

Knowledge Organiser: Year 7 'Twelfth Night'

Context:

- *Twelfth Night* is the only one of Shakespeare's plays to have an alternative title: the play is actually called **Twelfth Night, or What You Will**. Critics are divided over what the two titles mean, but "Twelfth Night" is usually considered to be a reference to **Epiphany**, or the twelfth night of the Christmas celebration (January 6). In Shakespeare's day, this holiday was celebrated as a festival in which everything was **turned upside down**—much like the upside-down, chaotic world of Illyria in the play.
- The play was written as a **comedy**, but like many of his plays it also contained ideas and themes that linked it closely with the society Shakespeare came from. It questions the strict **morals** of the time and pokes fun at them through Malvolio's character, as well as generally mocking court life. **It portrays women, such as Olivia and Viola, as strong characters**, in a world where women were encouraged to be seen as subordinate to men.
- *Twelfth Night* has remained popular throughout the ages for various reasons. It uses **puns** and **witty language**. It has a **slapstick humour** of mistaken identity, something that continues today in popular comedies such as **Fawlty Towers, Blackadder** and **Mrs Doubtfire**. Finally, it makes fun of pompous authority figures and it has a happy ending, although for Malvolio it is anything but happy.

Key Quotations:

"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 1 Scene 1)

"Better a witty fool than a foolish wit." (Feste, Act 1 Scene 5)

"Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon 'em." (Malvolio, Act 2 Scene 5)

"Out of the jaws of death." (Act 3, Scene 4)

"One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, A natural perspective that is and is not!" (Orsino, Act 5 Scene 1)

Plot:

Orsino, the Duke of **Illyria**, is in love with his neighbour, the Countess Olivia. She has sworn to avoid men's company for **seven years** while she mourns the death of her **brother**, so rejects him. Nearby a group of sailors arrive on shore with a young woman, Viola, who has survived a **shipwreck** in a storm at sea. Viola mourns the loss of her twin brother but decides to dress as a boy to get work as a **page** to Duke Orsino.

Despite his rejection Orsino sends his new page Cesario (Viola in disguise) to **woo** Olivia on his behalf. Viola goes unwillingly as she has already fallen in love at first sight with the duke. Olivia is attracted by the 'boy' and she sends her pompous steward, **Malvolio**, after him with a **ring**.

Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby Belch, her servant Maria, and Sir Toby's friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who is also hoping to woo Olivia, and is being led on by Sir Toby, who is trying to fleece him of his money, all plot to expose the self-love of Malvolio. By means of a false letter they **trick** him into thinking his mistress Olivia loves him. Malvolio appears in **yellow stockings** and **cross-garters**, smiling as they have told him to in the letter. Unaware of the trick the Countess is horrified and has Malvolio shut up in the dark as a **madman**.

Meanwhile Viola's twin brother, **Sebastian**, who has also **survived the shipwreck**, comes to Illyria. His sea-captain friend, Antonio, is a wanted man for piracy against Orsino. The resemblance between Cesario and Sebastian leads the **jealous** Sir Andrew to challenge Cesario to a **duel**. Antonio intervenes to defend Cesario whom he thinks is his friend Sebastian, and is arrested. Olivia has in the meantime met and become **betrothed** to Sebastian.

Cesario is accused of deserting both Antonio and Olivia when the real Sebastian arrives to apologise for fighting Sir Toby. Seeing both twins together, all is revealed to Olivia. Orsino's **fool, Feste**, brings a letter from Malvolio and on his release the conspirators confess to having written the false letter. Malvolio departs promising **revenge**. Maria and Sir Toby have married in celebration of the success of their device against the steward.

The play ends as Orsino welcomes Olivia and Sebastian and, realising his own attraction to Cesario, he promises that once she is dressed as a woman again they, too, will be married.

Themes:

Love as a cause for suffering;
The uncertainty of gender;
The folly of ambition;
Madness;
Disguises;
Mistaken identity;
Appearance and reality



Significant Characters:

Orsino The Duke of Illyria and its ruler. At the opening of the comedy, he is desperately in love with Lady Olivia, who spurns his romantic overtures in spite of the fact that he is a perfect and ideal gentleman. He is a vehicle through which the play explores the absurdity of love: He is an egotist and mopes around complaining how lovesick he is over Olivia, when it is clear that he is chiefly in love with the idea of being in love.

Viola/Cesario After being shipwrecked, she disguises herself as a young boy, takes the name of Cesario, and attains a position in Duke Orsino's household because of her wit and charm. As a boy, she is then used as an emissary from the duke to court Lady Olivia. Her twin brother, Sebastian, looks exactly like her. Viola finds that her clever disguise has entrapped her: she cannot tell Orsino that she loves him, and she cannot tell Olivia why she, as Cesario, cannot love her. Her plight is the central conflict in the play.

Lady Olivia She is a rich countess who, at first, plans to mourn her brother's recent death for seven years, but when she meets the emissary from Duke Orsino (Viola disguised as a boy), she immediately falls in love with the youth.

Sebastian The twin brother to Viola who is mistaken for Cesario when he (Sebastian) arrives in town. He meets Olivia and enters immediately into a marriage with her.

Sir Toby Belch Lady Olivia's uncle who lives with her and who is given to constant drinking bouts; he delights in playing tricks on others.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek A skinny knight who is encouraged by Sir Toby to continue courting Lady Olivia because as long as he courts Lady Olivia, Sir Toby can gull him out of enough money to continue the nightly drinking bouts.

Malvolio Lady Olivia's steward who also has fantasies that Lady Olivia might someday marry him and a powerful ambition to rise above his social class. He is opposed to Sir Toby's drinking bouts, and, thus, he becomes the object of one of Sir Toby's elaborate tricks.

Maria Lady Olivia's waiting woman; she is clever and arranges a superlative trick to be played on Malvolio.

Feste A clown, or "jester," in the employ of Lady Olivia; he has a marvelous way with words and with making a sentence "get up and walk away." He is Shakespeare's mouthpiece in the play