

Twelfth Night (c. 1602)

Contextual information

Quotes from *Twelfth Night*

The earliest reference to *Twelfth Night* is in [the diary of a law student, John Manningham](#). He saw the play performed on 2 February 1602 in Middle Temple Hall, in the legal Inns of Court in London at the Christian feast of Candlemas. The candle-lit hall in winter might have highlighted the play's themes of darkness and illumination.



View a [photograph of Middle Temple Hall](#), the location for the first recorded performance of *Twelfth Night*

The play's title refers to a Christian festival twelve days after Christmas on January 5–6. Before Henry VIII's reforms to the English church, 'twelfth night' was celebrated with a period of carnival. Social hierarchies were temporarily re-arranged to become 'topsy-turvy' and a 'Lord of Misrule' was appointed.



View [The Fight between Carnival and Lent](#)

This 1559 painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder represents the opposing forces of Carnival and Lent – raucous excess and religious restraint – which some see reflected in *Twelfth Night*.

John Manningham compared *Twelfth Night* to other plays involving confusion between twins, including Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and an Italian drama called *Gl'Ingannati* (1531) or 'The Deceived'.

In both *Twelfth Night* and *Gl'Ingannati* the twins are boy/girl pairs. But on the Italian stage, women were played by female actors, while in Shakespeare's England they were played by men.

Shakespeare had twins, Hamnet and Judith, born in 1585. Hamnet died in 1596, five years before *Twelfth Night* was first performed.



Explore [Gl'Ingannati, an Italian play about twins and mistaken identity](#)

In his *Symposium*, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, includes a fable explaining the origins of love, gender and sexuality:



Explore an [engraving of Plato](#)

Humans were originally two joined creatures, but we grew overconfident, and Zeus punished us by splitting us down the middle. Each half is plagued by loneliness which can only be remedied by finding our other half. Those who began as a half-male, half-female creature will be attracted to their heterosexual other. Those who began as two men, or two women, will search for their homosexual other.

Barnaby Rich's short story 'Of Apolonius and Silla' (1581) revolves around two twins and their confused love-interests, and it served as a key source for *Twelfth Night*. Where Shakespeare's Viola cross-dresses as the male eunuch Cesario and is later confused with her lost brother Sebastian, Rich's female twin, Silla, not only cross-dresses but uses her brother Silvio's name. Rich's version is darker: Shakespeare's sea captain helps Viola, but Rich's sea captain attempts to rape Silla.



Explore [Rich his Farewell to Military Profession, 1594](#)

When Shakespeare was writing, the word 'Illyria' referred to a region on the coast of the Adriatic Sea (north of modern central Albania), which was under the control of the Venetian Republic. Some scholars have argued that the connotations of 'Illyria' are more important than the actual location. The sound might evoke 'Elysium', the abode of the happy dead in Greek mythology, sometimes seen as a place of riotous excess.



View a [map of Illyria](#)

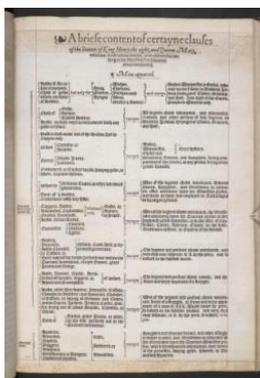
Women were not allowed to perform on the public stage in England until 1660 and so female roles in Shakespeare's time were played by younger male actors. The Globe's 'Original Practices' production of *Twelfth Night* in 2002, replicated this all-male casting, so Viola was played by Michael Brown, complicating the issue of the cross-dressing in the play itself.

The tight clothes for Viola/Cesario and Sebastian resembled the fashions for young men around the year 1600, and affected the way the actors moved around on the stage.



View a [photograph of Michael Brown as Viola/Cesario and Rhys Meredith as Sebastian, 2002](#)

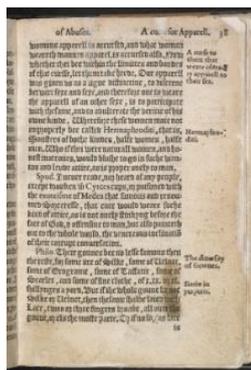
During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, 'sumptuary laws' dictated the colours and fabrics of people's clothes based on their social rank and wealth. The proclamation against 'the excesse of apparell (1574) aimed to regulate extravagant spending on clothes and prevent people of the lower sort from dressing above their station.



Explore the [Proclamation against Excess of Apparel by Queen Elizabeth I](#)

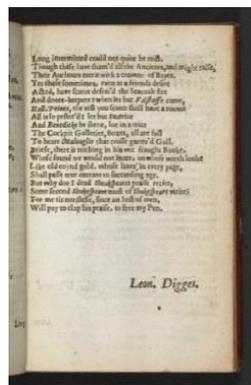
When Malvolio fantasises about being married to Olivia, he pictures himself ordering staff around in a 'branch'd velvet gown' (2.5.47–48).

In *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), the puritanical Philip Stubbes warns against wearing clothes intended for the other sex. He argues that 'our apparell was given as a signe distinctive, to discerne betwixt sexe and sexe, and therefore one to weare the apparell of another sexe, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his owne kinde' (p. 38).



Discover [The Anatomy of Abuses by Philip Stubbes, 1583](#)

The 1640 edition of *Shakespeare's Collected Poems* includes a verse in praise of Shakespeare by Leonard Digges. Digges notes particularly well-loved characters who 'ravish'd' audiences in the early 17th century. He says 'The Cockpit Galleries, Boxes, all are full / To heare Malvoglio that crosse garter'd Gull'.



Explore [Shakespeare's Collected Poems, 1640](#)

In the handwritten notes in his [personal copy of Shakespeare's works, King Charles I](#) also singles out Malvolio as the most notable character in *Twelfth Night*.

Stockings themselves would not have been unusual as clothing for men in Shakespeare's time. But we can assume from the amusement Malvolio's yellow cross-gartered stockings cause that this colour and method of fastening would have seemed out of date and ridiculous (3.2.75–77). Onstage before his transformation, Malvolio is often dressed in the sober head-to-toe black of a Puritan.



View a [photograph of Stephen Fry in a 2012 production of Twelfth Night directed by Tim Carroll](#)