



Twelfth Night, or What You Will

by William Shakespeare

In a Nutshell

[William Shakespeare's](#) *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* is a comedy about a cross-dressing, ship-wreck surviving, poetry-loving girl who finds herself at the center of a not-so-average love triangle.

Written between 1601 and 1602 (right around the same time Shakespeare wrote [Hamlet](#) and *Troilus and Cressida*), the play is most famous today for being a so-called "Transvestite Comedy" (which just means it's a comedy with one or more cross-dressing characters). In Elizabethan London, *all* stage plays were performed by male actors who cross-dressed in order to play the parts of women. *Twelfth Night* is particularly provocative and interesting, since the role of its heroine, Viola, would have been played by a boy actor, who was cross-dressed as a female character, who cross-dresses as a boy. The story line has inspired plenty of remakes and adaptations, including the popular teen flick [She's the Man](#), starring [Amanda Bynes](#).

Viola's cross-dressing may be no big moral whoop for audiences today, but, for 16th century Puritans, it was a big no-no. Theater critics argued that cross-dressing was sinful, "wicked," and "monstrous." They argued that it promoted sexual "deviance" and turned women into hermaphrodites. Today, however, *Twelfth Night* is one of the most popular and beloved of Shakespeare comedies perhaps *because* of its rebellious portrayal of gender ambiguity.

It was popular back in Shakespeare's day, too, but perhaps for different reasons. We know from 17th-century law student John Manningham's diary that *Twelfth Night* was performed at the Middle Temple (a London law school) on February 2, 1602. Check out what he had to say:

At our feast we had a play called "Twelfth Night, or What You Will," much like ["The Comedy of Errors"](#) [...] A good practice in it to make a Steward believe his Lady Widow was in love with him, by counterfeiting a letter [...]

It's interesting that Manningham's diary entry focuses on the Malvolio sub-plot, which isn't necessarily what contemporary readers think of when they reflect on the play. Manningham's entry suggests that, at least for him, the play's ridicule of the social-climbing Puritan figure, Malvolio, was the most interesting and entertaining part of the performance. Several decades later, [King Charles I](#) (b. 1600-1649) may have thought the same thing. In his copy of Shakespeare's works, he crossed out the title *Twelfth Night* and wrote in *Malvolio!* as a replacement. Guess old Charlie didn't like social climbers and Puritans either.

Of course, [Queen Elizabeth I](#) sat on the throne when *Twelfth Night* was penned. We wonder what *she* thought of the play. *If* she ever saw it, that is. Critics aren't sure. Check out "

night/what-s-up-with-the-title.html" target="_blank">What's Up with the Title?" for more on the debate.

Why Should I Care?

OK, most of us have no idea what it would be like to lose a twin sibling in a ship-wreck before cross-dressing as a singing eunuch, only to discover that we are in love with a man, who is in love with a woman, who is in love with our disguise.

But, anyone who has ever been a teenager (yep, that's everybody over the age of twelve) knows a little something about being in love. We're betting you know exactly what it's like to try to keep that love a secret, too.

If you think about it, this is what Viola in *Twelfth Night* deals with. Check out how she describes her secret crush to the guy of her dreams without revealing to him that he's the object of her affection:

*She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief.
Was not this love indeed?*

We don't run around talking like this in our day-to-day lives (it might be fun, though), but Viola's speech captures *perfectly* that gut-wrenching, sickly "yellow and green" feeling that makes your cheeks flush red ("damask") and literally seems to eat away at your insides ("like a worm in the bud") when you're too afraid to do anything about it and you don't want anyone to know your secret, because you're afraid they won't love you back if they know who you really are.

Yep.
That's it *exactly*.
Secret crushes are brutal, especially when you're trying to figure out who you are and you're afraid that what people see on the outside doesn't match what you feel like on the inside.
So, the next time you think nobody could *possibly* have a clue about what you're going through, crack open your copy of *Twelfth Night* and tell it to Uncle [Shakespeare](#). He totally gets you.