



Social Ambition and Class in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

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Abstract: William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; or, *What You Will* is often celebrated as a romantic comedy of mistaken identities, love, disguise, and festive disorder. Beneath its comic surface, however, the play presents a significant examination of social ambition and class consciousness. The social world of Illyria is structured by distinctions of rank, wealth, education, manners, and inherited status. Characters such as Sir Toby Belch, Maria, Malvolio, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Olivia, and Orsino reveal different relationships to this hierarchy. While some characters accept their social positions, others attempt to rise above them through marriage, self-fashioning, manipulation, or association with the powerful. Malvolio represents the most conspicuous example of social ambition: his fantasy of marrying Olivia is inseparable from his desire to transform his social identity. Maria, meanwhile, demonstrates a more practical form of social mobility, using intelligence and theatrical ingenuity to improve her position. Sir Andrew's dependence on wealth exposes the relationship between money and status, whereas Sir Toby's parasitic aristocratic identity reveals the instability of inherited privilege. Through disguise and role reversal, Shakespeare temporarily unsettles conventional hierarchies, but the final restoration of social order suggests that festive freedom has definite limits. This paper argues that *Twelfth Night* simultaneously mocks social ambition and exposes the arbitrary foundations of class distinction, making the comedy a subtle commentary on early modern English society.

Index Terms - Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, social ambition, class, social mobility, Malvolio, Maria, Sir Toby, hierarchy, status.

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, probably written around 1601–1602, is one of the most sophisticated comedies of the Elizabethan and early Jacobean period. The play is conventionally approached as a romantic comedy involving the intertwined relationships of Viola, Orsino, Olivia, Sebastian, and Antonio. Its comic structure depends heavily on disguise, mistaken identity, gender reversal, and unexpected marriages. Yet the play also contains a persistent concern with social position and class hierarchy.

Illyria is not a socially neutral world. Its characters occupy recognizable positions within a hierarchy determined by aristocratic birth, wealth, household employment, education, manners, and proximity to power. Shakespeare repeatedly places characters from different social levels in contact with one another. Their interactions reveal the tensions between who a person is socially and who that person imagines himself or herself to be.

The theme becomes particularly important in the characterization of Malvolio. As Olivia's steward, Malvolio occupies a position of authority within her household but remains socially inferior to her. His ambition to marry Olivia therefore involves more than romantic desire. He imagines a complete transformation of his social identity. His fantasy of becoming "Count Malvolio" demonstrates how social ambition can become a form of self-deception. At the same time, his treatment by Sir Toby and Maria raises a more troubling question: is Malvolio ridiculous merely because he is ambitious, or is he punished because he violates the boundaries of his class?

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ’em.” — Malvolio (2.5)

The social dimension of the play is inseparable from its comic treatment of identity. Characters are repeatedly judged according to birth, title, clothing, occupation, manners, and proximity to authority. The result is a dramatic world in which status appears fixed in theory but surprisingly flexible in practice. This tension is especially visible when characters move between household service and aristocratic society.

The play consequently raises an important social question: How far may an individual attempt to rise above his or her inherited social position? Shakespeare does not provide a simple answer. He mocks pretension, but he also exposes the cruelty of a society in which social hierarchy determines who is entitled to dream of advancement.

2. Social Hierarchy in the World of *Twelfth Night*

The society represented in *Twelfth Night* is characterized by a clear distinction between aristocratic figures and household dependants. Duke Orsino and Countess Olivia belong to the upper social order. Sir Toby, although a gentleman, possesses neither Orsino’s political authority nor Olivia’s wealth. Sir Andrew is a gentleman whose social identity depends largely upon inherited wealth. Maria occupies the position of a waiting-gentlewoman in Olivia’s household, while Malvolio is steward.

The household itself becomes a miniature social structure. Olivia possesses authority over those who serve her, but her household is also a space where servants and dependants exercise considerable influence. The apparent stability of this hierarchy is repeatedly disturbed by comic behaviour.

Shakespeare therefore creates a tension between formal hierarchy and practical power. Malvolio, for example, is socially subordinate to Olivia, but he exercises authority over other members of the household. His position gives him enough power to antagonize Sir Toby and Maria, even though he does not possess aristocratic status. His famous complaint about disorder reveals his obsession with social propriety: “Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?”

Malvolio (2.3)

The household structure also shows that class is not simply a vertical ladder. Authority can be divided: Olivia possesses aristocratic and economic power, Malvolio exercises household discipline, Sir Toby commands social influence through kinship, and Maria and Feste exercise forms of practical and intellectual power. Thus, the play distinguishes formal rank from the ability to influence events.

The phrase “respect of place” is particularly significant. Malvolio believes that every person should behave according to his or her social position. His objection to Sir Toby’s drinking and singing is therefore not merely moral; it is fundamentally class-conscious. He believes that social order depends upon proper behaviour.

3. Malvolio and the Psychology of Social Ambition

Malvolio is the most important character through whom Shakespeare explores social ambition. He is Olivia’s steward and therefore possesses considerable authority, but he remains a servant. His ambition is revealed most clearly in the forged letter prepared by Maria. The letter persuades Malvolio that Olivia secretly loves him. It also instructs him to display behaviours that will make him appear socially elevated: “Remember who commended thy yellow stockings, and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered”.

Malvolio obediently adopts the prescribed appearance. His yellow stockings and cross-gartering become external symbols of his imagined transformation. His social fantasy reaches its highest point when he imagines himself married to Olivia: “Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown.”

The imagery of “officers,” “branched velvet gown,” and aristocratic authority reveals that Malvolio does not merely desire Olivia as a woman. He desires the social identity that marriage with Olivia would provide. Most revealingly, he imagines himself as: “Count Malvolio!”

This exclamation exposes the psychological connection between romantic and social ambition. Malvolio’s dream is not simply “I will marry Olivia”; it is “I will become a count.” Marriage becomes a mechanism for social transformation. “To be Count Malvolio!” — Malvolio (2.5)

Malvolio's fantasy is significant because it joins erotic desire to social self-fashioning. The forged letter does not merely persuade him that Olivia loves him; it supplies a script through which he imagines himself performing aristocratic identity. His response reveals how readily social aspiration can become dependent upon appearances and imagined recognition.

Shakespeare makes the fantasy comic because Malvolio has mistaken desire for reality. Yet his dream also reflects a broader social reality: marriage could be a significant means of improving social position. His ambition is therefore not entirely irrational. What makes it comic is the disproportion between his actual position and the certainty with which he imagines his elevation.

4. Malvolio: Ambition or Social Transgression?

Malvolio's punishment is one of the most disturbing elements of the play. The other characters regard him as arrogant, puritanical, and self-important. His humiliation is presented as comic revenge. However, a closer examination reveals that his real offence may be his attempt to cross a social boundary.

Sir Toby and Maria do not merely dislike Malvolio's personality. They resent his attempt to exercise authority over them. Sir Toby declares: "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?"

The line exposes the conflict between Malvolio's moral discipline and the festive culture of Sir Toby's circle. Yet beneath this conflict lies a struggle for control over Olivia's household.

Malvolio's imagined rise threatens the existing social order. If he becomes Olivia's husband, the steward would become master. His fantasy therefore overturns the hierarchy that currently places Olivia above him and Malvolio beneath her. "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" — Sir Toby (2.3)

The treatment of Malvolio also invites a distinction between legitimate criticism of arrogance and collective punishment of a social outsider. His opponents exploit precisely the ambition that they know will make him vulnerable. The prank therefore functions simultaneously as comic entertainment and as a mechanism for enforcing the household's existing boundaries.

His punishment consequently serves two functions. On the comic level, it restores laughter and exposes vanity. On the social level, it disciplines an individual who has imagined himself beyond his allotted position.

5. Maria and Social Mobility

Maria provides a fascinating contrast to Malvolio. She is socially inferior to Olivia but demonstrates extraordinary intelligence, creativity, and practical power. Unlike Malvolio, however, she does not openly fantasize about becoming an aristocrat. Instead, she uses intelligence to manipulate the existing social structure.

Her greatest achievement is the forged letter. Through this theatrical deception, Maria controls Malvolio's behaviour and ultimately transforms her own position. "The devil a Puritan that he is, or anything constantly but a time-pleaser." — Maria (2.3)

Maria's success is rooted in her ability to read people and manipulate the conventions of the household. Her letter is a piece of social theatre: it converts Malvolio's desire for advancement into evidence against him. Her eventual marriage to Sir Toby further demonstrates that mobility in the play is mediated by relationships and opportunity rather than achieved through abstract merit alone.

At the end of the play, Maria becomes Sir Toby's wife. The marriage provides her with a form of social advancement. Her intelligence allows her to move from waiting-gentlewoman to the wife of a gentleman. This outcome is important because Shakespeare presents two forms of social ambition: Malvolio's ambition is imaginative and self-deluding. Maria's ambition is practical, strategic, and successful. Both seek transformation, but Shakespeare rewards Maria because she understands the mechanisms of social power. She does not simply imagine a new identity; she actively constructs one.

6. Sir Toby Belch and the Decline of Aristocratic Privilege

Sir Toby represents another dimension of class. He belongs to the gentlemanly world but possesses little productive purpose. His lifestyle depends heavily upon Olivia's wealth and hospitality. He enjoys drinking, entertainment, and social disorder. His behaviour challenges Malvolio's idea that social status requires disciplined conduct.

Sir Toby's aristocratic identity therefore appears increasingly unstable. He possesses inherited status but lacks economic independence and moral responsibility. His social superiority is largely a matter of birth and association.

“Out of my lean and low ability / I’ll mend it with a little help from you.” — Sir Toby (2.3)

Sir Toby's conduct complicates any assumption that inherited status corresponds to superior character. He depends on Olivia's household while behaving as though his gentlemanly identity authorizes disorder. His conflict with Malvolio consequently becomes a conflict between competing definitions of what status should mean: disciplined hierarchy on one side and inherited privilege expressed through festivity on the other.

His treatment of Sir Andrew is especially revealing. Sir Andrew is persuaded to spend money while remaining dependent on Sir Toby's friendship. Their relationship exposes a social world in which wealth, status, and manipulation are closely connected. Sir Toby's eventual marriage to Maria is also significant. The marriage connects the gentlemanly class with the intelligent servant class and suggests a limited form of social mobility.

7. Sir Andrew Aguecheek: Wealth Without Substance

Sir Andrew is another comic representation of class identity. He believes himself socially suitable for Olivia, but he possesses neither the intelligence nor the courage necessary to justify his confidence. Sir Toby's description of him as: “an ass” captures the comic discrepancy between appearance and reality.

Sir Andrew's principal advantage is his wealth. His social position depends largely upon money and gentlemanly appearance. Shakespeare therefore suggests that class identity is not necessarily connected with personal merit. This becomes an important counterpoint to Malvolio. Malvolio has ambition but lacks aristocratic birth; Sir Andrew has aristocratic status but lacks ability. The juxtaposition raises a fundamental question: Is social worth determined by birth, wealth, conduct, or intelligence?

“I was adored once too.” — Sir Andrew (5.1)

Sir Andrew demonstrates that economic resources can sustain a social identity even when personal qualities do not support it. His willingness to spend money and his confidence in his suitability for Olivia expose the difference between possessing the signs of gentility and possessing the qualities that the play associates with genuine distinction.

The comedy never provides a definitive answer, but it repeatedly demonstrates that these categories do not naturally coincide.

8. Olivia and the Power of Aristocratic Status

Olivia represents the established upper class. Her wealth gives her extraordinary independence. She controls her household, rejects Orsino's advances, and determines whom she will marry. Her attraction to Cesario is especially interesting because she believes Cesario to be a young man of uncertain but apparently acceptable social identity. When Sebastian appears, the confusion allows Shakespeare to demonstrate how much social identity depends upon external appearance. Olivia's position means that she can choose rather than merely be chosen. Her wealth provides her with agency that characters of lower status do not possess. “I do I know not what, and fear to find / Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind.” — Olivia (1.5)

Olivia's independence is partly enabled by her wealth and household authority. She can refuse Orsino's proposal, choose her own object of affection, and direct the behaviour of dependants. Yet her attraction to Cesario demonstrates that even a socially powerful woman can be governed by appearances and emotional uncertainty.

However, Shakespeare also complicates aristocratic privilege by showing that Olivia herself can be deceived by appearances. The supposedly stable social hierarchy becomes vulnerable to disguise and mistaken identity.

9. Disguise and the Temporary Suspension of Class

Viola's disguise as Cesario is central to the play's exploration of social identity. Viola, a woman of noble birth, assumes the identity of a male servant or attendant to Duke Orsino. As Cesario, she gains access to spaces and opportunities unavailable to her as Viola. Her disguise demonstrates that social identity can be performed. Clothing, speech, gender, and behaviour all contribute to how society recognizes an individual. “Conceal me what I am, and be my aid / For such disguise as, haply, shall become / The form of my intent.” — Viola (1.2)

Viola's disguise produces a temporary suspension of ordinary social and gender expectations. As Cesario, she gains access to Orsino's confidence and becomes an intermediary in the courtship of Olivia. The device suggests that social recognition

depends partly upon performance, although the final revelation of Viola's noble birth shows that the comedy ultimately restores a conventional basis for her marriage to Orsino.

This idea is closely connected with class. If people can be persuaded to accept Viola as Cesario, then identity is not entirely determined by birth. It is partly produced through performance. The play therefore anticipates a modern understanding of identity as socially constructed. Yet Shakespeare does not completely dismantle class hierarchy. Viola's eventual marriage to Orsino is possible partly because her birth is noble. The play's social mobility is therefore carefully controlled.

10. Feste and Social Intelligence

Feste, the Fool, occupies an unusual position. Formally, he is a servant, but intellectually he is often superior to the aristocratic characters around him. His wit allows him to move between social groups. He can speak truths to Olivia, mock Sir Toby, challenge Malvolio, and participate in the deception surrounding the household. Feste demonstrates that social status and intellectual value are not identical. His famous observation, "Better a witty fool than a foolish wit", captures one of the central principles of the comedy. A person may possess high social status but lack wisdom, while someone of low social position may possess extraordinary intelligence. "Better a witty fool than a foolish wit." — Feste (1.5)

Feste's role is especially valuable to a class-based reading because his occupational status as a fool coexists with unusual freedom of speech. He can criticize people of higher rank because his licensed foolishness provides a protective social role. The play therefore separates intellectual authority from formal hierarchy.

Feste's position therefore complicates the social hierarchy. He lacks aristocratic rank, but his verbal intelligence gives him considerable cultural power.

11. Marriage as an Instrument of Social Mobility

Marriage is one of the major mechanisms through which social relationships are reorganized at the end of *Twelfth Night*. The final pairings include: Viola and Orsino, Olivia and Sebastian, Maria and Sir Toby. These marriages do not merely resolve romantic confusion. They also reorganize social relationships.

The marriage between Maria and Sir Toby is particularly significant because it represents movement across class boundaries. Maria's intelligence and strategic ability allow her to achieve a higher social position. Malvolio, however, fails to achieve his desired marriage. His ambition remains a fantasy. "And all is semblable a woman's part." — Sebastian (5.1)

The marriages at the conclusion do not erase class distinctions; instead, they rearrange them. Viola and Olivia ultimately marry men whose identities and status make the unions socially intelligible within the play's world. Maria's marriage to Sir Toby is the clearest instance of upward movement across household rank, while Malvolio's failed aspiration marks the limits imposed upon his social ambition.

The contrast suggests that Shakespeare distinguishes between social mobility grounded in mutual recognition and social ambition based on self-delusion.

12. Festive Inversion and Social Order

The title *Twelfth Night* evokes the festive traditions associated with the Christmas season, particularly the temporary inversion of ordinary social roles. During such festivities, servants could symbolically become masters, fools could become kings, and established hierarchies could be mocked.

Shakespeare incorporates this principle into the dramatic structure of the play. Servants challenge masters; women exercise unusual independence; Viola becomes Cesario; Malvolio imagines himself as Count; Feste occupies intellectual authority; and Sir Toby transforms the household into a space of carnival. Yet the inversion does not last forever.

At the conclusion, social identities are largely restored. The temporary disorder gives way to a new but recognizable social arrangement. This is one of the central paradoxes of the play: The comedy permits social hierarchy to be challenged only within the controlled space of festive entertainment. "If music be the food of love, play on." — Orsino (1.1)

The comic energy of *Twelfth Night* depends on allowing characters to experience possibilities that ordinary social discipline would restrict. Festive inversion creates a temporary arena in which servants can outwit superiors, gender roles can be exchanged, and ambitious fantasies can become visible. The return to order at the end indicates that the play's social experiment is temporary rather than revolutionary.

The audience can laugh at class boundaries without necessarily witnessing their complete destruction.

13. Shakespeare's Critique of Class Consciousness

Shakespeare's treatment of class is neither simply conservative nor revolutionary. Instead, he exposes contradictions within the social hierarchy. On the one hand, Malvolio's ambition is ridiculed. The play seems to suggest that individuals should recognize their social limitations.

On the other hand, the aristocratic characters are hardly ideal representatives of social superiority. Sir Toby is irresponsible; Sir Andrew is foolish; Orsino is emotionally self-absorbed; and Olivia is vulnerable to romantic fantasy. Meanwhile, lower-ranking characters such as Maria and Feste frequently demonstrate greater intelligence. Shakespeare therefore separates social rank from human value.

“What is love? 'tis not hereafter.” — Feste (2.3)

A central irony is that the supposedly superior characters are frequently dependent upon those beneath them. Olivia needs servants to manage her household; Sir Toby relies on Olivia's resources; Malvolio relies upon the very people he attempts to discipline; and aristocratic characters repeatedly depend on the wit of lower-ranking figures. Comedy thus makes social hierarchy visible as a system of mutual dependence.

A person's birth does not necessarily determine his or her intelligence, moral worth, or capacity for action. The comedy repeatedly demonstrates that socially powerful characters can be foolish and socially subordinate characters can be brilliant.

14. Social Ambition and Self-Fashioning

One of the most significant features of *Twelfth Night* is its interest in self-fashioning. Characters attempt to create identities through clothing, language, behaviour, and association. Malvolio's yellow stockings are a particularly obvious example. He believes that by changing his external appearance, he can transform his social identity.

Viola similarly changes her clothes and identity as Cesario. Maria creates an imaginary Olivia through the forged letter. Feste assumes the role of Sir Topas during Malvolio's confinement. The play thus presents identity as theatrical. People become what others believe them to be, at least temporarily.

“An I thought he had been valiant, for the queen of the fairies.” — Maria (2.3)

The play repeatedly presents clothing and language as technologies of identity. Malvolio's yellow stockings, Viola's male clothing, and Feste's assumption of the Sir Topas persona demonstrate that social identity can be staged. Yet the success of such performances depends on the audience's willingness to believe them.

This theatricality has particular importance for class. If status can be performed, then social hierarchy is revealed as partly dependent upon collective belief.

15. Social Ambition as Comic and Tragic

Malvolio's story is comic because his ambition is exaggerated. His confidence in the forged letter produces ridiculous behaviour, and the audience is encouraged to laugh at his self-deception. Yet his final condition introduces a darker tone. He exits declaring: “I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you”.

This ending prevents the audience from interpreting his humiliation as entirely harmless. Malvolio's ambition may be foolish, but his punishment is excessive. His confinement and public humiliation reveal the cruelty that can exist within social comedy. His final threat suggests that the class conflict has not actually been resolved. The festive ending conceals a continuing resentment.

“I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you.” — Malvolio (5.1)

The darkness of Malvolio's ending complicates the conventional comic resolution. Although his vanity has been ridiculed, the collective humiliation he suffers leaves an unresolved grievance. His final declaration transforms the social joke into a reminder that exclusion can generate lasting resentment.

This ambiguity is one reason why Malvolio remains one of Shakespeare's most controversial comic characters.

16. Class, Power, and Social Control

The conflict between Malvolio and the other household members can also be understood as a struggle for power. Malvolio attempts to impose discipline from above. Sir Toby and Maria resist him through mockery and deception. The forged letter becomes a weapon of social control. Maria understands Malvolio's ambition and uses it against him.

This demonstrates that power does not operate only through formal authority. It also operates through: language, deception, performance, reputation, sexuality, wealth, and social knowledge.

“I am sure care’s an enemy to life.” — Feste (1.3)

The conflict also demonstrates that power circulates through knowledge. Maria knows Malvolio's weaknesses; Sir Toby understands the household's festive culture; Feste understands how language can destabilize authority. Malvolio's formal position is therefore insufficient to guarantee control. Shakespeare presents social power as something negotiated through information, performance, reputation, and collective action.

Malvolio has institutional authority but lacks the social intelligence necessary to protect himself. Maria has less formal authority but possesses superior knowledge of human behaviour. Shakespeare thereby distinguishes between official power and practical power.

17. Early Modern Context

The theme of social ambition in *Twelfth Night* becomes more meaningful when considered against the social realities of early modern England. Elizabethan and Jacobean society was strongly hierarchical. Social position was influenced by birth, land, wealth, occupation, education, and patronage.

At the same time, the period experienced increasing economic and social mobility. The growth of commerce, professional occupations, urban culture, and courtly patronage created opportunities for individuals to improve their social position.

Marriage was particularly important in establishing or improving status. Against this historical background, Malvolio's fantasy is not simply absurd. His ambition reflects a society in which social advancement was possible but remained constrained by class expectations.

“Fortune forbid my outside have not charm’d her!” — Sebastian (4.3)

Within an early modern setting marked by hierarchy and patronage, the fantasy of changing one's station carries both attraction and danger. The play's comic treatment of advancement should therefore be read alongside its awareness that rank was materially consequential. The distinction between gentleman, servant, steward, and noble household is not merely verbal; it affects authority, marriage prospects, and economic security.

Shakespeare's comedy therefore reflects the tension between a rigid hierarchical ideology and an increasingly mobile social reality.

18. Critical Interpretation

A class-based reading of *Twelfth Night* reveals that the play is not simply about love overcoming obstacles. It is also about the relationship between desire and social legitimacy. Malvolio desires Olivia but lacks the social status that would make his desire acceptable to the other characters. Maria desires advancement and achieves it through intelligence. Sir Andrew possesses status and wealth but lacks personal merit. Feste lacks conventional status but possesses superior intellectual authority.

The resulting pattern suggests that Shakespeare is interested in the difference between: social position and personal worth. The comedy destabilizes the assumption that aristocratic status automatically corresponds to superiority. However, it ultimately preserves enough of the social hierarchy to remain recognizable as a comedy of its historical period.

“Journeys end in lovers’ meeting.” — Feste (2.3)

The class question becomes most productive when the play's comic mechanisms are read together rather than separately. Disguise unsettles identity, marriage reorganizes relationships, festive inversion permits temporary rebellion, and Malvolio's punishment restores boundaries. The play consequently neither presents class as wholly natural nor imagines that love automatically abolishes it.

19. Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is a comedy of love, disguise, and mistaken identity, but beneath its festive surface lies a sustained exploration of social ambition and class. The characters inhabit a world governed by distinctions of birth, wealth, occupation, gender, and social authority. Their actions reveal both the attraction of social advancement and the dangers of violating established boundaries.

Malvolio is the central figure in this exploration. His desire to marry Olivia is inseparable from his fantasy of becoming "Count Malvolio." His tragedy lies not merely in his vanity but in the fact that he mistakes imagined social identity for actual social power. Maria offers a contrasting model of social mobility: she uses intelligence, theatricality, and social understanding to improve her position. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew demonstrate the weaknesses of inherited privilege, while Feste reveals that intellectual authority can exist outside formal class structures. Viola's disguise further demonstrates the theatrical nature of identity and the possibility of temporarily crossing social and gender boundaries.

Ultimately, *Twelfth Night* neither completely rejects nor fully endorses the class system of its time. Instead, Shakespeare exposes its contradictions through comedy. The play allows servants to outwit their superiors, aristocrats to behave foolishly, and socially ambitious individuals to imagine new identities. Yet the final restoration of order reminds us that the freedom offered by festive inversion is temporary.

Thus, *Twelfth Night* can be read as a sophisticated commentary on the relationship between social ambition, class consciousness, identity, and power. Shakespeare's comedy invites laughter at those who pretend to be what they are not, while simultaneously encouraging the audience to question why society insists so strongly upon determining what people are allowed to become.

This paper argues that Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* uses comic inversion, disguise, marriage, and mistaken identity to expose the tensions between inherited class privilege and individual social ambition. Through Malvolio, Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Feste, and Viola, Shakespeare demonstrates that social status is both a powerful external structure and a theatrical performance, while the restoration of social order at the conclusion reveals the limits of social mobility in the early modern world.

"But that's all one, our play is done." — Feste (5.1)

The central paradox of the play is that social hierarchy is both mocked and reproduced. Characters discover that rank can be manipulated, performed, or temporarily suspended, yet the final marriages and recognitions depend substantially upon socially acceptable identities. *Twelfth Night* therefore offers a comic critique of class consciousness without presenting a complete programme of social transformation.

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