

## Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

### Benchmark Assessment

Monday 14<sup>th</sup> November

1000 words

Explore the ways in which revels and revelry are presented in Acts 1 and 2 of *Twelfth Night*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.\*

[\* Apart from the restriction to the first two acts, this is what the question will look like in the exam.

In terms of “ideas from critical reading”, we have yet to look at the *Shakespeare Critical Anthology on Comedy* but I’d like you to include at least **one point** from John Hollander’s ideas on ‘Feasting, indulgence and the humours’, a photocopy of which is attached to this sheet.

In terms of “relevant contextual factors” these could be concerned with the **dramatic** context (such as the importance of revelry and the topsy-turvy to the genre of comedy; the importance of love as a theme) or with **social and historical** context (such as the way ranks, hierarchies and genders may be subverted; the puritan dislike of celebrations and the theatre).

Possible points of focus that could be selected might be Orsino’s food metaphor (1.1); Sir Toby’s drunken antics (1.3); references to revelry, Sir Toby’s drunkenness, (1.5); the Fools’ revels, Malvolio’s disapproval (2.3); the ‘sport’ from the gulling of Malvolio (2.5)]

## 2 Feasting, indulgence and the humours

*Twelfth Night starts and ends with music. Hollander argues that its music dovetails with its festive character of indulgence, even overindulgence. There is so much food and partying in the play that its outsider, the spoilsport Malvolio, is said by Hollander to suffer from 'moral indigestion'. While the play's use of moods, such as melancholy, is indebted to Elizabethan commonplace ideas about 'humours', its title, which evokes the Feast of Epiphany, leads us to expect revelry.*

Full of games, revels and tricks, and disguises, it is an **Epiphany** play, a ritualized Twelfth Night festivity in itself, but it is much more than this: the play gives us an analysis, as well as a representation, of feasting. It develops an ethic of indulgence based on the notion that the personality of any individual is a function not of the static proportions of the humors within him, but of the dynamic appetites that may more purposefully, as well as more pragmatically, be said to govern his behavior. Superficially close to the comedy of humors in the **characterological** extremes of its *dramatis personae*, the play nevertheless seems almost intent on destroying the whole theory of comedy and of morality entailed by the comedy of humors.

The nature of a revel is disclosed in the first scene. The materials are to be music, food and drink, and love. The basic action of both festivity in general, and of the play itself, is declared to be that of so **surfeiting** the appetite that it will sicken and die, leaving fulfilled the tempered, harmonious self. The movement of the whole play is that of a party, from appetite, through the direction of that appetite outward toward something, to **satiation**, and eventually to the condition when, as the Duke hopes for Olivia, 'liver, brain and heart / These sovereign thrones, are all supplied, and filled / Her sweet perfections with one self king'. The 'one self king' is the final harmonious state to be achieved by each reveller, but it is also, in both the Duke's and Olivia's case, Cesario, who kills 'the flock of all affections else' that live in them, and who is shown forth in a literal epiphany in the last act.

### Glossary

**Epiphany** Christian feast day, celebrated on 6th January, the 'Twelfth Night' after Christmas

**characterological** studying characters and their differences

**dramatis personae** Latin term for the list of characters in a play

**surfeiting** overindulging

**satiation** filled to excess, beyond the point of satisfaction

The Duke's opening speech describes both the action of feasting, and his own abundant, **ursine**, romantic temperament. But it also contains within it an emblematic representation of the action of surfeiting:

*If music be the food of love, play on,  
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken and so die.  
That strain again! It had a dying fall;  
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound  
That breathes upon a bank of violets,  
Stealing and giving odour! Enough, no more;  
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before. (1 i 1-8)*

The one personage in the play who remains in a melancholy humor is the one person who is outside the revels and cannot be affected by them. Olivia's rebuke cuts to the heart of his nature: 'You are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distemper'd appetite.' Suffering from a kind of moral indigestion, Malvolio's true character is revealed in his **involute**d, Puritanic sensibility that allows of no appetites directed outward. His rhetoric is full of the Devil; it is full of humors and elements as well. No other character tends to mention these save in jest, for it is only Malvolio who believes in them. Yet real, exterior fluids of all kinds, wine, tears, sea-water, urine, and finally the rain of inevitability bathe the whole world of Illyria, in constant reference throughout the play.

From John Hollander, 'The Role of Music in *Twelfth Night*', 1956.

**ursine** bear-like, from *ursus*, the Latin for bear  
**involute**d inward-looking