WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE'S
TWELFTH NIGHT
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Twelfth Night, or
What You Will

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IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S TWELFTH NIGHT, much of the humor and drama springs from the inversion of gender roles and the greater disruption of the social order. However, class roles remain largely static in the late-Elizabethan play, and it was this observation that compelled us to set our staging of Twelfth Night in 21st century corporate America.

Indeed, Illyrian and corporate American society share many striking similarities. Both, for example, possess clearly delineated class structures. Even though the Illyrian class structure is based on family and bloodlines, while that of corporate America is based on income levels and economics in general, the basic principle is the same. Thus, the nobles of Twelfth Night’s Illyria become the economic elite in this adaptation, with Duke Orsino and Olivia acting as CEOs of major corporations. Their proposed marriage parallels a corporate merger—appropriate, given that marriages between noble people in the early modern period were usually rooted in economic and social motivations, with the individuals or families involved hoping to consolidate their resources and gain wealth or status.

Corporate American society also mirrors Illyrian society in that both construct gender roles in a similar manner. As a female head of house, Olivia is quite unique for her time period, when a woman did not usually play that role. Conversely, Olivia would be equally unique as a female CEO, given the scarcity of women in the corporate elite. Indeed, the strong female characters of Twelfth Night are unusual in either setting, because men so heavily dominate both spheres.

With this in mind, it is also important to note the inherent conservatism of both settings. For all that Twelfth Night seems to challenge the social order, nearly everything returns to “normal” by the end of the play. Ultimately, gender and identity confusion are clarified, and the major characters neatly pair up—a triple “happy ending.” Furthermore, neither at the end of the play, nor at any other point in Twelfth Night, is there any actual possibility of a character violently disrupting the social order. Indeed, when Olivia and Cesario/Viola meet for the first time, she asks him “what is your parentage?” (1.5.223), clearly checking whether it would be socially acceptable to pursue this young man. Corporate America is similarly conservative, not only in terms of the previously discussed gender roles, but also in the sense that established corporations are often bound to means of operation that leave little room for the possibility of change. Of course, this barely scratches the surface of this issue, but we hope this will offer at least a partial explanation.

Ultimately, we hope this adaptation of Twelfth Night will prove not only to be a fresh and enjoyable way of watching the play, but will also encourage the audience to think critically both of the text and especially the setting, which is especially relevant given this time of economic turmoil.

Plot Summary

THE PLAY BEGINS WITH A SHIPWRECK ON THE ISLAND OF ILLYRIA; twins Viola and Sebastian are separated and think each other dead. For ambiguous reasons, Viola decides to disguise herself as a eunuch/page boy and adopts the name Cesario. Thus disguised, Viola joins Duke Orsino’s court. Orsino is madly in love with a noble woman named Olivia, who has repeatedly rejected his suits. Undaunted, Orsino—who already trusts his new friend explicitly—sends “Cesario” to Olivia to convince her of his love. Unfortunately, Olivia falls in love with Cesario/Viola instead, even as Viola herself has fallen for Orsino. Meanwhile, Sebastian and his rescuer, a pirate named Antonio, make their way to Illyria.

At the same time as these events are taking place, Olivia’s uncle, Sir Toby, and her maid, Maria, engage in their own mischief. They play an elaborate practical joke on Malvolio, Olivia’s steward, who has ambitions to rise above his current social standing—possibly by marrying his mistress. Maria and Sir Toby trick Malvolio into believing that Olivia is in love with him, which results in great humor. Also involved in the prank is a visiting knight by the name of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who also wishes to marry Olivia. Egged on by Sir Toby, a jealous Sir Andrew challenges Cesario/Viola to a duel for Olivia’s love. It just so happens, however, that Antonio is passing by, and he saves Cesario/Viola from the duel—mistaking Viola for her twin, Sebastian. At the same time as this is taking place, however, the real Sebastian meets Olivia who, mistaking him for Cesario/Viola, proposes to the enthusiastically agreeable Sebastian. The two marry, and when Orsino finds out about the union between Olivia and “Cesario,” he becomes incensed. Just as the scene is poised to become violent, Sebastian joins the others, resulting in initial confusion and ultimately the revelation of Viola’s true identity. The end of the play brings “happy endings” for all the characters except Malvolio. Maria marries Sir Toby, Olivia and Sebastian are married, and Orsino and Viola end up together.
Theme

**SOME MAY WONDER AT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE OF TWELFTH NIGHT**, and indeed, it is the basis of one of the most prominent underlying themes in the play. *Twelfth Night* refers to the Feast of the Epiphany on the twelfth day after Christmas, where celebrants could expect something fantastic to happen. During these traditional Christmas celebrations, one person was chosen at random to act as the “Lord of Misrule,” a position that allowed the commoner to possess the authority of a high class individual. This inversion of social order sets the foundation of the play, where the disruption of conventional societal roles results in a slow descent into massive confusion. And indeed, the social inversions throughout *Twelfth Night* emphasize the idea that this confusion of class is needed to disrupt the old, static and irrelevant social order, thereby bringing clarification and the birth a new order. It also asserts the idea that the identity of a person is almost completely performative. This instability of social roles also parallels the theatre itself, where character is never fixed and identity is nothing if not a performance—sometimes convincing, sometimes not.

Throughout this play, there are many occurrences of social inversions, such as Viola’s performance as “Cesario,” Olivia as the head of the household, the fool Feste as Sir Topas, and Maria forging the letter to impersonate a high-status individual. The idea that females have a higher power than males essentially deconstructs the view of gender roles. Orsino, who should be a powerful man, almost comes across as cowardly since he needs Cesario/Viola in order to court Olivia. Indeed, Cesario/Viola states that she would, “Make me a willow cabin at your gate/ And call upon my soul within the house” (1.5.214-215), suggesting that if she were to court a lady, she would actually be present at the lady’s house, and perhaps subtly criticizing Orsino’s self-indulgent behavior. Olivia’s high status makes Malvolio’s love for her seem comical, a sentiment that is emphasized by the prank Maria plays on him with her letter—making him look like a fool. In this play, the majority of the male characters are portrayed as possessing weak personalities, whereas the female characters are inordinately strong and bring order to society—a juxtaposition that may have been startling to audiences during Shakespeare’s time.

However, returning to the points made in the Director’s Note, these inversions and juxtapositions are ultimately resolved and more or less normalized by the end of the play. Thus, it is unclear whether *Twelfth Night* clarifies the conventional social order with this resolution, or if it challenges the social order by suggesting the inversions at all. This performance favors the former, for the most part, but it is still a compelling question to consider.

Symbolism

**LETTERS**

*He shall think, by the letters that thou wilt drop, that they come from my niece, and that she’s in love with him.* (2.3.134-35)

The characters of *Twelfth Night* frequently exchange letters and other tokens, telling items that reflect the larger thematic concerns of the play. The letters, especially, serve as an important symbol for the confusion and miscommunication that is so central to the plot—symbolism that is underlined by its irony, given the usual purpose of letters. “Olivia’s” letter to Malvolio is a prime example of this, as the letter is not written by Olivia at all, but is instead created by Maria, Sir Toby, and Sir Andrew as a means of taking revenge on Malvolio for having designs above his station. Indeed, letters in *Twelfth Night* are usually deceptive in intent or content—if they are delivered at all. This both adds to and parallels the larger confusion of the play and it speaks to the—in this case amusing—chaos that results from the lack of effective communication.

**OLIVIA’S VEIL**

*Give me my veil. Come, throw it o’er my face. We’ll once more hear Orsino’s embassy.* (1.5.129-30)

*Twelfth Night* is filled with problems of identity. Characters pretend to be who they are not, as when Maria and Feste visit Malvolio in his prison and assume the identities of a priest and Sir Topas, respectively. They create entirely new false identities, as Violas does when she becomes “Cesario.” They are mistaken for other characters, as happens to Viola and Sebastian at the end of the play. Thus, Olivia’s veil, which she dons in Act I before meeting “Cesario” for the first time, is a perfect symbol for the impermanence and malleability of identity within the play. The ease with which she dons and doffs it reflects the way other characters “play” with their identities, putting them on and taking them off as the situation calls for it. Finally, Olivia’s veil is doubly appropriate because it, as a facial covering, mirrors the costumes or body coverings that are so crucial in constructing character disguise and identity.

**THE SEA**

...*I saw your brother,*

*Most provident in peril, bind himself,
*Courage and hope both teaching him the practice,*

*To a strong mast that lived upon the sea;*

*Where like Arion on the dolphin’s back,*

*I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves*

*So long as I could see.* (1.2.11-17)
The sea is a very changeable entity—powerful, but uncertain. In *Twelfth Night*, the sea creates a clean slate for Viola and Sebastian by essentially wiping away their past; the twins arrive on the island with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, their personal histories more or less erased. Illyria, home of Duke Orsino and the setting of the play, is an island surrounded by the sea and thus divorced from the tighter constraints of society—and reality. This condition lends itself to the relative freedom from conventions—the misrule of “Twelfth Night” as a holiday, where societal roles are overturned for a brief period of time. As a result, the sea comes to represent instability in the social order, especially in terms of gender roles, even as it offers the opportunity for the destabilization of these roles through the erasure of historical precedent.

**Designers’ Note**

After reading our collaborator’s project brief and becoming clear on the story line of the play, we wrote out themes and possible symbols to use for the poster. Our collaborators followed the story line of *Twelfth Night*; however they transformed themes and symbols to play out in the business world. The main themes we uncovered from the project brief were gender roles and social class. Our collaborators chose to place the play in 21st Century corporate America while playing out both gender roles and social class themes. We wanted to incorporate these themes into the poster. Not only did gender roles come into play, but they came about through characters’ disguises. To portray a disguise, subtlety was a necessity. We aimed to turn the symbols provided from the actual Shakespeare play into more modern symbols; the sea became a city (New York City), and the veil became a hat.

Our illustration concept came about mostly because of the subtle portrayal of a woman dressed as a man—one of the main female characters, Viola, dresses as and pretends to be a man, her twin brother, throughout most of the play. Our goal was to make this aspect clear by having a piece of female hair slipping out of the hat, which is holding the rest of the hair back. The hair slipping out of the hat is important in relaying the message to the audience. We completed complementing illustrations of a mustache and a tie to complete the disguise. Ultimately, we chose to leave the three elements alone with no actual face or person within the poster to maintain the sense of mystery and disguise Viola is trying to accomplish throughout the play. By having hair slightly slipping out of the hat, it becomes clear that a woman is in disguise and that the disguise is not completely effective.

Using black and white best maintains the minimal feel created by the poster. The color contained within the hair forces the viewer’s eye to that point, which helps to emphasize the importance of the element. Showcasing just one or two elements of the corporate world enables the user to see various things. The tie and possibly the hat allude to corporate America. The mustache is both recognizable and is one usually seen in a disguise, but it could also be seen as just a man’s mustache. The choice of typeface, specifically the name, really solidifies the corporateness of the play. We chose Officina Serif and Officina Sans. The typeface is more modern, but the use of a serif type for Shakespeare’s name references typefaces used to make something feel classic. The use of ample white space is reminiscent of a corporate memo.
**THIS PROGRAM** and the corresponding theater poster were produced as part of an interdisciplinary collaboration between students in two *Reading Shakespeare* classes and two *Graphic Design Two* classes at Drake University in Spring 2011. The program is typeset in Chaparral Pro.

**THIS PROJECT** was conceived and organized by Sarah Hogan (Department of English) and Hilary Williams (Department of Art & Design).