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Notes on Twelfth Night

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Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* remains one of the most celebrated romantic comedies in the English literary canon, cherished for its lively blend of humor, wit, and profound insight into human nature. Written at the dawn of the seventeenth century, this play captures the festive atmosphere and playful chaos surrounding the Twelfth Night holiday—a time marked by masquerades, overturned social order, and the joyous suspension of rules. For generations of students and playgoers, *Twelfth Night* has offered both entertainment and a revealing lens through which to view Elizabethan society, human relationships, and questions of identity.

As a work designed to delight its original audiences during the winter revelries, *Twelfth Night* brilliantly encapsulates the transition from the old year to the new, a moment for transformation and renewal. Shakespeare exploits the traditions of disguise, mistaken identity, and festivity that accompanied the Twelfth Night celebration, channeling them into a vibrant comedy that investigates love in all its forms—romantic, unrequited, identical, and self-directed. The play's subtitle, "What You Will," further hints at the openness with which we might approach these themes, inviting us to interpret the mayhem and longing that unfold according to our own experiences and desires.

For English literature students, *Twelfth Night* provides an invaluable opportunity to trace Shakespeare's creative influences, examine his deft manipulation of comic and romantic tropes, and consider the implications of his characters' schemes and self-discoveries. The world of Illyria, at once unfamiliar and universal, serves as a stage for both the airing of contemporary social tensions and the contemplation of perennial issues—gender, ambition, class, and the pain and joy of love.

This book is designed as a comprehensive set of notes and commentary tailored for students. Each chapter unpacks a different aspect of the play, beginning with its historical context and sources before delving into individual characters, themes, language, and performance. Careful attention is paid to Shakespeare's style: his use of both prose and poetic blank verse, the vital role of puns and wordplay, and the importance of song and music in establishing the play's shifting moods. Along the way, readers will find detailed analysis of the main and comic subplots, as well as thoughtful discussion of the ambiguities—especially of gender and identity—that have fascinated audiences and critics for centuries.

While *Twelfth Night* is above all a comedy, its laughter is never without a hint of darkness or melancholy. The mockery of Malvolio, the threat of madness, and moments of longing and insecurity remind us that beneath the play's surface gaiety

lies a willingness to probe the complexities of the human heart and the unpredictabilities of life itself. This complexity is part of what has secured the play's enduring popularity on the stage and screen, as each new production brings fresh insight into its harmonies and discordances.

By working through the following chapters, students will gain not just a working knowledge of *Twelfth Night*'s plot and characters, but also the critical tools to appreciate its artistry, its layers of meaning, and its continually renewed appeal. Whether approaching the play as a text for study or for performance, these notes aim to illuminate the richness of Shakespeare's vision and encourage readers to make their own discoveries in the world of Illyria.

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CHAPTER ONE: The World of Twelfth Night: Elizabethan Context

To fully appreciate the delightful chaos and subtle observations within *Twelfth Night*, it is essential to understand the vibrant, complex, and often contradictory world from which it sprang: Elizabethan England. When Shakespeare penned this play around the turn of the seventeenth century, England was a nation under the long and relatively stable reign of Queen Elizabeth I, a period often lauded as a "Golden Age" of cultural flourishing. This era was characterized by a robust social hierarchy, burgeoning national identity, significant religious shifts, and a thriving, if sometimes controversial, theatrical scene.

Life in Elizabethan England was structured around a clearly defined social order, often visualized as a Great Chain of Being, extending from God down through the monarch, nobility, gentry, yeomanry, and finally the laborers and the poor at the bottom. While not entirely static, social mobility was generally limited, and one's place in the world was largely determined by birth. This rigid structure meant that outward appearances, particularly clothing, were crucial indicators of status. Sumptuary laws, though not always strictly enforced, dictated what colours, fabrics, and styles people of different ranks were permitted to wear, serving to reinforce visual distinctions between classes. The mere act of dressing "above one's station" could be seen as disruptive to the established order.

Within this hierarchy, the nobility held significant power and influence, often acting as patrons for artists, writers, and theatrical companies. The rising gentry class, composed of wealthy landowners who were not necessarily of noble birth, also gained prominence during Elizabeth's reign, contributing to shifts in the social landscape. Below them were the yeomen, independent farmers who owned their land, and then the vast majority of the population: laborers, servants, and the urban poor. *Twelfth Night*, with its Duke, Countess, knights, gentlemen, gentlewoman, steward, and servants, offers a cross-section of this Elizabethan social structure within the contained world of Illyria.

The role of women in Elizabethan society was largely circumscribed by patriarchal norms. Women were legally subservient to their fathers or husbands and generally could not own property or pursue professions like law or medicine. Their primary roles were within the household, managing domestic affairs and raising children. Education for girls, if available, was often conducted at home and focused on skills deemed appropriate for their future roles, although some notable exceptions existed, particularly among the upper classes, including the Queen herself, who was highly

educated. Marriage was often a strategic alliance between families, with a woman's dowry being an important consideration. Queen Elizabeth I, a powerful unmarried female monarch in a male-dominated world, was a remarkable anomaly, her very existence challenging conventional gender roles and expectations.

The burgeoning theatre scene was a vital part of Elizabethan popular culture, attracting audiences from all social strata. Permanent playhouses began to appear in London in the latter half of the sixteenth century, evolving from earlier forms of dramatic performance like religious mystery plays and university dramas. These public theatres, such as the Globe where Shakespeare's plays were performed, were lively and sometimes boisterous spaces where groundlings stood in the open yard for a penny, while wealthier patrons sat in tiered galleries. The atmosphere was interactive, with audiences often vocal in their reactions.

Acting itself was not initially considered a highly respectable profession, and actors often relied on the patronage of wealthy nobles or even the Queen herself for protection and legitimacy. Theatre companies were structured, with sharers who were part-owners and profit-sharers, along with hired men and boy apprentices who played the female roles, as women were not permitted to perform on the public stage. The need for a constant stream of new plays meant that playwrights like Shakespeare were prolific, often working quickly to provide material for their companies' extensive repertoires.

The theatre of this era served multiple purposes beyond mere entertainment. It was a social gathering place, a source of news and moral instruction (though often debated by more Puritanical elements of society), and, at times, a means for the authorities to gauge or even influence public opinion. Playwrights often drew on a wide range of sources, from classical literature and mythology to contemporary events and prose narratives, adapting and transforming them for the stage.

In a society where appearances were so closely tied to identity and status, the concept of disguise held a particular fascination. While sumptuary laws aimed to prevent deceptive dressing, theatrical performance, by its very nature, involved elaborate costumes and the adoption of different personas. This created an interesting tension, where disguise could be both a source of anxiety (threatening social order) and a source of theatrical delight (enabling plot complications and the exploration of identity). For a play like *Twelfth Night*, where disguise is central to the plot and themes, this Elizabethan context around appearance and identity is particularly relevant.

Elizabethan England was also a society grappling with shifting religious identities following the English Reformation. While Elizabeth I sought a middle ground with her Religious Settlement, tensions between Protestant and Catholic factions persisted, sometimes leading to suspicion and conflict. Superstition and a belief in the

supernatural also remained prevalent, coexisting with burgeoning scientific and intellectual advancements spurred by the Renaissance.

The world of *Twelfth Night*, while set in the somewhat fantastical Illyria, is undeniably filtered through and reflects these aspects of Elizabethan England. The concerns about social hierarchy, the roles of men and women, the power of appearance, the nature of love and desire, and the interplay between order and misrule were all deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness of Shakespeare's audience. Understanding this backdrop provides a richer appreciation for the characters' motivations, the comedic situations that arise, and the underlying social commentary that Shakespeare subtly weaves into the fabric of the play.

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