

# Twelfth Night



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Twelfth Night* has been referred to as a "transvestite comedy" and can be grouped with other Shakespeare plays in which characters cross-dress—namely, the comedy [As You Like It](#), but also *Merchant of Venice*, which includes a court scene in which the primary female character, Portia, dresses up as a young man. With its confused twins, *Twelfth Night* also resembles Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, which is based on the *Menaechmi*, by the Roman comedian Plautus. *Twelfth Night* itself is based on an Italian comedy called *Iganni*—or, the "unknown ones."

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*
- **When Written:** c. 1601
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance
- **Genre:** Comedy
- **Setting:** Illyria (an ancient area on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, between contemporary Croatia, Albania, and Montenegro)
- **Climax:** The weddings of Viola and Orsino, and Sebastian and Olivia

### EXTRA CREDIT

**What a drag!** *Twelfth Night* is sometimes called a "transvestite comedy" for the obvious reason that its central character is a young woman, Viola, who disguises herself as a pageboy, Cesario. In Shakespeare's time, Viola's part, like all the parts in *Twelfth Night*, would have been played by a man, because

women were not allowed to act. So, originally, "Cesario" would probably have been a boy, dressed up as a woman, dressed up as a man.

**Feast of Misrule:** *Twelfth Night* takes its name from an English holiday celebrated on January 5, the so-called "twelfth night of Christmas" or the Eve of the Feast of the Epiphany. In Renaissance England, Twelfth Night was known as a "feast of misrule." For the day, kings and nobles were to be treated as peasants, and peasants as kings and nobles. At the center of the Twelfth Night feast was a large cake with a bean or coin baked into it and served to the assembled company; the person whose slice of cake contained it became King Bean, the Christmas King, or Lord of Misrule—a commoner who would take the place of a king in order to watch over the topsy-turvy proceedings.

**Two titles.** *Twelfth Night* is the only play of Shakespeare's with an alternate name: its full title is *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. The second title references the holiday season of ritualized disorder and revelry, where you can act out all your fantasies.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In the kingdom of Illyria, the Duke Orsino laments over his unrequited love for the Lady Olivia, who is in mourning for her brother and has refused to see anyone for seven years.

Meanwhile, a ship has been wrecked by a storm off the coast, casting the young noblewoman Viola onto shore. Finding herself alone with the Captain, Viola assumes that her twin brother, Sebastian, with whom she was traveling, is dead. Grieving, she learns from the Captain—who, by chance, was born in Illyria—about the region, and decides that she would like to conceal her identity and offer her services to this Lady. However, after the Captain informs Viola that Olivia refuses to see anyone, Viola resolves to conceal her identity—she dresses up as a pageboy, Cesario, and go work for Orsino. The Captain agrees to help.

Viola advances quickly in Orsino's household. However, she soon finds herself falling in love with Orsino—a love which she cannot pursue, since Orsino believes her to be (the male) Cesario. At the same time, when Orsino sends Cesario to Olivia's house to woo her in his stead, Olivia becomes passionately attracted to "Cesario." Only Viola understands the love-triangle that her disguise has brought about: she loves Orsino, Orsino loves Olivia, and Olivia loves her. None of these loves can be fulfilled.

While the plot between Orsino, Viola, and Olivia unfolds,

scenes at Olivia's house introduce a second group of characters: Olivia's uncle, the drunkard Sir Toby; his equally vulgar friend and suitor of Olivia, Sir Andrew Aguecheek; Olivia's charming lady-in-waiting, Maria; the clown, Feste; and Malvolio, Olivia's self-important steward, who constantly scolds and irritates the rest of them. Maria devises a prank to get even with Malvolio. She forges a letter, supposedly from Olivia, addressed to a secret beloved "M. O. A. I."; the letter instructs its anonymous addressee to wear yellow stockings and crossed garters, to act haughty, smile constantly, and refuse to explain himself in order to show that he returns Olivia's affections. Malvolio finds the letter and assumes that he himself must be "M. A. O. I." Following "Olivia's" instructions, he behaves so oddly that she worries that he has gone mad.

Viola's twin brother Sebastian soon arrives up in Illyria: he was saved from the shipwreck by a local, Antonio, but thinks his sister is dead. Antonio has grown so attached to Sebastian that he follows him into Orsino's territories despite the fact that Orsino is an old enemy.

When Sir Andrew starts to notice that Olivia is in love with Cesario, Sir Toby encourages him to challenge Cesario to a duel. They are just about to fight when Antonio shows up and asks to defend Cesario, whom he mistakes for Sebastian. (Viola, in her disguise, looks exactly like her twin brother.) When Orsino's police show up and haul Antonio off, Cesario slips away. But then Sebastian happens to arrive on the scene. Sir Andrew and Sir Toby resume fighting—mistaking him for Cesario. Sebastian is baffled, but defends himself. Olivia shows up during the scuffle and, mistaking Sebastian for Cesario, calls Toby and Andrew off at once. She immediately asks Sebastian to marry her. Sebastian is mystified. But, seeing that Olivia is beautiful and wealthy, he accepts her offer.

Meanwhile, Olivia's belief that Malvolio is mad, has allowed Maria, Toby, and the others to lock him up in a dark cell for "treatment." They enjoy tormenting and mocking him. However, Sir Toby starts to get worried, since he knows how angry Olivia already is with him for attacking Sebastian (or, as she thinks, Cesario). Therefore, they let Malvolio send a letter to Olivia, arguing his case and demanding to be released.

Cesario and Orsino visit Olivia's house. Olivia welcomes Cesario as her husband, thinking that he is Sebastian. Orsino is shocked and enraged, but when Sebastian himself arrives on the scene, everything falls into place. Viola and Sebastian are reunited. Now aware that Cesario is in fact the woman, Viola, Orsino declares that he is in love with her and asks her to marry him. It is reported that Sir Toby and Maria have also married privately. Finally, Olivia remembers Malvolio and summons him out of the dark room. Furious, he accosts her. When she tells him he should not take things so seriously, he threatens that he will have revenge against them all and storms off. The happy couples await their marriage ceremony.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Viola (Cesario)** – The protagonist of *Twelfth Night*. An aristocratic woman, she is tossed up on the coast of Illyria by a shipwreck at the beginning of the play and disguises herself as the pageboy, Cesario, to make her way. Throughout the play, Viola exhibits strength of character, quick wit, and resourcefulness. Although her disguise puts her in an impossible position, she maintains self-control and a quiet dignity that contrast with the over-the-top emotional performances of love and mourning by the other main characters, Orsino and Olivia. While those two characters seem almost to be play-acting, Viola truly feels pain when she believes that her brother Sebastian died in the shipwreck and when her love for Orsino seems impossible.

**Orsino** – The Duke and ruler of Illyria. At the beginning of the play Orsino is obsessed by his unrequited love for Olivia. However, in the final scene, when Orsino discovers that Cesario is in fact the woman, Viola—and that Olivia has already married Viola's twin brother, Sebastian—he quickly proposes to Viola. Because the language and gestures he uses to talk about love are so melodramatic, and because he switches from Olivia to Viola so quickly, Orsino seems more in love with the idea of love and his own role as a spurned lover, than to actually be in love. His constant self-indulgent complaints about his lovesickness also display his extreme self-centeredness. Critics have also noted that, in the final scene, he seems to be attracted to Cesario *as Cesario*—that is, to Viola in her male persona.

**Olivia** – A beautiful noblewoman in Illyria. At the beginning of the play, she has rejected both Orsino and her ridiculous suitor, Sir Andrew Aguecheek. In mourning for her recently deceased brother, she has vowed not to receive any man, or to go outside, for seven years. However, when she meets Cesario (Viola in her male costume) she falls in love and forgets these oaths. Olivia's mourning for her brother therefore resembles Orsino's love-melancholy: it seems more like a performance than a real, deeply felt emotion. Like Orsino, she seems to enjoy indulging in misery, and also has no problem shifting the object of love from one person to the next.

**Sebastian** – Viola's twin brother, whom she believes is lost at sea, and who likewise thinks she's dead. Sebastian is noble and capable of strong, deeply felt emotion, just like his sister. The constant powerful love he shows while grieving and when reunited with Viola contrasts Orsino's and Olivia's relatively frivolous emotions. He is also the only major character in the play who never engages in deception. He can be pragmatic, though: when the beautiful, wealthy Olivia proposes to him, he accepts despite the fact that he has never met her before.

**Malvolio** – The steward in charge of the servants at Olivia's

house. A stuck-up killjoy, Malvolio annoys the other members of the household by constantly condescending to and scolding them. In revenge, Maria, Sir Toby, and others play a prank on Malvolio that adds comic relief to *Twelfth Night*, but also reveals Malvolio's ambition, arrogance, and self-love. The play provides a happy ending for all of the characters *except* Malvolio, reminding the audience that not all love is fulfilled.

**Captain** – The Captain of the ship that sank while carrying Viola and Sebastian. He survives along with Viola, and assures Viola that the last he saw of Sebastian that Sebastian was alive. Loyal, helpful, and a native of Illyria, he gives Viola information about the region that helps her devise her plan to find work with Orsino.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Maria** – Olivia's clever, feisty lady-in-waiting holds her own in battles of wit with the other servants and devises the prank on Malvolio. Although vicious to Malvolio, she is devoted and attentive to Olivia. Her wit wins the affection of Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby, whom she marries.

**Sir Toby** – Olivia's vulgar uncle, a drunkard, lives at and leeches off of her house. Sir Toby's crass double entendres and sex jokes offer an earthy contrast to Orsino's flowery love-poetry, and his antics help to overthrow Malvolio's efforts to impose order. Sir Toby eventually marries Olivia's lady-in-waiting, Maria.

**Sir Andrew Aguecheek** – A friend of Sir Toby, he hopes to marry Olivia, despite the fact that his suit is obviously hopeless. Sir Andrew provides a comic foil for the higher characters, who are much more serious about their wooing.

**Feste** – A clown, Feste is allowed to poke fun at the higher characters. In this role, he turns upside down the conventional social order, just as occurred during the Twelfth Night holiday (see Background Info for more detail on the Twelfth Night holiday).

**Antonio** – A local from Illyria who rescues Sebastian from the shipwreck. Antonio's feelings for Sebastian push the boundary line between devoted male friendship and love.

**Fabian** – An attendant in Olivia's household.

**Curio** – One of Orsino's attendants.

**Valentine** – One of Orsino's attendants.



## DESIRE AND LOVE

Every major character in *Twelfth Night* experiences some form of desire or love. Duke Orsino is in love with Olivia. Viola falls in love with Orsino, while disguised as his pageboy, Cesario. Olivia falls in love with Cesario. This love triangle is only resolved when Olivia falls in love with Viola's twin brother, Sebastian, and, at the last minute, Orsino decides that he actually loves Viola. *Twelfth Night* derives much of its comic force by satirizing these lovers. For instance, Shakespeare pokes fun at Orsino's flowery love poetry, making it clear that Orsino is more in love with being in love than with his supposed beloveds. At the same time, by showing the details of the intricate rules that govern how nobles engage in courtship, Shakespeare examines how characters play the "game" of love.

*Twelfth Night* further mocks the main characters' romantic ideas about love through the escapades of the servants. Malvolio's idiotic behavior, which he believes will win Olivia's heart, serves to underline Orsino's own only-slightly-less silly romantic ideas. Meanwhile, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Sir Toby Belch, and Maria, are always cracking crass double entendres that make it clear that while the nobles may spout flowery poetry about romantic love, that love is at least partly motivated by desire and sex. Shakespeare further makes fun of romantic love by showing how the devotion that connects siblings (Viola and Sebastian) and servants to masters (Antonio to Sebastian and Maria to Olivia) actually prove more constant than any of the romantic bonds in the play.



## MELANCHOLY

During the Renaissance, melancholy was believed to be a sickness rather like modern depression, resulting from an imbalance in the fluids making up the human body. Melancholy was thought to arise from love: primarily narcissistic self-love or unrequited romantic love. Several characters in *Twelfth Night* suffer from some version of love-melancholy. Orsino exhibits many symptoms of the disease (including lethargy, inactivity, and interest in music and poetry). Dressed up as Cesario, Viola describes herself as dying of melancholy, because she is unable to act on her love for Orsino. Olivia also describes Malvolio as melancholy and blames it on his narcissism.

Through its emphasis on melancholy, *Twelfth Night* reveals the painfulness of love. At the same time, just as the play satirizes the way in which its more excessive characters act in proclaiming their love, it also satirizes some instances of melancholy and mourning that are exaggerated or insincere. For instance, while Viola seems to experience profound pain at her inability to be with Orsino, Orsino is cured of the intense lovesickness he experienced for Olivia as soon as he learns that Viola is available.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## MADNESS

The theme of madness in *Twelfth Night* often overlaps the themes of desire and love. Orsino talks about the faculty of love producing multiple changing images of the beloved, similar to hallucinations. Olivia remarks at certain points that desire for Cesario is making her mad. These examples of madness are mostly metaphorical: madness becomes a way for characters to express the intensity of their romantic feelings.

But the play also has multiple characters that seem to go literally mad. As part of the prank that Maria, Sir Toby, and Fabian play on Malvolio, they convince everyone that he is crazy. The confusion that results from characters' mixing up Viola/Cesario and Sebastian, after Sebastian's arrival in Illyria, also leads many of them to think that they have lost their minds. The general comedy and chaos that creates (and results from) this confusion also references the ritualized chaos of the Twelfth Night holiday in Renaissance England.



## DECEPTION, DISGUISE, AND PERFORMANCE

Characters in *Twelfth Night* constantly disguise themselves or play parts in order to trick those around them. Some of the most notable examples of trickery and role-playing in *Twelfth Night* are: Viola disguising herself as the page-boy Cesario; Maria and Sir Toby playing their prank on Malvolio; and Feste dressing up as the scholar, Sir Topas. More subtly, Orsino's rather clichéd lovesickness for Olivia and Olivia's just-as-clichéd response as the unattainable mourning woman bring into question the extent to which these characters are just playing these roles, rather than truly feeling the emotions they claim to be experiencing.

Through the constant performance and role-playing of his characters, Shakespeare reminds us that we, like the characters, may play roles in our own lives and be susceptible to the role playing of others.



## GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

In connection with the themes of deception, disguise, and performance, *Twelfth Night* raises questions about the nature of gender and sexual identity. That Viola has disguised herself as a man, and that her disguise fools Olivia into falling in love with her, is genuinely funny. On a more serious note, however, Viola's transformation into Cesario, and Olivia's impossible love for him/her, also imply that, maybe, distinctions between male/female and heterosexual/homosexual are not as absolutely firm as you might think.

The play stresses the potential ambiguity of gender: there are many instances in which characters refer to Cesario as an

effeminate man. Even more radically than this, however, it also suggests that gender is something you can influence, based on how you act, rather than something that you *are*, based on the sexual organs you were born with. *Twelfth Night* also shows how gender-switches make the characters' sexual identities unstable. For instance, at times, Olivia seems to be attracted to Cesario *because* "he" is such a womanly-looking man, while Orsino at the end of the play seems as attracted to Cesario as he is to Viola.



## CLASS, MASTERS, AND SERVANTS

In *Twelfth Night*, as in many Shakespearean comedies, there are many similarities between a "high" set of characters, the masters or nobles, and a "low" set of characters, the servants. These separate sets of characters and their parallel plots provide comic counterpoint and also reflect the nature of the Twelfth Night holiday, which was typically celebrated by inverting the ordinary social order—a commoner or fool would dress up and get to play the king. The clown Feste's constant mocking of his "betters" further reinforces this idea of upsetting the social order.

Class and social standing is also a recurring theme in *Twelfth Night*. The priggish Malvolio is obsessed with status, always condescending to the other servants for their lowliness and dreaming of marrying Olivia and becoming a Count. Sir Andrew Aguecheek also wants to marry Olivia, but stands no chance because of his vulgarity and crassness. In marrying Olivia, even the noble Sebastian is moved in part by her wealth and social standing. Viola, at the beginning of the play, has lost her wealth in a shipwreck and in disguising herself as a page-boy is impersonating a different class from her own. Viola's disguise suggests that class, like gender identity, is to some extent a changeable role that you play by adopting a certain set of clothing and behaviors.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## COSTUMES

The costumes that many characters wear represent different identities that people take on, as much in their everyday lives as when acting in a play. The costumes in the play show that a character or person's identity can change in different situations.



## HALLUCINATION

At different points in the play, characters speak of

having **hallucinations** and compare the feeling of being in love to hallucinating. By connecting love with hallucinations, Shakespeare stresses that love is often based on misperceptions, mistakes, or fantasies imagined by the lover, rather than on real characteristics of the beloved.



## HUNTING

At various points in the play, **hunting** is used as a metaphor for the lover's pursuit of his beloved. The metaphor is telling because it emphasizes the extent to which a lover like Orsino takes pleasure in pursuing, rather than consummating, love: for an aristocrat like him, who does not need to hunt for food, once the prey of a hunt is caught, the fun is over.

●● So full of shapes is fancy  
That it alone is high fantastical.

**Related Characters:** Orsino (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 1.1.14-15

### Explanation and Analysis

In his first speech, Orsino laments the melancholy nature of love. He notes that love can manifest itself in many different ways, making it magical. Thus, he argues, love "alone" is the only true form of imagination. This moment gives readers an insight into Orsino's views on love, and also foreshadows the "shapes" and disguises characters will take on throughout *Twelfth Night*. Orsino's speech is dramatic and excessive. While he enjoys talking about love, we will learn that his feelings are actually quite fickle. He loves the idea of love as well as performing the act of being melancholy and heartbroken. In this speech he also sets the stage for love to be seen as a magical and deceptive undertaking, something that will appear more clear as Viola and Olivia begin their own journeys in the play.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Twelfth Night* published in 2004.

### Act 1, scene 1 Quotes

●● If music be the food of love, play on,  
Give me excess of it; that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die.

**Related Characters:** Orsino (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1.1.1-3

### Explanation and Analysis

The play opens with Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, listening to music and lamenting about love. *Twelfth Night* is a play about excess, as during Shakespeare's time, people would celebrate Christmas for twelve nights, partying and drinking. It is also a play about the overbearing nature of love and the madness that comes from it. From the very first line of the play, Orsino's language is over the top. He desires so much love that it makes him melancholy, even sick. As he sits in his court, he stops the music playing in the background, claiming it makes him too sad to listen to. Listening to music and spewing clichés of love, Orsino seems to be performing the act of the saddened lover. Yet the irony here is that he also seems to be enjoying it. We will see that Orsino's vision of "love" is both fickle and performative. He loves the idea of love but may not truly know what it feels like yet.

### Act 1, scene 3 Quotes

●● I am a great eater of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit.

**Related Characters:** Sir Andrew Aguecheek (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1.3.85-86

### Explanation and Analysis

Act 1 Scene 3 introduces us to Maria, a clever lady-in-waiting of Olivia's, Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle and a drunkard, and Sir Andrew, a rich, foolish man who hopes to marry Olivia. During this scene Sir Andrew and Maria enter into a verbal warfare, teasing and taunting each other's sexual appeal. After being outmatched by Maria's wit, Sir Andrew has a moment alone with Toby. Toby is shocked that Maria has outsmarted them both and Sir Andrew replies with this line.

Calling himself an "eater of beef" is Sir Andrew's way of calling himself dimwitted. During Shakespeare's time it was

believed that eating too much meat made an individual stupid or foolish. *Twelfth Night* reflects on how the excess of anything, particularly love, can make an individual behave foolishly. Similar to the meat Sir Andrew consumes, love can be all consuming, causing a person to behave uncharacteristically.

☝ I would I had bestowed that time in the tongues, that I have in fencing, dancing and bear-baiting: O, had I but followed the arts!

**Related Characters:** Sir Andrew Aguecheek (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1.3.91-94

### Explanation and Analysis

After a failed attempt to woo Olivia, Sir Andrew tells Toby that he is going to leave Illyria. Toby asks him why, saying "Pourquoi," and Sir Andrew replies with this quote. Sir Andrew doesn't understand the meaning of the french word, and laments that he wished he had focused more on the arts. He has spent his time fencing and training dogs to kill bears for sport instead of learning the language of love or studying literature. Thus, he blames himself for his own inability to get Olivia to marry him.

Here art, flourishing language, and impressive creative gestures are seen as way to a woman's heart. We've seen it with Orsino and now with Sir Andrew. Yet these things are merely performative, and we will learn that grand gestures don't always woo the woman. It's also ironic that Sir Andrew says this line incredibly dramatically, noted by the exclamation point at the end, suggesting that while he laments his lack of creativity and his time spent in the arts, he is in fact performing.

## Act 1, scene 4 Quotes

☝ Thy small pipe  
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,  
And all is semblative a woman's part.

**Related Characters:** Orsino (speaker), Viola (Cesario)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1.4.35-37

### Explanation and Analysis

Viola has disguised herself as a young pageboy named Cesario, and now resides in Orsino's court. Orsino has begun to rely on Cesario for advice and information on Olivia. He asks her to go to Olivia's home and woo her for him using any means necessary. In this moment Orsino tells Cesario that she may be able to persuade Olivia because she resembles and sounds like a woman, suggesting that Olivia may be more comfortable in the presence of a prepubescent boy than Orsino himself. Here Shakespeare notes the confusing nature of Viola's disguise and how it plays to the advantage of Orsino. Olivia has sworn off the presence of men, so Orsino uses the femininity of Cesario (Viola) to his advantage. There is also a sense of freedom that comes for Viola-as-Cesario. As a man she can walk the court freely and be independent, and she can also have a friendship with Orsino as well as be his confidant. This allows her to see Orsino as he truly is from the start; something she never would have been able to do as a young woman.

☝ Better a witty fool than a foolish wit.

**Related Characters:** Feste (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1.5.34

### Explanation and Analysis

Maria and Feste the fool have just finished speaking with each other. He pokes fun at her, and she calls him a troublemaker and exits. Feste is left alone on stage and tries to think up more funny, witty things to say. He then reflects on the made-up philosopher Quinapulus, saying that it is better to be witty and a fool than to simply be a foolish person.

Feste is a crucial character in *Twelfth Night*. As the fool in the court, he has privileged information about and access to both the masters and the servants. He is allowed to poke fun at those in higher social ranks without punishment, making him an important source of information and even a voice of reason throughout the play (as "fools" often are in Shakespeare's plays). Here he touches on the notion of the maddening aspects of love. Throughout the play, we will see the lovers behave foolishly in the name of love. In Feste's perspective, he would much rather be the Fool than be the foolish lover.

☞ He is very well-favored and he speaks very shrewishly; one would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him.

**Related Characters:** Malvolio (speaker), Viola (Cesario)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 1.5.159-161

### Explanation and Analysis

Disguised as a man (Cesario), Viola visits Olivia in order to woo her for Duke Orsino. Olivia's steward, Malvolio, tells Olivia that there is a young man at the door. Olivia asks Malvolio to describe him and he responds with this quote. Here, he tells Olivia that her visitor (Viola) is "well-favored" or attractive, and speaks in a high-pitched voice ("shrewishly") as if he were a child.

In this moment, Malvolio notes the gender ambiguity of Cesario without realizing he is in fact a woman. He writes off Cesario's femininity as a product of youth. This is a comedic moment for the audience; we know Cesario is actually Viola but no one else does.

☞ Lady, you are the cruell'st she alive  
If you will lead these graces to the grave  
And leave the world no copy.

**Related Characters:** Viola (Cesario) (speaker), Olivia

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1.5.240-242

### Explanation and Analysis

Viola enters Olivia's home dressed as Cesario, in order to attempt to woo her for Duke Orsino. The two begin a playful *tete-a-tete*. Here, Viola tries to appeal to Olivia by telling her how beautiful she is—so beautiful that it would be a disservice to the world not to produce an heir (and thus a new "copy" of her beauty). In a grand performance, Viola compliments Olivia's physical beauty in order to gain her trust and influence her to fall for Orsino. She also speaks in the convention of "poetic blazon," a form often used in sonnets, where the speaker itemizes and examines different parts of the body. Her speech mimics that of Shakespeare's own sonnets, revealing the poetic and hyperbolic nature of love and lust. Furthermore, in doing so, Viola-as-Cesario

demonstrates a certain level of mystery and intelligence to Olivia that Orsino doesn't possess. She speaks in a genuine and advanced poetic way, whereas Orsino is often clichéd.

☞ Make me a willow cabin at your gate  
And call upon my soul within the house;  
Write loyal cantons of contemned love  
And sing them loud even in the dead of night;  
Halloo your name to the reverberate hills  
And make the babbling gossip of the air  
Cry out 'Olivia!' O, You should not rest  
Between the elements of air and earth  
But you should pity me.

**Related Characters:** Viola (Cesario) (speaker), Orsino, Olivia

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 1.5.271-279

### Explanation and Analysis

In an attempt to get Olivia to fall in love with Orsino, Cesario (Viola) describes what he would do if he loved Olivia as much as Orsino. In a beautiful speech he tells her that he would write endless poems of his love, sing them through the night and scream her name so loudly that the air would echo the sound of "Olivia." In her speech, Viola-as-Cesario does something Orsino cannot; she says the right thing to make Olivia fall in love. Juxtaposed against Orsino's clichéd speeches on love and lust, Viola's are much more creative and subtle. She performs less, and rather actually imagines what it means to be in love. She also uses natural imagery, suggesting that her love is simple and truthful. What is more, as a woman, Viola understands the needs and interests of other women. Being of the same gender, she is able to find ways to appeal to Olivia that differ from Orsino's.

☞ What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;  
Present mirth hath present laughter:  
What's to come is still unsure.  
In delay there lies no plenty;  
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty:  
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

**Related Characters:** Feste (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 2.3.48-53

### Explanation and Analysis

Feste, Sir Toby Belch, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek are drinking and singing together, and Feste begins to sing a song about love. He sings about how love must be taken advantage of in the moment, as it is a youthful and passionate game. Feste's song on love is another example of the performative nature of love and desire in *Twelfth Night*. It also examines the difference in behavior between members of the court and the servants. Orsino performs his feelings of love through his flourishing, over the top, clichéd language, and Viola does so with beautiful poetry. Here, Feste, a court fool, examines love through drunken song, viewing it as something natural and even funny, not such a serious, melancholy matter as Orsino seems to think.

☞ My purpose, indeed, is a horse of that color.

**Related Characters:** Maria (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 2.3.66

### Explanation and Analysis

Malvolio enters and berates Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew for drinking in Olivia's home. After Malvolio leaves, Maria tells them that she has discovered a way to trick him. She will mimic Olivia's handwriting and write Malvolio a love letter. Sir Toby is thrilled by this plot, and Maria responds with this line. She confirms the layout of the prank, by agreeing that her "horse" or "idea" is exactly of the kind ("color") Sir Toby is probably imagining. This moment brings reveals how deception and disguise can be used against an individual, to hurt instead of the help. The prank provides an important counterpoint to the disguises already happening in the play, i.e. Viola as Cesario.

## Act 2, scene 4 Quotes

☞ Let still the woman take  
An elder than herself: so wears she to him,  
So sways she level in her husband's heart:  
For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,  
Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,  
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,  
Than women's are.

**Related Characters:** Orsino (speaker), Viola (Cesario)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 2.4.34-40

### Explanation and Analysis

Cesario (Viola) and Orsino sit listening to music, and Orsino asks Cesario if he has ever been in love. Cesario says yes. Not knowing that under the disguise Viola is confessing her love for him, Orsino tells Viola-as-Cesario that whoever this woman is, she is not worthy of his love because she is older than he is. Orsino encourages Cesario to instead marry someone younger than himself. The reasoning he gives for this is that men are more wavering with love, they become less attracted to older women, and their feelings change and are "unfirm." Orsino points out that men long for *more* than women do and they fall out of love quickly. Orsino pauses in his excessive, clichéd speech to have a truthful moment with Cesario, but he does not see the irony in it. He is, in fact, discussing the wavering (but excessively powerful, he believes) nature of a man's love to Cesario, who is secretly a woman. He is blinded by Viola's disguise and speaks candidly and openly with her as Cesario, in a way that he never would if she were to appear as Viola.

☞ Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make  
thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very  
opal.

**Related Characters:** Feste (speaker), Orsino

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2.4.80-82

### Explanation and Analysis

Feste sings a song to Orsino, and when Orsino asks him to leave, Feste sings this final segment, in which he mocks Orsino's melancholy nature. He calls upon Saturn, the

Roman god associated with "melancholy," to protect him. He tells Orsino that he hopes he can find a tailor that can make him clothing that changes color, because his mind is "opal," an iridescent, cloudy stone, and he never seems to know what he wants. Because of his position as the fool, Feste has the ultimate freedom to poke fun at the masters without getting in trouble. Here he comments on the foolishness of Orsino's performative melancholy and sad, over-the-top musings on love. Yet Orsino is so involved in the song and his love that he doesn't notice the sarcasm. Love is all consuming for him. We also see here that Orsino's childish lamenting of love doesn't go unnoticed by members of the court, as well as his own fool.

●● Viola: My father had a daughter loved a man,  
As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,  
I should your lordship.

Orsino: And what's her history?

Viola: A blank, my lord. She never told her love,  
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,  
Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,  
And with a green and yellow melancholy  
She sat like patience on a monument,  
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?

**Related Characters:** Viola (Cesario), Orsino (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 2.4.118-127

### Explanation and Analysis

The self-absorbed Orsino tells Cesario (Viola) that no woman could ever love a man as much as he loves Olivia. Cesario disagrees. She then tells him her own story (of the love she has for Orsino) in a roundabout way, pretending it is the story of her sister. Orsino is blinded once again by Viola's disguise, unaware of the irony of the situation. She is confessing her love for him, but is shielded by the mask of Cesario. Her own love also mimics Orsino's in its strength and melancholy—but it's also suggested that, contrary to Orsino's sexist declaration about women's capacity for love, Viola's love for Orsino is more enduring and powerful than his love for Olivia.

## Act 2, scene 5 Quotes

●● Now is the woodcock near the gin.

**Related Characters:** Fabian (speaker), Malvolio

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 2.5.85

### Explanation and Analysis

Because of his self-righteous behavior towards the other servants, Maria decides to play a prank on Malvolio. She writes a love letter to him from an anonymous lover, but does so in Olivia's handwriting, and she riddles the letter with obvious clues that point toward Olivia as the author. Here Malvolio finds the letter, and Maria and the other servants hide in a tree to watch him read it. Fabian says then says this line in hiding, calling Malvolio a "woodcock." During Shakespeare's time the woodcock was known to be a particularly stupid breed of bird, and easy to catch in a "gin" or trap. Thus by calling him this, he is making fun of Malvolio's ignorance and stupidity. As with all disguises in *Twelfth Night*, whether shielding themselves behind a tree or behind a letter, they help characters tell each other what they really feel and think.

●● I may command where I adore.

**Related Characters:** Malvolio (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2.5.107

### Explanation and Analysis

In an effort to embarrass Malvolio, Maria writes a letter in Olivia's handwriting, telling him that she is in love with him. The letter is only signed with what seems to be the letters of an initial. Here, Malvolio reads lines of the letter aloud, which he will later deconstruct, in order to find out if it was Olivia that wrote it. This line is the first major hint that it could be Olivia. The person who wrote the letter both commands and loves the same person, suggesting that it is a master who loves her servant (Malvolio).

The love letter is a symbol of the performative nature of love seen throughout *Twelfth Night*. Characters feel that the only way to properly share their love or express it is

through extreme and over-the-top behavior, whether that be song, poems, laments, or letters. So, while this letter comes at a surprise for Malvolio, he is not put off or shocked that someone would express their love in this way. This is also another moment of deception in the play, as Maria uses deception as a mechanism to embarrass and punish Malvolio for his mistreatment of other servants and his self-righteousness.

☛ Be not afraid of greatness: Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em.

**Related Characters:** Malvolio, Olivia (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 2.5.148-150

### Explanation and Analysis

Malvolio reads the love letter that he thinks is from Olivia, as Maria, its true author, hides in a tree with Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, watching Malvolio embarrass himself. This iconic quote happens toward the end of the letter as an attempt to reveal who the author could be. Malvolio interprets this section to mean that he is one who could "achieve" greatness by marrying the noble-born Olivia (one who was "born great"). Thus the joke being played on Malvolio isn't just getting him to think someone loves him, but also getting him to attempt to rise above his station—flattering his arrogance and sense of superiority. Maria is trying to lift Malvolio up in order to ultimately persuade him to embarrass himself in front of the whole court and Olivia herself. Here we see both the power of words and just how far the performance of love can go in *Twelfth Night*. Malvolio becomes smitten by his secret admirer simply from her hyperbolic and romantic words.

## Act 3, scene 1 Quotes

☛ This fellow's wise enough to play the fool,  
And to do that well craves a kind of wit.

**Related Characters:** Viola (Cesario) (speaker), Feste

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 3.1.61-62

### Explanation and Analysis

Viola, dressed as Cesario, arrives at Olivia's home to speak to her on behalf of Orsino once again. When she arrives she meets Feste, who mocks Orsino's love for Olivia. After he exits, Viola says this line. Here, Viola comments on Feste's performance as a fool. She sees his behavior as an act, and she explains that only wise and witty people can be true "fools," as they see things that others can't see, and they are intuitive and insightful. Thus, the fools are very much un-foolish, quite possibly making them the wisest people in the court (as is often the case in Shakespeare). Shakespeare suggests in this moment that the disguises we put on, i.e. the wise man as the fool, or Viola dressed as Cesario, allow us to have the freedom to both see and tell (or in Feste's case comment on) the truth.

☛ O world! how apt the poor are to be proud.

**Related Characters:** Olivia (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 3.1.134

### Explanation and Analysis

Cesario and Olivia are alone. When Olivia asks him to introduce himself once again, he says he is a humble "servant." This leads Olivia into a series of wordplays on the idea of servitude, as she uses Cesario's own position as a servant as a mode of flirtation. Olivia admits her love for Cesario (not knowing he is actually Viola) and Cesario tries to politely turn her down. Olivia replies with this line, suggesting that the poor, or in this case, a servant, should not be too proud to accept the sexual advances of a noble lady like herself.

Here, Olivia uses her higher social position as a device to woo Cesario. She tries to convince him to be with her by claiming that it is better to fall before the "lion" than the "wolf"; to fall in love with the noble beast (Olivia) over the wild forest animal (a fellow servant). Here Cesario and Olivia use class to their own advantages. On one side, Cesario tries to use his place as a servant as a way to fight off Olivia, while Olivia uses it as a way to convince him, suggesting that he take advantage of her nobility.

## Act 3, scene 4 Quotes

☛ Why, this is very midsummer madness.

**Related Characters:** Olivia (speaker), Malvolio

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 3.4.61

### Explanation and Analysis

Malvolio is love stricken with Olivia, and thinks that she has written him a love letter with instructions for how he should dress and comport himself (the letter was actually written by Maria). Here Malvolio enters, wearing yellow cross-gartered stockings and grinning from ear to ear (as the letter told him to do). Olivia, confused, asks Malvolio to stop, but he won't. Convinced her steward has gone mad, she then says this line. During Shakespeare's time the summer moon was thought to be a major influence on madness and insanity. Thus, having a "midsummer madness" was considered a kind of temporary insanity. Here Shakespeare shows us how easy it is to confuse love and desire with lunacy, as well as how easy it is for an individual to become a fool in the name of love.

☞ Go hang yourselves all! You are idle shallow things; I am not of your element.

**Related Characters:** Malvolio (speaker), Feste, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Sir Toby, Maria, Fabian

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 3.4.132-133

### Explanation and Analysis

Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian have entered the scene, all pretending to be concerned about Malvolio's state of mind (although they all know that he has in fact become the subject of a cruel joke). They express their concerns and Malvolio responds with this quote, telling them that they don't understand what he is going through. This shows that Malvolio is still as rude and arrogant as he was at the beginning of the play, and now even more so because of his sense of confidence in Olivia's love, and the letter's instructions to look down upon and criticize the other servants. The word "element" denotes social class, and as it is used here, Malvolio suggests that the other staff members are shallow and lazy, and that he is above them in both social and intellectual rank. The irony is that while he is behaving this way, he has also succumbed to Maria's trick and is currently dressed outrageously in his yellow

stockings. He looks like a fool, and yet lectures the other servants on their own foolishness.

☞ If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction.

**Related Characters:** Fabian (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 3.4.236-137

### Explanation and Analysis

After Malvolio tells the other servants that he is not of their "element," or is now above them in social class because he is supposedly worthy of Olivia's love, Fabian says this quote. Here he suggests that if this scene were a performance it would likely be considered fiction, as it is too ironic and unrealistic. Malvolio is chastising his fellow servants for being low class and stupid while he is dressed in the ridiculous clothing that the letter requested him to wear.

Once again, performance becomes an important theme in this moment. Many of the characters in *Twelfth Night* feel the need to perform or hyperbolize their emotions. In this case, Malvolio is so convinced that Olivia plans to marry him (thus making him a nobleman) that he already starts acting arrogant and overconfident towards other. He has gone mad with love and the love of power, and has thus lost all sense of rationality. His story at this point thus seems too fictional for the stage—a throwaway comment that is also Shakespeare commenting on his own work in a slyly ironic way.

## Act 5, scene 1 Quotes

☞ Give me thy hand  
And let me see thee in thy woman's weeds.

**Related Characters:** Orsino (speaker), Viola (Cesario)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 5.1.285-286

### Explanation and Analysis

After finally identifying herself as a woman of noble blood to

Orsino, Viola tells the court that she will return to the captain of her ship who will rightly identify her and return her clothes to her. Orsino then takes her hand and asks to see her in her "woman's weeds," or women's clothing.

Here we see how fickle or performative Orsino's love for Olivia truly is. The moment Viola reveals herself and identifies herself as not only a woman but a high class woman, he falls in love with her. This could simply be a result of the fact that Orsino's love for Olivia was merely a performance, or it could be that through her disguise, Orsino has begun to learn so much about Viola, and to love her deeply as an effeminate male comrade, that he is instantly smitten when he discovers that she is actually a woman. Of course, there are also complex issues of gender at work here (particularly as during Shakespeare's time, all the female characters would have been played by male actors), which Shakespeare uses to complicate the theme of love and (heterosexual) desire, and plays up for comic effect.

☛ Why have you suffered me to be imprisoned,  
Kept in a dark house, visited by the priest,  
And made the most notorious geck and gull  
That e'er invention played on? Tell me why.

**Related Characters:** Malvolio (speaker), Olivia

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 5.1.363-366

### Explanation and Analysis

Malvolio continues to be called mad and is mocked by the members of the court—even locked in a dark room (a traditional "treatment" for mental illness at the time). During this moment, Malvolio finally confronts Olivia about the writing of the love letter. After this speech, Olivia discovers that it was in fact Maria who wrote the letter, forging her handwriting, and the Fool who was in fact the "priest" visiting Malvolio.

Malvolio's plotline makes clear the connection between love and madness, and emphasizes the nature of revelry and

wildness in the environment of *Twelfth Night*. At the same time, it also introduces some more troubling elements to the comedy—Malvolio is certainly arrogant, dull, and hates any kind of fun, but the punishment he suffers seems to far outweigh his "crimes," and the glee the other characters derive from his suffering often feels downright cruel. While the final revelation of the play's "disguises" is a cause for happiness among most of the characters, for Malvolio it only shows him how thoroughly he has been tricked and how cruelly he has been treated—and, as he says here, for seemingly no good reason.

☛ I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you.

**Related Characters:** Malvolio (speaker), Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Feste, Fabian

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 5.1.401

### Explanation and Analysis

By the end of the play all of the disguises have been taken off and the deception has been revealed. While disguising oneself has worked in favor for Viola and even Olivia (who marries Sebastian), Malvolio realizes how thoroughly and cruelly he has been tricked, and remains a single negative voice among the happy lovers. In his last moments on stage, Malvolio says this line to the others and storms off, threatening to take revenge on those who embarrassed him.

Malvolio's unresolved plot-line is the only thing disrupting the otherwise traditional comic ending to the play (i.e., everyone is happy, and everyone gets married). While love has worked out well for all the other main characters, Malvolio's love for Olivia ends up wholly unrequited, and his attempts to better his class situation are presented as foolish and laughable. He is undeniably an unlikeable character, but Shakespeare also uses his story to show how love can be cruel as well as pleasurable, and to remind the audience that the harsher realities of class and station remain in place in spite of the happy ending.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## ACT 1, SCENE 1

Duke Orsino lounges in his palace in Illyria, alternately praising and lamenting the nature of love. First, he asks his attendants to serenade him with music. Then, he makes them stop. Love, he says, like the ocean, consumes whatever is cast into it. He adds that it is so "full of shapes," constantly changing its objects, that it is like a **hallucination**.

Curio, one of Orsino's attendants, enters and asks the Duke whether he will he come **hunt** "hart" (male deer). Orsino jokes that, since he first saw Olivia, he himself has been like a hart, hunted by his own desires.

Valentine, another attendant, returns from Olivia's palace, where Orsino has sent him. He reports that Olivia is deep in mourning for her brother, who recently passed away. To keep her brother's "dead love" (1.1.31) fresh in her memory, she has vowed to live like a nun, cloistered and weeping, for seven years. Orsino is further impassioned, rather than discouraged, by this news. If Olivia will "pay this debt of love but to a brother" (1.1.34), he exclaims, imagine how intensely she will love when she is filled with (romantic) affections for only one man.

*Attended by servants, Orsino indulges fully in his melodramatic melancholy, not only staging a musical performance but also using clichéd language to compare his intense feelings to madness.*



*Employing the metaphor of a hunt and punning on the words heart/hart, Orsino's love-melancholy seems like a self-conscious performance.*



*Although Olivia's intention to honor "dead love" contrasts with Orsino's passionate desire, Olivia's mourning, like Orsino's love-melancholy, involves self-conscious performance: she takes the role of a nun. Meanwhile, Orsino continues to play the role of a stereotypical lover, growing more impassioned by his beloved's resistance.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 2

Somewhere on the coast, Viola, a young noblewoman, a Captain, and several sailors, have just washed ashore from a shipwreck. Viola asks what country they are in, to which the Captain responds, "Illyria." She then cries out that her brother is "in Elysium"—the land of the dead (1.2.4). The Captain reassures her that he last saw her brother, Sebastian, alive, clutching the mast of their ship during the storm. Viola thanks the Captain for granting her some hope.

The Captain, who was born in Illyria, explains to Viola that Illyria is governed by a Duke Orsino, a bachelor who is in love with a noblewoman named Olivia. Olivia, herself the orphaned daughter of a count, who out of "dear love" (1.2.39) for her brother, died a year ago, has promised to never marry.

*Viola's single outburst of sorrow, in contrast to Orsino's flowery speech in the previous scene, suggests that her mourning for her brother is more sincere than his love-melancholy. Even so, in referring to "Elysium" she too uses literary allusion to express her intense feelings.*



*Viola's open and easy conversation with the Captain contrasts with the stilted exchanges between Orsino and his servants. The fact that they have both lost a brother creates a parallel between Viola and Olivia.*



Intrigued, Viola wonders whether she could temporarily conceal her aristocratic identity and go work for Olivia. The Captain replies that this would be difficult because Olivia is refusing to see anyone. Viola then decides that she wants to become a servant to Orsino, and asks the Captain to help her disguise herself as a man and get an interview with Orsino. The Captain agrees.

*Viola first considers concealing just her aristocratic identity, but then develops a plan that also includes hiding her gender. She trusts the Captain enough to confide in him.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 3

At Olivia's palace, Olivia's crass uncle, Sir Toby Belch, has just returned from a night of drinking. Olivia's serving woman, Maria, scolds him in a flirting way: Olivia has been complaining about Sir Toby's bad behavior and about Sir Andrew Aguecheek, the foolish knight he brought to Illyria to woo her. Sir Toby protests: Sir Andrew is tall—and rich! Maria scoffs that this makes no difference. The two are still quarreling when Sir Andrew enters the room.

*The characters introduced here represent a "low" world of servants, parallel to the nobles'. The flirtation between Maria and Toby, and the practical criteria that Toby applies to Andrew as a suitor (he is tall and rich), both contrast with the flowery love-melancholy Orsino exhibited in 1.1.*



Sir Andrew and Sir Toby greet each other affectionately. Sir Toby jokes that Sir Andrew should "accost" Maria—"woo her, assail her" (1.3.54)—setting off a volley of double entendres in which Maria easily bests Sir Andrew, Maria then departs.

*These vulgar puns contrast with Orsino's poetic musings. The low characters are far less genteel and more overtly sexual in their games of love than the nobles are.*



Sir Andrew tells Sir Toby that he is leaving the next day, because Olivia refuses to see him. But Sir Toby persuades Sir Andrew to stay just one month longer.

*In contrast to Orsino, who enjoys playing the spurned lover and is spurred on by Olivia's lack of interest, Andrew takes Olivia's hints at face value.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 4

At Orsino's palace, Viola, now disguised as the page boy Cesario, chats with Valentine. Valentine tells Cesario that if he continues to please Orsino this well, he will advance quickly in the household: after only three days the Duke already trusts him intimately.

*In this conversation, which anticipates Viola's intimacy with Orsino, Viola appears disguised as Cesario in the costume she'll wear for the rest of the play.*



Orsino enters and asks to speak with Cesario privately. Orsino then tells Cesario he has Orsino's full confidence, and tells Cesario to go to Olivia's house and do whatever he can to receive an audience on Orsino's behalf. Cesario is skeptical, given the firmness of Olivia's resolve not to see anyone. But Orsino is confident that Cesario will be able to persuade her—particularly because, prepubescent, he still looks like a woman: his lips, his voice all resemble "a woman's part" (1.4.35).

*This exchange further establishes the degree of trust between Orsino and Cesario. At the same time, Orsino's comment that because Cesario resembles a woman he is likely to persuade Olivia alludes to the ambiguity of Cesario's gender and the confusion it will cause.*



Cesario departs for Olivia's house with four or five attendants. But, privately, Viola remarks to herself that she is in a difficult situation: she must woo on behalf of a man whom she herself would like to marry!

*Viola's love for Orsino is even more impossible than Orsino's love for Olivia. Disguised as a male servant, Viola can't even reveal her love. But Viola never displays the showy melancholy that Orsino seems to enjoy. Instead, her language is plain, which makes the pain she feels seem more real.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 5

In Olivia's house, Maria is chiding Feste, the clown, for a recent unexplained absence. Feste responds by teasing Maria about her recent flirtations with Sir Toby Belch. Snapping that he should keep this to himself, she exits.

*This scene once again presents the servants' separate, yet parallel world. Maria wants to keep her love for Toby secret, just as Viola does for Orsino.*



Olivia enters, wearing mourning clothes and attended by her steward, Malvolio. Olivia first instructs her attendants to send Feste away, but he teases her into better spirits by saying that she is the fool of the two of them—for mourning her brother, who is in heaven. This pleases Olivia. But Malvolio disapproves and calls Feste a "barren rascal" (1.5.76). Olivia criticizes Malvolio for his "self-love" (1.5.83)—taking himself too seriously.

*The fool (Feste) has official permission to cross boundaries of politeness between masters and servants. Malvolio's reaction to the fool's jokes establishes both his isolation from the other servants and his general humorlessness. In a play whose main focus is love, Malvolio primarily loves himself.*



Maria returns to announce that a young man at the gate wishes to speak with Olivia. Olivia asks if he has been sent by Orsino. Maria doesn't know. Olivia sends Malvolio to send the man away. Passing through, Sir Toby exchanges a few drunken words with Olivia—also informing her about the gentleman at the gate. Olivia sends Feste to look after Sir Toby, who, Feste agrees, is drunk as a "mad man" (1.5.121).

*Orsino's sending of messengers is so common that Olivia now expects them. Sir Toby's constant bad behavior provides a point of contrast to such courtly ceremonies. Feste's casual reference to Toby's drunken madness anticipates the antics to follow.*



Malvolio returns and informs Olivia that the young man outside will not leave. Olivia asks what he is like. Malvolio replies that he is an androgynous adolescent, "between boy and man," (1.5.148) and speaks like a woman. Hearing this, Olivia gives in: she agrees to see the messenger. She quickly asks Maria to give her a veil to hide her face.

*This is the second account of Cesario's ambiguous gender. And it is precisely this ambiguity that seems to convince Olivia to see him. However, before meeting Cesario, Olivia covers her face—costuming herself for the courtship-game.*



Cesario enters and recites ornate poetry about Olivia's "unmatchable beauty" (1.5.158). Olivia instructs him to get to the point. Cesario protests that he put a lot of effort into memorizing this speech and adds that, besides, it is beautiful poetry. But Olivia refuses to listen: it is "not the time of moon," she says, to try to make her crazy by carrying on like this (1.5.187). Maria asks Cesario to leave but he persists, insisting that he must speak with Olivia in private. Finally, Olivia agrees. She sends the others away. Now, she demands to know: who wrote Cesario's "text" (1.5.208)? Cesario confesses that it was indeed Orsino. Exasperated, Olivia says that she has already heard all he has to say. Cesario asks to see Olivia's face. Olivia consents, joking that they are "now out of text" (1.5.217), and unveils herself.

Cesario says it would be cruel for Olivia to go through life without producing an heir to keep such beauty alive after her death. Cesario adds that Orsino loves Olivia so deeply that she should yield to him. Olivia asks Cesario to describe Orsino's affections for her. Cesario reports: he adores her, weeps for her, groans, and sighs. Olivia replies that Orsino is a worthy man but knows perfectly well that she cannot return his affections. Cesario responds that, if he were Orsino, he would not accept this denial: he would build a makeshift hut at the gate of Olivia's house, and spend all his time calling, writing, and singing to her, until she was finally moved to pity.

Cutting Cesario off, Olivia asks what his own background is. Cesario replies that he is a gentleman by birth, although conditions have reduced him. Olivia replies that Cesario should return to Orsino, tell him that Olivia cannot love him and must not to send any further messengers—except, that is, for Cesario. Olivia offers Cesario money but he refuses, telling Olivia that he hopes that one day she will love as passionately as Orsino does, and find that the object of her affections has a heart of stone. With this, Cesario departs.

Once she is alone, Olivia admits to herself that she is extremely attracted to Cesario. She lists his beautiful features—"Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs" (1.5.269)—and describes them as a "blazon." Thinking fast, Olivia summons Malvolio and gives him a ring, which, she lies, Cesario left behind on Orsino's behalf. She commands Malvolio to chase down Cesario, return the ring, and instruct him to come back on the following day to hear her reasons for rejecting it. Malvolio takes the ring and hurries off to catch up with Cesario. Olivia remarks to herself that she does not know what she is doing: she is acting irrationally, purely on the basis of physical attraction. Yet, she says, she cannot resist fate.

*Orsino conducts his wooing through go-betweens, never actually meeting with Olivia. It's as if he wants to woo Olivia more than he actually wants to win her love. Olivia's references to "scripts" highlight how she is playing a role in the wooing ritual. Even when Olivia unveils her face and jokes that she is departing from scripted action, she is in fact creating a highly theatrical moment. In this way, Shakespeare uses traditional clichés for talking about love while also satirizing them at the same time. In effect, he is winking at the audience.*



*In improvising a response to Olivia, Cesario demonstrates his cleverness and skill. He is a natural poet: the argument that beautiful people are obligated to love and produce heirs is a common theme of Shakespeare's own sonnets. Viola's poetry is new and interesting in comparison to Orsino's clichéd poetry, and her description of what she would do in Orsino's place is urgent and powerful. Orsino himself would never live in a makeshift hut.*



*Saying that Orsino should send Cesario is a clue that Olivia is falling for Cesario. Cesario's witty refusal of Olivia's money shows his skill with verbal conventions of love and also hints at the resentment Viola must feel: she is in love with Orsino, and unable to act on it, while Olivia, who could have him instantly, is too proud to love him back.*



*A "blazon" is the term for a list of a beloved's features in a poem. Olivia here adopts the kind of ornate language mainly used by Orsino up to this point. She also starts playing lovers' mind-games: her lie to Malvolio, designed to get Cesario to come back, marks a big change from her nun-like behavior earlier. The fact that Olivia's love is pretty shallow—she describes Cesario only in terms of his looks—indicates the play's satirical attitude toward love and emphasizes the homoerotic dimension of her desire. She is specifically attracted to Cesario's female features.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 1

Somewhere on the coast of Illyria, two men, Antonio and Sebastian, stand in front of Antonio's house. Antonio begs Sebastian to remain as his guest, but without success. Finally, Antonio asks at least to know where Sebastian is going. Moved by Antonio's concern for him, Sebastian admits to the identity he has been hiding: his name is Sebastian, he is an aristocrat from Messaline, and he has a twin sister who drowned on the same day that Antonio saved him from the sea. His sister was beautiful and intelligent, and he cannot stop weeping whenever he thinks of her.

Touched by the story, Antonio begs Sebastian to let him remain with him as his servant. Sebastian says that he would prefer to be left alone but tells Antonio he is headed to Orsino's court. Antonio pauses, because he has many enemies at Orsino's court, yet decides that since he does "adore" Sebastian he will follow him, despite the danger.

*By revealing his identity, Sebastian gives up deception, disguise, and performance in favor of open friendship with Antonio. Also notice how Sebastian's deep mourning for Viola parallels Viola's own mourning for Sebastian and contrasts with the levity Olivia has shown in the previous scene, casting off her mourning obligations in order to pursue romantic love.*



*The male-male, master-servant relationship between Sebastian and Antonio seems more profound and less fickle than the romantic relationships between Viola, Olivia, and Orsino. Yet the extent of Antonio's devotion hints at some possible deeper emotion that Antonio might feel toward Sebastian.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 2

Malvolio catches up with Cesario. He gives Cesario the ring from Olivia and explains that Olivia doesn't want it and has nothing more to say to the Duke, but would like Cesario to return to tell her how Orsino reacts. Although momentarily confused because he didn't leave any such ring, Cesario plays along by refusing to take the ring back. Malvolio, growing angry, throws the ring at Cesario's feet, then storms off.

Alone, Viola picks up the ring and realizes that Olivia has fallen in love with "Cesario," and that by taking on her disguise she has created an impossible love triangle: Orsino loves Olivia, Olivia loves Viola/Cesario, and Viola loves Orsino. Because Orsino takes Viola for a man, she has no chance with him; and because Olivia takes her for the pageboy Cesario, she is in love with someone who does not even exist. Overwhelmed, Viola remarks that only time can solve this mess.

*Once again, Cesario shows his skill with love-games by picking up on Olivia's ploy with the ring immediately (ring were also common symbols of both sex and marriage). Malvolio, by contrast, exhibits his usual haughtiness and cluelessness.*



*By tricking others with her costume, Viola has trapped herself inside the "Cesario" persona, suggesting that how the world sees you has a profound influence on one's class and gender. Viola's realization of her romantic predicament deepens the melancholy she hinted at in Act 1, scene 5.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 3

Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek are up late, eating and drinking in a room in Olivia's house. Feste soon joins them, and they are all raucously singing together, when Maria shows up. Maria warns them that if they aren't quiet, Olivia will have Malvolio throw them out of the house. Sir Toby responds that he is Olivia's relative and she will do no such thing. They continue singing.

*Toby, Andrew, and Feste's antics present a "lower" world of performance that provides a coarse parallel to the courtly performances of love by Orsino, Cesario, and Olivia.*



Malvolio enters and berates the group for treating his "lady's house" like an "ale-house" (2.3.83-4). Sir Toby retorts that Malvolio is just a steward and should not expect others to follow his strict standards of behavior. Furious, Malvolio yells at Maria that if she respected her mistress, she would reprimand these lowlifes. Threatening to tell Olivia everything, he storms off. Maria is annoyed at Malvolio, but begs Sir Toby and Sir Andrew to quiet down because ever since Olivia saw Cesario earlier that day, she has been badly distressed.

Maria then says she has a great idea for a prank on Malvolio. She boasts that she can imitate Olivia's handwriting perfectly, and will drop in Malvolio's way a love letter that Malvolio, in his arrogance, will assume is from Olivia to him. Meanwhile, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste will get to watch how Malvolio reacts.

Maria leaves to go to bed. Sir Andrew notes approvingly that she is a good woman. Toby agrees. Andrew once again laments that he needs more money in order to stay in Illyria and continue wooing Olivia. Sir Toby reassures Sir Andrew that he will win Olivia's affections in the end.

## ACT 2, SCENE 4

The next day, Orsino lounges in his palace as usual, attended by Cesario, Curio, and other servants and musicians. Orsino sends for Feste, to sing. While Curio looks for him, the musicians start playing.

Orsino tells Cesario that, if he is ever in love, he must remember and imitate Orsino's passion for Olivia. Noticing that Cesario seems moved by the music, Orsino then asks whether he is not himself in love. Cesario—who is in fact in love with Orsino—confesses that he is. Orsino asks what Cesario's beloved is like. Cesario responds that she is very similar to Orsino, in both appearance and age. Orsino tells Cesario that this woman cannot be worthy: because men's passions are less stable than those of women, and women quickly lose their beauty with age, men should always take younger wives.

Curio returns with Feste. Orsino instructs him to sing what he sang the previous night, a melodramatic lover's lament. After he sings, Orsino rewards Feste with a few coins, and Feste prays for the "melancholy god" to protect the Duke (2.4.72). Orsino dismisses everyone but Cesario.

*Malvolio, proud and self-righteous, objects to how the other servants' make his high-class household look common. He fears that if the household looks common, he will look common. In contrast, Maria shows concern for Olivia's well-being. Maria's comment about Olivia's distress hints that Olivia is now racked with love-melancholy for Cesario.*



*This prank offers a counterpoint to the ceremonies and love-games that Orsino, Cesario, and Olivia have been playing so far—it particularly parallels and mocks the carefully scripted love letters that Orsino sent by messenger to Olivia.*



*The rest of the scene establishes that Toby is as interested in Maria as she is in Toby. Andrew's dwindling funds also highlight another aspect of wooing and love-games that the idealistic nobles ignore: wooing takes money.*



*Repetitive scenes in Orsino's palace show the paralyzing stasis of his love-melancholy. This melancholy is always linked with artistic or musical performances*



*For the first time in the play, Orsino responds to the emotions of someone besides himself. Although blinded by Viola's disguise, he cannot see the irony that the audience does: he thinks that he shares only a master-servant relationship (like, for instance, Antonio and Sebastian in 2.1). Orsino's interest is also short-lived, and he soon returns to speaking in clichés (his discussion of women's beauty).*



*More melancholy and musical performance. Feste's reference to the "melancholy god" is mocking since Orsino really does seem to worship melancholy. The self-obsessed Orsino doesn't notice.*



Orsino instructs Cesario to go woo Olivia once again on his behalf. Cesario suggests that Orsino give up. What if a woman loved Orsino just as he loves Olivia, and he did not requite her love? She would have to give up eventually. Orsino says no woman could love like he does. Cesario responds that his father had a daughter, very similar to Cesario, who once loved a man just as much as Orsino loves Olivia. The girl never confessed her love but pined away with melancholy. Orsino asks if she died of love. Cesario avoids the question. Orsino then sends Cesario with a jewel to Olivia, instructing him to hurry.

*Viola's disguise is once again a source of dramatic irony: we know that Viola is talking about her own love-melancholy and near madness. Yet, with Orsino once again acting self-absorbed—he only briefly listens to the story—the scene suggests that perhaps Orsino's love is selfish: his total disregard for Olivia's feelings make it seem like he is more in love with the idea of love than with a real other person.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 5

As Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian, one of Olivia's attendants, wait in Olivia's garden, Maria runs in and instructs them all to conceal themselves inside a tree because Malvolio—who has been in the sun, practicing elegant mannerisms—is coming! They hide. Maria rushes off.

*The prank creates a kind of play-within-the-play. Under Maria's direction, Malvolio, who acts phony all the time anyway, will become an unwitting actor for a hidden audience.*



Malvolio enters, talking to himself. As it happens, he already believes that Olivia fancies him. Hiding in the tree, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian try to suppress their laughter, as Malvolio fantasizes about how wonderful it would be to marry Olivia and become a count. Suddenly, Malvolio breaks off: he has caught sight of the letter that Maria planted in his path. Inside the tree, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian can hardly contain themselves. Malvolio immediately recognizes "Olivia's" handwriting and seal. He opens the letter and starts reading it aloud. It says that Olivia has a secret love she will call "M, O, A, I" (2.5.131). After some puzzling, Malvolio concludes that these letters must refer to him. He reads on. The letter instructs that, if "Olivia's" beloved finds it, he must indicate that he reciprocates her feelings by being surly with the servants, wearing yellow stockings, crossing his garters at the knee, and smiling all the time. Overjoyed, Malvolio resolves to do all of these things and hurries off.

*Malvolio's materialistic motivations for wanting to marry Olivia reveal how selfish his love is—he wants to marry Olivia not because he loves her, but because he loves himself and wants to rise in rank. Both his desire to promote himself through marriage, and his arrogant willingness to believe that Olivia loves him—however improbable that may be—make this play-within-the-play a kind of satire of love. Toby, Andrew, and Feste, mirroring the position of the actual audience watching Twelfth Night in the theater, further draw attention to theme of performance.*



Sir Toby says he could marry Maria for thinking up this prank. Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria then rush off to watch Malvolio make a fool of himself.

*Toby loves Maria for what she does, while Orsino seems to know nothing about Olivia. From now on, Toby, Andrew, and friends will be Malvolio's audience.*



## ACT 3, SCENE 1

Cesario arrives at Olivia's palace (following Orsino's instructions in 2.4). Outside he finds Feste, who clowns a bit and mocks both Olivia and Orsino. Amused, Cesario gives him a few coins. As Feste scurries off, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew appear. Then Olivia arrives with Maria. Cesario asks to see her in private. Olivia sends everyone else away.

*Feste's mockery of the noble lovers, coming directly after Toby, Andrew, and Maria's laughs at Malvolio's expense, reminds the audience that the noble lovers are not necessarily any less ridiculous than Malvolio is.*



When they are alone, Cesario says that he is Olivia's servant: he is Orsino's servant and Orsino belongs to Olivia. So, by extension, he does too. Olivia says she wishes Cesario would never again speak of Orsino but, rather, woo her for himself.

*Cesario's servitude metaphors create a link between literal servants and nobles metaphorically enslaved by love. Here, love makes Olivia more open and honest.*



Cesario responds that he pities Olivia but cannot love her—because, as he tells her, "I am not what I am" (3.1.138). Cesario adds that no woman will ever have his heart; he himself shall be mistress of it forever. Nonetheless, Olivia encourages him to return in hopes that he will learn to reciprocate her affections.

*Cesario's mysterious comment reflects the ambiguity that his disguise has created around his gender identity. Speaking of a "mistress" of his heart, he both hints at his true identity as Viola and extends the master/servant metaphor for love.*



## ACT 3, SCENE 2

In another room of Olivia's house, Sir Andrew tells Sir Toby that he has finally decided to give up and leave because he saw Olivia flirting with Cesario in the orchard. Sir Toby assures Sir Andrew that Olivia was only trying to test his valor, and that to impress Olivia, Sir Andrew should now challenge Cesario to a duel. Persuaded, Sir Andrew goes off to write a letter of challenge. Sir Toby promises to deliver it.

*Spying on Olivia and Cesario, Andrew acts as the audience to their courtship "performance." From here on out, the subplot involving Andrew and Cesario parodies another conventional ritual of dramatic love: the duel.*



Once Sir Andrew has left, Sir Toby admits to Fabian that he only wants Sir Andrew to hang around so that he can keep leeching off of him.

*Another performance: Toby, Andrew's supposed friend and ally, is deceiving him.*



Maria arrives, and tells Sir Toby and Fabian that Malvolio is doing everything instructed in Maria's letter, and making himself entirely ridiculous in the process. Maria comments that Olivia will probably hit Malvolio for his idiotic behavior and that, when she does, Malvolio will simply smile and consider it a sign of favor. Sir Toby is delighted.

*The over-the-top drama of the prank on Malvolio, which causes Malvolio to make himself look absolutely ridiculous for the sake of love, echoes the Orsino-Viola/Cesario-Olivia love triangle and forces the audience to see how love makes those characters also act in silly ways.*



## ACT 3, SCENE 3

Antonio and Sebastian arrive in Illyria. Sebastian says that Antonio didn't have to come, but Antonio insists that he has come out of "willing love" (3.3.11).

*Antonio's persistence strengthens the impression of his love for Sebastian.*



Sebastian then suggests that they take in the sights of the city, but Antonio explains that he once fought at sea against Orsino. If discovered in Illyria, he will be in danger. He gives his purse to Sebastian, telling him to feel free to buy anything that he desires. Antonio himself will wait at a local inn, The Elephant. They makes plans to meet at the inn in an hour.

*Antonio gives his purse freely, in contrast to the gifts with the gifts Orsino and Olivia gave earlier, which were intended to manipulate their objects of desire. This contrast reaffirms the strength of Antonio's devotion.*



## ACT 3, SCENE 4

In her garden, Olivia consults with Maria on how best to woo Cesario, who has agreed to come back yet again. She asks Maria to bring Malvolio to advise her, as his melancholy mood will better match her own. Maria replies that Malvolio seems to have gone mad, for he does nothing but smile. Sending Maria off to fetch him, Olivia remarks that she herself feels just "as mad as he, if sad and merry madness equals be" (3.4.14-5).

Malvolio enters wearing yellow cross-gartered stockings, smiling idiotically. Olivia scolds him for this behavior. However, he continues grinning and alluding to the letter which he believes she sent. Olivia concludes that Malvolio has fallen into "midsummer madness" (3.4.52). A servant enters, reporting that Cesario has returned. Olivia asks Maria to get Sir Toby to look after Malvolio. Then she goes to receive Cesario. Once Olivia and Maria are gone, Malvolio celebrates. He is convinced that his behavior has pleased Olivia and that now nothing can come between him and the "full prospect of [his] hopes" (3.4.76-7).

Maria enters with Sir Toby and Fabian. All three pretend to be worried about Malvolio. Maria implies to Malvolio that he is acting crazily and reminds him that Olivia wanted him to remain in Sir Toby's care. Quickly losing patience, Malvolio dismisses the others as lower in rank than he, warns that they will hear more from him later, and storms off. Fabian comments that if their prank "were played upon a stage," he would dismiss it as "improbable" (3.4.119). Maria encourages them both to pursue Malvolio and continue to torment him. Sir Toby reports that Olivia already thinks that Malvolio is mad.

Sir Andrew enters, holding the letter he has written to challenge Cesario to a duel. Sir Toby reads it, declares that it's sure to provoke Cesario, and offers to deliver it. When they learn from Maria that Cesario is at that moment visiting Olivia and is about to depart, Sir Toby convinces Sir Andrew to go lie in wait and swear at Cesario when he passes. Sir Andrew hurries off. Once alone with Fabian, Toby confides that he has no intention of delivering Sir Andrew's letter: Cesario is clearly too well bred even to acknowledge such a ridiculous challenge. Instead, Sir Toby will tell Cesario that Sir Andrew wants to fight, convince each of the other's dueling skills, and make each terrified of the other.

*Olivia's continued obsession with Cesario, and her private remark that she is suffering from "sad and merry madness," show her love-melancholy approaching the intensity of Orsino's—and perhaps even exceeding it.*



*The servant/low and the noble/high plots start to come together, as they will continue to over the course of this scene. Malvolio, blinded by arrogance, totally fails to gauge Olivia's reactions—she obviously thinks he has gone crazy. Speaking of his love in terms of "prospects," Malvolio makes clear that he is still motivated most by a desire to boost his rank and wealth—that his love is really self-love.*



*As Maria and the others continue to direct their prank in such a way as to make Malvolio seem mad, Fabian's remark that he wouldn't believe what he is seeing if it were performed on stage takes the theme of performance to the next level. In his grouchy threats, Malvolio both exhibits his usual snobbery and makes clear that he still believes Olivia will marry him, promoting and giving him power over the others.*



*Like the prank on Malvolio, which provides an over-the-top parody of the way that lovers behave to win over their beloveds, this second comic subplot parodies another traditional love ritual—the duel. Like the prank on Malvolio, the duel will also be instrumental in bringing the high and low characters together. Toby is central to both plots. A noble who is more comfortable among the servants, he is a perfect agent of misrule, sowing chaos that will bring the high and low characters together.*



Olivia enters with Cesario, apologizing for having said too much: she is so in love, she cannot help herself. Cesario reminds Olivia that his master, Orsino, is suffering just as she is. Olivia gives Cesario a locket containing her picture and promises that she won't deny Cesario anything he wishes. Cesario insists that he wants only for Olivia to reciprocate Orsino's love: she should transfer her feelings for Cesario to the Duke. Frustrated, but not defeated, Olivia bids Cesario farewell, reminding him to come the next day. She is so in love, she remarks, Cesario is almost like a "fiend" to bear her soul to "hell" (3.4.204). Olivia exits.

Once Olivia has gone, Sir Toby and Fabian approach Cesario. Using all sorts of double entendre's about swords and sheathes, Sir Toby warns Cesario that a deadly assailant is waiting to attack him in the orchard. Baffled, Cesario asks Sir Toby to explain to this assailant that he did not mean to offend anyone. Sir Toby departs. Fabian picks up where Sir Toby left off, telling Cesario that the knight is the most dangerous in all Illyria. Cesario says he does not mind admitting that he's too cowardly to fight. Meanwhile, Sir Toby finds Sir Andrew and tells him that after receiving the (actually undelivered) letter, Cesario is furious and ready to duel. Fearful of what he has set in motion, Sir Andrew curses. As Sir Toby's prank comes to a head, Cesario remarks, in an aside, that he is so terrified he almost wants to confess that he is a woman to save himself.

Cesario and Sir Andrew approach each other and draw swords, terrified. At this instant, Antonio enters. Seeing Cesario—whom he thinks is Sebastian—he says that he will fight in Cesario's place. Sir Toby demands to know who Antonio is. Antonio replies that he is someone who in "his love dares yet do more" (3.4.297). Puzzled and irritated at this interruption, Sir Toby draws against Antonio.

Suddenly, several officers appear. Sir Andrew and Cesario, overjoyed to stop fighting, put away their swords. The officers arrest Antonio, who asks Cesario—whom he still mistakes for Sebastian—to return the purse that he lent him. Cesario, confused but grateful for Antonio's help in the fight, offers him half of the money that he has on him. Dismayed, Antonio asks how the friend for whom he has done so much can deny him in his moment of need? Cesario replies that he doesn't know what Antonio is talking about, and that Antonio must be crazy.

As the officers pull him away, Antonio explains to them that he saved the life of this boy when he was drowning at sea. He shouts that "Sebastian" should be ashamed of himself. The officers drag Antonio off. Viola, meanwhile, is filled with sudden hope that her brother is still alive. She rushes off to search for him.

*By staging this moment between the main characters as just a fleeting interruption of the low characters, Shakespeare inverts the priority of the two plots—a switch-up that echoes the switch-ups of servants and nobles that traditionally occurred during the Twelfth Night holiday. Falling deeper and deeper into the trouble caused by Cesario's disguise, Olivia seems desperately in love—she thinks she, like Malvolio, is really going mad.*



*The extensive exchanges between the various characters here draws out the metaphorical similarities between physical fighting and the "battle of the sexes" that has been going on (and conducted through messengers). It also goes on so long as to make the duel absolutely ridiculous. The dirty double entendres involving swords and sheathes draw attention to the fact that Viola has concealed her gender and that that is a problem: just as she cannot engage in the battle of love with Orsino, she cannot fight a man in a duel here.*



*Sir Toby, who is the "director" of this little "play-within-the-play" is irritated to have the events that he has set in motion interrupted. Once again, Antonio shows the deep devotion of his "love" for Sebastian, in contrast to the petty emotions that Sir Andrew expresses.*



*Viola's disguise brings love-melancholy to her and Olivia. It also harms Antonio, who has given Sebastian honest and open friendship. The confusion that Viola's disguise causes—like the confusion that Maria, Sir Toby, and friends have deliberately caused Malvolio—starts to make Antonio seem mad to everyone around him.*



*The outcome of the "duel" provides the first glimmer of the potential reuniting of Viola and Sebastian. Viola's excitement in running off to try to find Sebastian shows her deep devotion to her brother.*



Once everyone has left, Sir Andrew vows that he will pursue and defeat Cesario. He runs off, with Sir Toby and Fabian following.

*Sir Andrew continues to show ridiculous persistence.*



## ACT 4, SCENE 1

Near Olivia's house, Feste runs into Sebastian, whom he mistakes for Cesario. Feste asks Sebastian to return and speak with Olivia. Confused, Sebastian offers Feste some coins to leave him alone. Feste is about to run off with the money when Sir Andrew appears, trailed by Sir Toby and Fabian. Sir Andrew punches Sebastian. Stunned for a moment, Sebastian then punches Sir Andrew back, asking "are all the people mad?" (4.1.24) in Illyria. Feste rushes off to tattle to Olivia. Sir Toby and Sebastian begin to fence.

*Viola's disguise continues to create confusion, even chaos. Here, Sebastian's real confusion about whether everyone is crazy replaces all the flowery language of love and valor. With the physical comedy of the fist fight, things go really topsy-turvy...*



Olivia rushes in, ordering Sir Toby to stop. Olivia sends Toby away, while begging "Cesario" (in fact, Sebastian) not to be offended. Once Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian have sulked off, Olivia apologizes profusely to "Cesario" and asks him to return with her to her house. Sebastian fears that he is mad or dreaming, and yet he is also overwhelmed by attraction to Olivia. If this is a dream, he says, he would like to keep on sleeping! He accepts the invitation and leaves with Olivia.

*Olivia's passion contrasts comically with Sebastian's befuddlement. His repeated questioning of whether he is literally crazy recalls the tendency of Orsino and Olivia to speak this way in their love-melancholy. Yet, Sebastian seems far more pragmatic than they are—if a rich, beautiful lady loves him, he won't resist by playing games.*



## ACT 4, SCENE 2

Back at Olivia's house, Maria and Toby have locked Malvolio in a dark chamber to cure his "madness." Outside the chamber, Maria instructs Feste to put on a gown and beard she has procured and to pretend to be a "great scholar" (4.2.10), "Sir Topas." Maria goes to fetch Sir Toby while Feste puts on the gown. When they return, Sir Toby is delighted: "the knave," he says, "counterfeits well" (4.2.19).

*The subplot of the prank on Malvolio is coming to a peak. Costume changes and role playing on stage also create another play-within-the-play, drawing attention to the theme of performance.*



"Sir Topas" goes to the door of Malvolio's cell. Malvolio tries desperately to enlist him as an ally; Sir Topas parries his every attempt, telling him that the dark room he is in is really light as day. Malvolio begs Sir Topas to test whether or not he is mad by asking him a question. Sir Topas asks, "[W]hat is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild fowl?" Malvolio replies (correctly) that Pythagoras argued that the human soul might just as well inhabit the body of a bird. Sir Topas asks what Malvolio thinks of this; Malvolio (who, we will recall, is a Puritan) says that he thinks nobly of the soul and does not in any way approve of Pythagoras' opinion. Sir Topas replies that Malvolio must remain in the darkness then: he will not be let out until he believes that a human soul could just as well inhabit the body of a bird. With this "Sir Topas" leaves Malvolio, who cries out after him.

*Sir Topas' question about Pythagoras is pseudo-intellectual, thus parodying Malvolio's pretentiousness. Yet Feste's Q&A with Malvolio also reflects the themes of inconstant love and changing identity. Over the course of the play, the powerful love that Orsino and Olivia claim to feel is directed at so many different people that it becomes meaningless—it might as well be aimed at a bird. Similarly, Sebastian and Viola/Cesario's identities are also confused multiple times, raising questions about the constancy of a "soul" or of one's internal nature. If a mere disguise can transform Viola into a man, why can't her soul inhabit a bird?*



Sir Toby, amused, mocks Malvolio's desperate cries. But he confides in Maria that they must find a way out of this prank to avoid irritating Olivia any further. The two sneak off to Sir Toby's bedroom.

*Here, in a rather unromantic off-stage culmination of the low plot, Toby and Maria get together.*



Back in his clown personality, Feste returns to Malvolio's cell. Malvolio begs Feste to bring him a candle, pen, ink, and paper, so that he can write a letter asking Olivia for help. Feste agrees to deliver the letter, but first dallies for a while, teasing Malvolio.

*The spectacle of the servant teasing his superior is precisely what took place on the Twelfth Night holiday (see [Background Info](#) for more on this holiday).*



## ACT 4, SCENE 3

In another room in Olivia's palace, Sebastian is wandering around, trying to make sense of what has happened. Sebastian wishes that he could find Antonio to get his advice, but for some reason Antonio wasn't at the Elephant Inn when Sebastian went to meet him. Sebastian keeps turning over the facts: it seems as if either he or Olivia must be mad.

*Unlike the other lovers, who say that they are mad in order to emphasize the extreme intensity of their love, Sebastian really does have good reason to worry about his sanity.*



Sebastian's thoughts are interrupted when Olivia enters with a priest. She begs Sebastian to agree to marry her secretly at once. Then, when Sebastian is ready, they can then make their marriage known and have another celebration, commensurate with Olivia's wealth and social standing. Sebastian agrees. The priest leads him and Olivia away.

*As with Toby and Maria, the wedding takes place off-stage. This drives home the point that the focus of the play is not about the consummation of love, but rather the ridiculous way that people act when wooing.*



## ACT 5, SCENE 1

In front of Olivia's house, Feste holds the letter that Malvolio has written begging for Olivia's help. As Fabian tries to get Feste to let him read it, Orsino arrives with Cesario and several others. After exchanging some casual banter with Feste, Orsino sends the clown to inform Olivia of his arrival.

*As Feste and Fabian engage in a kind of power struggle over the letter, Orsino arrives and shows who has the real power.*



While Orsino waits, the officers barge in with Antonio. Cesario defends Antonio—noting that Antonio saved him from Sir Toby and Sir Andrew—but concedes that he did seem crazy. Orsino asks Antonio why he came to Illyria, where he knew it would be dangerous for him. Antonio explains that he came to serve the "ingrateful boy" (5.1.72)—Cesario, whom he still mistakes for Sebastian. He says that he saved this "boy" from a shipwreck and, from then on, followed and defended him, "pure for his love" (5.1.78) Yet, when Antonio was arrested, the boy ignored him, refusing even to return the purse, which Antonio had lent him. Cesario is mystified. Orsino asks when the boy Antonio is talking about arrived in Illyria. Antonio replies that they arrived today, having spent the past three months together. As Olivia approaches, Orsino tells Antonio that he is mad, considering Cesario has been in Illyria for the past three months.

*The characters' use of indirect language like "ingrateful boy" draws attention to the fact that confusion about Viola/Cesario's and Sebastian's identities is reaching a climax. Antonio's description of his "pure love" for his master really is impressive. He hasn't just talked about his love, as all the other characters do, he has acted on it and shown his master nothing but devotion. Some critics argue that this extreme devotion can only be motivated by homoerotic desire on Antonio's part, but one can also see it is as offering a contrast to all the other loves on display in the play. Only Antonio's love is pure, honest, and completely out in the open.*



Olivia demands to know where Cesario has been. Has he broken his marriage promises to her already? Cesario is confused. Orsino, who now thinks that Cesario has wooed Olivia in secret, grows enraged. He tells Olivia he should kill her out of "savage jealousy" (5.1.113), or kill Cesario to spite Olivia, although he holds his page boy dear. Cesario replies that to give Orsino rest, he would die a thousand deaths: he loves Orsino more than he will ever love a wife. Horrified, Olivia fetches the priest who has just married her to Sebastian. The priest confirms that he has sealed an "eternal bond of love" (5.1.151) between Olivia and Cesario. Hearing this, Orsino storms off, disgusted, while Cesario struggles to stop him.

As Orsino is leaving, Sir Andrew enters, bleeding and calling for a surgeon. He accuses Cesario of injuring him. General puzzlement descends upon the group. Sir Toby, also bleeding, enters with Feste and joins in accusing Cesario. Olivia sends them away to have their injuries tended and demands to know who is actually responsible.

At this moment, Sebastian rushes in, apologizing to Olivia, begging her pardon for having hurt her kinsman. Everyone is astonished. Orsino exclaims that Sebastian and Cesario are identical: "one face, one voice, one habit, and two persons" (5.1.208). Antonio says, "an apple, cleft in two, is not more twin" (5.1.216), while Olivia exclaims that what they are seeing is like magic, "most wonderful" (5.1.217).

Through a series of questions, Sebastian and Viola identify each other and rejoice: they are reunited! Yet, Viola says to the confused onlookers, Sebastian should not embrace her until she has discarded the "masculine usurped attire" (5.1.241) that has been her costume, and proven who she is to everyone's satisfaction. To do this, she must return to the Captain who saved her from their shipwreck, knows her story, and has her old clothes.

Sebastian turns to Olivia to explain: all that time, she wanted to marry a woman. Orsino reassures Olivia, telling her that the twins have noble blood. He then turns to Viola and says that he often heard Cesario swear that he would never love a woman as he loves Orsino. Is it true? Viola affirms that it is. Then, Orsino continues, she should give him her hand and let him see her in her "woman's weeds" (5.1.265) or clothing. Viola replies that the Captain who brought her to shore from the shipwreck has her clothes. But he is currently tied up in some legal suit led by Malvolio, a servant of Olivia's...

*Orsino's rhetoric about his "jealousy," like many of his other speeches, is clichéd. He always seems to be playing a part, rather than feeling true emotions. In the escalating confusion, Viola/Cesario declares her thwarted desire for Orsino and love-melancholy more directly than ever before: both "rest" and "dying" are English Renaissance terms for sexual climax. The Priest, seeking to restore order, only adds to the chaos.*



*With Andrew and Toby's dramatic entry, the comic subplot of the servants returns, adding to the bewilderment about Cesario's identity. The Viola/Cesario disguise resides at the center of nearly all of the chaos in Twelfth Night.*



*Once Sebastian and Cesario are together, all the confusion that has been set in motion by Viola's disguise can be resolved. However, at first, many of the characters seem to think that they are hallucinating—the twins in front of them seem to have traded, or lost, identities.*



*Overjoyed to be reunited with the brother she loves, and out of mourning, Viola discards her class- and gender- disguise. But to dispel the madness that she has set in motion, she will require someone else to confirm her story independently.*



*Finally, all the confusion about gender and identity that Viola's disguise created starts to be tidied up. Yet Orsino's love seems almost ridiculously fickle, as he instantly changes its object from Olivia to Viola. In addition, just as Olivia seemed attracted to Cesario's womanly features, Orsino now is attracted to Viola not after she has appeared as Viola, but while she is still in the costume of the Cesario.*



Olivia instantly agrees to take care of this minor detail—which reminds her that, distracted by her own "frenzy," (5.1.273), she has completely forgotten about Malvolio. At this moment, Feste enters, holding Malvolio's letter. The letter warns Olivia that Malvolio will show the world how she wronged him: he still has the letter in which Olivia instructed him to adopt the costume and behavior for which all the others have called him mad. Olivia remarks that the letter does not sound like it was written by someone crazy. She sends Fabian to fetch Malvolio from the cell where he has been imprisoned.

Waiting for them to return, Olivia asks Orsino to think of her as a sister and offers to host a wedding feast for all four of them. Orsino accepts. He releases her from his service and from the persona of Cesario.

Malvolio enters with Fabian. Fuming, he presents Olivia with Maria's trick letter. After a quick examination, Olivia replies that the handwriting is Maria's, and she realizes that Maria and the others must have pulled a prank on Malvolio. Although Olivia initially promises Malvolio that she will let him punish the guilty parties, Fabian defends himself, as well as Sir Toby and Maria—who, he reports, have just been married. He convinces Olivia that, all in all, the whole thing was a good joke, not to be taken too seriously. Feste interjects that it was he who played Sir Topas. Enraged, Malvolio declares that he will revenge himself on everyone present, and storms off-stage. Orsino sends Fabian to try to appease him, because they still need news from Viola's loyal Captain.

Orsino says that when the Captain has given his account, he and Viola and Olivia and Sebastian will be properly married. Aside, he adds that as long as Viola is still dressed as Cesario, he will call her "Cesario" and think of her as a man, but that once he has seen her in her "other habits" (5.1.376) she will be his mistress and the queen of his love. All exit.

After the others have departed, Feste remains alone on stage, singing a melancholy song about growing old that ends with the gloomy refrain: "The rain it raineth every day" (5.1.381).

*Olivia's reference to her own "frenzy"—a word for both madness and sexual desire—and the parallel between Malvolio's letter and the love letters that have preceded it, reinforce the theme of how close love can be to madness. The confusion caused by the servants' deception, is about to be clarified, like that caused by Viola's costume has been.*



*It seems that all confusions and conflict have been tidied up.*



*Now the servants' comic subplot is fully resolved. Yet Malvolio never gets any sort of revenge or even much sympathy for the prank he has had to endure. Instead, he gets only humiliation. The fact that he walks offstage furious, while everyone else is celebrating shows how love can be cruel, despite the happy ending worked out here.*



*In the moment of resolution, the homoerotic aspect of Orsino's attraction is particularly present: he affirms that he still thinks of Viola as a pageboy, besides using the more conventional metaphors of master and mistress.*



*This melancholy ending, like Malvolio's departure, shows that despite the temporary happy ending for the lovers, life is still full of sadness and death. That the play ends with its "lowest" character on stage is appropriate to the inversion of hierarchy associated with the real Twelfth Night festival. It also reminds the audience of the parallels between the workings of the play and the deceptions and performances it contains.*





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To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Weigel, Moira. "Twelfth Night." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 22 Jul 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

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Weigel, Moira. "Twelfth Night." LitCharts LLC, July 22, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/twelfth-night>.

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Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Simon & Schuster. 2004.

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Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2004.