

TWELFTH NIGHT

Character Notes

VIOLA

A very likeable young woman of aristocratic parentage. She gets washed up alone on the shore of Illyria after a ship wreck. Determined to survive in a land she does not know, she disguises herself as a young man, and calls herself "Cesario", believing that as a man she has a better chance of surviving by herself. She finds work in Duke Orsino's court, and dotes upon him as his attendant. She finds herself falling in love with him. At the same time, Olivia (the woman that Duke Orsino is courting) falls in love with Cesario. Upset and confused, Viola's disguise prevents her from telling Orsino that she loves him, and from telling Olivia why she, as Cesario, cannot love her. She has no one to confide in and thus her conundrum becomes the central plot of the play.

ORSINO

A powerful Duke and a well known figure in the community of Illyria. Orsino has long been lovesick for the beautiful Lady Olivia. He finds himself becoming very fond of his young attendant Cesario (Viola) whose youth, handsome looks and character allure him. His attraction to Cesario adds some sexual ambiguity into his character. Orsino is somewhat self-centred – his language and expression of his feelings for Olivia are exaggerated, flamboyant and sometimes absurd. We get the idea that it is perhaps not so much Olivia that he is so in love with, but the glamorous and emotional idea of love and being in love.

OLIVIA

A wealthy, beautiful and noble Illyrian lady. She claims she will not marry for 7 years because she is mourning for her brother, who has recently died. It may be that she is just using this as an excuse not to marry Orsino or Sir Andrew Agucheek, who are both courting her. Olivia likes to exaggerate her emotions, believing she is in a state of deep misery. When Cesario (Viola) appears at her house, his boyish good looks and amicable character move Olivia to stop wallowing in her misery and make herself available to Cesario. Despite a lack of interest from Cesario, Olivia continues to throw her affections at him. Like Orsino, Olivia's interest in love seems somewhat fickle.

SEBASTIAN

Viola's lost twin brother, separated from her in the storm and the "spitting-image" of his sister when she is disguised as a man. He travels with a companion, Antonio. When exploring Illyria people greet Sebastian as though they know him. They are of course assuming that he is Cesario. Sebastian is very confused and can't work out why people think they've met him before. To add to the confusion the beautiful Lady Olivia, whom he has never met, wants to marry him. Sebastian is upset at the loss of his sister, confused by the reactions of the people of Illyria, and consequently finds Illyria a very strange place.

MALVOLIO

The head servant of Olivia's household. He is very good at his job but is also self righteous. A very 'straight-living' man, Malvolio abhors drinking and ill mannered behaviour. He doesn't like to see Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby having fun, and this leads to him becoming the butt of their jokes. To pay him back for his constant reprimands, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Sir Toby and Maria (Olivia's waiting woman) play a trick on him. They set out to make him believe that Olivia is in love with him, and encourage him to dress outlandishly to impress her. Malvolio takes himself and his duties very seriously; he has a desire to rise above his social class, and does not like to be mocked. The joke shatters his ambitions and ridicules him in front of Olivia.

SIR TOBY

Olivia's uncle. Olivia lets Sir Toby Belch live with her, presumably because of his inability to look after himself but perhaps also to encourage him not to live a 'yobbish' existence - she strongly disapproves of his rowdy behaviour, practical jokes and heavy drinking. She also dislikes his friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek, whom she thinks is ridiculous and stupid. Sir Toby has an ally in Maria (Olivia's waiting woman) whose wit helps him to launch the cruel practical joke on Malvolio. Sir Toby is chaotic, fun and free willed. He embodies the frivolous and witty nature of the play. He cares very little for the tight-lipped control freak Malvolio. Sir Toby marries Maria despite being of much higher social standing than her. The genuine quality of his feelings is in contrast to the fickle behaviour of Olivia and Orsino.

MARIA

Olivia's waiting woman and, to some degree, her confidante. Maria has aspirations to rise above her social position and achieves as much by marrying Sir Toby at the end of the play. She is a strong female character; her wit and intelligence put her on equal footing with Sir Toby and he admires her for these characteristics. Maria and Sir Toby lead the secondary plot in Twelfth night, a plot that adds good comic effect to the play.

SIR ANDREW AGUECHEEK

The foolish friend of Sir Toby. He thinks he is intelligent, witty, good-looking and multi-talented. He is actually foolish, silly, and not at all clever; often making a fool of himself obviously. He tries to court Olivia, trying to impress her with his looks and intelligence. In reality, he wears garish clothing and comes across as an idiot. He thinks he is friends with Sir Toby and Maria. Although they appear to enjoy his company, they mock him constantly.

ANTONIO

Antonio is a sea-captain and rescues Sebastian from the shipwreck. He brings Sebastian to Illyria in search of his sister despite the fact that he risks arrest, and possibly death, if Orsino finds him. Sebastian appreciates Antonio's help and the use of his ship but Antonio seems to be more than normally fond of Sebastian. He shows this by accompanying him, giving him money and worrying about his safety. Some may argue that his admiration for Sebastian is romantic, an addition to the theme of shifting gender roles and sexuality in the play. Later in the play he is arrested and appeals to Cesario, whom he assumes is Sebastian, for help. He is naturally horrified to hear Cesario swear that he has never met Antonio. He asks for his money back and again Cesario denies ever receiving anything from him.