



SANTA CRUZ SHAKESPEARE EDUCATION PROGRAM

TWELFTH NIGHT

Twelfth Night, or *What You Will* is a romantic comedy that uses gender and performance to engage audiences with questions about the nature of love and desire. The contradictions between how characters present themselves and who they really are generate both comedy and pathos in one of Shakespeare's most popular plays. Below, you will find resources to examine this play with your students.

Misrule & Folly



This play is full of antics, revelry, and lovestruck characters. What happens when you let emotions rule your life? Have there been times when you got so carried away by love, anger, or another emotion that it disrupted your life? What happened? Is there ever a time when letting our emotions overtake our reason is a good thing?

Think about these questions and your experiences as you read these excerpts:

[Misrule & Folly](#), excerpt from Alabama Shakespeare Festival Study Guide

[Merriment & Sobriety](#), excerpt from Seattle Shakespeare Company Study Guide

Embody The Text

One of the most memorable scenes of *Twelfth Night* is when Malvolio confesses his love for Olivia in his bright yellow stockings. This next lesson from the Royal Shakespeare Company will engage your students with this most

entertaining moment in the play, and the scene leading up to Malvolio's declaration of love - when he finds the love letter he is set up to believe is written by Olivia herself. Working in groups, students will perform a bit of Act 2 Scene



5, all the while thinking about staging the scene and comedic timing. Students will also use the text in Act 3 Scene 4 to create freeze frame images of Malvolio showing off his yellow stockings to Olivia, Olivia receiving the message that Cesario had just arrived, and the servants in Olivia's household reacting to Malvolio's new wardrobe choices.

Lesson Link: [Malvolio's Madness](#)

An Unfulfilling Ending?

Could the ending of *Twelfth Night* be considered unfulfilling? What are your thoughts on how the play ends? Do you think all characters are happily in love with their chosen partner? Has everyone found a resolution in their mishaps and trickeries? Below, have your students



read about some other theater companies' ideas on this play's ending and have a discussion on whether or not this play leaves you feeling resolved.

In Seattle Shakespeare Festival's *Twelfth Night* Study Guide they write, "At the end of Shakespeare's comedies, there is always a wedding and a celebration. The central couples have declared their love, all obstacles have been overcome and the audiences are treated to a happy ending. But even with this, Shakespeare had a tendency to leave the endings somewhat messy, as life often is . . . In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare gives us one of his messier endings in one of his

most celebrated comedies.

The most obvious character who ends the play unhappy is Malvolio. By the end of the play, he has become humiliated and hurt by the deception foisted on him by Toby Belch and Maria . . . If one looks deeper at the core relationships in the play, it does leave more questions. For example, does Orsino love Viola? Their relationship has been built on deception. He has only known her as Cesario, not Viola. He really does not know who she is as a woman. Viola and Orsino have shared their souls and feelings with each other, but all of this happened while Viola was in disguise. Will they truly be happy? Shakespeare doesn't give an answer one way or the other. The same can be said of Olivia and Sebastian. Sebastian is not his sister, in men's clothes or not. Olivia believes he is Cesario and marries him under that belief, which Sebastian goes along with. How long will these relationships last? Shakespeare does not give us an indication of what will happen after the curtain falls."

The Royal Shakespeare Company states, "As always with Shakespeare's comedies the audience are left to wonder what might happen next for the love matches: Viola and Orsino; Olivia and Sebastian; Sir Toby and Maria. How happily ever after do you think each pair will be? How much sympathy do you have for those characters who are left out: Malvolio, Sir Andrew, Antonio?"

The Philadelphia Shakespeare Theater's Study Guide claims, "The comedies Shakespeare wrote after *Twelfth Night* have come to be known as "problem plays" because they stretch the comic genre until it breaks. *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* have endings that feel forced and unearned, the villains are too real, the hurts too serious for an easy fix. At the end of his career Shakespeare pushed the genre so far beyond its norms that now we call plays like *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* romances instead of comedies. And *Twelfth Night* is the tipping point between the two styles."



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