

Chaos and order in twelfth night



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The only reference to Twelfth Night during Shakespeare's own lifetime is to a performance on February 2, 1602. A law student named John Manningham wrote in his diary about a feast he attended at the Middle Temple in London where he was a law student and where " we had a play called Twelfth Night; Or, What You Will. " This was likely to have been an early performance since it is generally agreed that the play was probably written in 1601. In 1954 Sir Leslie Hotson's book, *The First Night of Twelfth Night*, sought to identify the exact date of the first performance of Twelfth Night.

He used the evidence of old records to suggest that Queen Elizabeth asked for a new play for the last night of the Christmas 1600-01 season, the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6, and that Shakespeare wrote Twelfth Night accordingly. Among other evidence for this conclusion cited by Hotson is the information that during this period Queen Elizabeth was entertaining at court one Don Virginio Orsino, the Duke of Bracciano, who supposedly gave his name to the chief male character in the play. Hotson's conclusion is that this play was written specifically for this occasion – hence the title.

Whether or not this was indeed the case, and the play did in fact gain its primary title from the date of its first performance, has continued to be a source of disagreement for critics, directors, and actors, some of whom, like Samuel Pepys, agree that the play is " not at all related to the name of that day. " The title is therefore not necessarily helpful in ascribing time, or even place to Twelfth Night. It has been variously presented onstage at any time of the year from the deepest and bleakest English midwinter to the height of " midsummer madness" on a Greek island.

I would like to address two issues: firstly, what kind of relationship the play has with its title, and secondly, where, or rather what, Illyria is. The festival of Twelfth Night is the Roman Saturnalia, the Feast of Fools. There can be little doubt that the license that marked this occasion had its origin in very ancient pagan customs. As Christianity spread across Europe, the church subsumed the old pagan festivals and replaced them with celebrations of religious significance. However the old traditions took centuries to die out, and the feast of the Epiphany on January 6 retained a Saturnalian flavour for many centuries.

Even superficially, it is quite clear that Twelfth Night echoes this religious and cultural “ compromise” by highlighting notions of order and chaos: the order of accepted religious and social morals, and the chaos of pagan Saturnalian licence. It is certainly possible from Leslie Hotson’s extensive research that the play was indeed performed on this date, but I suggest that the title has more to do with the atmosphere surrounding the play than the actual date of the original performance.

Unlike Samuel Pepys, I cannot contend that the play has nothing to do with the feast – indeed I will argue that the festival of Twelfth Night and the traditions surrounding it are central to both the sustaining mood of the play as well as its final outcomes. The world of Twelfth Night is often seen to be a utopia of “ Olde Englande,” where the old traditions are given free reign and where that elusive “ happy ever after” quality can be achieved.

Yet there are disquieting elements in Illyria that in many ways reflect the situation in early seventeenth century England. Despite the exotic and

distant sound of its name, Illyria is in fact a peculiarly English setting and the play is sprinkled liberally with references to the social life and customs of Jacobean England: Antonio and Sebastian lodge at the Elephant (probably an inn south of the Thames in London); Fabian is in trouble with Olivia for a “bear-baiting,” Sir Andrew is a “great eater of beef” (I. iii. 1); Sir Toby talks heartily of beagles, staniels and bumbailies; and we hear variously of spinsters, tinkers, tosspots, peascods, bawcocks and woodcocks. The disquieting element comes with the revelation that despite Sir Toby’s freedom to drink and make merry, despite Malvolio’s strict adherence to puritanical doctrine and despite Orsino’s romantic inclinations not one of them is truly happy; in fact nobody in Illyria is happy. Society cannot function normally because the extremes of social and religious life depicted by Sir Toby Belch and Malvolio cannot co-exist.

The cause of the underlying despondency is the way in which Illyrian society works in reverse to social norms. This reversal is linked closely with the festivities of Twelfth Night. The central idea of Twelfth Night was derived from the old notion behind Saturnalia: a brief social revolution or period of “misrule” in which power, dignity, or impunity is reversed upon those ordinarily in a subordinate position so that masters become servants and servants become masters.

A mock figure known as the “Carnival King” or “Boy-Bishop” was elected to head the festivities; a figure echoed in Twelfth Night both by Sir Toby Belch, who becomes a kind of “carnival king” upholding the feasting, revelry and license of the festival period, and by Feste who impersonates a clergyman in his attempts to “re-educate” Malvolio into his “right” mind. When

challenged about his drinking by Maria; “ Ay but you must confine yourself within the limits of order,” Sir Toby retorts, “ Confine!

I’ll confine myself no finer than I am. ” In the true style of Saturnalia, Sir Toby overturns all norms. He almost literally turns night into day through his apparently continuous drinking: “ Cousin, cousin, how have you come so early by this lethargy” (I. v. 102), and is cheerfully unrepentant of his behaviour: “ I’ll go burn some sack; ‘ tis too late to go to bed now” (II. iii. 159-60). He presides over the mock duel between Viola and Sir Andrew, and he finally rejects the social norms of his class to marry a waiting maid.

However in Shakespeare’s day, the ruling Church of England was not only attempting to retain control over the excesses of festivals such as Twelfth Night, but also endeavouring to temper a compromise between the rival factions of Rome and Geneva; in other words, to mitigate the abstemiousness of the Puritans. The “ Roman” faction favoured observance of the old saints’ days (also called “ holy days” or “ holidays”), which, as we have seen, retained elements of the old pagan rituals, whilst the Puritans frowned on festivities of all kinds.

Sir Toby’s response to Malvolio’s puritanical admonishments in the “ midnight revels” scene: “ Dost thou think that, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale? ” (II. iii. 114-15), is essentially a rejoinder to the sobriety of the Puritans. If Toby’s drunkenness and unconventional behaviour are purely Saturnalian, Shakespeare also shows the diametrically opposite excesses at Olivia’s house: her mourning for her

dead brother verges on self-confinement in a nunnery and her steward's objections to all merry-making voice the confines of Puritanism.

Both the main plot and the sub-plot of Twelfth Night strongly echo the idea of Saturnalian "misrule," as Warren and Wells identify in the Oxford edition of the play: ...in the main plot, the Duke Orsino is educated out of his aberrant state of love-melancholy by his servant, who then becomes her "master's mistress;" in the sub-plot, Olivia's steward aspires to become his mistress's master. Social boundaries are crossed and re-crossed as the characters undergo transformations in class distinctions, appearance and gender.

These transgressions of the norm cause varying degrees of chaos that can only be eventually restored to order through the appearance of both twins onstage together, providing a visual sense of order that resolves the chaos created by their separation. Orsino, Olivia, Sir Toby, Malvolio, and implicitly, Maria's love interests lead them across the divisions of the social classes defined in the play, just in the way that social codes were reversed during the period of Twelfth Night.

The crossing of gender norms and gender boundaries is constantly examined through the actions of the main characters. Viola and Sebastian, fraternal twins, are mistaken for each other because they wear the same clothing. In the true spirit of carnival, the audience becomes complicit in the element of misrule as they suspend their disbelief to "see" these fraternal twins as identical beings. Similarly, we are asked to believe in, and recognize love at

first sight. Viola's transvestism is also emblematic of the antic nature of festival.

Cross-dressing was a feature of Twelfth Night revels, and gives Viola not only the appearance of a male, but the privileges and power of masculinity. In this way, by reversing her own notions of social and romantic normality, Viola becomes the servant in charge of her master, the woman in charge of a man, and leads Illyrian society towards a normal hierarchy. At the beginning of the play, Orsino declares his passionate love for Olivia, who is probably his social equal and therefore an appropriate marriage partner, although Sir Toby interestingly tells Sir Andrew that will “not match above her degree” (I. ii. 102-3). His affection for her is soon perceived by the audience as merely self-indulgent and during the course of the play, we are led to assume, becomes focused instead on his page, the disguised Viola. The comic confusion of this situation is given greater effect through the reversal in the master-servant relationship as Viola-Cesario. By the end of the play Orsino accepts as his “fancy's queen” this young woman who only five minutes before functioned as his male page, underscoring the opal-like quality of his affections.

Olivia, who has spurned the sight of men rejects the love of her social equal Orsino and instead embraces a complete stranger, the Duke's page, as a worthy partner. It is interesting that in doing so, she also rejects the conventional forms of wooing as she takes the initiative both in appearance and in fact; much as Viola does on Orsino's behalf. She eventually marries Sebastian whom we gather is not of her class, but his blood is “right noble” (V. i. 258), making the marriage socially acceptable.

Sir Toby too, rejects social expectation and eventually marries his niece's waiting-woman, Maria, rather than a woman of his own class. Maria provides an interesting parallel with Malvolio in that she, like Malvolio, seeks a liaison outside her social class. The difference is that unlike Malvolio, she is able to see the necessity of both excess and restraint. She is therefore rewarded for her clever schemes by being allowed to rise through the social hierarchy as she becomes the wife of a knight.

Of all the characters however, it is Malvolio who gains nothing from the play's resolutions. Malvolio's very name, Italian for "ill-will" sets him up in opposition to the other characters. His social status is quite clearly defined – he is the steward of Olivia's household, a figure who, in the Elizabethan period was a highly trained and often well-educated person with responsibility for the running of a large house and estate. Malvolio, however, has developed a greater sense of his own importance. He is, as Maria points out, "a kind of puritan" (II. iii. 30), and the humour of the "box-tree" scene and his appearance in yellow stockings "derives from the incongruity between his puritanical rectitude and the context in which he finds himself...". The Puritan faction was a crucial part of Shakespearean society, providing a threat to both the social and religious traditions of generations. Forty years after Twelfth Night was written, the Civil War saw them running the country; a fact that critics often claim the play very accurately foreshows in Malvolio's somewhat disconcerting exit line, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you" (V. . 368). It is certainly tempting to read the play as a call for moderation in the changing society of the early seventeenth century. Whilst Maria's description suggests that Malvolio only adopts a puritanical

demeanour when it suits him, it does not adequately explain that it is his unbending attitude towards his fellow human beings that means that eventually, he cannot be redeemed from himself. Being the puritan in the general Illyrian atmosphere of license and revelry allows him to create a sense of dignity and authority.

What he forgets, and what Sir Toby reminds him of so abruptly in the “midnight revels” scene, that he is, in truth, no more than a steward. Malvolio’s crime, and the one for which he undergoes punishment, not only in the dark house but also by leaving the impending wedding festivities without allowing himself to be reconciled to the other inhabitants, is that he refuses to acknowledge a balance between the extremes of his existence and that of Sir Toby. Taking Malvolio and Sir Toby as the opposite ends of the Illyrian spectrum gives us a personified image of the Saturnalian spirits of chaos and order.

Sir Toby represents not only the advocate of perpetual festivity, but through it, the chaotic aspects of Illyria. For Illyria, whilst a place of magic and enchantment, is also a place of lurking dangers inspired by carnival revelry and reversals of normal behaviour. There is a wild and uncontrolled element that lurks beneath the apparent festivity and jollity of the surroundings. Illyria is, in the language of the play, a world “gone mad.” No-one, not even the sanctimonious Malvolio is exempt from the influences of Illyrian magic and its carnivalesque reversals of normality and acceptability.

It is a world pervaded by the non-conformist spirit of carnival that allows aristocrats to fall in love with servants, servants with their masters, and

where stewards are able to entertain absurd delusions of grandeur. Disguise, mistaken identity, and gender reversals combine to provide a deliberate and provoking reversal of sixteenth century English social norms. Notions of madness and sanity are frequently invoked to provide a counterpoint to the normality of life outside the play, a fact we are reminded of by Feste, when he sings of the “ wind and the rain” in his final song.

It is not in fact a “ real” place at all. Geographically, Shakespeare used the name for an area on the Adriatic coast, but in terms of the play, it exists only as a hypothetical parallel universe inhabited by drunkards and zealots. Into this peculiar melting pot of puritan extremism and festive license arrives Viola, a heroine who brings with her the power for a restorative balance to the wild swings of mood, temperament, and behaviour inherent in Illyrian society.

If Sir Toby represents the archaic “ carnival king,” and Malvolio the unbending proponent of puritanical abstinence, then Viola can be seen to approximate the reverse: the voice of reason and renewal. Sir Toby upholds chaos, Malvolio maintains rigid adherence to unrealistic self-denial, and Viola is eventually the mechanism for normality and order. Viola’s arrival suggests an influence from the external world – our world, the world of the audience – where festivity is confined within proper boundaries, and an apposite balance of ravity is achieved: nothing occurs in excess. What we see therefore is that Twelfth Night refers not to the time of year at which the events in the play take place, nor perhaps even the time at which it was first performed. Twelfth Night is not about the end of the Christmas festivity period when the decorations come down and “ normal” life is resumed, it is <https://assignbuster.com/chaos-and-order-in-twelfth-night/>

instead a picture of the chaos and order created by extremism at both ends of the spectrum.

By association, the place in which the play is set is not geographically representative of any actual place, but of a hypothetical state in which the norms and order of everyday life are absent, and the chaos of excess runs unchecked. The opposing elements of liberalism and Puritanism espoused by the chief characters of the play, and the way in which the multi-plots of Twelfth Night rely heavily on the elements inherent in the historical festivities of Twelfth Night show that the title has much more to do with the pervading “ anything goes” spirit of festival; the “ What You Will” of the subtitle.