

Twelfth Night

INTRODUCTION

Twelfth Night, the end of the Christmas season, was traditionally a time of revelry and topsy-turvydom; Shakespeare's title for a play in which a servant aspires to his mistress's hand has no more specific reference. It was thought appropriate to the festive occasion of Candlemas (2 February) 1602 when, in the first known allusion to it, John Manningham, a law student of the Middle Temple in London, noted 'at our feast we had a play called *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*'. References to 'the Sophy'±± the Shah of Persia (2.5.174; 3.4.271)±±probably post-date Sir Robert Shirley's return from Persia, in a ship named *The Sophy*, in 1599; and 'the new map with the augmentation of the Indies' (3.2.75) appears to be one published in 1599 and reissued in 1600. Shakespeare may have picked up the name Orsino for his young duke from a Tuscan nobleman whom Queen Elizabeth entertained at Whitehall with a play performed by Shakespeare's company on Twelfth Night 1601. Probably he wrote *Twelfth Night* during that year.

Twelfth Night's romantic setting is Illyria, the Greek and Roman name for Adriatic territory roughly corresponding to modern Yugoslavia. Manningham had noted that the play was 'much like *The Comedy of Errors* or *Menaechmi* in Plautus', thinking no doubt of the confusions created by identical twins. Shakespeare may also have known an anonymous Italian comedy, *Gl'Ingannati* (*The Deceived Ones*), acted in 1531 and first printed in 1537, which influenced a number of other plays and prose tales including Barnaby Riche's story of Apolonius and Silla printed as part of *Riche's Farewell to Military Profession* (1581). Riche gave Shakespeare his main plot of a shipwrecked girl (Viola) who, disguised as a boy (Cesario), serves a young Duke (Orsino) and undertakes love-errands on his behalf to a noble lady (Olivia) who falls in love with her but mistakenly marries her twin brother (Sebastian). Shakespeare idealizes Riche's characters and purges the story of some its explicit sexuality: Riche's Olivia, for example, is pregnant before marriage, and his Viola reveals her identity, in a manner impractical for a boy actor, by stripping to the waist. Shakespeare

complicates the plot by giving Olivia a reprobate uncle, Sir Toby Belch, and two additional suitors, the asinine Sir Andrew Aguecheek and her steward, Malvolio, tricked by members of her household into believing that she loves him. More important to the play than to the plot is the entirely Shakespearian clown, Feste, a wry and oblique commentator whose wit in folly is opposed to Malvolio's folly in wit.

Twelfth Night is the consummation of Shakespeare's romantic comedy, a play of wide emotional range, extending from the robust, brilliantly orchestrated humour of the scene of midnight revelry (2.2) to the rapt wonder of the antiphon of recognition (5.1.224±±56) between the reunited twins. In performance the balance shifts, favouring sometimes the exposure and celebration of folly, at other times the poignancy of unattained love and of unheeded wisdom; but few other plays have so consistently provided theatrical pleasure of so high an order.