

Introduction to Shakespeare

A Brief Biography of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 to John and Mary Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His birthday is celebrated on April 23. This is memorable because April 23 is also the day Shakespeare died in 1616.

Shakespeare was the eldest of nine children in his family, six of whom survived to adulthood.

William Shakespeare's father worked with leather and became a successful merchant early in his career. He held some relatively important government offices. However, when William was in his early teens, his father's financial position began to slide due to growing debt. After many years, John Shakespeare's fortunes and respect were restored, but records indicate that the years of debt and lawsuits were very stressful.

Historians assume that young Will went to school and took a rigorous course of study including Latin, history, and biblical study. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was three months pregnant. Studies of Elizabethan family life indicate that Anne's situation was not unusual since it was accepted that the engagement period was as legally binding as the marriage. The couple had a daughter, Susanna, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. Not much is known about Shakespeare during the next seven years, but his name is listed as an actor in London by 1592. This was a difficult time for the theater because measures to prevent the spread of the plague regularly closed the theaters.

Between 1594 and 1595, Shakespeare joined the Chamberlain's Men as a playwright and actor. The acting company featured actor Richard Burbage, and they were a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. During this time, Shakespeare was writing such plays as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even though Shakespeare was enjoying great success by the time he was 32, it was dampened by the death of his son, Hamnet, in 1596. Soon after, Shakespeare refocused on his home in Stratford where he bought an estate called New Place, with gardens, orchards, and barns in addition to the main home. He still maintained a home in London near the theater.

In 1599, Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It*. The Globe Playhouse was up and running, with Shakespeare a 10 percent owner. This means that he was able to earn 10 percent of any show's profits. This business position helped him solidify his wealth.

In 1603, Shakespeare's reputation earned his acting troop the sponsorship of James I, who requested one play performance per month. Their name changed to the King's Men. By this time, Shakespeare had written and performed in almost all of his comedies and histories. He was proclaimed the finest playwright in London.

But Shakespeare still had what is considered his finest writing to do. He began his writing of tragedies beginning with Hamlet in 1600. In the following five years, Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear. Why Shakespeare turned to these darker, more serious themes is widely debated by scholars. But all agree that these plays established Shakespeare's premier place in English literature.

Toward the end of 1609 through 1610, Shakespeare began to write his problem romances. These works, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*, are rich with mature themes of forgiveness, grace, and redemption.

After 1611, at the age of 47, Shakespeare moved back to Stratford exclusively, settling into life at New Place and enjoying a renewed relationship with his daughters, especially Susanna. He prepared a will, which has become famous for the request to leave his wife their "second best bed." Many have debated whether this is a sentimental or cynical bequest. In the same year that his daughter Judith married, 1616, Shakespeare died at the age of 52. However, it was not until 1623 that all his plays were collected into one manuscript, now referred to as the First Folio. The fellow King's Men players who compiled the manuscript, Heming and Condell, entitled it *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*.

Shakespeare's England

The age of Shakespeare was a glorious time for England. William Shakespeare's life in England was defined by the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603). During her leadership, England became an important naval and economic force in Europe and beyond.

England's rise to power came when its navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, when Shakespeare was about 24 years old. Queen Elizabeth was skillful in navigating through the conflicts of religion. She maintained religious independence from Rome as the Church of England became firmly rooted during her reign. Additionally, she financed the establishment of colonies in America to grow the British Empire and expand its economic opportunities. At the end of her reign, England was the leader in trade, naval power, and culture.

Because of its role as the main economic, political, and cultural center of England, London became the hub of England's prosperity and fame. If anyone wanted to become famous as a poet or dramatic writer during Shakespeare's time, he would need to be in London. In fact, London was full of great writers besides Shakespeare, such as Marlowe, Sidney, and Jonson. Yet, even as London was full of parties, trade, and amusement, it was also full of poverty, crime, and disease. Crime was a large problem, and the main jail in London was called the Clink. Disease and poor sanitation were common. In fact, twice in Shakespeare's lifetime, London endured an outbreak of the plague, which killed thousands upon thousands of people.

Introduction to the Play

Background to *Twelfth Night*

The title, *Twelfth Night*, is most likely a reference to the celebration of the Feast of Epiphany, which occurs the twelfth night after Christmas, on January 6. In the Christian church, the Epiphany is the final night of the celebration of Christmas. On this night, the celebration centers on the Three Wise Men who journey to find Jesus and present to him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. However, in Shakespeare's era, this religious celebration was also part of a cultural tradition. In the same way, the Easter Bunny is a cultural tradition during Easter, which is a religious celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

When Shakespeare was writing his play, the Feast of Epiphany or *Twelfth Night* was celebrated in secular society as the Feast of Fools. This celebration involved a reversal of roles between people in authority and their subordinates. Everyday rules and procedures were changed or abandoned. The Feast of Fools was a great time of partying and joking, and people who were tired of taking orders from their superiors could be in charge and play pranks, or "punk," others. This celebration of role reversal, and the drinking and playing that accompanied it (instead of quiet, work, and sobriety), is very important to the action of this play.

The second part of the play's title, *What You Will*, is a wonderful play on the name of the author, William Shakespeare. In addition, it indicates that the play is not a religious pageant but is open to interpretation. It is as if Shakespeare says with deep seriousness, "Here is *Twelfth Night*." And then immediately he changes his tone in a light, flippant way to say, "Or, whatever. . . ." The second part of the title also helps us understand the play, because it is defined by mistaken identities, gender switches, love at first sight, and pranks, as well as loyalty, reunion of siblings, and marriage.

The plot of the play is similar to an Italian play called *Gl'Ingannati*. In that play, a brother and sister are parted by a twist of fate, but they eventually find each other. The sister disguises herself as a male page at the court of a count. The count asks his page to be his ambassador to a disdainful woman, who falls in love with the sister dressed as the page. Eventually the brother arrives on the scene, and the woman transfers her affection to the brother. However, Shakespeare takes this basic plot outline and fills it out with great language, humor, and memorable characters.

Another key component of the play is mistaken affection. Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, is mistaken in his love for Olivia. Olivia, a rich countess, is mistaken in her love for Viola, who is disguised as Orsino's page. Malvolio, a steward of Olivia, is mistaken when he assumes that Olivia is in love with him. Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a friend to Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle, is also mistaken in thinking that Olivia would consider him a worthy suitor. The only character who is not mistaken is Viola, who declares her love for Orsino to the audience early. It is her loyalty

that wins over his heart at the end of the play. The joy of *Twelfth Night* is to see how all these reversals are made right by the conclusion.

To Shakespeare's audience, the plot device of a shipwreck in the ocean near a remote land helps give a fairy-tale distance to the story. The name of the country, Illyria, suggests illusion or delirium. However, in Shakespeare's era, Illyria did exist as a small country located on the east coast of the Adriatic Sea, where Yugoslavia is located today.

Because of the great themes, memorable characters, and wonderful fun of this play, it is one of the most popular and most produced of Shakespeare's works.

Synopsis of *Twelfth Night*

Act one, Scene 1

Orsino enters his court, accompanied by lords and musicians. He asks the musicians to play music to help him forget his love sickness. They play for a little while, but Orsino tells them to stop because his love cannot be drowned out by their music. Curio asks Orsino if he is going hunting, and he replies that he does hunt, but it is Olivia and not a deer that he is hunting.

Valentine enters and reports that Olivia will not allow herself to have a suitor until she has mourned her brother's death for seven years. Orsino is impressed with her devotion to her brother and says that because her capacity for love is so intense, her love for a suitor will be even more amazing.

Act one, Scene 2

Viola is on the seacoast of Illyria with a Captain and other sailors. Viola is sad that she has survived a recent shipwreck, but her brother seems to have perished. The Captain tells her to hope that since she survived the shipwreck, maybe her brother did as well.

Viola asks about the place where they have landed, and the Captain explains that Illyria is governed by Orsino. Orsino is in love with Olivia, who is mourning the loss of her father and her brother, and therefore will not be wooed by any man.

Viola does not want to be identified until she can discover what her position in the world will be. She asks the Captain to lend her some boy's clothes so that she can serve the duke as a page. The Captain agrees to help Viola with her disguise.

Act one, Scene 3

At Olivia's house, Maria, Olivia's maid, tells Sir Toby that he must reduce his drinking and partying with Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Sir Andrew enters and misunderstands Sir Toby's command to accost, or greet, Maria. Sir Andrew and Maria speak, and Maria hints that she thinks Sir Andrew is a fool. After Maria leaves, Sir Andrew admits to Sir Toby that Maria won the

battle of wits, and he blames his lack of wit on the amount of beef that he eats. Sir Andrew wants to leave the next day, but Sir Toby convinces him to stay in order for Sir Andrew to win the hand of Olivia. Sir Andrew agrees to stay, commenting on what a superb dancer he is.

Act one, Scene 4

In Orsino's court, Valentine remarks at how much favor the Count Orsino has shown Viola, now dressed as a page and known as Cesario. Orsino enters and commands Viola to go to Olivia and declare Orsino's love to her. Viola protests that Olivia will not listen to a young page, but Orsino compliments Viola's lips and voice and says that Olivia will most certainly be willing to listen to the message. Orsino promises that he will reward Viola for good service. In an aside to the audience, Viola admits it is difficult to woo for Orsino because she is in love with him herself.

Act one, Scene 5

Maria jokes with Feste the clown about where Feste has been. Olivia, Malvolio, and some servants enter. Olivia is upset with Feste for his absence. He tries to earn her favor by witty puns and jests, telling Olivia she must think that her brother is in hell because she is still mourning him. Therefore, she is the fool, not he. Olivia appreciates his wit, and remarks to Malvolio that Feste seems to be improving. Malvolio, however, is unimpressed.

Maria enters and reports that a young man is at the gate who wishes to speak to Olivia. Olivia sends Maria and Malvolio to get rid of the visitor. Sir Toby enters, obviously drunk, and Olivia is dismayed at his condition. She sends Feste to look after her uncle.

Malvolio reenters, reporting that the young man at the gate will not leave until he can speak with Olivia. She decides to meet with him, and puts a veil over her face.

Viola, dressed as a page, makes sure that Olivia is really the person she seeks, because she doesn't want to waste her speech. Olivia tells Viola to skip the poetry and get right to the point. Viola asks to see Olivia's face, and Olivia takes off her veil. Viola says that Olivia is selfish because she will leave no copy of herself, meaning a child. Olivia retorts that she will leave a copy by sending out a list of her itemized features.

Viola repeats that her master, Orsino, loves Olivia with great passion. Olivia appreciates Orsino's nobility, but she cannot be persuaded to love him. Viola says she cannot understand how Olivia can reject such a strong passion. Olivia instructs Viola to tell Orsino not to contact her anymore—unless he sends Viola.

After Viola leaves, Olivia confesses that she is attracted to the young page. She calls Malvolio in and gives him a ring to "return" to Viola, asking him to come tomorrow to hear why she rejects Orsino's love.

Act two, Scene 1

In the countryside of Illyria, Viola's brother Sebastian tells Antonio that he is grateful to him for saving his life by rescuing him from the sea. At the same time, he expresses grief that his twin sister, Viola, has drowned in the same shipwreck that he endured. He wishes to head to Orsino's court alone. Antonio would go with Sebastian, but he has too many enemies in Orsino's court.

Act two, Scene 2

Malvolio finds Viola and throws the ring at her, telling her that Olivia wishes to return the ring to Orsino. After Malvolio leaves, Viola speaks in a soliloquy in which she realizes that Olivia has a crush on her. She sees the hopelessness of Olivia's infatuation, because she is a girl. Also, she is in a love triangle because she loves her master, her master loves Olivia, and Olivia is in love with her. She tells Time to unravel this complicated knot, because she cannot do anything to help the situation. Act two, Scene 3 In Olivia's house, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are up late drinking. They congratulate themselves on their self-control, because they are actually up early. Feste enters and joins the merriment. When Toby and Andrew pay him, Feste sings a song of love. The song is about living and loving for today, because tomorrow is uncertain. They all decide to sing, "Hold thy peace, thou knave." They all joke that they will now be calling one another a knave, and singing out when they are saying, "Be quiet."

Maria enters and tells the three revelers to quiet down because they will awaken Olivia, and she will send Malvolio to deal with them. Malvolio enters and tells Sir Andrew, Sir Toby, and Feste that they must be crazy to be acting this way. Malvolio tells them that unless they stop being so wild, they will have to bid farewell to Olivia's home. This prompts Sir Toby and Feste to sing a humorous farewell song, and they then tell Malvolio to mind his own business. He leaves, telling Maria that she should not condone their uncivilized behavior.

Sir Andrew wants to challenge Malvolio to a duel, but Maria says she has a better plan to get back at Malvolio. She tells them that Malvolio is so prideful that he thinks everyone loves him. To play on this weakness, she will write a love letter to Malvolio that he will think comes from Olivia. Then, Malvolio will act foolishly, because he will falsely assume that Olivia is in love with him. Sir Andrew likes this idea and thinks that he has a chance to win Olivia for himself. Since it is now too late to go to bed, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew go off to drink some more.

Act two, Scene 4

Back at Orsino's court, Duke Orsino enters with Viola, Curio, and others of the court. Orsino asks to hear a special love song that was sung by Feste the clown. Curio goes to find Feste, and the musicians play Feste's tune. Orsino approaches Viola and asks her about love. Viola comments that she does love someone who looks like the Duke and is about the Duke's age. Orsino tells Viola that someone his age is too old for her.

Feste enters and sings the love song at the Duke's request. It is a very sad song about a man who dies from being rejected in love by a "fair cruel maid."

After Feste leaves, Orsino tells Viola to return to Olivia and declare his love for her again. Viola asks the Duke what he will do if Olivia will not love him back. She argues that, if another woman were in love with him, he would have to reject her, and she would have to accept it. Orsino rejects Viola's argument on the basis that a man's love for a woman is much stronger and more abiding than a woman's love for a man.

Viola responds that a woman can be as strongly in love as a man and tells him of "her sister," who had a strong love for someone like the Duke, but she never told him of her love (she is, of course, talking about herself). Viola concludes that it is women who are strongest in love. Orsino then asks her to go to Olivia's house and bring her a jewel to show his love.

Act two, Scene 5

In Olivia's garden, Sir Toby, Fabian, and Sir Andrew hide so that they can watch Malvolio find the letter written by Maria. She has written the love letter so that Malvolio will think it is from Olivia. Malvolio enters, and he muses aloud about how delightful it would be to be married to Olivia and be Count Malvolio. His words infuriate the three who are in hiding. They almost lose their temper completely when Malvolio imagines that he can tell Sir Toby and Sir Andrew to mend their ways and stay away from alcohol. Malvolio then spies the letter and begins to read it aloud. Maria has left many obvious hints in the letter that it is from Olivia and that it declares her love for Malvolio. She asks him to be mean to the people in her house, to be informal with her, to smile all the time, and to wear yellow stockings that are cross gartered.

Malvolio is thrilled with the letter and vows to do everything requested of him. When he leaves, Fabian, Sir Toby, and Sir Andrew come out of hiding. Maria enters and states that Malvolio is now going to act in every possible way to irritate and annoy Olivia. They all congratulate Maria on her great wit.

Act three, Scene 1

Viola meets Feste in Olivia's garden. They exchange words about the honesty of language, Viola's lack of a beard, and begging. Viola gives Feste two coins. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew enter and greet Viola. Olivia and Maria also enter. Olivia wants to speak only to Viola, and the others leave.

Olivia tells Viola that she is in love with her, thinking, of course, that Viola is a young man named Cesario. Viola tells Olivia that she cannot return her love and so must leave, never to return. Olivia invites Viola to come again to talk about Orsino as a way to see Viola again.

Act three, Scene 2

Sir Andrew complains to Sir Toby that Olivia likes Orsino's servingman, Cesario, more than she likes him. Sir Toby concocts a story that Olivia showed favor to Cesario just to make Sir Andrew jealous. He encourages Sir Andrew to challenge Cesario to a duel to show his bravery to Olivia.

Sir Andrew agrees to write the letter of challenge and leaves. Fabian and Sir Toby enjoy this contest since both Sir Andrew and Cesario are so meek. Maria enters and reports that Malvolio is now smiling constantly as he wears his yellow stockings with cross garters.

Act three, Scene 3

Sebastian and Antonio talk on a street in Illyria. Sebastian thanks Antonio for his loyalty and support and suggests that they tour the town. Antonio refuses because he is a wanted man in Illyria and does not want to risk being caught. Antonio gives Sebastian his purse in case he wants to buy anything and goes ahead to the Elephant Inn, in the suburbs, to order dinner and wait for Sebastian.

Act three, Scene 4

In Olivia's garden, Maria warns Olivia that Malvolio is acting very strangely. Olivia is hoping that a visit with Malvolio, who is usually prim and proper, will suit her melancholy spirits and distract her from thinking about Cesario. Malvolio enters and makes many references to the letter he received, which Olivia finds very confusing. Dressed in yellow stockings that are criss-crossed with garters, he looks ridiculous. And instead of his usual civility, he is smiling wildly and showing improper boldness. Olivia is informed that Cesario has returned. As Olivia leaves, she instructs a servant to have Sir Toby look after Malvolio. Olivia does this out of concern for Malvolio's sanity, but Malvolio mistakenly assumes that this treatment shows her favor to him. Sir Toby, Fabian, and Maria enter and treat Malvolio as if he is possessed by a demon. After Malvolio leaves in a huff, the three plan to put him in a dark room, which was a common way to deal with madness in Shakespeare's time.

Sir Andrew enters and reads his challenge letter aloud. The letter comes close to challenging Cesario, but it is extremely silly. Sir Toby promises to give it to Cesario, and Sir Andrew exits. Sir Toby says he will not deliver the letter because it would not scare Cesario. Instead, he will frighten Cesario (Viola) by saying Sir Andrew, a skillful and furious dueler, is looking for a fight. Then, when they confront each other, they will both be so afraid that neither will harm the other.

Olivia gives Viola a locket to show her love, but Viola protests that Olivia's love should be given to her master Orsino. Olivia tells Viola to come again tomorrow.

Sir Toby and Fabian tell Viola that Sir Andrew is furious, and that Viola should be very careful because Sir Toby is a dangerous man. Viola is upset, confessing, "I am no fighter."

Sir Toby then tells Sir Andrew that the young man is a very skilled fighter. Sir Andrew is afraid and wishes to withdraw from fighting. However, in order to enjoy the joke, Fabian and Sir Toby insist that both must fight each other.

Just as Viola and Sir Andrew are about to fight, Antonio enters and begins to defend Viola, thinking the young page is his friend Sebastian. The disturbance brings Illyrian officers to the scene, who immediately arrest Antonio. Antonio asks Viola for his money, but she denies ever receiving any money from him. Antonio speaks to Viola, calling her Sebastian and shaming her for denying him in his time of need. The officers exit with Antonio, but Viola stands amazed by the exchange and hopeful that perhaps her brother is still alive.

Feeling stronger now than Viola, Sir Andrew vows to continue his fight against the young page.

Act four, Scene 1

Feste sees Sebastian near Olivia's house. He assumes that Sebastian is Viola and asks if he is coming to see Olivia. Sebastian denies knowing Feste or Olivia, and he gives him some money to make him go away. Sir Andrew enters with Sir Toby and Fabian, and he resumes the fight with Sebastian, also assuming he is Viola. Sir Andrew begins to beat Sebastian with the hilt of his dagger, and Sir Toby tries to restrain Sebastian. Angry and astonished, Sebastian breaks free and draws his sword to fight in earnest. Sir Toby also draws his sword.

In the nick of time, Olivia enters and calls on Sir Toby to stop. She orders everyone out of her sight but Sebastian. She apologizes for their behavior and invites Sebastian into her house. Sebastian cannot believe what is happening, but he agrees to go with Olivia because he is very attracted to her.

Act four, Scene 2

Maria brings clothes to Feste to have him dress like a priest. Feste goes to the dark room where Malvolio is being kept and tells him that he is not in a dark room but in a room full of windows and light. He then tells Malvolio that he cannot be freed until he believes in reincarnation. All of this disturbs Malvolio even further. Feste returns to Malvolio, speaking in his natural voice as well as the voice of the "priest," Sir Topas. Speaking as the priest, Feste tells Malvolio that he is crazy, which Malvolio denies. Speaking in his own voice, Feste agrees to help Malvolio by bringing him pen and paper so he can explain his situation to Olivia.

Act four, Scene 3

Sebastian is in Olivia's garden. He cannot believe that Olivia can act as though she knows him and is in love with him without her being crazy. But, because he is attracted to her, he is willing to suspend his doubts and go along with her wishes.

Olivia enters with a genuine priest and asks Sebastian to go with her to the church where he will marry her. Then, when the time is right, they can have a lavish wedding ceremony. He agrees, and they go to the church, led by the priest.

Act five, Scene 1

Standing before Olivia's house, Fabian, Feste, Viola, Curio, Orsino, and some of Orsino's attendants meet up, and Feste uses his wit to earn three coins from Orsino. Antonio is brought forward to Orsino for punishment for past crimes. Antonio tells Orsino that he never would have come to Illyria except that he was helping defend his friend, pointing to Viola.

He states that they have been inseparable since they landed on the island.

Orsino tells Antonio that Viola has been with him for the past three months. When Olivia enters, Orsino expresses his anger with her for refusing his love. To pay her back, he threatens to kill Cesario. Olivia says that Cesario has betrayed her love and calls Cesario (Viola) her husband. To prove it, the priest verifies that he has joined Olivia and Cesario together. Orsino tells Viola never to cross his path again.

Sir Andrew enters and reports that Cesario has fought with him and Sir Toby and injured them, which Viola denies. Sir Toby enters with Feste, and everyone sees how drunk Sir Toby is and that he has indeed been injured.

Sebastian enters and apologizes to Olivia for fighting with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew. Then Sebastian and Viola see each other, and each is amazed that the other is alive. Viola wants to prove her identity by showing her woman's clothes from the shipwreck. Orsino realizes from previous conversations that Viola deeply loves him.

They then remember that Malvolio is imprisoned, and they read aloud his letter of protest. Olivia asks for Malvolio to be brought to them. While they wait, Orsino asks Viola to marry him, and Olivia calls her sister.

Malvolio enters with the letter written by Maria, and he uses it to blame Olivia for his behavior. Olivia tells him that Maria was most likely the author. Fabian and Feste admit to the plot to fool Malvolio. Malvolio leaves, promising revenge. Orsino tells everyone that they will work out a peaceful settlement with Malvolio. Everyone leaves except for Feste, who sings a song and announces that the play is over.

Source: Shakespeare Made Easy

For objective type test on Shakespeare *Twelfth Night*, join Google Classroom using class code: bld23gw