Discovering Literature

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Teachers' Notes

Curriculum subject: <u>English Literature</u>

Key Stage: <u>4 and 5</u>

Author / Text: <u>William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*</u>

Theme: <u>Festive Comedy, Gender and Confusion</u>

Rationale

The activities explore how Shakespeare used and subverted early modern ideas of gender, misrule and confused identity to create the comedy in *Twelfth Night*. These ideas are intended to present a range of creative activities to assist the development of independent research. It is hoped they will reinforce work undertaken collaboratively in class and develop confidence in examining the text of *Twelfth Night*. Working with the sources supports wider reading, encouraging students to explore the unfamiliar in a supportive environment.

Content

Literary and historical sources:

- Rich his Farewell to Military Profession (1594)
- Gl'Ingannati, an Italian play about twins and mistaken identity (c. 1540)

Recommended reading (short articles):

- *Twelfth Night* and festive comedy: Penny Gay
- Festivity, dressing up and misrule in *Twelfth Night*: Michael Dobson
- A Queer Reading of *Twelfth Night*: Miranda Fay Thomas

External links:

- Aristophanes' speech on the origin of love, gender and sexual orientation in Plato's *Symposium*

Key questions

- How might understanding Shakespeare's sources help you to broaden your interpretation of the text?
- In what ways does Shakespeare explore and challenge gender stereotypes in *Twelfth Night*?
- In what ways does comedy reflect a society's attitudes and values?

Activities

1) Divide a page into two columns headed 'male' and 'female'. Write a list of characteristics which you associate with each gender, or which you have heard, seen or read in relation to men and women. Using at least three ideas from one of your lists, create a statement entitled: 'Women are…' or 'Men are…'. You could include why you think this, using evidence. Now think about the different ways in which Shakespeare confirms, complicates and challenges these ideas in *Twelfth Night*.

2) When Shakespeare wrote *Twelfth Night*, the title would have symbolised things being turned upside down. It was connected to the idea of reversing the roles of noblemen and peasants, at the end of a winter festival which started on Halloween. At this time of the year, it was also common for tricks to be played on people. Consider how Shakespeare has used the following ideas:

>   a) His separation of the twins as a device to cause confusion. Refer to [Aristophanes' speech on the origin of love, gender and sexual orientation in Plato's *Symposium*](#).

>   b) In constructing the joke played on Malvolio some aspects of Malvolio's costume could be represented as androgynous. How does Shakespeare play on the features of cross-dressing to create his comedy?

>   c) How else does Shakespeare create comedy at Malvolio's expense? Consider:

>   - the use of language

>   - dramatic devices

3) Unlike today, basing your writing on someone else's ideas was considered an acceptable practice at the time that Shakespeare lived. He based many of his plays on traditional stories and historical works. Look closely at the source *[Rich his Farewell to Military Profession](#)* (1594) and consider why Shakespeare would have altered Rich's account of the sea captain's behaviour. Connect and compare your thinking with activity number two.

4) There is further evidence of how Shakespeare may have drawn on earlier works in *[Gl'Ingannati](#)*. Study the source and accompanying notes carefully and examine the similarities and differences between this and Shakespeare's interpretation.

>   a) To deepen your appreciation, give some thought to how you would bring your own interpretation to bear on this story. Discuss a modern outlook on the ideas represented in this source.

>   b) Compare the different freedoms afforded to Viola/Cesario and Olivia. Through close reading of the text, identify how the audience are reminded of this.

5) Which of the characters do you think could be played by either a male or female actor? At the end of *[Gl'Ingannati](#)*, we are reminded that whilst Shakespeare was only able to employ male actors, in Italy female roles were played by women.

a) What potential difference could this make to the audience's reaction to Viola/Cesario's cross-dressing?

b) What potential difference could this make to the confusion caused and the comedic effect, especially on Twelfth Night?

c) Can you identify any examples of Shakespeare exploiting this confusion through dramatic irony, for instance?

Extension activities

- Sebastian describes his sister as having 'a mind that envy could not but call fair' (2.1.29). In Act 3, Scene 1, when Viola converses with the fool, Feste, she joins in with his banter:

  VIOLA Art thou a churchman?

  FESTE No such matter, sir: I do live by the church; for I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church.

  VIOLA So thou mayst say, the king lies by a beggar, if a beggar dwell near him; or the church stands by thy tabor, if thy tabor stand by the church. (3.1.4–10)

  Shakespeare is using puns as a technique to play with the language and meaning of 'by', thereby creating a comic effect.

  Puns are still in use today. Compare and contrast Shakespeare's technique with that of contemporary comedians. Which do you think is more or less effective? Why?

- Look again at the extract from Act 3, Scene 1 and consider what atmosphere or tone Shakespeare is trying to create. In your opinion, how is this achieved? How would you direct the actors to deliver their lines? In what tone(s) of voice and with what gestures or movement would you use to emphasise your interpretation of the meaning?