivia, till he realizes the futility of it. Viola falls in love with Duke Orsino. They form a match.

Subplot. Just below the surface of the above action, which needs supplementing, for its disinclination to wrap itself up tightly at the end, with more than one marriage, there is a farrago of comic episodes, some involving the fate of Malvolio, Olivia's steward, others the witticisms and antics of Sir Toby Belch—always on the side of 'cakes and ale'—and his bosom buddy Sir Andrew Aguecheek.

Malvolio. The plot against Malvolio is carefully orchestrated. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, devotees of the bottle, stay up noisily on the grounds of Olivia's estate, and make a general ruckus which leads Malvolio, steward of the estate, to drive them away unceremoniously. A plot is then hatched to leave a letter—which Maria will write, pretending to be Olivia—informing Malvolio that Olivia is very fond of him, and particularly fancies him when he cross garters wearing yellow stockings—a guide which, to the audience as well as Olivia—will seem strikingly ridiculous, though Malvolio takes the letter at face value, and dresses as requested for his next visit with Olivia. She is predictably disgusted, and makes no fuss when her servants drag Malvolio away to a dark prison, to get over his madness.

In the midst of this madness, Viola's lost twin Sebastian, arrives in the city, himself too having survived, and finds his way to the estate of Olivia, who, confusingly enough, takes him to be Viola, and this time falls in love, with Viola's brother. Olivia, abandoning her seven year strictures, asks Sebastian to marry her; which in fact happens, under a priest's blessing. In the end, when her resemblance to Sebastian has been sufficiently noted, Viola reveals her true identity, and is formally reunited with her twin brother, effecting a belated harmony of couples, the expected final tone of a Shakespearian comedy, though still far from the sharp paced wrap up taken for norm in plays like *As you like it*, where the reestablishment of geometric peace is experienced as a requisite.

THEMES

Resolution Shakespeare's comedies tend to fold themselves up into closes of discovery, in which lost relatives find one another, marriages take place which surmount what formerly were obstacles among lovers, the nature of the universe, loosely speaking, is restored. What else than this occurs in *Much Ado about Nothing*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *A Comedy of Errors*, or our present play, *Twelfth Night*? One

might say that the essence of Shakespearean comedy—such plays as the above—is the restoration of an inherent status quo, and in that sense resembles the achievement of Shakespearean (or ancient Greek) tragedy, which is also about resolution, the Aristotelian stasis in which, as the Stagirite says, pity and are aroused in order to be driven out, so that stasis is reestablished, and original conditions restored. Not to say that comedy and tragedy come down to the same thing, but that, perhaps, they converge on the ultimate point they both want to make. Silence follows on the heels of both genres.

Disguise Viola/Cesario. The disguise of Viola as Cesario—like that of Rosalind as Ganymede, in *As you Like it*—is the key to the confusions, and gradual resolutions, that follow from that disguise. So strong is the impression Viola makes, as Cesario, that when her twin brother comes along, at the end of the play, Olivia falls for him, as she had for Viola, without a blip, in perfect continuity. What is the concern for disguise and ultimately reestablished identity in Shakespeare? The major literary source is probably the Roman Plautus, though Shakespeare drew in such sources indirectly, through the immediate contemporary materials he read.

Sources. The real source is the genius of Shakespeare himself mulling through the dramaturgical peculiarities of the stage he inherited, on which women did not participate as actors, but were represented by male actors dressed as women. Not only were trans dressing styles built into the theatrical system, but so were arguably the conditions for homoerotic relationships—cf. the relation of Viola to Duke Orsino, which starts as master-page, then morphs into master love-object. The disguise theme, in the present play, self morphs into the self-consciousness of the play and playwright themselves, about the fact that they are acting in and writing a play.

Metatheatrical. This metatheatrical awareness, is a glimpse into the tireless modernity of Shakespeare. At Olivia's first meeting with "Cesario" (Viola) in I. v, she asks her "Are you a comedian (an Elizabethan term for "actor")?". Viola's reply, "I am not that I play", which means that she is conscious of playing a part, even as she is embedded in the part. One would have to wander as far as Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1775) to find equally subtle discourse around the mysteries of acting and of what we now call 'acting out.'

Mockery The gang-up on Malvolio, the totally unqualified and comic wooer of Olivia, involves passing off on him a letter purportedly written by Olivia. In the letter he is advised—by 'Olivia,' though Maria wrote the letter—to delight Olivia by certain charming habits, like smiling constantly in her presence (which she hates) and cross-gartering with yellow stockings (which she hates.) The result, of course, is that Malvolio follows the suggestions in the letter, visits Olivia, and makes a classic fool of himself, to the delight of all the plot participants. The mockery leads to a kind of verbal bullying of the astonished Malvolio, who is trundled off to a dark prison for his efforts.

Wit A great deal of wit is devoted to building up the subplots of this play; so much so that, like *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Twelfth Night* might almost be viewed as a play about language, even about what Oscar Wilde saw as the primary function of language, to 'hide our thoughts from one another.' Aguecheek and Belch serve up a nonstop comedy routine, in which each forever outdoes the other. Not to mention the clown and the jester, and, for heaven's sake, the tireless wit of Olivia herself, who can outsubtle the craftiest of her verbal playmates. The stress on resolutions, with which the play concludes, plays counter to the refusal of witty interchanges ever to be resolved.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Viola

Character Yes Viola is the main character, although *Twelfth Night*, like most Shakespeare comedies, is not a drama of character, but of situation, wit, and resolution. In that sense Viola is a classic Shakespearian comedy figure, a composite of emotions, to be sure—terror, wonder, doubt, as she lands in Illyria—but above all she exists as language reacting to situations, rather than, say in the case of Lady Macbeth, being the stormy center from which plots, schemes, and dreadful recriminations emerge. Viola is a true actor, full of real life in her artifice, a clear sighted fake in her real life.

Parallels Viola, as we have seen, is embedded in a historical-dramaturgical situation which carves her into a unique female portrait. There are, however, intimations of her style, in different quarters. Has she a bit of Circe in her, a bit of cool magic, that can bend reality to her fantasy? Or how about Anna Karenina, a cool classy schoolgirl from the start...until she lost her way? Or Jane Eyre, proud, passionate, and independent? Or you know why...best thought of all? Greta Thunberg, the seventeen year old Swedish climate activist who can trade wit and irony with the big guys, and leave them struggling to know what hit them.

Illustrative moments

Shock Viola first appears to us in a state of shock; she has just survived a shipwreck on the coasts of Illyria, and is disoriented. We see her as pure wonder and amazement.

Subtle 'I am not what I play.' Don't take me at face value, for I am an actor, and you know about actors, who have for all time been suspect, as lacking a stable character.

Complex While passing on Orsino's suit, to Olivia, Viola is all the time thinking of her own growing passion for Duke Orsino. She can definitely walk and chew chewing gum at the same time.

Cautious Even when hearing that someone resembling her brother has been seen in tow, Viola is very cautious in her acceptance of reports. Her situation in Illyria is too precarious, and she has trouble feeling at home.

Comprehensive Viola is the first of the *dramatis personae* to grasp the nature of the love triangle she is involved in, and the peculiar difficulties presented by the attempt to untangle the complexities, from inside them.

Discussion questions

Twelfth night signifies the end of the Christmas season, and is presumed to be a night of revels, and especially of a topsy-turvy world in which usual values and class relationships do not apply. How does *Twelfth Night* reflect this situation?

What is the significance of the country of Illyria in this play? What are the connotations of the place name, Illyria, and how do they cohere with the events of the play itself?

We have been discussing Shakespeare's comedies as plays of structure and solution rather than of character. Is this a contention that applies to comedy in general? Wouldn't we be right to say that comedy is a critique of life while tragedy is an existential experience of life?