

Shakespeare's twelfth night, or what you will: saturnalia, or just sad?

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Topic: One theatre critic has said of Twelfth Night: "...the key question seems to me how much one regards it as a festive piece of saturnalia, written for a very specific occasion, and how much as a dark comedy about impermanence and pain." What is your response to this question? George S. Kaufman duly notes that, "The trouble with Shakespeare is that you never get to sit down unless you're a king" (Epstein, 2). Similarly, one can also feel exhausted after attempting to discern whether Shakespeare's play, Twelfth Night, or What You Will is more a festive piece of saturnalia, or more a dark comedy about impermanence and pain. It can of course be argued that this play is a romantic comedy written for a specific occasion. However, a closer examination of the role of the songs, the absurd ending, and the character of Malvolio leads one to see the darker elements of this "comedy," and conclude that Shakespeare's Twelfth Night is actually intended to be more tragic, and not simply comedic. The songs play a vital role in creating a somber effect throughout the play. A melancholy tone is created immediately at the onset of the play as Orsino is listening to music. He aptly describes his state of distress when he states: If music be the food of love, play on, Give me excess of it, that surfeiting, The appetite may sicken, and so die. That strain again! It had a dying fall; O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound That breathes upon a bank of violets, Stealing and giving odour! Enough, no more! 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before. (Twelfth Night, 1. 1)

Although Orsino's comments can be interpreted as a way of satirizing the extreme yet almost mechanical emotions exhibited in courtly love, they nonetheless depict the tragic nature of the play. For instance, the reader can especially observe the theme of emotional pain during the fourth scene

when Feste sings the following song: Come away, come away death, And is sad cypress let me be laid. Fly away, fly away, breath; I am slain by a fair cruel maid. My shroud of white, stuck all with yew, O, prepare it! My part of death, no one so true Did share it (TN, 4. 2) The song suggests love is both misery and mortality. Appropriately, the song is preceded by an intimate dialogue between Orsino and Cesario, during which Cesario must "kill" Viola's sexual frustrations. The motif of misery is further exemplified in Feste's song at the end of the play. He sings about the wind and rain, a song that could seem like a trivial and ridiculous song at a superficial level. However, this last song plays the very crucial function of bringing the audience out of the world of Illyria and back into the reality of an ending holiday season. Hence the songs in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night are placed at strategic points in the play, such as the beginning, ending and around intimate dialogues in order to stress the melancholic elements of the play throughout. Conversely, it could easily be argued that Twelfth Night is a festive piece of saturnalia. This is made especially apparent in the "double dramatic irony" presented in the play (Belsey). For instance, the audience is uncertain about which romantic pairs will form at the end of the play, thereby adding to the suspenseful and comedic effect of the play. Furthermore, the romantic pairs that do form at the end of the play do so in such a simplistic manner that it would be difficult to suggest that the playwright intended the audience to take a play with such an impulsive ending seriously. For example, Sebastian marries Olivia upon minutes of meeting her. Similarly, Orsino proposes to Cesario while she is still in her male disguise, thereby contributing to the light-hearted ambiance of the

play. Likewise, the subtitle of the play, *What You Will*, further suggests the carefree nature of the play, where everyone “will” do as they desire, especially in their romantic lives. For example, the characters of the play fall in love with whoever appeals to them, without any regard for class or gender. In fact, the Italian word for “will” is “volio,” a word that constantly appears throughout the play in the form of anagrams in the characters’ names (Belsey). Hence, the emphasis on “will,” and moreover, “free will” is continually highlighted in the play. In fact, Shakespeare composes his work *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* for a holiday season, so it is easy to assume that the play is intended to be a merry comedy. Although it would be easy to mistake Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* as a comic piece of saturnalia written for a specific holiday, it is essential to examine the context in which the play is first presented. Shakespeare premiered his *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* to a smaller audience as opposed to a larger audience in the Globe theater. An entirely comical play would have been inappropriate for such an intimate audience (Auden, 153). According to literary critic W. H. Auden: ...at the time Shakespeare wrote the play, he seems to have been averse to pleasantness. The comic convention in which the play is set prevents him from giving direct expression to this mood, but the mood keeps disturbing, even spoiling, the comic feeling. One has a sense, and nowhere more strongly than in the songs, of there being inverted commas around the “fun.” The plays that followed *Twelfth Night* are the tragedies, as well as *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well That Ends Well*, which are considered his dark comedies. (Auden, 152) In assessing the social context of the play, we are given additional insight into its true melancholic

nature. Analyzing simply the dramatic irony and subtitle of the play could lead one to falsely conclude that Twelfth Night is only a romantic comedy. In essence, the play is about both “ love and grief, their pains and their pleasures and how these emotions are often indistinguishable” (Epstein, 135, emphasis added). The greatest example of the melancholy nature of Twelfth Night is evident in the absurd ending. It can be seen as comic when Sebastian agrees to marry Olivia without hesitation upon minutes of meeting her, and that Orsino proposes to Cesario, not Viola. However, there is an extremely unsettling element to this ending that prevents the audience from leaving the play with untainted exuberance. For instance, the individuals of the romantic pairs that form at the end of the play exhibit compromise. That is, Olivia, Viola, Orsino and to some extent Sebastian, do not obtain partners they truly desire. For example, although Olivia is truly in love with Cesario, she must settle for marrying Sebastian as his body is that of a male, unlike his disguised sister. However, it is important to note that it is precisely his disguised sister who Olivia sincerely adores, that is, Olivia loves Cesario for more than just “ his” body, but for his mannerisms as well. Of course, Cesario’s personality is undoubtedly comprised of Viola’s feminine traits, and therefore, it would be unfulfilling for Olivia to marry Sebastian. Likewise, it is also crucial to note that Orsino falls in love with Cesario, and not Viola. Although he proposes to Cesario, he must actually marry Viola in order to conform to the social conventions of his time. It could be assumed that Orsino exhibits homosexual tendencies, as is demonstrated by his extreme performance of the courtly lover to Olivia. He professes his undying love for Olivia continually, yet falls out of love with her almost instantaneously. He

ironically describes in his dialogue with Cesario that: There is no woman's sides Can bide the beating of so strong a passion As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart So big, to hold so much... Make no compare Between that love a woman can bear me And that I owe Olivia. (TN, 2. 4) We can infer from Orsino's remarks and behaviour that he is not just impulsive, but perhaps also a homosexual, for he expresses that only men are capable of loving passionately and later goes on to propose to Cesario. Of course, the character who makes one of the greatest compromises in love is Viola, for she marries a man who does not love the woman in her, but her male form of Cesario. Even Sebastian must abandon his loyal companion Antonio in order to earn a place in the chaotic Illyria. When Antonio is left isolated without his love Sebastian at the end of the play it creates a lasting impression of the pain enmeshed with love. Shakespeare's Twelfth Night certainly emphasizes the impermanence and pain of love, as is most evident in the "not-so happy" ending of the play. In addition to the seclusion of Antonio at the end of the play, the depiction of Malvolio at the end also leaves an unsettling feeling of impending doom with the audience. Moreover, it is not only the unjust treatment of Malvolio at the end of the play, but rather, his entire character throughout the play that dampens the merriment of this supposed comedy. Malvolio is a member of the rising mercantile class, and therefore not a member of the elite aristocratic class of people surrounding him. He is even reminded of his mediocre status by the lewd Sir Toby, who asks Malvolio, "Art any more than a steward?" (TN, 2. 1). Malvolio's desperate attempts to rise in status lead to an uptight and arrogant disposition that elicits scorn from his acquaintances, and ultimately

results in his demise. As the practical joke against Malvolio goes to an extreme and he is artificially deemed insane, the viewer may be tempted to lament for a character who is so far obsessed with the appearance of his virtue that he does in a way become insane over the idea of gaining greater influence. Though Malvolio's thirst for power can be largely attributed to his egotism, one can feel sympathy for him when considering that this thirst stems from his insecurity over belonging to a mediocre class. Most importantly, the audience is left with a very bitter ending with Malvolio's final cry of "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" (TN, 5. 1). As critic David Jones describes, this exclamation "casts an even longer shadow over the play as it is going to have its answer forty years down the line when the Puritans come to power in England and every theatre in London is shut down" (Epstein, 137). Thus, Malvolio only heightens the emphasis on impermanence and pain in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, or What You Will is a chaotic play infused with elements of sadness that are thinly blanketed by comedic pleasantries. The melancholy aspects are mostly exhibited through the songs in the play, the absurd ending and the character of Malvolio. Shakespeare often employs gender reversal in his plays in order to stress that "All the world is a stage" and we are all merely playing roles, ones that can be easily disguised and reversed. However, I believe that in Twelfth Night his goal with gender reversal is more profound because he suggests that we are not only actors in the drama of life, but we also play the roles that society demands of us. That is, we must suppress our innate desires in order to conform to externally set standards, and ultimately, it is when we deny ourselves our true passions that

insecurities develop and lead to our misery and downfall. We see this depressing effect too clearly in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, when the major characters must settle for less than what they desire in marriage partners, and most especially with the tormented Malvolio. Thus, it is difficult to classify this play as simply saturnalia, as it should be more appropriately deemed as a dark comedy about impermanence and pain.

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