

*Four essays by students in Patrick Baliani's Calderwood Seminar in Public Writing
Honors College, University of Arizona*

**1. *Twelfth Night* Program Notes
by Erin Broas and Nicholas Owen**

English playwright Ben Jonson famously described Shakespeare as, “not of an age, but for all time.” *Twelfth Night*, a classic comedy that puts gendered performances on display, is emblematic of the timeless and universal nature of Shakespeare's work. Much like the holiday it is named after, the play is an exploration of a world in which social orders are upended and reversed. Shakespeare's classic devices of deception and disguise blur the lines between genders and sexualities and encourage viewers to question whether such lines truly exist.

Written around 1601, *Twelfth Night* predates our contemporary notions of gender. The sex binary—the idea that gender is dichotomous, masculine versus feminine—is a startlingly recent invention. Beginning in the 19th century, our “modern” institutions established an understanding of gender in terms of anatomy; they convinced us that physical differences between males and females drastically separate our minds, our abilities, and our behaviors. Understanding of gender in the Renaissance was comparatively more fluid, placing greater emphasis on our actions and behaviors rather than our anatomy. Shakespeare's Viola—whose feminine physique and perspective bolstered rather than inhibited her performance as a male page—reflects the historic Renaissance notion (and the rising progressive notion) that gender is defined by the way we choose to present ourselves, and that it exists on a spectrum. Olivia, a parallel to Viola, also challenges stereotypical femininity by occupying a position of power that is contextually masculine. Head of her household and beholden to no man, Olivia subverts the traditional roles of men and women in courtship; she functions as the assertive pursuer in love rather than the powerless pursued. These characters reveal that gender is multiplicitous, not dichotomous, and more dynamic than anatomy would suggest.

The Renaissance construction of gender as fluid also applies to sexuality, similarly contrasting with its modern definition. The heteronormative world is relatively new, with the term ‘heterosexuality’ first appearing in the mainstream in 1930. Before then, as articulated in “The Invention of Heterosexuality”, sexual fluidity was viewed as a “rather unremarkable aspect of human possibility” (Katz). In this thinking, Olivia, Orsino, and Antonio's attraction to Viola and Sebastian requires no explanation, no pigeonholing into a gendered category of love. The alternate title given to *Twelfth Night*—*What You Will*—positions their desires and passions as outside the bounds of gender, driven more by self-generated behaviors and feelings. Shakespeare's own sexuality falls into this ambiguous, unlabeled norm, with language of sexuality in his sonnets addressed to men and women alike. *Twelfth Night* dexterously juxtaposes the fluid perceptions of sexuality of the Renaissance with the socially constructed heteronormativity of today.

Through the muddled portrayals of gender and sexuality in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the ability to transcend social divides takes center stage. The play pushes the boundaries of a gender binary and heteronormativity that did not exist in the time of its conception, suggesting that Shakespeare may not necessarily have been ahead of his time but is in some ways ahead of our supposedly modern thinking.

2. *Twelfth Night* Program Notes **by Daisy O’Sullivan and Mireya Borgen**

Take a moment to picture a world free from the governance of gender stereotypes that suppress true expression of human love and sexuality. *Twelfth Night* shows you that world.

The cross dressing of the protagonist, Viola, and the expressiveness of the language from characters such as Feste, Maria, and Malvolio strip away disguises that typically allow queer love and raw eroticism to exist unnoticed on the classical stage. Viola claims “they that dally nicely with words quickly make them wanton.” Masters of language can slip innuendos into their words without losing poeticism, a gift epitomized by Shakespeare. His creative, unrelenting verbal play brings explicit sexuality to the forefront of *Twelfth Night*. Cross dressing and double entendres are used as powerful dramatic and comedic devices that in tandem illustrate a world that transcends gender stereotypes and sexual limitations.

Viola disguises herself as a man, and names her male self Cesario. Cesario serves Duke Orsino, who declares that Cesario “is semblative a woman’s part.” Perhaps Orsino notices her “buttery-bar,” and therefore expresses a desire for Cesario. Is he subconsciously aware that Cesario, whom he believes to be a man, is a woman? Or is his attraction to Cesario rooted in a belief that Cesario is a man, albeit an effeminate one? Eventually, as Viola sheds her traditional female garb, Shakespeare stages a coup against the tyrant that is societal expectation and replaces her with a state ruled by carnal desire and romantic attraction.

Olivia expresses a similar desire. Cesario is sent to Olivia by the Duke to, as Sir Toby Belch might say, “front her, board her, woo her, [and] assail her” in the Duke’s name. Olivia, however, is immediately captivated by Cesario. Olivia’s attraction to Cesario instead of Orsino, a man of much higher status and greater wealth, raises the following question: Is Olivia attracted to Cesario because she is beguiled by his masculine presentation or because she is drawn to his femininity? Orsino notices quickly that Cesario resembles a woman. Should the audience accept that Olivia was truly oblivious to Cesario’s feminine qualities? Could Olivia believe that Cesario might be “well hanged” as Feste might joke?

Twelfth Night may not give explicit answers to the questions it forces one to think of, but the ambiguity behind Shakespeare’s language allows one to sink into the play’s imaginary world. Shakespeare crafted a story that urges one to reflect on gender stereotypes, expectations, eroticism, and sexually charged language all while enjoying the comedy brought forth by cross dressing and entertaining innuendos.

3. *Twelfth Night* Program Notes by Ethan Snapp and Isabella Anghel

When Cleopatra asks Mark Antony how much he loves her, he responds by saying, “There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned.” While *Twelfth Night* is a decidedly different play than Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony’s point remains universal; love that can be fully explained or quantified is cheap. Rather than asking how much someone can love another, *Twelfth Night* instead asks why we love them. Is there also beggary in the love that cannot be reckoned?

Shakespeare penned *Twelfth Night* in 1601 and it was first performed for Queen Elizabeth’s court in 1602 to mark the end of the Christmas season (and bid farewell to the familiarly-named Italian Duke of Orsino). The play’s name refers to the twelve days of Christmas, ending with the Christian holiday, Epiphany. The festive setting of *Twelfth Night* lends itself to a classical literary style coined by Bakhtin called the Carnavalesque. In this style, disparities between characters are diminished which allows anyone, regardless of class or gender, to have similar agency. Shakespeare plays upon the Carnavalesque by mingling characters from upper and lower classes, highlighting that love is not determined by social constructs but instead is an uncontrollable and inexplicable attraction towards someone. The chaotic love triangles within the play subvert classical expectations of masculine-feminine pairings, and the corresponding eccentricity serves as comedy. The attraction of characters with opposite personalities and backgrounds highlights the Carnavalesque: a world where anything is possible.

Viola disguises herself for the majority of the play, a common facet of Carnavalesque literature. Viola’s male persona, Cesario, demonstrates how quickly people become infatuated with something new. How is it that Viola woos Olivia with just one honeyed conversation despite all of Orsino’s earlier attempts? Her monologues as Cesario are clearly superficial, yet Olivia is hungry for more. Not only are Viola’s words exaggerated, but her identity is fabricated. Still, Olivia is smitten by Viola’s facade; Cesario is something new, something exciting. Conversely, Orsino falls in love with Viola after he understands her affection towards him. He responds to Viola’s identity reveal by saying, “I shall have share in this most happy wreck. Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times Thou never shouldst love woman like to me.” Orsino’s words focus on Viola’s love for him, less so his love for her. There is something unexplainable about Viola’s magnetism, and both Orsino and Olivia fall for her without any sense of “reckoning.” Is this love authentic? Should love require a ‘why?’

Can we confidently say why any of the play’s romantic leads fall for each other so quickly? They may muse about each other’s beauty or character but ultimately their love remains superficial. Their love is not necessarily logical—but does it have to be? See which character you fall in love with during the performance: then ask yourself the same question.

It may be best to echo Orsino’s words while considering *Twelfth Night*: “If music be the food of love, play on.” Leave the ‘reckoning’ for later.

4. *Twelfth Night* Program Notes by Gaby Gubka and Z Nava

Reality exists to be challenged. When facing the illusion of another's exterior, it is only natural to wonder, *what is below the surface?* While stories with a plethora of characters often achieve clarity by keeping their identities relatively static, the faces of *Twelfth Night* are intricately layered and change in relation to each other. *Twelfth Night* is uncommonly realistic. As in the real world, the Shakespearean characters surpass their circumstance — be it gender, class, or sexuality — and challenge some norm.

The central character, Viola, most actively subverts expectations in terms of the Elizabethan era she was born from. The qualities she takes on to become Cesario break social convention and surpass the assumed immutable traits of women. Viola shows the audience that these traits *are* mutable, however, and to varying degrees, as her more masculine self attracts the attention of both Olivia and Orsino. Olivia, who thinks she is falling in love with a man, happens to have set her sights on a woman. Orsino, who finds himself drawn to a man, is open-ended; is he attracted to Cesario's femininity or masculinity, or both? Perhaps it does not matter, and the play is clear in saying that gender does not determine sexuality. Despite any level of femininity or masculinity, there is a piece of Viola at her core that surpasses gender and exists in both her and Cesario, and it is arguably this piece that attracts men and women alike to her.

Twelfth Night champions that gender is learned, and class is too. Feste, the fool, jests Olivia for a living — a seemingly meager role. However, Feste quickly proves to the audience that he is highly intelligent, making us naturally wonder, “Does intelligence really determine class status?” After meeting the drunk Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, it becomes clear that it does not. Feste says it himself: “Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit.” Society would have it that two men worthy of a title demanding respect would surpass Feste in terms of cunning and wit, though Sir Toby and Sir Andrew lack both and exist as the real fools in the story. In another sense, just as one cast as Viola must be pliable in becoming both Viola and Cesario, the cast imagines themselves as dukes and servants, roles that are socially quite different than their non-diegetic ones. Like gender, social class is not inherent in the characters as much as within us; we are malleable.

The play exposes identity as an illusion; while we may fulfill our roles in society, the reality of identity lies at the pit of the person. The subtitle of *Twelfth Night*, or “What you will,” is our modern-day “whatever.” It's undemanding, respectfully reminding the audience that perhaps all that we've witnessed — the gender and class dysphoria — doesn't matter. Perhaps Olivia loves a woman, perhaps she doesn't. If identity is an illusion, what does it matter? Think of identity, and the world, what you will, the play offers.