

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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William Shakespeare (1564-1616) *Twelfth Night*(A, 510-571)

William Shakespeare was born in the small market town of Stratford-on-Avon in April 1564, the son of a successful businessman and governmental official who then suffered financial losses. Shakespeare began his career as a playwright in the early 1590s by writing comedies and history plays. His subsequent professional life was involved with the theater.

Twelfth Night was probably written in the same year as *Hamlet* (c. 1601), that is in a time when there was a shift in the tone and character of Shakespeare's writing. Many have suggested that it was a time of personal anguish, but there are no direct records. What we can say is that there is a biting tone, an uneasiness with comic conventions, and a ruthless questioning of the values of the characters. There are dark notes in *Twelfth Night*--mourning, betrayal, and tragic isolation--but all are swept up in a "giddy, carnivalesque dance of illusion, disguise, folly, and clowning"(510).

Question: Comedy and Social Stability

Is comedy related to identity and stability, and is comedy ultimately a conservative kind of writing? This large question is a fitting intro to Shakespeare's creative environment. We see a world in chaos, at the beginning of the present play. Everyone is confused, or wants what he or she cannot obtain, starting with the Duke's passion for Olivia whose own passion is totally devoted to what she takes to be the death of her brother at sea. By the end of the play these confusions have been cleared up and a new restored order imposed. People tend to get answers to what they want. Even Malvolio has been graciously supported, by Olivia, and the Duke has married Viola. *Is this restoration of order*, to repeat our question, of the essence of comedy, and if so would that be because comedy is about norms and the breaking of them? Is the classic comedic situation simply like that of the man walking rhythmically down the street, who slips on a banana peel, is reduced to chaos, then rises again and goes on walking, a little the wiser?

Comparative Literature :

1. It would be worth looking backward and forward in the history of Western comedy, to Aristophanes in the fifth century B.C., and to television sitcoms in our day. Would we discover a conservative nature to comedy as we traveled through these times? Would Lucy, Jefferson, and Jack Tripper amuse us mainly through their unexpected and socially tweaked behavior? (Or is that simplifying the nature of comedy too greatly?) What about Aristophanes' extended satires on the law courts of his time, on the high philosophy of Cloud Cuckoo Land, or on the vanity of politicians? Is Aristophanes able to make us roar, at these excesses, simply because he knows the social norms against which these excesses are established?
2. The literature on Shakespeare is endless. Give yourself a treat and read a small masterpiece, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1942), by E.M.W. Tillyard. Through the window of this little book you will see a backdrop of customs, religious beliefs and practices, and philosophical assumptions which will help to convince you that Shakespeare lived in an Age profoundly different from ours. I suspect you will also feel the closeness of Shakespeare's world to that of the later Middle Ages, not only to Chaucer but to Christian sophisticates like the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight*.