

# Twelfth night



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Discuss the role of the explicitly comic characters - Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Feste, and Maria. What function do they serve in the play? How is each one different from the others? What effect does it have on your appreciation for their role in the play? *Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare, explores themes of love and mistaken identity through a witty and comedic story. Some supporting characters - Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Feste, and Maria - seem at first to be explicitly comical characters, added to the story only for their additions to the funny scenes and witty dialogue of the play.

Their scheming and fooling embodies the *Twelfth Night* season, a topsy-turvy festival of mayhem. However, these four characters play a much greater role. They make much of the confusion that creates the humour of the play. They drive the sub-plots of the play, and at times the main plot. They are all a fool in their own different ways, and it is this difference that makes each one better appreciated as an individually important character. Sir Toby Belch is the first of the comic characters introduced.

He is Olivia's uncle, and a jovial drunkard who embodies the *Twelfth Night* season of topsy-turvy mayhem. " Confine [myself]? I'll confine myself no finer than I am. " (I. iii. 9) Sir Toby refuses to change his attitude or behaviour. He is happy simply having a good time. He acts as an opposite to Malvolio; bringing an air of fun and laughter to Olivia's court. Unlike almost every other character in the play, Sir Toby engages in no melancholy love-seeking. He is in love with Maria, and eventually marries her, but does not engage in the languishing of other characters.

He does not change his behaviour to try and attract love, but stays the same character from beginning to end. This jolly attitude means that Sir Toby's role is better appreciated as a Twelfth Night role. The maintaining of his spirit throughout the play embodies the Twelfth Night season, and makes the tricks played on Malvolio seem more playful than they may actually be. Sir Andrew Aguecheek is almost the complete opposite of his friend Sir Toby. While Sir Toby is short, fat and jolly, Sir Andrew is tall, thin, and sober.

He is the stereotypical fool of the play. He believes himself to be witty, athletic, and handsome, and when others see through this, as Maria does in her description; " he's a fool, he's a great quarreller; and but that he hath the gift of a coward to allay the gust he hath in quarrelling," (I. iii. 26-30) he tells himself they must be wrong. He is led on by Sir Toby, blindly following his plans to try and gain Olivia's love. His unknowing foolishness brings a contrast to the play between the mild fooling of other characters and his true foolery.

His role is mostly that of a pawn of other characters, like Sir Toby and Maria, and he is used to push the plot onwards by following their plans. None of these plans bode well for Sir Andrew, and his unhappy situation at the end of the play, lacking money and love, brings a strain of sadness to the foolery of the story. His quote, " I was adored once too," (II. iii, 164) indicates that he may be hiding some sadness in his past, as well. This contrasts with the happy endings that all other characters except Malvolio and Antonio reach.

It makes his mistreatment seem more serious, after its treatment as light-hearted trickery through the rest of the story. His true foolery compared to other characters lets the audience better contrast what makes a real fool. He

drives the plot forwards at times, but without the oblivious foolishness of his character, the audience could not as well see who the real fools of Twelfth Night are. Maria completes the trio of tricksters. As the one who conceives the plot against Malvolio, Maria acts as the almost behind-the-scenes director of the trickery.

She prefers to use other characters to do her work for her. " I will plant you two, and let the fool make a third, where [Malvolio] shall find the letter. (II. iii. 156-7) She makes her biggest plan for the other three, removing herself from the actual event. Maria is the one who comes up with all the clever plans, and while she's there to see them enacted, she doesn't take part in the action. Her character has a level of tact and subtlety that the other, more boisterous comic characters do not have.

She still embodies the Twelfth Night season, with her trickery, but in a different way to the others. Maria is seen by audiences as a cleverer schemer due to her taking herself out of the direct action. Despite being a professional fool, Feste is the least foolish of the four comical characters. His status as a fool allows him to speak freely about the other characters under the guise of foolishness, and his comments are amongst the wisest in the play. " The more fool, [Olivia], to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven. " (I. v. 3-4)

He questions why Olivia is mourning her dead brother, when she is certain that he is at peace in heaven. Feste does not engage in the foolish behaviour of the other trio. He comments on what has happened, and sometimes even predicts what is going to happen. When he is present for the action, he watches without impacting. Feste has a lack of emotional involvement that

no other character displays, all the more unusual in a play so focused on love. This makes his role as a commentator all the more appreciated by the audience, as he provides an unbiased view of the story and its characters.

The varying personalities and roles of the four seemingly explicitly comic characters make each character's contributions to the plot more interesting. The four different types of foolishness displayed by Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Maria, and Feste, all lead to different consequences for the characters. As a group, they embody the chaotic Twelfth Night festival, but they also all play separate roles in driving the story forwards. Their differences allow them to all be appreciated as individual and important characters.