

In a 700-word essay, compare an element of *Twelfth Night* (a word, a plot device, a character, etc.) to some counterpart in a previous play.

*Twelfth Night* is the last play Shakespeare wrote that can comfortably be called a comedy: after *Hamlet*, there are the great tragedies, the romances, and some half-comic plays (like *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*) that, for want of a better name, scholars tend to call “problem plays.” But the string of great comedies in the first half of his career does finish with a bang, a kitchen-sink comedy that seems to get just about everything in from the previous decade, cross-dressing, twins, fools, crossed loves, fat old men, and more besides. It is a wonderful summa of the comic enterprise as Shakespeare imagined it.

Because this play looks back over so much terrain, this week’s exercise asks us too to look back: to take a word, a scene, a motif, a device, some part of *Twelfth Night* and connect it to an earlier play, in order to explore how Shakespeare is developing his materials, and how he changes his approach to recurring questions. It is often said that the plays, taken together, are their own best criticism. What does the late comedy *Twelfth Night* have to say about the comic project?—via one detail that you can trace backward into one of its predecessors.

Some specific questions you might ask.

- Find a word in *Twelfth Night* that has a history in Shakespeare: identify a small number of focused instances that allow you to compare its use between two plays.
- Consider a particular element of plot, like the discovery of twins, or a conversation about time, or an argument between lovers, or a marriage ceremony, etc., and look backward from *Twelfth Night* to an earlier instance.
- Consider the genealogy of a particular character. What does Sir Toby, for example, owe to Falstaff, or Viola to Rosalind? Again, choose a specific focus (a scene, a handful of lines) as a focus for your comparison.

Do not surrender in advance to any of the ready conclusions that might govern such an enterprise, e.g., look how the Bard’s mastery of his forms has grown over time! That may be so, but let your materials dictate your conclusions. The plays are experiments, all of them, as Shakespeare comes back to old questions in new ways. What is he trying to understand? What has changed? What has remained the same? You need not even think chronologically: there may be some value to regarding the two instances as parallel explorations of a common problem.