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# Aspects of comedy - resource package for Paper 1B, Section A

## AS and A-level English Literature B (7716/7717)

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For teaching from September 2015

### Introduction

We have developed a range of resources to help you plan your teaching and to create practice exam questions for every component of AS and A-level English Literature B.

In this package you find a variety of resources related to Aspects of comedy, including:

- creating your own questions guidance document, to give you the power to create your own practice exam questions
- sample assessment materials, which include question papers and mark schemes
- specimen question commentaries, which explain how a question taken from the sample assessment materials addresses the assessment objectives, and which give some suggestions of how the task might be approached
- exemplar student responses with marking commentary, including two responses of different mark bands are given to a specific question from the Sample Assessment Materials
- text overviews, which show how you how the texts you have chosen can be read through the lens of the genre of comedy.

### Resources in this package

- Creating your own questions for Paper 1B, Section A
- Exemplar student response - band 3 response - *Twelfth Night*
- Exemplar student response - band 5 response - *Twelfth Night*
- Specimen question commentary - *Twelfth Night*
- Text overview - *Twelfth Night*

### How to use these resources

These documents are clearly an excellent starting point when planning your teaching. If you haven't yet decided on which texts or text combinations to teach, the Text Overviews and specimen mark schemes give you details about some of the elements of the genre each text covers, which can help you decide. Don't forget to consult the specification for a list of possible elements. Once you have decided, these documents will help you to focus your teaching on those elements and to work towards the relevant exam question in the specimen assessment materials. The exemplar student responses with marking commentary act as models for the students and help you to assess their work.

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# Creating your own questions

AS and A-level English Literature B

Aspects of comedy resource package for Paper 1B, Section A

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For teaching from September 2015

## Introduction

Below you will find instructions on how to use the accompanying resources to create your own exam practice questions.

## Aspects of comedy: Paper 1B, Section A

If you have used the relevant question from the specimen assessment materials and want to set a question on a different passage, you can use these documents in the following way:

1. Look at how the relevant question from the specimen assessment materials is constructed:

*Read the extract below and then answer the question.*

*Explore the significance of this extract in relation to the comedy of the play as a whole. Remember to include in your answer relevant analysis of Shakespeare's dramatic methods.*

The question wording can remain unchanged. You will need, however, to choose a different passage from the text depending upon the aspects of comedy you want the students to explore.

2. Read the relevant Text Overview to help you choose a different passage for analysis: consider the different possible aspects of comedy, the various characters who might be involved and the action in the play which might provide the best passages.

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# Exemplar student response and examiner commentary

AS and A-level English Literature B

Aspects of comedy resource package for Paper 1B, Section A

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For teaching from September 2015

## Introduction

Below you will find an exemplar student response to a Section A question in the specimen assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.

## Sample question

Read the extract below and then answer the question.

Explore the significance of this extract in relation to the comedy of the play as a whole.

Remember to include in your answer relevant analysis of Shakespeare's dramatic methods.

## Band 3 response

In this scene, Viola has a discussion with Orsino in his palace and he reveals that he is serious about loving Olivia 'the passion of my love', who doesn't want to return his love, which he sees as his 'woe'. Viola does not want to go on Orsino's errand as she says that Olivia 'never will admit me' – though really, as we see at the end of the scene, it is because she loves Orsino herself. However, Orsino only thinks of himself and he believes the 'beauty' of Cesario will 'become thee well to act my woes'.

This scene has several comic features and it would really depend on how this scene was staged as to whether or not it was actually funny. Personally, I think it is one of the more serious scenes unlike others which are more humorous such as when Malvolio is wearing yellow stockings and is made to look a fool by Sir Toby Belch. Moments like when Maria and Andrew and Toby are all drunk and singing and making fun of Malvolio are more significant in terms of humour than this one. However, love is an aspect of comedy and there are different examples of love here. Orsino is over the top in the way he expresses his love for Olivia and this is ridiculous. He uses religious language, 'I have unclasped to thee the book of my secret soul'. There is also the love of Viola which is expressed in an aside at the end and this is much simpler and more honest, 'Yet a barful strife! Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife'. When she tells of her love it is a surprise and a bit hard to believe. However, she is very serious and comedies are always about the seriousness of love as well as how daft it is. At the end of the play Viola is rewarded for her serious and genuine feelings of love for Orsino as he takes her as his wife.

Another aspect of comedy is Viola's disguise and no one knows that she is a woman. She is pretending to be Cesario, but even though the Duke doesn't know she is a woman he refers to

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Cesario's female qualities which is ironic— 'Diana's lip', her 'small pipe' (voice). This could be performed humorously on stage. Cross dressing and mistaken identities are always funny. It would have been especially funny for the Elizabethans to see Viola dressed as a man and pretending to be a man when the actor playing Viola was actually a man. Another aspect of disguise is that Viola is playing the part of a servant and here the job of the servant is strange. Orsino is sending someone of a lower social class to tell a high class woman that he loves her, 'unfold the passion of my love; surprise her with discourse of my dear faith'. Later in the play a different servant – Malvolio – is made to believe that Olivia loves him and he thinks that he can marry her and be her master. In this play many things are topsy turvy. This is because it is about the twelfth night festivities.

There is another comic aspect which is being prepared for here. Earlier in the play Valentine went to Olivia on Orsino's behalf and he was turned away. The audience will wonder if Viola will also be unsuccessful but in fact she is not and Olivia, believes in her disguise and thinks she is a man, and falls in love with her. This is about the complications in love which is part of comedy. There are further complications later in the play when Olivia thinks that Sebastian is Cesario and they suddenly get married.

## Examiner commentary

This response is relatively brief but it does reveal the candidate's understanding in a straightforward and relevant way. The answer is a little list like and points are not developed very thoroughly but there are relevant quotations to support ideas. The candidate makes some references to other parts of the play but they are not very well integrated.

### AO1

The ideas are sensibly ordered though not put together in a coherent way. There is some use of literary critical concepts and terminology ('comedy of Viola's disguise', 'cross dressing and mistaken identities', irony, religious imagery) and the expression is mainly appropriate though sometimes it is a little informal and sometimes a little clumsy.

### AO2

There is a straightforward understanding of the play as a drama and the candidate is aware that Shakespeare has constructed the play for the stage. There is some relevant comment on how meanings are shaped by the methods used.

### AO3

The candidate makes some straightforward points about the dramatic and comedic contexts and there is some comment on Elizabethan staging.

### AO4

The candidate connects in a straightforward way with other literary texts through the points made about the comedic genre. There is some sense of how this extract and Twelfth Night connect with the wider genre of comedy.

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## **AO5**

There is a straightforward engagement with 'significance' in which the candidate is able to explore some meanings. However these points are not developed very fully.

This answer seems to be operating in Band 3.

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# Exemplar student response and examiner commentary

AS and A-level English Literature B

Aspects of comedy resource package for Paper 1B, Section A

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For teaching from September 2015

## Introduction

Below you will find an exemplar student response to a Section A question in the specimen assessment materials, followed by an examiner commentary on the response.

## Sample question

Read the extract below and then answer the question.

Explore the significance of this extract in relation to the comedy of the play as a whole.

Remember to include in your answer relevant analysis of Shakespeare's dramatic methods.

## Band 5 response

Shakespeare sets this scene in the Duke's palace which contrasts with the setting of Olivia's house of the previous scene. Viola's appearance dressed as a boy would potentially create an immediate sense of comedy and dramatic confusion given the fact that the role would have been played by a male actor in the sixteenth century. The use of disguise also contributes to the thematic concern of mistaken identity which perhaps reaches its apex when Olivia marries Sebastian and when Sir Andrew duels with him (both believing Sebastian is Cesario). Viola was last seen telling the captain that she would serve the duke 'as an eunuch' and her disguise now shows that time has passed and that she is determined and resourceful. There is an element of humour in Valentine's initial comments concerning the 'favours' that the Duke has already shown Viola that could well imply Orsino's fascination with her, (something that is perhaps confirmed by the trust he now places in her as his amorous messenger). Moreover, the intimacy of the dialogue between Viola and Orsino, despite the presence of others on stage who are comically ignored, and despite the personal nature of the topic under discussion, could well suggest a romantic affection on the part of the Duke. This is only strengthened by his complimentary description of her lips as 'smooth and rubious', which in their romantic and flattering connotations, all hint at his underlying attraction as do his regular use of terms of endearment such as 'dear lad' and 'good youth'. This is a source of humour given Viola's semblance as a boy as well as the fact she is Orsino's servant, which would perhaps make such feelings humorously inappropriate to an Elizabethan audience. However, this prepares us for Orsino's swift shift of affections from Olivia to Viola in the final act thus bringing about the comic resolution of the play.

At the start of the scene it could also be suggested that Shakespeare forewarns us of Viola's affections (revealed at the end), which create a further layer of comedy given her inability to openly

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express her feelings to Orsino. The manner in which she rushes to respond to his call when he first enters could suggest a romantic eagerness. Likewise, the fact she continues to subtly question him as to what she should do in order to win over Olivia, asking 'what then?' could imply her desire to hear more words of affection from the man she loves. The fact her affections are expressed in a more subtle way than either Orsino's or later characters, such as Aguecheek and Malvolio, heightens our impression of the central female character as more intelligent and rational than her male counterparts, which, certainly for a modern audience, is potentially a source of comedy.

There is also an element of comedy in the way in which Orsino behaves so capriciously, which hardly seems fitting for a man of his station though in the comic world of the play is entirely apt. Viola's initial question to Valentine, 'is he constant?' reveals the changeability of Orsino's emotions that we have already witnessed in the opening scenes when he demands music and then immediately has 'enough, no more'. Thus his fluctuating emotions, (which may be seen as effeminate and ridiculous), are a source of humour. Likewise, his desperation for a wife and thus presumably company, is contradicted by his later claim 'I myself am best/ When least in company', suggesting his desires are shallow and liable to change as he clearly has little understanding of the nature of marriage or of himself. This is then verified by the excessive nature of his declarations of love for Olivia despite her repeated rejections of him in the past. His commands to 'be clamorous' at the doors of a house in mourning are utterly inappropriate according to Elizabethan mourning conventions, (although his self-absorption prevents him from recognising this). Similarly, his hyperbolic proclamations of love, which he refers to as 'passion' which bring him such 'woes', seem excessive and thus in their ridiculous effulgence present him as a figure of fun. What is yet more humorous is the fact that he believes a young man would be more successful than 'a nuncio's of more grave aspect.' Not only does this show a fundamental lack of understanding of the woman whom he is trying to win over (who has chosen as a steward a man of 'grave aspect') but it is ironic that he believes another could express his affections more convincingly.

In fact, Orsino's blindness is another source of comedy made evident in his description of Viola. The blindness of love is a recurrent feature of comedy and it is not surprising to see Shakespeare develop it here. Orsino describes her as having lips like 'Diane's' and a voice much like a 'maiden's organ' and in fact 'all is semblative [of] a woman's part' and yet he fails to recognise the truth of his own words. This is of course an example of dramatic irony as the audience is all too aware of Viola's gender. Comedy encourages readers and audiences to feel superior to fictional characters and here that superiority is felt in terms of a noble duke. Interestingly, the notion of feeling 'superior' is also vital to the comedy of the servants fooling their superiors – Malvolio and Olivia - as part of the *Twelfth Night* carnival.

In contrast to Orsino, Viola's words are far more measured and brief perhaps displaying the sincerity of her feelings. She reasons with him that Olivia may be 'abandoned in her sorrow' for example. The fact that a servant and a female character is more reasoned and logical than the infatuated Duke is another comedic aspect. What is more, Viola's revelation at the end of the scene 'Yet, a barful strife! / Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife' in its simplicity and genuine feeling juxtapose Orsino's outlandish claims of affection for a woman he has barely seen. Here, the use of the rhyming couplet and alliteration give her words a playful tone so they seem almost like a tongue-twister that mirrors the confusion that has already been set up in this scene and which dominates the play. The confession is also dramatically surprising and thus creates a further sense of comedy particularly given the fact that Viola has just been tasked with the role of wooer on Orsino's behalf. Shakespeare thereby sets up an element of comic confusion through the creation of a love triangle that will only be resolved in the final scene when Viola's true identity is revealed and she can openly express her love. Moreover, he may also be commenting on the disarming nature of love itself showing that even the practical heroine is unable to escape, (particularly if the object of her affection is seen as unworthy given his ludicrous behaviour and his supposed love for

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another woman). However, this could also be seen as anticipating Olivia's display of feeling for Viola despite her supposedly sombre character, which is a further source of comedy in the subsequent Act.

Furthermore, it could be argued that Orsino's commands to Viola on how to behave are also a source of comedy given their ridiculousness. He commands her to 'Be not denied access; stand at her doors, / And tell them', where the series of imperatives suggest his determination despite the ironic fact that he will not be acting himself. This all sets up the comedic confusion to come as it is Viola's determination to fulfil her master's wishes that result in Olivia falling in love with her. The absurd nature of his commands is, however, exposed by Viola's simple response, 'I think not so, my lord', which thereby draws the audience's attention to the foolishness of Orsino's desires. A further sense of comic foreshadowing is also conveyed in Orsino's words, 'Prosper well in this, / And thou shalt live as freely as thy lord, / To call his fortunes thine.' Viola's eager reaction of 'I'll do my best' may comically belie her feelings, but more importantly, his words anticipate the fact that she will indeed eventually 'call his fortunes thine' when she becomes his wife as he promises in the final scene where there is a comedic resolution.

## Examiner commentary

This candidate clearly knows the play very well and can range around it to develop points in relation to the extract. This is a very secure response though the student does tend to 'go through' the extract rather than standing back and seeing how it operates in a wider sense.

### AO1

Ideas are clearly organised and there is some perception in the answer. The candidate's expression is assured and the writing is accurate and entirely appropriate to A level.

### AO2

The candidate has a good sense that Shakespeare has constructed the play and the writing about dramatic methods is confident and assured. There are perceptive comments on structure, setting and language, and the candidate has an eye on visual comedy seen in the comment about Viola's appearance. There is some good work on language and the contrast between Orsino's and Viola's utterances.

### AO3

A range of contexts are embedded in the response in an assured way; there is perceptive understanding of the significance of relevant contexts including references to mourning conventions, gender relationships and the relationships between different social classes. There are also some sensible comments on Shakespeare's audiences.

### AO4

Perceptive points are made about the comedic nature of the scene. The candidate focuses on a range of comedic aspects throughout. In selecting aspects of the comedic genre, the candidate is connecting with other comedies.



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## **AO5**

There is confident engagement with significance and the candidate is able to explore meanings in a sophisticated and perceptive way.

This response seems to comfortably fit into Band 5.

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# Specimen question commentary

AS and A-level English Literature B (7716/7717)

Aspects of comedy resource package for Paper 1B, Section A

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## Introduction

This resource explains how a question taken from the specimen assessment material addresses the assessment objectives, with some suggestions of how the task might be approached. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of every point that could be made but it gives teachers and students some guidance that will support their work on this paper.

## Paper 1B, Section A

As this is a closed book exam students will need to know their texts very well and be able to recall specific details that can be used in their responses.

## Sample question

*Read the extract below and then answer the question.*

*Explore the significance of this extract in relation to the comedy of the play as a whole.*

*Remember to include in your answer relevant analysis of Shakespeare's dramatic methods.*

## How the question meets the Assessment Objectives

In this question, as throughout the paper, the assessment objectives are all assessed. The key words and phrases in the question are: explore, significance, comedy of the play as a whole, analysis and dramatic methods, and these are clearly connected to the assessment objectives.

**AO1** will be tested through the ways the students organise their writing and express their ideas as they are exploring significance. **AO2** is set up in the requirement for students to analyse Shakespeare's dramatic methods in the extract and to show how the methods open up meanings about comedy in *Twelfth Night*. The word 'significance' is an invitation for students to target **AO3** and **AO5**, to show what is signified in terms of contexts and interpretations that arise from the comedy of the extract. **AO3** will be addressed through the students' showing their understanding of both the dramatic and comedic contexts of *Twelfth Night*, and in the way they will elicit from the extract contextual ideas about when the text was written and how it might have been and is now received. **AO5** will be addressed when students grapple with meanings that arise from their exploration of comedy in the extract and in relation to the whole play. Finally, in writing about and engaging with 'comedy', **AO4** will be hit as students will be connecting implicitly with concepts of the comedy genre (and other comedic texts) through the 'aspects' which they are exploring.

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It may be helpful for students to begin by briefly establishing an overview of the passage and identifying where it occurs within the play. For example: 'At this stage of the play, Viola has been shipwrecked and has found safety on the coast of Illyria. She has assumed the male guise of Cesario in order to find employment and has acquired a position as a servant in Orsino's court. Orsino believes himself in love with Olivia and in this passage demands that Cesario woos her on his behalf.'

## Possible content

Students might explore the following dramatic methods: the use of disguise – Viola is dressed in man's attire; the entrance of the Duke; the language used to show the excessiveness of Orsino's love for Olivia; the use of dialogue to show the master/servant relationship; the language used to dramatise the intimacy of Orsino's and Viola's conversation; the foregrounding of the use of the go-between; the embedded report of Olivia's rebuttal of Orsino's love; the language used to reveal the ridiculousness of Orsino's demands for Cesario; the irony as Orsino describes Cesario's beauty as a woman; the use of foreshadowing – 'Prosper well in this/And thou shalt live as freely as thy lord,/To call his fortunes thine'; the dramatic surprise of Viola's confession of love in an aside and its placement at the end of the scene, etc.

## Elements of comedy that might be explored

- The first appearance of Viola as Cesario
- The suggestion that Orsino might be capricious regarding love (language relating to this – his 'humour', 'question the continuance of his love', 'Is he inconstant ... in his favours').
- The terms of endearment from Orsino to Cesario (affectionate use of 'thee', 'good youth', 'it shall become thee well', 'dear lad', 'I know thy constellation is right apt').
- The focus on romantic love – or idolatry – and the use of religious imagery – 'secret soul' – to show the apparent depth of Orsino's love for Olivia (though it is in fact shallow).
- Comic excess – Orsino's use of excessive language – 'clamorous', 'leap all civil bounds', 'unfold the passion of my love'.
- The focus on physical love evidenced by Orsino's comments on Cesario's lips and voice and the use of classical and romantic imagery.
- The natural love of Viola shown through the simplicity of her statement of love for Orsino ('a barful strife! Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife') which contrasts with the elaborate declarations of his idealised love for Olivia.
- The framing of Orsino and Cesario's dialogue with Viola's growing interest in Orsino as a love interest.
- Her final aside to end the scene to intensify the comedic aspect of love's being complicated.

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- the use of foreshadowing (there is every expectation that emotions will intensify as they do and that Viola will ultimately call her lord's fortunes hers), etc.

## Significance

Students might develop any of the points mentioned above and suggest what meanings arise from the ideas they select.

Comments might be on:

- the developing love between Viola and the Duke
- the Duke's unconscious love perhaps
- his attraction for a seeming young man
- attitudes towards power and servitude
- the expectations of the Elizabethan court as represented in the play
- the ridiculousness of Orsino as a character (his excessiveness and self-indulgence, his lack of depth, his behaviour, his sentimentality, his luxuriating in his own excesses, the stupidity of his focusing on an object of love (Olivia) that is apparently unmoveable)
- Viola's good sense and the depth of her feelings
- the sincerity of her love being bestowed upon an unworthy object
- gender roles – how in Elizabethan society as set up in the play, women have to disguise themselves as men to have an active social role
- the nature of love itself and how it is shown to be disarming whether from an Elizabethan or 21st century context
- the nature of dramatic comedy where audiences need to suspend disbelief and enter into the chaotic world that is demanded by the genre, etc.

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# Text overview – *Twelfth Night*

AS and A-level English Literature B (7716/7717)

Aspects of comedy resource package for Paper 1B, Section A

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For teaching from September 2015

## Introduction

Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider *Twelfth Night* in relation to the genre of Comedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.



*Twelfth Night* Act II Scene IV by Walter Deverell (1850)

“Well, God give them wisdom that have it; and those that are fools, let them use their talents”

## Overview

*Twelfth Night* contains many classic aspects of dramatic comedy. Central to its design is a series of tangled love interests (Orsino loves Olivia, Olivia loves Cesario and then Sebastian, Viola loves Orsino, Sir Andrew and Malvolio love Olivia); disguise (the plot hinges on Viola's dressing as a male servant in order to survive after being shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria); mistaken identities (Viola and Sebastian are twins so alike that no-one can tell them apart); trickery and tomfoolery; the lavish use of singing and dancing; the ridiculing of hypocrisy, excess and affectation; the temporary domination of chaos and misrule; and an ending where all confusion is resolved and three marriages take place.

## Slapstick and physical comedy

Perhaps the most obvious form of comedy in *Twelfth Night* is the slapstick humour generated by Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek (whose names are themselves a source of humour) and their cronies. The humour is immediately signalled by their use of prose, bawdy language and song

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that would no doubt have appealed to the working class audience in the pit. Their buffoonery during their midnight revel in Act 2 scene iii, where they drunkenly carouse, mock Malvolio and sing at the top of their voices, reflects their sense of fun and joie de vivre. Likewise, the physical comedy in the scene where Sir Andrew and Cesario attempt to duel, but prove themselves utterly inept and fearful, is clearly entertaining and invites laughter.

## Malvolio's downfall and schadenfreude

If there is a comic villain in *Twelfth Night* it is, at least initially, Malvolio, whose puritanical stance and attempts to destroy the revelry of Sir Toby's party place him at odds with the lovable rogues and the joyous spirit of the play. Moreover, his hubristic attitude, evident in both the ways he reprimands his superiors and in his conceited belief that he could be his mistress' master, means that the audience, much like the onlookers in the Box-tree scene, enjoy his downfall. His appearance in 'yellow and cross-gartered' stockings, so different from his usual funereal garb, is a source of visual comedy. Similarly his suggestive comments as he fantasises about Olivia – 'To bed! Ay, sweetheart, and I'll come to thee!' – are amusing because of Shakespeare's deployment of incongruity. Whilst the way he is thrown into "a dark room" and then taunted by Feste may seem cruel to a modern audience, there is a sense of schadenfreude in witnessing the downfall of the pompous fellow who has overstepped the bounds of his social position and attempted to destroy the festive spirit of the play's world. It is also important to remember that humiliation is often at the heart of comedy and that comedy is born of cruelty.

## The role of fools – Feste and Sir Andrew

A predominant figure of comedy is the fool. In the world of *Twelfth Night*, Feste is a licensed and professional fool. He contributes to the festive spirit, implied by his name, through his creation of music, song and jokes. He is attached to Olivia's household though he is something of a free spirit often frequenting the Duke's palace and singing to him. Feste embodies the spirit of misrule in which the play delights and he is the perpetrator of folly – the antithesis of the serious Malvolio who, as a Puritan, scorns merrymaking. However, it is not merely his witty word-play that generates comedy. He also exposes truth to the other characters and the audience: he mocks Orsino's lovelorn behaviour; he challenges Olivia's obsessive mourning and, much to Malvolio's horror, proves her a 'fool' in his witty repartee; and he lays bare Malvolio's hubris by publically humiliating him. He thus seems able to see the true nature of those around him, mocking their foibles and flaws, leading to the comic resolution of events. There is also humour in the fact that his role gives him licence to mock his superiors. Despite his status as jester, he is far wiser than his masters ('wise enough' as Viola says 'to play the fool').

The truly foolish character in the play is Andrew Aguecheek, whom Shakespeare creates to play the 'gull'. Andrew is frequently depicted as cowardly, incompetent and unintelligent. He is unable to understand the simplest of jokes or metaphors, responding to Sir Toby's 'I smell a device' with the literal 'I have't in my nose, too'. Maria aptly describes him as 'a fool', 'a great quarreller', and one who has the 'gift of a coward'. He is ludicrously led to believe that he could be a potential suitor for Olivia. In this he proves hopeless, as is evident when he attempts to listen in to Cesario to learn how to woo and thus becomes a parody of the courtly lover. Andrew Aguecheek is a figure of fun central to Sir Toby's revelries and a character whose denigration is amusing for both stage and theatre audiences.

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## Wit and Wordplay

This is a play rich in punning, irony, wordplay and jokes. Language as a source of humour is especially evident in the bawdy dialogue between Maria, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby and in Feste's verbal out manoeuvring of Olivia and Viola. Words are often shown to be slippery and false and communications are frequently misinterpreted, epitomised in Malvolio's misreading of the letter. Just as appearances cannot be trusted, neither can language. Often the audience is alive to the true meaning of innuendoes and equivocating comments when the characters are not. One example is when Viola (as Cesario) informs Orsino 'I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too', thus subtly hinting at her true gender, which Orsino fails to realise.

## The Twelfth Night Festivities – a Topsy-Turvy world

*Twelfth Night*, the eve of the Epiphany, was, in Shakespeare's time, a traditional festival, a time of misrule when social roles were relaxed, when masters waited on their servants, when men were allowed to dress as women, and women as men. The Christmas revels were often led by a chosen Lord of Misrule.

*Twelfth Night* reflects these traditions. There is an evident festive mood with boisterous revelry; Sir Toby has dominance over Olivia's household and the austere Malvolio is overthrown. Even the exotic setting of Illyria (a name that perhaps recalls the mythical Elysian Fields) seems to set up a fantasy world where normal rules do not apply, establishing a sense of liberality. Moreover, the fact that gender roles are inverted from the moment Viola assumes the guise of Cesario immediately creates a sense of confusion, which is sustained throughout the drama. Cesario openly confesses 'I am not what I am'; but in this play, it seems, neither is anyone else. This is a play where disguise creates significant perplexity: Viola finds herself loved by a woman while she loves a man who assumes she is a boy, making both relationships apparently impossible. It is a world where identities are constantly muddled so Viola and Sebastian are repeatedly mistaken for one another. It is also a world where the conventional social hierarchies are disrupted, given that neither Orsino nor Olivia (due to her state of mourning) appears capable of ruling their households as they should. As a result, for much of the play, the lords of misrule hold sway, revelling long past the midnight hour, meddling in affairs, manipulating those around them and so creating a jovial state of anarchy to which their masters, consumed by their own woes, seem oblivious. However, the audience is always aware of the truth (we know that Sir Andrew is being used by Sir Toby, that Cesario is a woman, that Malvolio is being fooled). Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony thus encourages feelings of superiority which enhance the comedy.

## Mocking courtly love and desire

From his opening lines, Orsino's indulgence in his supposed passion for Olivia makes him an obvious source of humour. He is only mildly elevated above the other incompetent suitor, Andrew Aguecheek, and can be read and played as equally ridiculous: he languishes in his own supposed adoration of Olivia, employing hyperbolic language to describe a woman that, given her state of mourning, in the constructed world of the play, he cannot have seen, let alone spoken to, for many months. Moreover, the manner in which he forces another to undertake his wooing for him suggests his emotions are disingenuous – he is in love with the idea of being in love and with playing the role of courtly suitor. Orsino requires music to feed his sickness and is not really in love with Olivia at all. Her very inaccessibility seems to be what makes her appealing as it enables him to indulge his misery and luxuriate in his role as unrequited lover. Moreover, his fickleness, evident

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in his opening speech when he moves between demanding music in 'excess' and then suddenly commanding 'Enough! No more!' suggests a changeability that anticipates the speed with which he is prepared to shift his affections from Olivia to Viola at the end of the play. Orsino thus represents many of the notions associated with courtly love but in his fickle, melodramatic character they are parodied.

Furthermore, what Shakespeare appears to be suggesting is that love is not something that can be constructed or created as Orsino attempts to do, but is rather an instinctive natural emotion. However, initially, even this natural emotion, is meat for comedy: Viola's adoration of Orsino, which cannot be fulfilled owing to her disguise, and her attempts to get Orsino to speak words of love so that she can imagine herself in the role of lover, are funny. Likewise, there is humour in Viola's accidental success in winning Olivia's heart, not for her master but herself, through her genuine declarations of affection in her 'Make me a willow cabin' speech, which ironically is not actually directed at Olivia but at the absent Orsino.

What is more, love is seen as capable of making a fool of even the most straight-laced of individuals. Malvolio's belief that Olivia loves him, and his lustful desire for her (evident when he imagines himself rising 'from a day bed where' he has 'left Olivia sleeping') lead him to behave absurdly. When Sir Toby and Maria trick him into believing Olivia loves him, he vows to 'do everything' that she requires of him, despite the debasing and ludicrous nature of her (apparent) requests. Similarly, Olivia, who appears at first restrained and intelligent, behaves impulsively when she marries Sebastian without even knowing him and then begs Cesario to acknowledge their union, degrading herself in public in the process. The laughable and demeaning manner in which the courtly individuals act when in love enables the audience to smile at their idiocy and gullibility. Importantly, though their foolishness can be forgiven in the world of comedy, not least of all because it is a reminder that love can render all human beings ridiculous.

## Comic Resolution

The conclusion of the play consolidates its comic nature. There is the promise of marriage between Orsino and Viola as well as a re-confirmation of the marriage between Olivia and Sebastian. Even Sir Toby and Maria are united, her just reward for her loyalty to him. This series of marriages creates a sense of happiness, a jubilant conclusion clinched by the performance of Feste's seemingly jovial final song. Reminiscent of Puck's conclusion to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Feste moves us from the fantasy play world back to reality. A key feature of comedy is that it draws attention to its own artifice and that is exactly what happens in Feste's song. What is more, families are also reunified: when Orsino refers to her as 'sweet sister', he comes to replace the brother that Olivia has lost and mourned. Likewise, Sebastian and Viola, divided by the shipwreck at the play's outset, are also reunited, creating a happy resolution that is satisfying for the audience. In the final scene, Shakespeare also interweaves elements of visual and aural comedy. Feste attempts to read Malvolio's letter in the voice of a madman, Sir Toby arrives in a drunken state, and Sir Andrew appears with his 'bloody coxcomb', humorously claiming that the quivering Viola is 'the very devil incarnate'.

Although some readers and audiences are unsettled by what they see as dark shadows across the play (the mistreatment of Malvolio, his vow to be revenged on the whole pack of them, the sadness of Antonio and Sir Andrew and the silencing of Viola), many focus on the positives in the play's outcome, when order is restored and the lords of misrule are overthrown. Malvolio, after all, is released from prison and his behaviour is explained when the plot against him is revealed. Olivia acknowledges that he has been 'most notoriously abused' and Orsino insists he must be entreated 'to a peace'. Attention finally is on the match between Viola and Orsino (she is to become



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‘Orsino’s mistress and his fancy’s queen’). Viola thus assumes her appropriate position within the social hierarchy as opposed to that of a servant. The play thus ends joyfully with Feste’s music acting as a traditional symbol of peace and goodwill.

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