



**UNDERSTANDING
SHAKESPEARE**

**Twelfth
Night**

Robert A. Albano

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SHAKESPEARE:

TWELFTH

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MERCURY PRESS

Los Angeles

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

Introduction

The eminent literary critic **Harold Bloom** compared the pacing of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* to that of a Marx Brothers comedy. In their wild and zany motion pictures from the 1930s, the **Marx Brothers** – Groucho, Harpo, and Chico – mixed raw physical humor or slapstick with clever verbal humor (including mad puns and foolish banter). Audiences during the 1930s in Depression-ravaged America needed an escape from the drudgeries of life, and the Marx Brothers provided just such an escape. The pacing of their films was unrelenting: one joke followed quickly upon the heels of another, and the people in the audience never had a chance to take a breath because they were so doubled-over with laughter.

William Shakespeare was aware that the audiences of his own day also needed **psychological escape**. Life was not always easy in England during the time of the Renaissance, and the people attending Shakespeare's theater also desired to leave the insanity of the real world for a different kind of insanity – the insanity of foolishness in a make-believe world of nonsense.

Two words that perhaps best describe a Marx Brothers comedy are *insanity* and *fun*. Bloom's comparison is not as far-fetched as some people might at first think. *Twelfth Night* is also a play about insanity and fun. Shakespeare, as he does with nearly all of his plays, engages the imagination of his audience; but he does so in a clever and amusing

manner. Like a Marx Brothers' film, Shakespeare's comedy stretches the limits of believability in his plot; but the Renaissance audience did not mind that. The play was not intended to be either serious or realistic. A reader of this play should always keep in mind that Shakespeare plays with the notion of credibility – the reader should not take the plot seriously. Shakespeare amuses and delights his audiences, yet in this delightful *tour de force* he also teaches his audience about the meaning of love and the behavior of lovers.

The full title of Shakespeare's comedy is *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. The word *will* was a potent one for Shakespeare. Of course, it was his nickname – a designation that he surely enjoyed because it was so full of meaning. The word, on the one hand, means want or wish. And the characters in this play do wish for things, usually things they cannot obtain easily or at all. But the word *will* also indicates desire, including sexual desire and the desire for love. In most of Shakespeare's plays – including his serious tragedies – the playwright examines the conflict between emotion (or passion) and reason. In *Othello*, for example, the hero's **jealousy** causes him to lose his reason or rational ability. In *Macbeth*, the main character's **ambition** blinds him from assessing his situation rationally. Any intense emotion may cause someone to become totally and completely irrational. And Shakespeare was certainly well aware that one of the most intense emotions was **love**. In the **conflict of reason vs.**

emotion, Shakespeare time and again revealed that emotion could and would triumph over reason.

The first part of the title is also significant. Specifically, **Twelfth Night** refers to the twelfth night after Christmas. Christians during the Middle Ages referred to this date, January 6, as the Feast of the Epiphany. It was intended to be a holy and special occasion. However, the occasion became a secular one throughout many places in Europe. Instead of being a religious holiday, it became the wild and chaotic **Feast of Fools**. Readers familiar with any motion picture version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (or with **Victor Hugo's** book, *Notre Dame de Paris*) may recall how the film begins with the title character, Quasimodo, being elected as the King of Fools. The entire celebration, including the election of the King of Fools, played an important psychological function for the people living during the Middle Ages. Many felt life to be oppressive. Only a small minority, the aristocrats, enjoyed power and privilege. The commoners worked long hours six days a week, and found little in life worth enjoying or celebrating. But on the Feast of Fools, the world order was turned upside down. Laws and rules did not apply. The King and other aristocrats were, for that day, suspended from enjoying their power. The biggest fool was elected as king for the day to indicate that foolish and wild behavior would instead reign over the kingdom. Chaos and anarchy supplanted order and rule. The people celebrated,

became wildly drunk, and acted quite madly. There was no place for reason on that day.

In fact, so wild did the festivities become that, towards the end of the 15th Century, the Church found it necessary to end the practice and celebration known as the Feast of Fools. A hundred years later, by the time Shakespeare was a child, the Feast of Fools was no longer associated with a religious holiday. Yet the celebration continued – although perhaps with less wild abandon – as a secular holiday. People still desired to have a day where they felt unconstrained by political and social ties. They still needed a day when they could act a little wild and crazy.

The action of Shakespeare's comedy lasts for several months, so the playwright was not using the title to refer to a specific chronological point in the calendar. Rather, the title is **symbolic**. Most of the major characters act wildly and madly throughout most of the play. In fact, Shakespeare clearly introduces a **theme of madness** running throughout his comedy. Rational thought and rational action rarely appear. Moreover, Shakespeare even provides his audience with a King of Fools in the character of **Sir Toby Belch**. As his name indicates, Sir Toby likes to drink; and a thoughtful director would most likely have his actor perform as if he were drunk throughout most of the play.

The Russian literary critic and theorist **Mikhail Bakhtin** coined the expression **carnavalesque** to designate works of literature that

suggest or symbolize the Feast of Fools carnival or celebration. The Feast of Fools was an important cultural and social event that impressed itself upon the minds and consciousness of the people of Europe for many centuries.

Shakespeare sets the action of his play in **Illyria** – a name the geographically indicates the coast of the Balkans along the Adriatic Sea. However, Shakespeare's Illyria is actually a once-upon-a-time, make-believe kingdom that is not really intended to suggest any real place. Yet, although Shakespeare's Illyria is not a real place, the emotions of his characters are quite real and do represent the emotions within all people. In Illyria, everyone is in love, and that emotion renders everyone irrational and a little bit mad.

The plot of *Twelfth Night* involves **identical twins** and **mistaken identity**. Such a device was not original with Shakespeare (although he did use the concept earlier in his *Comedy of Errors*). But plots involving mistaken identity and twins appear in French and Italian comedies years before Shakespeare was even born. However, Shakespeare employs the device in a new way. In this play, the twins are **Viola** and **Sebastian**, a female and a male. In the comedy, Viola disguises herself as a young man when she finds herself shipwrecked and alone on a foreign shore. Unescorted woman were not only at risk for their safety, but they were not allowed the privileges and freedom that men at that time were given. Disguised as a male, Viola is thus able to

protect herself and achieve a certain amount of success that would have been impossible had she not disguised herself.

However, to complicate matters and to complicate the plot, Viola is mistaken for being Sebastian. And much comic madness results from the mistake.

During the Renaissance, Shakespeare most likely did not have twins to play the parts of Sebastian and Viola (although a male would have been used to play the role of Viola since females were not allowed to act on public stages in that era). Yet even if the two actors did not closely resemble each other, the Renaissance audience would not have been bothered by such a detail. Renaissance audiences were accustomed to supplying gaps or inconsistencies in the plays with their **imagination**. They would readily accept the supposition that Viola and Sebastian do resemble each other. If not, they would not be able to enjoy the comedy. But Renaissance audiences did indeed enjoy this popular comedy. They enjoyed the sheer raw madness of it. The play, like the Feast of Fools carnival, provided a means of escape from the drudgeries of the world. Watching the play allowed the people in the audience to release some of the stress and anxiety that was so much a part of daily living.

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