

PLOT SUMMARY OF

TWELFTH NIGHT

The twins Viola and Sebastian, all but identical in appearance, are shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria, each thinking the other dead. Thrown upon her own resources, Viola disguises herself as a boy (calling herself Cesario) and presents herself for service at the court of Duke Orsino – with whom she promptly falls in love. But Orsino is carrying a torch for his neighbour, the Countess Olivia, who is in mourning for her dead brother and uninterested in Orsino's tiresome attentions. Living under Olivia's roof are two people who cordially detest each other: her uncle, the feckless alcoholic Sir Toby Belch; and her butler, the puritanical Malvolio, who is himself hopelessly smitten with her. Impressed by the qualities of 'Cesario' (i.e. the disguised Viola), Orsino sends him/her as a go-between to Olivia's household, but his plan misfires: Viola/Cesario's eloquent pleading on his behalf leads to Olivia falling in love, not with Orsino, but with Viola/Cesario herself.

Meanwhile, Sir Toby has been cynically cultivating the friendship of a rich aristocrat, the cowardly Sir Andrew Aguecheek, falsely promising him the hand-in-marriage of his niece. With the help of three of Olivia's servants –

the feisty maid Maria, the resourceful Fabian, and Feste her household jester – a plot is successfully hatched to engineer the downfall of the hated Malvolio by forging a letter to him from Olivia, in which she apparently declares her love for him: when Malvolio acts on this letter, dressing in an incongruously flamboyant style and grinning at Olivia, he is declared mad.

This whirlwind of unrequited love is at last resolved by the appearance of Viola's 'lost' twin, Sebastian, who, immediately falling in love with Olivia, prompts a series of misunderstandings and quarrels. Following the twins' joyful reunion, both Viola and Orsino, and Sebastian and Olivia, are free to declare their love – but others are left out in the cold. Sir Toby violently falls out with the cowardly Sir Andrew, who leaves for home after a farcical duel with Viola and a more violent offstage encounter with Sebastian; Antonio, the sea-captain who has adoringly steered Sebastian to this outcome, is now abandoned; Malvolio is released from his confinement, but vows revenge; and Feste the fool is left alone to sing the last of his songs.

