

**DOST THOU THINK,
BECAUSE THOU ART
VIRTUOUS, THERE SHALL
BE NO MORE CAKES
AND ALE?**

**—TWELFTH NIGHT,
2.3.106–107**

Unit 1

Lesson 1

Twelfth Night

INTRODUCTION

You're probably familiar with the Christmas carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas." These twelve days refer to the twelve days after Christmas, and particularly the twelfth day, which in myth (not in the Bible) is the day when the Magi first saw Jesus. This day (January 6) is also called *Epiphany* (which means "manifestation"). Shakespeare probably wrote *Twelfth Night* for an Epiphany celebration; you should not take the title as referring in any way to when the play is set, or the passage of time in the play.

Although the title does not refer to the setting, in *Twelfth Night* characters do have revelations or epiphanies. Another reason the title is fitting is that in Elizabethan England, Epiphany was a day of festivals and celebrations. The mood of *Twelfth Night* is celebratory, and one of the themes of the play is to assert the fundamental goodness of celebration and festival. Those who would interfere with such happiness are either converted from their position or dealt with harshly.

WHILE YOU READ

Here are some questions to consider while reading the play:

- What types of love are shown?
- Who is having fun and who isn't?
- Who hides or disguises themselves in some way?
- Who speaks in prose and who speaks in blank verse? Why do you think that is?

PLOT SUMMARY

1.1

The duke is pining away for Olivia, who is in mourning for her brother.

1.2

Viola has been washed up on shore after an accident at sea. Her brother may have perished in the same accident, but she isn't sure. She decides to disguise herself as a boy/young man to work in service to the duke, Orsino. The captain is going to help her with this ruse.

1.3

We meet Sir Toby Belch, Maria, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who will provide many comic moments in the play. Toby is Countess Olivia's uncle, and he has brought Andrew to the house to woo Olivia, even though she refuses to entertain any men because she is in mourning for her brother. In the meantime, Toby is happy to have Andrew as a drinking buddy. Although he claims to Maria that Andrew is cultured and speaks several languages, in truth Andrew doesn't know the meanings of the simplest foreign words, and is more interested in dancing than the arts.

1.4

Viola has quickly gained the duke's confidence, disguised as Cesario. The duke orders Viola to see Olivia and tell her of his love. Viola is not happy about this, because she has fallen in love with the duke.

1.5

Maria warns Feste (Olivia's jester) that Olivia is unhappy with him, and when Olivia enters she demonstrates this herself. Feste is able to win her over though. In fact, when she discovers that Sir Toby is drunk, she orders Feste to look after him. Viola, disguised as Cesario, arrives, and her persistence is rewarded when Olivia agrees to see her. Viola delivers Orsino's message of love to Olivia, but Olivia tells Viola that she cannot love the duke. Olivia sends Viola away, but discovers that she is attracted to Viola (whom she thinks is a young man, Cesario). She sends Malvolio, her steward, after Viola to give her a ring and tell her to return the next day.

2.1

We learn that Viola's twin brother, Sebastian, is still alive, having been rescued from the sea by Antonio. He believes Viola is dead. He parts from Antonio, bound for the duke's.

2.2

Malvolio catches up to Viola and gives her the ring sent by Olivia. After he leaves, Viola soliloquizes, revealing that she gave no ring to Olivia, and she realizes that Olivia is attracted to her, thinking she is a man. She neatly sums up the problems so far: she is in love with the duke, but cannot confess it because he thinks her a man; the duke is in love with Olivia who wants nothing to do with him; and Olivia is in love with her, thinking she is a man.

2.3

Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and the clown are up late drinking and singing. Maria and Malvolio enter, and Malvolio upbraids them for making so much noise in the house. Malvolio even threatens to expel Sir Toby if he does not quit drinking and carousing. After Malvolio leaves, Maria hatches a plan for a practical joke against Malvolio. She will write letters, imitating Olivia's handwriting, professing Olivia's love for Malvolio and leave them for Malvolio to find. Toby and Andrew are all in favor of this plan.

2.4

Feste is now at the duke's, and at the duke's request he sings a song for him. After the duke dismisses everyone else, he tells Viola to return to Olivia and present her with a jewel to renew his pledge of love to her. Viola tries to persuade him to abandon his suit for Olivia, but he insists that his love is so strong no woman could withstand it. He and Viola discuss the nature of a woman's love, the duke claiming it to be much less than that of a man's, but Viola insisting that it is as strong, and citing her "sister" as an example.

2.5

Toby and Andrew have invited Fabian to enjoy the joke on Malvolio. These three hide behind a hedge and watch. Maria places the letter for Malvolio to find, then leaves. Malvolio enters and daydreams aloud about marrying Olivia, then finds the letter and reads it aloud. He is ecstatic to find that Olivia, so the letter says, is in love with him. All the while, the men watch from behind the shrubbery and comment on Malvolio's actions and reactions; the audience hears these comments but Malvolio doesn't. When Malvolio leaves, Maria returns, and the men praise the brilliance of her plan.

3.1

Viola returns to Olivia. First, she speaks with Feste for awhile. She then encounters Toby and Andrew. When alone with Olivia, Olivia tells Viola that she loves her, but Viola rejects her. Olivia tells Viola to come again, claiming that she may yet move Olivia with the duke's suit.

3.2

Toby and Fabian convince Andrew that Olivia's attention towards Viola was only to spur Andrew to action. They recommend to Andrew that he write an insulting letter to Viola, challenging her to a duel. Toby is certain that nothing will come of it, neither of them being the type to duel. Maria enters, and tells Toby and Fabian that Malvolio has fallen for the trick, and he is doing everything mentioned in the letter she forged.

3.3

Antonio has followed Sebastian into town, and Sebastian has agreed to his company. Antonio does not wish to stay in the streets though, because he's wanted by the count. Sebastian agrees that Antonio will arrange for a room for them at an inn, and Sebastian will wander the town for a bit, then meet him there.

3.4

Maria's practical joke bears fruit when Malvolio comes before Olivia in yellow stockings, cross-gartered, and grinning like an idiot. He also quotes several lines from the letter, and all of this leaves Olivia horribly confused and worried. She leaves him in Toby's care, which Malvolio takes as a sign to treat Toby with disdain (as mentioned in the letter). Toby, Maria, and Fabian taunt Malvolio, pretending to believe he may be possessed by the Devil.

Next, Andrew enters, and they continue their fun there, as well. They listen to a letter he has written to Viola challenging her to a duel. Toby assures him he will deliver the letter, but after Andrew leaves, says he will not, because it will be apparent to Viola that Andrew is a fool. Instead he decides to deliver the challenge verbally. When he does, after Viola and Olivia have talked, Viola denies having done anything to provoke someone. Toby says he'll try to settle things with Andrew. When he talks to Andrew, he tells him that Viola is a formidable swordsman and Andrew offers his horse to get out of the dispute. Viola and Andrew are now terrified of each other and Toby and Fabian are having great fun at their expense. Toby tells Andrew, and Fabian informs Viola, that the other must fight to preserve honor, but will not cause an injury. Just as they are about to fight, Antonio arrives. Thinking Viola is Sebastian, he insists on fighting in her place. Officers arrive to arrest him for his previous problem with the count. Antonio asks Viola for the return of his money, but of course Viola has no idea what he is talking about. Antonio thinks from this that Sebastian is deserting him. When Antonio says Sebastian's name before being taken away, Viola realizes that he must have mistaken her for her brother, and therefore her brother must be alive. Toby and Fabian think little of Viola's apparent desertion of Antonio, and they tell Andrew that Viola is a coward.

4.1

Feste mistakes Sebastian for Viola, confusing Sebastian. More confusing is when Andrew, Toby, and Fabian mistake him for Viola, and Andrew strikes him, having been worked up against Viola again by Toby and Fabian. Sebastian strikes Andrew in return until Toby restrains him. The argument heats up until Sebastian and Toby have drawn swords, but at this point Olivia intervenes, also mistaking Sebastian for Viola. Unlike Viola though, Sebastian finds Olivia very attractive, and goes inside her house with her.

4.2

Maria and Toby continue to torment Malvolio, who they have confined somewhere in the house. This time they have Feste disguise himself as a curate and continue the ruse that Malvolio is possessed by the Devil. When Feste is alone, not in disguise, with Malvolio, he agrees to get him some paper and a pen to write to Olivia. Toby is beginning to think he should stop this joke because Olivia is already angry at him.

4.3

Sebastian arrives on stage alone, wondering about his sudden good luck with Olivia and where Antonio is. Olivia arrives with a priest, and asks Sebastian to meet her in a chapel to marry her. He agrees.

4.4

The duke and Viola arrive at Olivia's, and now all parties meet. Antonio insists that Viola has been disloyal to him and kept his money. The duke says that is not possible because Viola has been with him the past three months. Olivia arrives and claims she is married to Viola, which of course Viola denies. But when the priest confirms Olivia's claim, the duke is enraged. Andrew and Toby appear and accuse Viola of having wounded them. After they leave with Fabian and Feste, Sebastian arrives. His presence is enough to enlighten everyone: Antonio realizes his error, Olivia realizes to whom she is actually married, and Viola discovers that her brother is alive. Viola reveals that she is a woman, and Sebastian's sister, and the duke is now free to feel an attraction for her. Feste delivers Malvolio's letter to Olivia, and then Malvolio himself is brought in, with the letter Maria wrote. Olivia examines the letter, reveals its origin, and determines to get to the bottom of the prank. Fabian interjects, and tells Olivia that the trick was his and Toby's idea, and that Maria only wrote the letter at Toby's insistence. He also says that in recompense, Toby has married Maria. And so, Toby marries Maria, Sebastian marries Olivia, and the duke will marry Viola.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. “I’ll do my best
To woo your lady. [Aside] Yet a barful strife!
Whoe’er I woo, myself would be his wife.” (1.4.40–42)
Who is speaking? To whom (before the aside)? Who is the “lady”?
2. By the end of act 1, who are Olivia’s two suitors? Which one appears to be more in love with her? Who is Olivia attracted to?
3. Why is Malvolio upset with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew in act 2, scene 3?
4. “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em.” (2.5.136–137)
Who says this line? What is its source? Which character actually wrote it? What does it mean, in context?
5. “By innocence I swear, and by my youth,
I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth,
And that no woman has; nor never none
Shall mistress be of it, save I alone.” (3.1.156–159)
Who is speaking? To whom? What has prompted this response?
6. How do Andrew and Viola feel about fighting, once Fabian and Toby have described them to each other?
 - a. They are both eager for it.
 - b. They both wish to avoid each other.
 - c. Viola is eager, but Andrew is afraid.
 - d. Andrew is eager, but Viola is afraid.
7. “In nature there’s no blemish but the mind;
None can be called deformed but the unkind.” (3.4.352–353)
Who is speaking? About whom? What has prompted this remark?
8. Why does Andrew hit Sebastian (4.1.23)?
9. “One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons—
A natural perspective that is and is not.” (5.1.211–212)
Who is speaking? About whom? What has prompted this remark?
10. Some characters in *Twelfth Night* are known by two names. Match the names in each column that refer to the same character:

____ a. The Duke	i. Feste
____ b. Viola	ii. Orsino
____ c. The clown	iii. Olivia
____ d. The Countess	iv. Cesario

LITERARY LESSON: Twelfth Night

Theme: Love

This theme is introduced beautifully in the play's opening line: If music be the food of love, play on. Almost everyone in *Twelfth Night* is in love with, or expresses love for, someone else. Most of these instances are romantic in nature: The duke is in love with Olivia, Viola is in love with the duke, and Olivia is in love with Viola (as Cesario). Although it's probable that social ambition rather than love propel their actions, Andrew and Malvolio both woo Olivia. They never declare their love, but Toby and Maria have married by the end of the play, and they do demonstrate affection for each other and (on Toby's part) admiration. Not all the love is romantic love though: Viola and Sebastian love each other as siblings, and Antonio declares his love for his new friend, Sebastian.

For the most part, romantic love in this play happens quickly—love at first sight (a theme you'll see again in *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Viola has fallen in love with the duke quickly—sometime within the first three days of knowing him (1.4.3 and 1.4.42). Also, during that time the duke has grown quite fond of Viola (1.4.1–4). Because he thinks she is a man, he has not developed a romantic love for her, but it seems reasonable to suppose that if he had known she was a woman he would have fallen in love with her as quickly as she did with him. The fact that he entrusts her with the task of wooing Olivia indicates his desire to include her in his romantic life, even if it is as his proxy rather than the object of his affections.

Olivia falls in love with Viola on their first meeting as well. At the end of the play, she seems to fairly easily switch her love to Sebastian (though it is understood that Sebastian is essentially the male version of Viola—so it is not much of a switch). The duke says that he fell in love with Olivia when he first saw her (1.1.20–21), and he will easily switch his affections to Viola at the end of the play.

It is interesting that Toby and Maria, lower-status characters than those mentioned above, are the only ones who do not appear to have fallen in love at first sight. It is unclear when Maria falls in love with Toby, and Toby appears to become interested in Maria only when she conceives of the prank to play on Malvolio. These characters have spent more time together, and know each other better than the other couples, but the play gives us no indication that their marriage will be more successful or that their love is deeper or more mature.

Theme: Appearance Versus Reality

The disparity between appearance and reality is one of the most common themes in Shakespeare's plays, and it's a theme that connects strongly to the theater where actors pretend to be other people and say words which are not their own. This theme is prevalent in Shakespeare's tragedies and intricately tied to the tragedies that occur in those plays. When a character pretends to be something they're not, or acts in a way that does not coincide with

their nature, it's usually an indication that something has gone, or is about to go, horribly wrong.

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola assumes a disguise immediately after the (supposed) death of her brother. Viola loves her brother dearly, and his death is devastating to her. Although she does not consciously relate her assumption of a disguise to her brother's death, it is an escape from reality. In fact, she looks so much like her brother, that when she is disguised as a male they are indistinguishable. She has become her brother in a sense, keeping him alive because she cannot yet cope with his death.

Because this is a comedy, Viola's departure from reality does not have tragic consequences. Nor does it arise from a true tragedy—although Viola thinks her brother is dead, he is not. There are consequences though. Viola, as Cesario, is tasked with a job from the duke: to woo Olivia for him. Although Viola is not happy about this, she does her best, but is so unsuccessful that Olivia falls in love with her (as Cesario) instead. Viola is in love with the duke, but is unable to fulfill that desire either. While in disguise, Viola is ineffectual.

In the end, everything works out. Olivia marries Sebastian (the male version of Viola), and the duke shifts his love from Olivia to Viola. But these things only occur through Sebastian's return, which allows Viola to drop her disguise. It is through luck that Viola's disguise does not cause grief for many people. Although Viola does not assume her disguise to hide sinister actions or intentions, her disguise separates her from reality—from her true self—and until she returns to her natural state she is unable to progress.

In spite of being unable to forward her own romance, however, Viola as Cesario does affect others' lives. Viola does all of Sebastian's courting for him, and when Sebastian meets Olivia she is ready to marry him, believing him to be Cesario. He is only too happy to comply. Viola also forms a relationship with the duke, a friendship that presumably leads to his shifting of affection to her from Olivia. So, although Viola as Cesario is unable to consummate her desires, she does have influence.

Although Viola's disguise is the most obvious example of appearance disguising reality in this play, it is not the only one. Olivia also disguises herself, though probably in a more unconscious way. There is no reason to believe her grief for her brother is not genuine, but she has used that grief to shut herself away from the world, refusing to see anyone until Viola arrives. Her removal of her mask is symbolized when she removes her veil for Viola (1.5.222–223), and her reward for unmasking her face (literally) and her heart (figuratively) is that she is able to fall in love with Viola. (This seems not much of a reward at first, but it will become one when Sebastian appears.) When disguise falls away, love can enter.

Maria also embodies this theme when she disguises her handwriting to match her mistress's, hence tricking Malvolio. In this same prank, Toby and Andrew pretend to believe Malvolio is possessed by the devil. Later, Feste disguises himself as a priest in the same joke. How

funny these scenes are depend on the production (the early parts of this prank—before Malvolio is imprisoned in the dark—should be played very humorously), but what is certain is that in the end this prank has no beneficial effect. Malvolio does not learn a lesson, but merely swears revenge. Again, disguise has not helped anyone.

Theme: Festival and Fun

As noted in the introduction, the Epiphany, or twelfth night of Christmas, was a time of festival and celebration in Elizabethan England. The spirit of *Twelfth Night* is one of gaiety and celebration, and much of the tension in the play comes from people and circumstances that try to thwart this sense of fun.

These circumstances have already begun before the play opens. The death of Olivia’s brother (nearly a year ago) has continued to cast a pall over Illyria. (Illyria was an actual place, near Italy, but for the purposes of this play, it can be thought of as a make-believe, near-idyllic land.) Olivia and everyone in her household have been gloomy, and this particularly exasperates Toby (1.3.1–2). Feste’s absence from Olivia’s household for some unknown amount of time before the play begins (1.5.3) is symbolic of this. And the misery is not restricted to Olivia’s house, but extends itself to the duke and his household, as he pines away for her while she will not see him.

The spirit of Twelfth Night is one of gaiety and celebration, and much of the tension in the play comes from people and circumstances that try to thwart this sense of fun.

Malvolio, of course, is the character who strives hardest to eliminate fun. Although Olivia is gloomy when the play begins, this seems more in response to her circumstances than indicative of her nature. But Malvolio is determined to stop the fun of those around him because he does not approve of their activities.

Toby, Maria, and Andrew enjoy themselves thoroughly. Their fun is not without consequence though. Toby drinks a lot, and this is clearly a burden for Olivia. Andrew is Toby’s follower, providing him a companion for his drinking and carousing. Maria is the member of this trio who is most creative (but also the most cruel) with her fun, conjuring the practical joke to play on Malvolio (which has possible unfortunate consequences, as I discuss below in the section on Malvolio).

But it is Feste who most embodies the festival spirit (notice the closeness of his name to the word *festival*). Feste constantly plays with words, engaging in delightful banter with everyone. Just how delightful each character finds it gives us a clue as to their capacity for enjoyment. Olivia (1.5.69–70) and Viola (3.1.59–60) enjoy Feste, while Malvolio (1.5.79–80) is less impressed.

In Feste's first conversation with Olivia, he illuminates why she should not be in mourning (1.5.62–68). Thus he fights the circumstance which has cast the household into gloom. He fights Malvolio as well, humorously upbraiding him several times. Although he participates briefly in Maria's joke on Malvolio by playing the curate, he shortly makes amends for this by providing Malvolio with paper and pen to write a note to Olivia.

Feste's fun—words and music (the fun of the theater)—is healing, joyous, creative, and unsullied.

Feste also sings many songs throughout the play, and his music adds greatly to the play's beauty and feeling of celebration. The play's first line, "If music be the food of love, play on," indicates that Feste's music also helps to inspire the various lovers. More than once I've seen a performance of this play where the duke begins to fall in love with Viola during Feste's song in act 2, scene 4, and I think this is a reasonable interpretation.

While Maria's fun is largely cruel, Toby's largely self-indulgent, and Andrew's largely imitative, Feste's fun—words and music (the fun of the theater)—is healing, joyous, creative, and unsullied. Feste's importance to the play, hence the importance of this type of fun, is underscored by two things: He is the only character to interact with every group (Olivia's household, the duke's household, and Sebastian) on stage before the final act, and he is given the honor of the play's epilogue.

Character: Viola & Olivia (and Shakespeare's Women)

Viola and Olivia have much in common (something which may be partly symbolized by the fact that their names are near anagrams of each other—add an *i* and swap the letters around, and *Viola* becomes *Olivia*). Both are mourning the deaths of their brothers, and, as discussed above, both assume disguises, though Viola's is more blatant. Olivia refuses to see the duke, or any man, making herself unmarriageable. Viola does not cut herself off from society, but by disguising herself as a man, she effectively bars any romantic possibilities as well. It is only when Olivia removes her veil that she is able to love, and only when Viola drops the disguise that she is loved by someone who can consummate that love.

Viola and Olivia also propel most of the action in the play. (A third woman, Maria, is responsible for the rest when she originates and orchestrates the prank on Malvolio.) Although each wants what she seemingly cannot have (Viola wants the duke; Olivia wants Viola/Cesario), they pursue their heart's desires and in the end are rewarded. The duke and Sebastian, on the other hand, merely fall into marriage at the end.

In three of the four comedies covered in this guide, the women are a stronger, more vibrant force than the men, and this is interesting when you consider that women did not have many rights in Shakespeare's time—they did not even act in plays; instead, their parts were played by boys. There is much discussion about this aspect of Shakespeare's plays in the academic

world, though it is too tangential to delve into here. But the arguments about Shakespeare's female characters are pervasive and shrill, and if you continue to study Shakespeare on your own or in college, you will encounter them. It is an interesting issue, but be careful of two opposing groups: Those who say that Shakespeare was definitely a proponent of women's rights, and those who say that Shakespeare did nothing but uphold the patriarchy of his day. The first assumes too much about the character of the author based on his work, and the second forces a reading of Shakespeare into preconceived notions. Because these are both dangerous traps, I wanted to mention them in passing. My advice is to enjoy and learn from Shakespeare's female (and male) characters, preferably without boxing them into an ideology or "-ism" ("feminism," "chauvinism," etc.).

Character: Malvolio

Malvolio is a Puritan, and thus bears the brunt of the play's cruel jokes. Puritans hated the theater, and were not much liked by theater-folk in return. He is a killjoy, furious at Toby and the others when they sing, dance, and drink. He is self-important, imagining (even before finding the letter) that Olivia would marry him, and picturing what he would do to people like Sir Toby if given the chance. He is so little aware of Olivia's tastes and temperament, that he believes she will like his cross-gartering, yellow stockings, and incessant smiling—all of which Maria is well aware that she will not.

Malvolio is the prime inhibitor of the festival atmosphere in the play. While Toby, Andrew, and Feste want little more than to drink, eat, sing, dance, and joke, Malvolio insists on silence and decorum. Toby understands that the spirit that drives Malvolio is the same one which would drive the Puritans to destroy all the theaters, simply because they hated them:

Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes
and ale? (2.3.106–107)

Olivia is also well aware of Malvolio's character:

O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered
appetite. To be generous, guiltless, and of free disposition, is to take
those things for birdbolts that you deem cannon bullets (1.5.86–89)

Malvolio is the center of his own universe. He believes that his virtues should be shared by everyone, and he is devoted to his own advancement. Yet even for the chance of advancement (by marrying Olivia) he cannot pay enough attention to Olivia to discern what might actually work to woo her, instead being easily deceived by Maria's letter which recommends all the things that Olivia hates.

Malvolio's punishment for this starts in a humorous vein, but quickly descends to become the dark side of this play. Maria's letter simply plays on Malvolio's own faults—if he were more interested in other people, if he genuinely loved Olivia and paid attention to her as lovers do,

he would not have been fooled by it. Malvolio wants to marry Olivia to obtain power to exert his will (this is underscored by the most memorable lines of the “love letter”—“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em” (2.5.136–138), and readers and audiences sense that Malvolio’s foolish behavior in front of Olivia is a proper retribution for his ill feelings and behavior.

Locking him in the dark is another matter, though. Even Sir Toby, whose idea it was (3.4.129) becomes uneasy about it, sensing that he is skating on thin ice (4.2.66–70). In the end, Malvolio is released, and Feste sums up the prank:

And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges. (5.1.369–370)

But Malvolio’s last words of the play, which immediately follow the above line, are:

I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you! (5.1.371)

A whirligig both now and in Shakespeare’s day is a mechanical device that spins or has spinning blades. It can also mean anything (e.g., fate) that goes in circles (“What goes around comes around”). This gives a strong sense that revenge is not solely under people’s control, but comes around automatically (“You reap what you sow”). And this, in turn, leads us to the dark side of *Twelfth Night*, wherein Malvolio’s revenge seems assured. Malvolio’s unexpected power over what happens to the characters after the play’s end is indicated in 5.1.269–271:

The captain that did bring me first on shore
Hath my maid’s garments. He upon some action
Is now in durance, at Malvolio’s suit

This is Viola speaking. Of course, by this time, everyone knows she’s a woman, and the duke has declared his love for her, but the clothing is still important. It is symbolic of Viola’s final, definite transformation back into her natural self, the transformation which will allow her and the duke to marry. The fact that she can easily buy new clothes is unimportant; what matters here is that Malvolio wields power over these people’s happiness, and it is uncertain how he will use that power.

Language: Antithesis

I want to take just a quick look at an antithesis central to the play. In 2.2.36–39, Viola, disguised as Cesario, says:

What will become of this? As I am a man,
My state is desperate for my master’s love.
As I am woman (now alas the day!),
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe?

This antithesis of man and woman is embodied in Viola, and provides much of the tension and humor of the play. Here, Viola neatly summarizes the awkward position she's in as a living antithesis.

Language: Irony

The duke provides some dramatic irony with these lines:

There is no woman's sides
Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart
So big to hold so much; they lack retention.
Alas, their love may be called appetite,
No motion of the liver but the palate,
That suffers surfeit, cloyment, and revolt;
But mine is all as hungry as the sea
And can digest as much. Make no compare
Between that love a woman can bear me
And that I owe Olivia. (2.4.93–103)

The duke contrasts his love with that of women. Women are not constant in their love, he claims, nor can they love as deeply as he can. What he does not realize is that Olivia and Viola will remain constant in their love (and Olivia will remain constant in her lack of love for the duke), whereas the duke will easily transfer his passion for Olivia to Viola at the end of the play.

Whereas this is a fairly serious use of irony, a more lighthearted verbal irony happens in act 2, scene 3. Here, Toby, Andrew, and Feste are up late, and they decide to sing a song, even though the rest of the household is asleep. The song they choose, which rouses Maria and Malvolio, is “Hold thy peace”—a phrase which means “keep quiet.”

Language: Poetry and Prose

You may have noticed that some characters speak mostly in prose, and others mostly in poetry. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, even though their rank would normally make them high-status characters, speak in prose here to reinforce their function as comedic characters. Their prosaic speech also binds them more tightly to the low-status characters of Maria, Feste, and Fabian. If Toby and Andrew were speaking in blank verse while their friends were speaking prose, it would create distance and a strong distinction between them, hardly appropriate for this band of pranksters.

Contrast those passages with all the dialogue between Viola and the duke, Antonio and

Sebastian, Sebastian and Viola, and Olivia and Viola (after the first few lines). All of this is in blank verse, often with the two characters sharing one line (i.e., one starts the iambic pentameter, and the other provides the remaining feet). All of these conversations are about love (though not always romantic love) or are between characters where at least one loves the other. Both the status of the characters and the nature of the conversation are underscored by the blank verse.

Don't crush great writing so it bows to you; expand your heart and mind to encompass it.

Malvolio, although he would raise his status, also speaks in prose, and this anchors him to the low status characters. He is different though, because his final speech (5.1.324–338) is in blank verse. This indicates a true shift in Malvolio at the end. The prank has had an effect, but it is not the effect Maria and Toby hoped for. Instead of feeling chastened, Malvolio's status and power have most likely increased, as evidenced by his switch from prose to blank verse, and his promise of revenge is disquieting. (This is almost eerily prescient on Shakespeare's part, since only a few decades later the Puritans would have their revenge and burn down all the theaters in London.)

My Parting Thoughts

Although I give you some tools for basic analysis of Shakespeare in this guide, I also want to warn you: Don't get so entrenched in analysis that you forget the joy of Shakespeare (or any other author). You can gain valuable insights by examining Shakespeare's themes and characters, and recognizing Shakespeare's playfulness with language is fun. These things can also enrich your own writing. But often people take their analyses so seriously that they develop a sort of tunnel-vision, seeing only in the writing what fits their preconceived notions, bending and skewing anything that doesn't fit until it does. That Shakespeare understood this human foible is clear in Malvolio:

M, O, A, I. This simulation is not as the former; and yet, to crush this a little, it would bow to me, for every one of these letters are in my name.
(2.5.131–133)

If you learn one thing from this course, I hope it is this: Don't crush great writing so it bows to you; expand your heart and mind to encompass it.

WRITING EXERCISES

1. Of the three couples—Viola and the duke, Olivia and Sebastian, and Toby and Maria—which do you think is the best match? Write an opinion paper explaining why. Support your assertion with evidence about the characters from the play.
2. Choose one of the primary supporting characters not discussed much in this lesson—Antonio, Sebastian, Fabian, or the captain—and write a paper analyzing that character’s role in the play. Or you may choose any character for analysis, but do not repeat any information from your lesson.
3. Olivia says, “Love sought is good, but given unsought is better” (3.1.155). Write a paper examining *Twelfth Night* in light of this line. What does the play have to say about sought and unsought love?
4. Feste says he profits more from his foes than from his friends because “. . . they [friends] praise me and make an ass of me. Now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass; so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself, and by my friends I am abused” (5.1.16–19). Using this quote, write one of the following papers:
 - a. Write an opinion paper evaluating this comment on friends and foes. Include at least one example from your own life to support your opinion.
 - b. Write a paper examining the friendship of Maria, Toby, and Andrew and their relationship as a group with Malvolio (their foe). How do these relationships fit this description?
5. Music is very important to *Twelfth Night*. Write a research paper on Elizabethan music. Include information on how it was used in Elizabethan theater.

[Continued]

6. Andrew says to Toby, “I was adored once too” (2.3.169). Write either a short story or a short play about Andrew and the woman who adored him. Show what she was like, why she adored him, and why the relationship ended.
7. Using Feste’s final song as a model, write a song that tells the story of *Twelfth Night*. (You need write only the words, not the music.) Like Feste’s, it should have stanzas of four lines, with the second and fourth lines as refrains, until the final line. It should use the *a b a b* rhyme pattern. It can be longer than Feste’s, and must be at least four stanzas in length. You need not cover every detail, but choose the most important points of the play. The refrains should somehow capture an important theme or tone of the play.
8. I mentioned earlier that Shakespeare’s plays are often reset in different times, places, and circumstances. If you watched Helena Bonham Carter’s *Twelfth Night*, you’ve seen an example of that. Think about a non-Shakespearean setting for this play, and write a paper describing it. Consider costumes, time period, circumstances, etc.—there are many variables you can play with. But don’t choose randomly—your paper must also explain why you made the choices you did and what aspects of the play you wanted to highlight with your choices.
9. See a live (not film) performance of this play. Write a review, examining aspects of the performance in light of your understanding of the play. (What choices did the director/actors make? Were any surprising? Did you disagree with any of their choices, and why? Did they do anything that made you see a part of the play in a new light?)