

## *Twelfth Night Synopsis*

Like many of Shakespeare's comedies, this one centers on mistaken identity. The leading character, Viola, is shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria during the opening scenes. She loses contact with her twin brother, Sebastian, whom she believes to be dead. Masquerading as a young page under the name Cesario, she enters the service of Duke Orsino through the help of the sea captain who rescues her. Orsino has convinced himself that he is in love with the bereaved Lady Olivia, whose father and brother have recently died, and who will have nothing to do with any suitors, the Duke included. Orsino decides to use "Cesario" as an intermediary to tell Olivia about his love for her. Olivia, believing Viola to be a man, falls in love with this handsome and eloquent messenger. Viola, in turn, has fallen in love with the Duke, who also believes Viola is a man, and who regards her as his confidant.

Much of the play is taken up with the comic subplot, in which several characters conspire to make Olivia's pompous head steward, Malvolio, believe that his lady Olivia wishes to marry him. It involves Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby Belch; another would-be suitor, a silly squire named Sir Andrew Aguecheek; her servants Maria and Fabian; and her father's favorite fool, Feste. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew get drunk and disturb the peace of their lady's house by continuously singing catches late into the night at the top of their voices, prompting Malvolio to chastise them. This provokes Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Maria to plan revenge on Malvolio.

The riotous company convince Malvolio that Olivia is secretly in love with him through a love letter written by Maria in Olivia's hand asking Malvolio to wear yellow stockings cross-gartered, to be rude to the rest of the servants, and to smile constantly in the presence of Olivia. Malvolio finds the letter and reacts in surprised delight. He starts acting out the contents of the letter to show Olivia his positive response. Olivia, saddened by Viola's attitude towards her, asks for her chief steward, and is shocked by a Malvolio who has seemingly lost his mind. She leaves him to the contrivances of his tormentors.

Meanwhile Sebastian arrives on the scene, sowing confusion. Mistaking him for Viola, Olivia asks him to marry her, and they are secretly united. Finally, when the twins appear in the presence of both Olivia and the Duke, there is more wonder and awe at their similarity, at which point Viola reveals she is really a female and that Sebastian is her lost twin brother. The play ends in a declaration of marriage between the Duke and Viola, and it is learned that Toby has married Maria. An elegiac song from Feste ("heigh-ho, the wind and the rain") brings the entertainment to a close.