

Twelfth Night

Death and Grief

- Olivia grieves primarily for her brother, but we are also told that her father died not long before.
- The siblings Viola and Sebastian each believe that the other has drowned in the shipwreck and they express their grief at several points.

Ableism

- The play draws a lot of attention to the role of the fool. The fool was both a type of role associated with clowning or witty improvisation and an ableist term used to identify a person with intellectual disabilities (sometimes described within Shakespeare's lifetime as 'natural folly'). In early modern drama, there is often a connection between these two understandings of the fool.
- 'Mad' appears 22 times in the play. Whilst this word is often used for comedy with Shakespeare's plays, it is an ableist term.
- Some students may find Sir Toby's and Maria's trick on Malvolio, in which he is locked up in a dark room for being 'possessed' or 'mad' upsetting. Malvolio is placed into a position of physical and psychological distress, and his sense of reality is repeatedly manipulated and denied by the other characters.
 - The idea that a person experiencing mental illness is possessed by the devil is ableist, although it does reflect early modern beliefs about the potential causes of mental illness.

Gender Nonconformity and Queer Desire

- Some students might question what it means that Viola's gender disguise is only temporary – is it merely a plot device or a deeper exploration of gender identity or fluidity? Once her female identity is revealed, traditional heterosexual relationships are restored, potentially glossing over more complex discussions about gender and sexuality.
- Similarly, students might question why expressions of queer desire – between Sebastian and Antonio, Orsino and Cesario/Viola, or Olivia and Cesario/Viola – ultimately give way to traditional heterosexual marriages. Still, it's worth considering how forms of queer desire are not fully erased by the play's ending.
- In 2.2, Viola describes herself as a 'poor monster' because of her androgyny. This corresponds with early modern understandings of gender nonconforming people as 'monsters' – a term which could denote the unnatural or supernatural, Gods disfavour and also physical disabilities. Students may find this derogatory representation of gender expression upsetting.

Alcohol

- Sir Toby's and Sir Andrew's excessive drinking could be triggering for some, especially as it often framed as an addiction.

Misogyny

- There are some descriptions of women with misogynistic undertones, and this is sometimes voiced by female-identifying characters.
- In 2.2, Viola represents women as frail and weak: 'our frailty is the cause, not we, / For such as we are made of, such we be'.
- In 2.4, Orsino's misogynistic speech is largely motivated by Olivia's rejection of him. He describes women as inconstant, less capable of feeling nuanced emotions and more inclined to pursue appetite than true feelings of love.

Classism

- Illyria is a society which is clearly concerned with distinctions in class, wealth and social standing. The socially elite – including Orsino and Olivia – are sharply distinguished from the lower status characters.
- Malvolio is brutally mocked for having ambitions above his station as a steward.
 - This is clearest when Sir Toby, Maria and other characters convince Malvolio that Olivia wants to marry him. To other characters, this is completely absurd.

Racial and Religious Prejudice

- Some of the language in *Twelfth Night* has undertones of racial and religious prejudice.
- In 2.3, Sir Toby derogatorily refers to Maria as 'a Cathayan', meaning a person from China (Cathay is the ancient Mongolian name for China). In early modern English writing about foreign cultures, people from this region were associated with deceit and lying.
- In 3.2, Malvolio is described as having 'turned heathen, a very renegado'. These were terms used to derogatorily refer to non-Christians, and more specifically to Muslims. There was a fascination in this period with Christians 'turking Turk' – that is, converting to Islam.