

TWELFTH NIGHT SYNOPSIS

The Play

After her ship wrecks at sea, a young noblewoman named Viola washes up alone on the coast of Illyria. Mourning the assumed loss of the ship's crew and especially her identical twin brother Sebastian, Viola devises a plan to survive in this strange new land. For protection, Viola disguises herself as a man named Cesario and finds employment with the Duke Orsino, who loves the countess Olivia. Orsino is immediately drawn to this clever and handsome new servant, and entrusts "him" to woo Olivia by proxy. Things become complicated when the disguised Viola herself falls madly in love with Orsino, from whom she must hide her true identity.

Orsino cannot pursue Olivia himself because she is cloistered and will receive no suitors. Viola/Cesario nonetheless faithfully woos Olivia on his behalf. Orsino's second-hand courtship fails to move Olivia, but the countess soon falls in love with his messenger, the disguised Viola. Although Viola adamantly insists that no woman will rule "Cesario's" heart, Olivia persists in her affections.

Meanwhile, Olivia's court is in some disarray. Her drunken uncle, Sir Toby, keeps noisy company all night with his wealthy but foolish friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Andrew wants to marry Olivia, and Toby exploits his desire to fund an indulgent lifestyle. Olivia's household servants are fed up with Toby and Andrew's boisterousness. Maria, Olivia's waiting woman, upbraids them both as well as the fool Feste for carrying on all night. But she defends the drunkards when Malvolio, Olivia's puritanical steward, registers his own disapproval. Annoyed by Malvolio's high-handedness, Maria, Toby, and Andrew band together to play an elaborate prank on the steward. Maria forges a note in Olivia's hand to make Malvolio believe that Olivia is in love with him—that she wants to marry him and make him a count. The note directs Malvolio to alter his clothes and behavior, so he begins to behave and dress outlandishly, donning bright yellow socks and cross-tied garters. Seeing this, Olivia fears that Malvolio has gone mad, so puts Toby in charge of his care. Toby and Maria lock Malvolio in a pitch-dark room and proceed to pull cruel pranks on him.

Meanwhile, we discover that Viola's brother Sebastian is alive and well, though he too believes his twin to be dead. Shortly after he arrives in Illyria, he encounters Olivia, who mistakes him for Viola/Cesario and marries him. With the identical Sebastian and Viola/Cesario in the same city but unknown to each other, much chaos ensues. Eventually, though, all mistaken identities are sorted out and Viola's gender is revealed. Orsino marries her. Toby and Maria likewise marry, having fallen in love over their shared experience pranking Malvolio, who vows to be revenged on them all. Unperturbed, the couples joyously celebrate the triple wedding between Olivia and Sebastian, Orsino and Viola, and Sir Toby and Maria.

The Major Characters

VIOLA: A noblewoman, later disguised as Cesario; twin sister to Sebastian; in love with Orsino, whom she eventually marries

OLIVIA: A Countess; in love with Cesario; eventually married to Sebastian

ORSINO: Duke of Illyria; in love with Olivia and eventually married to Viola

MARIA: Olivia's waiting woman; eventually married to Sir Toby

MALVOLIO: Olivia's puritanical steward

SIR TOBY BELCH: Olivia's drunken uncle

SIR ANDREW AGUECHEEK: a blockheaded companion of Sir Toby's who wants to marry Olivia

SEBASTIAN: Viola's twin brother; eventually married to Olivia

FESTE: A professional fool variously employed by Olivia and Orsino

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