

# ENG1DB Twelfth Night Play Unit: Examining the Article “Revels, Folly and Madness” by Robert Blacker



- Please read the article entitled, “Revels, Folly and Madness” by Robert Blacker and respond to the knowledge questions provided in short answers (only one to a few words are required).

1. During what holiday does Twelfth Night traditionally occur?
2. Is the play literally set during Twelfth Night? Why or why not?
3. Who plays the role of the “Lord of Misrule” in the play?
4. Who is Sir Toby's nemesis in the play?
5. What darker concepts underlie the presence of silly revelry and excess in the play?
6. What are two reoccurring motifs in the play?
7. What words are repeated throughout the play?
8. What does Feste's character remind the audience/readers of through his words and actions?

9. What character remains outside of the newly established order at the end of the play?

10. What is the significance of Feste's melancholy song at the end of the play?

# Revels, Folly and Madness

by Robert Blacker

BELOW: FROM LEFT, BRIAN DENNEHY (SIR TOBY BELCH), BEN CARLSON (FESTE) AND STEPHEN OUIMETTE (SIR ANDREW AGUECHEEK) WITH MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY IN REHEARSAL. FACING PAGE, FROM TOP | CARA RICKETTS (MARIA); STEPHEN OUIMETTE, DIRECTOR DES McANUFF; SARA TOPHAM (OLIVIA) FOLLOWING PAGE | TOM ROONEY (MALVOLIO), MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY, BRIAN DENNEHY. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIN SAMUELL.



In *Twelfth Night*, a drunken Sir Toby reminds us of the twelve days of Christmas when he misquotes the old song, which begins, "On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me. . . ." *Twelfth Night* was the last day of the Christmas holidays; the next day people went back to work.

In his earlier comedies Shakespeare sends his lovers into the woods – the forests of *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example – where they discover their true selves. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola and Sebastian set foot on equally magical ground, a holiday state of the mind called Illyria, where parents and affairs of the state do not exist and everyone is beset and infected by love.

Although Shakespeare does not literally set his play during *Twelfth Night*, the spirit of holiday revelry and holiday excess pervades the play.

The atmosphere of overindulgence is established right at the beginning, where the lovesick Duke speaks his famous lines:

If music be the food of love, play on,  
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die.

In the holiday revels Shakespeare would have witnessed as a child, a Lord of Misrule was selected to indulge the excess. Mardi Gras is a remnant of

those traditions that is still with us today. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare evokes the Lord of Misrule in the figure of Sir Toby Belch. Like Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Sir Toby is an unemployed knight and he must depend on the largess of his wealthy niece. To quote Ralph Berry, "he has rank and nothing else, hence his addiction to spectator sports, conversation, drinking and practical jokes. . . . His is the classic *ennui* of the unemployed." Sir Toby's nemesis is Malvolio, and their opposition reflects a profound change in Elizabethan society.

Sir Toby is a remnant of an England that under Elizabeth I moved from its medieval past into the modern world. That world, with its emerging middle class and work ethic, has no place for a knight-errant *bon vivant*, who has no function in this new society. For his part, Malvolio is a model of cool, upwardly mobile efficiency that is still with us today. He may be foolish, but he is no fool. As Steward, he has charge of Olivia's household. Whether Malvolio is a true Puritan or merely a "time-pleaser" as Maria calls him – someone who is religious because it is fashionable – he and Sir Toby are natural enemies in a changing social order.

Toby rages when Malvolio tries to put an end to a late-night binge with his companions: "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" Their volcanic confrontation sets off much of the action of the play. What makes the scene so memorable and so utterly Shakespearean in its complexity is the intimation that the excess we see here and elsewhere in the play masks the loneliness underneath.

Indeed, melancholy runs underneath the entirety of this sparkling comedy. Shakespeare's earlier love comedies may present us with a man who remains single, notably Jaques in *As You Like It*, but four bachelors remain alone at the end of *Twelfth Night*. For their part, the three couples who are to be married are examples of movement up and down the social ladder. Shakespeare shows us a cross-section of Elizabethan society at a time when there was unprecedented social mobility in England, and it is the potential couplings that are closest in class – Orsino/Olivia or Olivia/Aguecheek – that are thwarted.

In good holiday tradition, the Lord of Misrule must be overthrown before we return to the serious world of work. And so Sir Toby is beaten by Sebastian, who everyone believes is Cesario, a name derived from Caesar. The emergence of





this new king is another layer of the play's title, for Twelfth Night, January 6, is also the Feast of the Epiphany, when the new king was revealed to the three Wise Men.

Wisdom and folly in love are recurring motifs in the play, and Feste, the professional fool, reminds us that the truly wise man admits that he is a fool. He is another example of the changing Elizabethan world. In an earlier time, he would have been attached solely to one household, as Touchstone is in *As You Like It*. Although Feste lives in Olivia's house, he also seems to freelance, working for both Olivia and the Duke, and he must constantly ask for money.

Feste also reminds us that words can be twisted to mean their opposite. And deception in all its forms runs rampant through Illyria, as the lovers of the play must indulge their individual follies to excess before they learn the lessons of love. *Mad* and *madness* are also recurring words in *Twelfth Night*, and from its half-way point through to the end, its love-sick characters ask if they are mad indeed.

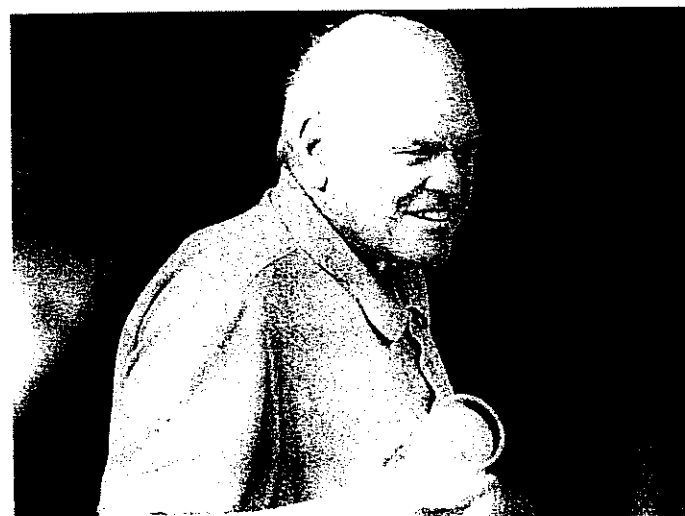
Only Malvolio refuses to admit that he is, and only he remains outside the new social order that is established at the play's end. His parting shot, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you," however, reminds us that he will not remain low on the social ladder for very long. Forty years after Shakespeare wrote *Twelfth Night*, the Puritans, under Cromwell, would overthrow the British monarchy – and close the theatres.

*Twelfth Night* is the last party of the Christmas season, and *Twelfth Night* is a farewell to an England that is now on the brink of the Queen's death. The word *carnival* means farewell to things of the flesh. Feste ends the play with a song that begins:

When that I was and a little tiny boy,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
A foolish thing was but a toy,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

That melancholy song goes on to list work and love among the foolish things of the world of adults, where the constant wind and rain are alleviated only by fleeting entertainments such as the glorious one Shakespeare gives us here.

*Robert Blacker is Dramaturge for the Stratford Shakespeare Festival.*



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