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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare, widely regarded as the greatest poet and playwright who ever lived, wrote his plays in England some four hundred years ago. And yet today in the United States, more theaters put on plays by Shakespeare than by any other playwright. Why? Because of the stories Shakespeare tells, the characters he imagines, and his magnificent way with words—some of the most beautiful, profound, and sometimes hilarious words you will ever hear.

Shakespeare’s plays are loved around the world, even by people whose language is not English. His plays have been translated into many other languages—Spanish, Japanese, Russian, and many more.

Shakespeare wrote at least thirty-seven plays. He sometimes acted in them himself. In his lifetime, Shakespeare’s plays were enjoyed by people from all walks of life—from butchers and blacksmiths and shopkeepers to Queen Elizabeth herself.
Shakespeare wrote many kinds of plays, including histories, tragedies, and comedies. Perhaps you know one of his best-loved comedies, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which tells of the romantic mix-ups that take place when mere mortals find themselves in a mischievous, magical fairyland.

Most of Shakespeare’s comedies are filled with love and laughter. *Twelfth Night*—generally considered Shakespeare’s final and greatest comedy—offers many occasions for laughter. Yet there is a current of sadness running through the play as well. If laughter is sunshine, then *Twelfth Night* shines brightly while also showing that “the rain it raineth every day”—so sings Feste, a jester or “fool” who, in his foolery, speaks much wisdom.

A sense of loss haunts the play’s early scenes. Olivia, a young noblewoman, has recently lost her father, and soon after that her brother dies. Elsewhere, a brother and sister, Sebastian and Viola—twins who look so much alike that they can be mistaken for each other—are separated in a shipwreck, each thinking the other drowned. (Shakespeare himself had twins—a boy, Hamnet,
and a girl, Judith—though Hamnet died when he was only eleven.)

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola, the central character of the play, is cast ashore in a strange land, where she resolves to create a new life for herself. She decides to disguise herself as a boy—more about this in a moment. In her new identity as Cesario, she quickly becomes a favored servant in the household of the lovesick Duke Orsino.

Orsino longs for the love of Lady Olivia. But Olivia, in grief over the death of her brother, has vowed to reject the company of men for many years. So the Duke sends Cesario (who we know is Viola in disguise) to try to persuade Lady Olivia to accept Orsino’s love. Viola does as the Duke asks, but with very mixed feelings, because she has herself fallen in love with Orsino. When Viola, as Cesario, visits Lady Olivia, she speaks so passionately that Olivia is jolted from her grief and falls head-over-heels in love with Cesario, not knowing that he is a she.

Male-female mix-ups are featured not only in *Twelfth Night* but also in some of Shakespeare’s earlier comedies (such as *The Comedy of Errors* and
As You Like It). In part, Shakespeare got the idea for such mix-ups from the older stories on which he based his plays. But in part he was playing with the dramatic potential of an unavoidable fact about theater in his time—in Elizabethan England, women could not be actors; only men and boys were allowed to act onstage.

So, back in Shakespeare’s day, if you were in the audience for a performance of Twelfth Night, you would see Viola—a female character—played by a young male actor, whose voice still remained somewhat high. Which means that, when Viola disguised herself as Cesario, you’d see a male actor playing a female character pretending to be a male character, who then became the object of affection for a female character played by a male actor.

Today, while you’re most likely to see a woman in the role of Viola, the play’s comic confusions remain a source of delight. They also prompt us to think about the qualities and behaviors we associate with masculinity and femininity, and to consider questions about the relationship between perception and gender. For example, what does it mean to “act like a man” or to be “girlish”?
How do social traditions and expectations shape our answers to those questions?

There are two major plot lines in *Twelfth Night*. One follows the romantic entanglements of Viola, Olivia, and Orsino. The other follows the fortunes of Malvolio, Lady Olivia’s vain and snobbish steward, a high-ranking servant who supervises the household. Malvolio dreams of rising in the social order. He values order and propriety, which places him at odds with Lady Olivia’s uncle, Sir Toby Belch, who prefers to live for pleasure and (as his name suggests) unfortunately finds too much pleasure in hard drinking. Maria, a personal servant to Lady Olivia, devises a plan to bring Malvolio down by tricking him into believing that Olivia loves him. While this trick leads to some of the funniest scenes in the play, it goes too far, quieting our laughter and complicating our feelings about the characters.

Sir Toby Belch, with his delight in drinking and reveling, most directly embodies the spirit of the play’s title. Twelfth Night is the holiday celebrated on the evening before January 6—the Twelfth Day of Christmas. (Perhaps you know the
song that begins, “On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me . . . ”). In England, Twelfth Night was not only a celebration of miracles, but also a time of wild, carnival-like partying. It was a topsy-turvy night—sometimes, servants and masters would briefly change places, or men might dress as women, and women as men. While the action of Shakespeare’s play doesn’t take place on the actual night of Twelfth Night, the anything-can-happen spirit of that holiday lives in the script.

The complete title of this comedy is *Twelfth Night, or, What You Will*. The words in the subtitle—“What you will”—can mean various things, such as, “As you wish,” or “Anything goes,” or even, “Sure, whatever.” Is the subtitle Shakespeare’s way of promising his audience that he’s giving them the kind of comedy he knows they will enjoy—“As you wish”? Or is he hinting at the fun and mischief to come—“Anything goes”? Or is he saying that if you don’t like the title or the play, that’s fine by him—“Sure, whatever”? The subtitle seems to be both having fun and making us think—which is pretty much what the entire play does so brilliantly well.
This book presents a shortened version of *Twelfth Night* that can be performed in under ninety minutes. While condensed, with some words changed and some lines moved, this version of *Twelfth Night* remains true to Shakespeare, generally using the original language. This book also provides helpful background information on Shakespeare’s theatre and poetry.

Shakespeare didn’t write his plays for silent reading from a book. He wrote them to be seen and heard. *Twelfth Night* will come to life when you gather with classmates, friends, or family members to read it aloud, or, even better, to act it out. You don’t need fancy costumes or special effects, just curiosity and imagination. And remember the advice of one of Shakespeare’s greatest characters, Hamlet, who says that you only need to “speak the speech” naturally, letting the words help you express the emotions.
A collection of Shakespeare’s plays, known as the First Folio, was published in 1623.