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Twelfth Night

William Shakespeare · *c. 1601 · original English text*

A shipwrecked girl puts on a boy's name and serves a duke who loves a countess; the countess then loves the messenger. Meanwhile a steward is gulled for pride, and a fool keeps telling the truth in songs. The comedy is about revels, disguise, and the hurt that remains when the whirligig of time has brought in its revenges.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

When identity, desire, and revels are all at odds, can mercy still be shown to the proud as well as to the loving?

"If music be the food of love, play on, / Give me excess of it; that, surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken and so die."
Orsino · Act I, Scene I

Orsino's appetite is cured not by excess but by seeing Viola plain. Olivia's mourning is broken by a love she did not seek. The revels expose Malvolio, and the play does not pretend he is uninjured: he will be revenged on the whole pack of them. Comic order returns, with a scar.

KEY CHARACTERS

Viola
Shipwrecked, disguised as Cesario, faithful in service and in a love she cannot yet speak

Orsino
Duke of Illyria, in love with being in love, until he sees who has served him

Olivia
A countess in mourning, surprised by a love she did not seek, and generous when the truth is out

Malvolio
Olivia's steward, proud, precise, and cruelly gulled; he will not laugh at the end

Feste
The fool, who sings the truth and is wise enough to play the fool

Sir Toby Belch
Olivia's kinsman, a reveler whose joke against the steward goes too far

Sir Andrew Aguecheek
A foolish suitor, used by Toby, and no fighter

Maria
Olivia's waiting-gentlewoman, author of the letter

Sebastian
Viola's twin, whose face unknots the plot and whose hand meets Olivia's

Antonio
The sea-captain who loves Sebastian and is nearly ruined by the likeness

A FOOL'S WISDOM, AND A STEWARD'S SCAR

> *"Better a witty fool than a foolish wit."*
> **Feste** · Act I, Scene V

> *"I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you."*
> **Malvolio** · Act V, Scene I

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Food of Love
ACT I

A duke dotes, a countess mourns, and a shipwrecked girl takes a boy's service.

- Orsino feeds on music and on love for Olivia, who will not hear him, being in mourning
- Viola, washed ashore and believing her brother drowned, disguises herself as Cesario and serves the duke
- Olivia, receiving Cesario, is struck with love for the messenger
- Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria keep the cakes and ale going in Olivia's house

> *"If music be the food of love, play on, / Give me excess of it; that, surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken and so die."*
> **Orsino** · Act I, Scene I

02
Cakes and Ale
ACT II

A letter is laid for a proud steward, and Cesario must speak another's love.

- Malvolio rebukes the midnight revelers; Toby asks whether virtue shall have no more cakes and ale
- Maria forges a letter that will make Malvolio believe Olivia loves him and bids him smile in yellow stockings
- Viola, as Cesario, cannot tell Orsino her own love; she speaks of a sister who sat like patience on a monument
- The plot against Malvolio is now in motion, and it will go further than a joke should

> *"Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?"*
> **Sir Toby Belch** · Act II, Scene III

03
Greatness Thrust Upon Him
ACTS II—III

The steward reads the letter, and Olivia presses a love Cesario cannot return.

- Malvolio finds the letter: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em
- He comes to Olivia smiling, cross-gartered, and is taken for mad
- Olivia, loving Cesario, says that love sought is good, but given unsought is better
- Viola, trapped in the disguise, can only swear she has one heart and one truth

04
The Duel and the Brother
ACTS III—IV

A coward's challenge, a sea-captain's twin, and a secret wedding.

- Sir Andrew is goaded to challenge Cesario; both are unwilling, and Antonio's arrival deepens the confusion
- Sebastian, Viola's brother, is alive in Illyria and is taken for Cesario
- Olivia meets Sebastian and finds a willing hand; they are married in haste
- Malvolio is locked up as a madman, and the fool visits him in two voices

05
The Whirligig of Time
ACT V

Faces are known, marriages are sorted, and one man will not be reconciled.

- Orsino, Olivia, Viola, and Sebastian are at last seen together; the twins explain the night
- Orsino takes Viola's hand; Olivia has already taken Sebastian's
- The plot against Malvolio is confessed; Feste recalls the whirligig of time and its revenges
- Malvolio, unpent, will be revenged on the whole pack of them, and leaves unreconciled

> *"And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges."*
> **Feste** · Act V, Scene I

Disguise and Truth | Love unsought | Pride | Revels and Measure | Mercy | Time

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The gulling of Malvolio begins as a just check on pride and becomes a false imprisonment. The play lets him name the injury.
2. Viola's patience—"she never told her love"—is a picture of her own concealed heart, told to the man she loves.
3. Olivia's line that love given unsought is better is generous, and it is also dangerous until Sebastian's face is known.
4. Feste's songs are not interludes only. "Journeys end in lovers meeting" and the rain that raineth every day both belong to the play's weather.
5. Twelfth Night is a feast of misrule. Watch what must be put back in place when the revels are ended—and what cannot be.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1526, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/twelfth-night/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.