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# *Twelfth Night*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



# TWELFTH NIGHT

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William Shakespeare

*Edited by*  
CEDRIC WATTS



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## TWELFTH NIGHT

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series, with *Henry V* and *The Merchant of Venice* as its inaugural volumes, presents a newly-edited sequence of William Shakespeare's works. Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive paperbacks for students and for the general reader. Each play in the Shakespeare Series is accompanied by a standard apparatus, including an introduction, explanatory notes and a glossary. The textual editing takes account of recent scholarship while giving the material a careful reappraisal. The apparatus is, however, concise rather than elaborate. We hope that the resultant volumes prove to be handy, reliable and helpful. Above all, we hope that, from Shakespeare's works, readers will derive pleasure, wisdom, provocation, challenges, and insights: insights into his culture and ours, and into the era of civilisation to which his writings have made – and continue to make – such potently influential contributions. Shakespeare's eloquence will, undoubtedly, re-echo 'in states unborn and accents yet unknown'.

CEDRIC WATTS  
*Series Editor*



## INTRODUCTION

‘[T]he tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta,  
for thy mind is a very opal.’

(2.4.72-4.)

### I

*Twelfth Night* is one of the most popular of Shakespeare's comedies: it is frequently revived in the theatre, while the cinema and television have brought it to millions of viewers. In some respects, this popularity is unsurprising, for the play offers a variety of comic situations, some subtle, some broad, some ingenious, some farcical. In another respect, however, the popularity may seem surprising, for there are sombre and jarring features, too. Perhaps the appeal lies in that very combination of light and dark, of the joyous and the melancholy, of harmony and discord. Like Orsino's mind as described by the Clown, the play is opaline: iridescent, variable in hue. This chiaroscuro and the related bitter-sweet quality enable the fictional Illyria of the comedy to blend with familiar and not always comfortable realities. In stage productions, the emphasis can fall now here, now there: on the festive or on the decadent, on the comic or the cruel, on the eventual love-matches or on those excluded from the social celebrations.

The most conspicuous of those excluded individuals is, of course, Malvolio. Like Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, he is the puritanical foe to festivity who eventually suffers public humiliation; and, as in the case of Shylock, his plight holds poignancy.<sup>1</sup> Many modern readers or spectators feel that the treatment of Malvolio becomes distastefully harsh. We expect him to become a

butt of humour; we know that in the world of comedy, a rather puritanical and joyless figure (particularly one doomed to bear a name meaning 'Ill-Will') is likely to receive comic humiliation; but in this play the humiliation seems severe and protracted. When he rebuked Sir Toby and Sir Andrew for their drunken noisiness, he was only doing his job, after all: he has to work for his living (as a steward), while they are idle; and they have behaved boorishly in what is supposed to be a house of mourning. Sir Toby's response to Malvolio's rebuke has become famous:

Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?

Arguably, however, without the labours of people like Malvolio, there would be no cakes and ale for such parasitic consumers as Toby and Andrew. Of course, Malvolio's supercilious demeanour partly provokes the revenge-plot in which he becomes ensnared, and the outcome – his appearance as a doting lover, simpering inanely, cross-gartered in yellow hose – is one of the most joyously farcical scenes in Shakespearian comedy. The protracted torment of Malvolio which follows, however, entailing the mockery of the incarcerated 'lunatic' by the Clown posing as 'Sir Topas the curate' while Sir Toby and Maria gloat at their victim's wretchedness, is likely today to seem unfunny and even distasteful. (It brings to mind the tormenting of Stanley in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.)<sup>2</sup> Malvolio has indeed, as he claimed, been 'notoriously abused', and his final words, 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!', can credibly be uttered as the bitter howl of a broken man. It's the most resonant discord in the play. (Perhaps there's just a hint, however, that it may be resolved as harmony. Orsino says that the weddings will take place when the matter of the arrested captain has been dealt with, and this in turn depends on Malvolio's co-operation.)

There is another, subtler, exclusion. In *Twelfth Night*, as in *The Merchant of Venice*, a character called Antonio dearly loves a male friend, to whom he lends money, and for whom he imperils himself. In both cases, the friend makes a fortunate marriage to a wealthy lady, and Antonio is eventually delivered from peril. *Twelfth Night* certainly provides an eager reunion: Sebastian cries:

Antonio! O my dear Antonio!  
How have the hours racked and tortured me,  
Since I have lost thee!

But by now Sebastian has married Olivia (so he has found some mitigation of the torturing hours); and Antonio, it seems, is relegated to the position of onlooker at the dénouement, even though his love for Sebastian seems more soundly based, and has been more thoroughly tested, than Sebastian's for Olivia.<sup>3</sup> The title of the play reminds us that the night of January 6 (Epiphany), the twelfth night after Christmas, was the time of a festival characterised by excess and 'misrule';<sup>4</sup> but the misrule was temporary, and usually served ultimately to strengthen the prevailing order. Judith Buchanan has incisively remarked of the play's conclusion:

The playful experiments of the holiday's festivities are over. Women are to appear and behave as women once again, marriage to be seen as a desirable way of giving shape and stability to a society, stewards to remain stewards, and any figures of challenge to the solidity of these structures (a homosexual suitor, a servant who aspires to rise) to be necessarily, and vigorously, excluded from the heart of the community.<sup>5</sup>

This, however, suggests a less ambiguous process and outcome than are provided by the play itself, with its curiously shot-silken qualities of light and dark. An obvious instance is provided by the concluding song. Orsino has eventually seemed to order the action briskly and positively; everyone except the Clown withdraws; and the Clown is left to sing a song which is variously obscure, clumsy and poignant. The refrain, 'For the rain it raineth every day', is (to English ears at any rate) evidently melancholy; and the Clown's words, however delphic, make clearly enough the point that marriage does not solve all problems; so he provides a sombre coda to the main action. Certainly, the music and lyrics which intersperse the events have maintained the bitter-sweet quality. The song beginning 'O mistress mine, where are you roaming?' reminds us that life is fleeting: 'Youth's a stuff will not endure'; while that beginning 'Come away, come away, death' is an elegy for a shunned lover.



If the foundation of the concluding marriages is love, the play shows that love can be both a benign and a malign madness. Indeed, there's a theme of illusion, delusion and madness which unites almost every part of this play. 'My masters, are you mad?', cries Malvolio when he interrupts the carousing Toby, Andrew, Maria and Clown; so perhaps he had unwittingly suggested to them the nature of their eventual revenge against him, when he is incarcerated. The forged letter had obliged him to act in a way which was, in his eyes, that of a lover; to other eyes, that of someone deranged. But what Malvolio exhibits in an extreme and farcical form is not so different from what is exhibited by other characters in his world.

The very opening of the play links Orsino's love for Olivia to decadence, sensual self-indulgence and inconstancy:

If music be the food of love, play on,  
Give me excess of it; that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die.

Commentators sometimes remark that Orsino is in love less with Olivia than with love itself; but that is not quite what these lines suggest. He is saying, 'Give me so much of this love-food that I become sick of it and lose my appetite – for the food and for love.' This tallies with what he tells Viola-Cesario later about men's inconstancy:

Our fancies are more giddy and infirm,  
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and won,  
Than women's are.

Yet, within the same scene, as if to underline the notion of inconstancy, he contradicts himself by claiming that women are fickle and by attributing to them that 'appetitive' quality:

[T]hey lack retention.  
Alas, their love may be called appetite –  
No motion of the liver, but the palate –  
That suffers surfeit, cloyment and revolt.

For him, 'appetitive' love is superficial and changeable: one may be hungry only until the meal; whereas deep love springs from 'the liver', thought to be the main corporeal source of passion.