Welcome to Yale Repertory Theatre’s WILL POWER! program. This Study Guide accompanies our production of *Twelfth Night*, directed by Carl Cofield. The articles will set you up to understand the play, the production, and how Shakespeare made theater. You can read the articles before or after you see the show. We can’t wait to see you at the theater!

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Orsino, Duke of Illyria, wishes to woo Olivia, but his lords tell him that she will not let anyone interrupt her mourning for her recently deceased brother. Viola, a young woman of Messaline, has survived a shipwreck that she believes has killed her brother, Sebastian. Seeking shelter on Illyria’s shore, Viola disguises herself as a young man named Cesario and gains employment as Orsino’s page. Orsino likes Cesario and sends him to Olivia to win her over on his behalf. Meanwhile, Olivia’s uncle, the rowdy Sir Toby Belch, and his friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek (who also has his sights set on marrying Olivia), have a plan to cheer up Olivia, though her servant Maria scolds them for their frivolity. Olivia’s fool Feste also attempts to bring her cheer, though he is humiliated in front of the court by her steward, Malvolio. Viola enters disguised as Cesario to flatter Olivia, and to her surprise, Olivia begins to fall in love with Cesario.

Elsewhere in Illyria, Viola’s brother Sebastian is very much alive! He was rescued from the shipwreck by the sea captain Antonio, and just as Viola assumes he has died in the wreck, he assumes she has died as well. Back in the Illyrian court, Malvolio finds Cesario and delivers a ring from Olivia. Left alone, Viola realizes that Olivia is declaring her love for Cesario with this token. Late at night, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste loudly carouse, and Maria comes to reprimand them. However, she soon realizes that all four share a dislike for Malvolio, and they band together to create a ruse to humiliate “the puritan”: Maria will forge a love letter to Malvolio from Olivia. Meanwhile, Orsino tells Cesario of his love for Olivia. Viola, realizing she’s falling in love with Orsino, describes similar emotions, pretending to talk of her “sister.” Maria plants her fake letter; Malvolio finds it and delights; and Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria rejoice that he’s fallen for their trick.

Once alone with Cesario, Olivia declares her love for “him.” As Viola must keep up her disguise as Cesario, she fends off Olivia’s advances, declaring that she “can never love a woman.” Andrew tells Sir Toby that he’s jealous of the attention that Olivia pays to Cesario and states that he wishes to challenge Cesario to a duel. Maria runs to tell them that Malvolio is ready to go to Olivia to declare his love for her, as he believes the forged love letter to be real. Sebastian tells his friend Antonio that he’s ready to explore Illyria. Malvolio arrives to woo Olivia in yellow stockings and crossed garters (as Maria’s letter instructed him to do), and Olivia is bewildered. She asks Maria to look after Malvolio, whom she thinks may have gone mad. Sir Toby delivers Sir Andrew’s challenge to Cesario. To add to the confusion and misinformation, Antonio enters, sees Viola dressed as Cesario, and mistakes her for Sebastian. Guards realize that Antonio is a wanted man and arrest him, and he pleads with Cesario, still believing he’s speaking to Sebastian, for help. Viola realizes that if Antonio thinks she is Sebastian, her brother may still be alive.

Feste and Sir Andrew see the real Sebastian; they mistake him for Cesario; and Sir Andrew almost attacks him. Olivia interrupts them, sees Sebastian, mistakes Sebastian for Cesario, and whims him away. Sebastian, caught off-guard by this woman’s beauty and charm, goes along with her. Fully in love with Sebastian, who she still believes is Cesario, Olivia sends for a priest to wed them immediately. Taking liberty at Olivia’s instruction, Maria has had Malvolio locked away, and she, Sir Toby, and Feste (disguised as a priest, Sir Topas) torment him.

Orsino arrives at Olivia’s court with Viola-as-Cesario, meets Feste, and asks him to bring forth Olivia. The officers burst onto the scene with a captive Antonio, who sees Cesario and again believes him to be Sebastian. Olivia enters and sees Cesario, whom she believes is now her husband, though Viola has no idea what she’s talking about. Viola reveals her disguise and sees her brother Sebastian. The siblings recognize each other and rejoice. Orsino and Viola admit their feelings for each other, and Orsino agrees to marry her once she changes out of Cesario’s clothes. Malvolio returns to swear revenge, and the happy couples resolve to celebrate their love.

—CHARLES O’MALLEY
Using the Synopsis and the Character Map, can you write the story of Twelfth Night only using emojis? It might sound like a silly exercise, but it’s important to think about what events or characters are essential in a story. What choices do you need to make, and how does the finite keyboard of wacky symbols help—or hinder—this process?
Carl Cofield, the director leading Yale Rep’s production of *Twelfth Night*, spoke with production dramaturg Molly FitzMaurice about his first encounter with Shakespeare—and how he hopes *Twelfth Night* will invite young people into the vibrant Afrofuturist world of Illyria and into a friendly conversation with Shakespeare.

**MOLLY FITZMAURICE:** Could you tell me about the very first time you encountered Shakespeare?

**CARL COFIELD:** My first encounter was not until I got into theater conservatory at the University of Miami. As part of the actor training, we had to explore Shakespeare, and I remember vividly saying to my instructor that, in my future career, I didn’t envision doing Shakespeare. I didn’t think there would be a part for a young, black man in the canon. I told him that I would leave Shakespeare alone because Shakespeare had left me alone. And he persuaded me and said that there wasn’t just one role for me—but the possibility of many roles.

**MF:** What did performing Shakespeare for the first time feel like?

**CC:** Once I made the text and the characters make sense for me, and gave myself that freedom to explore and to push, I realized, “Wow, I know exactly what this character is feeling. I know exactly what this character is saying.” I found myself pulled to the rhythm of iambic pentameter and the heartbeat that went along with it—that seemed to just feel right. That was my first taste of Shakespeare, and that began my career. I spent the next twenty years doing classical Shakespeare work as an actor and director.

**MF:** What made you keep returning to Shakespeare’s work?

**CC:** I saw that Shakespeare didn’t have to be done one certain way. I came to it with a phobia that it had to be British; it had to be stodgy. But when I saw it being done as I think it would have been done in Shakespeare’s time—for the people, with the audience of the time in mind—it just became so much more alive and so rich. It became freer and much more accessible. And that’s what drew me to Shakespeare’s plays. I think if Shakespeare were alive, he would be pushing the boundaries with music, working with different contemporary musical genres, like rap, hip hop. All of that has a place within the canon.

**MF:** How does your belief that Shakespeare should be geared toward the people watching it now influence your vision for *Twelfth Night*?

**CC:** I’m a big believer that Shakespeare productions should be accessible. And of course, for me, that always means the play should look like a representation of where I live. So in this production there are different hues of people; there are different complexions; there are different body types.

**MF:** Why are contemporary reinterpretations of classics so important?

**CC:** I think it’s vital. “The Star-Spangled Banner” (1814) was created when it was created, and to a certain group of people, it means one thing. But when I hear Jimi Hendrix play “The Star-Spangled Banner” (1969) and put his flavor, his funk, on it, it unlocks things that I don’t even know if Francis Scott Key knew were there. And it makes me hear it and feel it a different way.

So that’s why I love to reinvestigate classics through a more inclusive and multi-cultural lens and hopefully unlock parts of the text that might not resonate if it were done in a more conventional way. When I see brown and black people grapple with Sir Toby Belch and Andrew Aguecheek, there might be something in there that really comes into focus.

**MF:** That strikes me as a powerful way to look at the central character of Viola.

**CC:** She’s one of my favorite characters in the canon. She exudes confidence. She exudes this supreme wit. She’s washed up onto the beach with nothing. Yet, through her will, her courage, and her wit, she’s able to navigate a treacherous environment. To see a young woman of color meet this challenge head-on is something that I hope will resonate with audiences. To see this woman do her thing like that, I hope will give all of us a little bit of courage and a little bit of reflection.
MF: Could you tell me more about this production’s Illyria, where Viola unexpectedly finds herself?

CC: To me, it is a fantastical, romanticized version of where we could possibly be thirty years from today. It’s a world where Beyoncé, Hamilton, and and the Afrofuturist Black Panther are the norm and not the exception. What’s important is creating a world where brown and black people have taken the reins and control how their narrative is going to be given over to the world.

MF: What influenced the visual design for this production of Twelfth Night: the setting, costumes, lights, and projections?

CC: I’ve also been inspired by the Afropunk movement: a movement on Instagram where brown and black people are defining and reclaiming their own narratives. Different skin tones and different body types are being celebrated in a way that they haven’t been before. The production design team and I have a crazy vision for the world Viola walks into when she says, “What country, friends, is this?” It looks and feels much like the space that Afropunk is inhabiting now. Or, if the seeds of today’s Afropunk movement were to really blossom, what they would look like thirty years from now. It’s much more vivid. It’s much more lush. You have Afropunk artists really pushing the boundaries. I’m excited to collaborate with the designers to create a magical, vivid, lush world.

MF: I know music, sound, and harmony are important in Twelfth Night. What music inspires you? What’s on your Twelfth Night mix tape?

CC: Sound is referred to so much in Twelfth Night: prose, iambic pentameter, heightened language, lower language, and music especially. I would love this world of Illyria to have a soundscape that is both familiar and strange at the same time. I listen to musical artists like Fela Kuti, who takes music that’s deeply rooted in Africa, but also has influences from around the world, and creates something brand new all of his own. It’s my great hope to have the audience think they’ve heard this type of sound before, but yet also say, “Wow, this is so different. I’ve never heard it this way before.” To me, that would be the ultimate success: if the text can resonate with the audience in that same way. “I’ve seen Twelfth Night a thousand times, yet this one feels different, fresh, more urgent, and more alive.”

MF: What do you hope audiences, especially young people, seeing Twelfth Night, come away with?

CC: It’s vitally important for me, as an artist of color, to have the next young theater-maker be in the audience, one who might come into the theater begrudgingly, and say, “Why do I have to see a play by this old white man? He’s not inviting me into the conversation.” Hopefully that young theater-goer can come in and say, “You mean to tell me that Olivia can be a beautifully eloquent black woman with dreadlocks? I had no idea Shakespeare could be done that way!” To me, that would be a resounding success and unlock some future theater-maker, artist, or citizen’s imagination. My biggest hope is that they’d come back and say, “I had no idea it could be done that way. And if it could be done that way, what’s to stop the next thing from being done even bolder?”

CARL COFIELD directed One Night in Miami (New Drama; Rogue Machine Theater, world premiere; Denver Center Theatre Company; numerous awards from the Los Angeles NAACP, including Best Director, and L.A. Drama Critics Circle; Huffington Post: Best of L.A., 2013). Other directing credits include A Raisin in the Sun (Two River Theater Company); Henry IV Part 2 (Oregon Shakespeare Festival); Disgraced (Denver Center); The Mountaintop (Cleveland Play House); the 50th-anniversary production of Dutchman (Classical Theatre of Harlem/National Black Theatre; AUDELCO nomination, Best Director); The Tempest, Macbeth (Classical Theatre of Harlem; AUDELCO nomination, Best Director). Additional credits: the world premieres of The White Card by Claudia Rankine directed by Diane Paulus (Associate Director, American Repertory Theater) and Camp David by Laurence Wright directed by Molly Smith (Assistant Director, Arena Stage). He also directed the reading of Camp David for President and First Lady Carter at the Carter Center retreat in Colorado. As an actor, he has been seen at Manhattan Theater Club (Ruined), Berkeley Rep, Alliance Theatre, Arena Stage, The Shakespeare Theater, Intiman Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Shakespeare Santa Cruz, Milwaukee Rep, Alabama Shakespeare, McCarter Theatre, The Acting Company, The Studio Theatre, and many others. Carl was recently appointed as the Associate Artistic Director for Classical Theatre of Harlem. He also teaches at New York University and The New School. Education: M.F.A., Columbia University. carlcofield.com
What's on the Director's Desk?

As director Carl Cofield draws inspiration from Afropunk and Afrofuturism to conceive his production of *Twelfth Night* at Yale Rep, we imagine what might be on his desk, on his Instagram feed, and on his playlists.

**Playlist: Afropunk Illyria**

- Kendrick Lamar
- Fela Kuti
- Childish Gambino
- Solange
- Janelle Monáe
- Charlie Parker

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from Jimi Hendrix – Live at Woodstock

The Star Spangled Banner

Arranged by Jimi Hendrix

“Octoria Butler is a writer who will be with us for a long, long time, and *Kindred* is that rare, magical work that... the novel one returns to, again and again.” — Harlan Ellison
When the shipwrecked Viola enters in Act One, Scene Two, of *Twelfth Night*, she asks, “What country, friends, is this?” Her rescuer, the ship’s captain responds: “This is Illyria, lady.” Elizabethan theaters didn’t use elaborate sets—the stage looked the same for all performances, give or take some small props or pieces of scenery. The words of the play needed to communicate all necessary information about setting to the audience. The same wooden stage instantly transformed into whatever place or time the performer said, and Elizabethan audiences knew to listen closely to the performers’ dialogue—especially at the beginning of the play and the tops of scenes—to know where each scene took place. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind says, “Well, this is the forest of Arden,” to let the audience know that the second part of the play has moved to the forest. The Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* takes care to mention “Fair Verona, where we lay our scene,” and the Chorus in *Henry V* is more philosophical, wondering if the theater can hold “the vast fields of France” and if it was possible to “cram within this wooden O the very casques that did affright the air at Agincourt,” the “wooden O” being, of course, Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, which was round.

Shakespeare based *Twelfth Night*’s Illyria on the ancient region on the Balkan peninsula in what is today Croatia, though the society he created in the play bears little resemblance to the real place. This was typical of Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights in Early Modern England. Very few English people of this time travelled abroad, and we have no evidence that Shakespeare ever did. He created the distant lands he wrote about from a variety of written sources, some historical, some not. The Venice of *Othello* and the Rome of *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus* curiously resemble the London in which Shakespeare lived. Similarly, his depictions of Bohemia (today’s Czech Republic) of *The Winter’s Tale* and the forest outside ancient Athens in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* bore strong resemblance to rural sixteenth-century England. After all, he adds a coastline to Bohemia—and the Czech Republic is completely landlocked!

Though the entirety of *Twelfth Night* takes place in Illyria, Shakespeare takes care to emphasize that Viola and Sebastian are foreigners: they come from Messaline, a place Shakespeare very likely made up. Though the siblings are desperate to reunite, they show no urgency to return home. Why is this? Was their ship fleeing Messaline? Was it returning home? Where were they going? Was this something to do with the death of their father? These unanswered questions make the play engaging for both the artists working on it and the audience watching it. While we don’t learn much about Messaline, we do know that Illyria is a place Viola and Sebastian grow to love and in which they choose to stay. In writing *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare used a land he’d heard of, or read about, and imagined an entire culture for it. Viola and Sebastian become the audience’s guide to Illyria, and as they learn about this new land, we do, too.

Throughout *Twelfth Night*’s production history, directors have used the idea of Illyria to bring to life their own concepts. Some productions imagine Illyria as a real place that they’ve recreated onstage, and some create it as a completely original fantasy world. A 2016 production at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival imagined Illyria as Hollywood in the 1930s, and a 2013 production at the Folger in Washington, DC, set the play on an early-twentieth-century luxury ocean liner. Yale Rep’s production casts Illyria in a world inspired by Afropunk and Afrofuturism, perhaps a few decades from now. One of the greatest gifts that Shakespeare has given us is that he’s put all the information we need into the play’s dialogue, so today, theater artists are able to create new and vibrant worlds around classic characters and stories. Yale Rep’s production of *Twelfth*
Director Carl Cofield’s production of *Twelfth Night* pairs William Shakespeare’s comedy with the ideas of Afrofuturism. Cofield and the creative team behind the show imagine that the setting of *Twelfth Night*, the coastal nation of Illyria, is home to people of African descent who have developed advanced technology and have access to wealth. In this interpretation, Illyria might be a welcome surprise to *Twelfth Night*’s heroine, Viola, who comes from a time and place like our own in contemporary America—one with a dominant culture that is hostile to Black self-expression unless it is stereotyped, contained, and policed. Shipwrecked on the shores of an Afrofuturist Illyria, Viola finds herself surrounded by a new population that is more diverse and free than that in her homeland. Viola asks, “What country, friend, is this?” when she arrives in Illyria. What might an Afrofuturist vision of Ilyria look like?

What does “Afrofuturism” mean?
Afrofuturism refers to a broad movement of artists and thinkers who make music, novels, films, plays, poetry, visual art, scholarly work, critical writings, and more that put the lives, concerns, and hopes of African people and people from the African diaspora—the people scattered around the world by slavery and migration—at the center of their creative work and cast their imaginations to an Afrocentric vision of the future.

Today, Afrofuturist art is made around the world, but this wasn’t always the case. Proto-Afrofuturist perspectives were being adopted as far back as 100 years ago by African American artists and writers living in the United States, such as Ralph Ellison (the author of *Invisible Man*) and W. E. B. Du Bois (NAACP founder and author of “The Comet”). Living in a dominant culture that was hostile to their lives and imaginings, African Americans used their art to speculate about other possible futures for Black people. The

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_Shamespeare’s Ilyria To Day_

Director Carl Cofield’s production of *Twelfth Night* pairs William Shakespeare’s comedy with the ideas of Afrofuturism. Cofield and the creative team behind the show imagine that the setting of *Twelfth Night*, the coastal nation of Illyria, is home to people of African descent who have developed advanced technology and have access to wealth. In this interpretation, Illyria might be a welcome surprise to *Twelfth Night*’s heroine, Viola, who comes from a time and place like our own in contemporary America—one with a dominant culture that is hostile to Black self-expression unless it is stereotyped, contained, and policed. Shipwrecked on the shores of an Afrofuturist Illyria, Viola finds herself surrounded by a new population that is more diverse and free than that in her homeland. Viola asks, “What country, friend, is this?” when she arrives in Illyria. What might an Afrofuturist vision of Ilyria look like?

**Shakespeare’s Geography Lesson: New Worlds**

What inspired some of the settings for Shakespeare’s plays? Here are a few examples of “new worlds” that the Bard imagined. What do you imagine these plays to look like, sound like, feel like?

**As You Like It**
This play takes place in France, but much of the story takes place in the forest of Arden, possibly inspired by an English forest of that name, possibly an Anglicization of the French Ardennes, or maybe a hybrid of the classical Arcadia and the Biblical Eden.

**A Midsummer Night’s Dream**
After the four young lovers of this play leave Athens, they enter the nearby woods, where Lysander claims he has an aunt. However, upon entering the woods, they learn that neither rules nor reality necessarily apply.

**Pericles, Prince of Tyre**
In this adventure story, Pericles journeys around the Mediterranean, stopping in North Africa, Turkey, and Lebanon. When this play was set, around 200 BCE, these places were part of the Roman empire, and when the play was written, the early seventeenth century, they were places of fascination to the British.

**The Tempest**
Prospero, a magician and the former Duke of Milan, has been banished with his daughter, Miranda, to a remote island. Though evidence suggests that Shakespeare may have imagined this island to be in the Mediterranean, many have interpreted the work as expressing a seventeenth-century idea of the Americas.

—CHARLES O’MALLEY

**Scenic designer Riw Rakkulchon builds a model that shows his ideas for the Twelfth Night set during the design process.**

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AFROFUTURISM: IMAGINING NEW FUTURES

continued on next page →
term *Afrofuturism* wasn’t popularized until the early 1990s, when it was used to describe artists—including Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Octavia Butler—who had been working throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Afrofuturism continues to grow and change through the work of a new wave of artists such as Janelle Monáe and Wanuri Kahiu.

Despite the name, only some Afrofuturist stories are about the future. Some are about alternative presents, some take place in imagined pasts, and others challenge dominant notions of chronological time. Regardless of when they are set, these stories center African people and people of African descent as playing key roles in histories—past, present, and future—roles that are otherwise often reserved for white characters. Afrofuturist storytellers sometimes imagine times and places where Black people are free to live and create without danger, and where being Black doesn’t place one lower on social, economic, or political hierarchies. These are often worlds rich with technology and full of prosperity. Other times, Afrofuturist stories speculate about times and places where Black characters must overcome fictionalized versions of recognizable difficulties. The wave of reactionary American politics that Octavia Butler’s characters face in her book *Parable of the Talents* can feel oddly familiar because it builds on real violence—racial, sexual, and religious, in particular. Butler’s fictional heroines survive and defy repression in the past and future, and, in so doing, sketch out strategies for real women working to survive and create different futures. In *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, author and activist Adrienne Maree-Brown observes that this exchange between fiction and reality flows in both directions. She writes that, “All organizing is science fiction.”

Afrofuturist stories unfold in many ways. Sometimes, Afrofuturist writers only have to put Black people back into stock science-fiction stories to open up the stories to new voices and perspectives. Afrofuturist authors have, for example, noted the similarities between stories of being abducted from one’s home planet, taken across the galaxy, and forced to work and the experiences of enslaved West Africans who were abducted, taken across the Atlantic, and forced into slavery in the Americas. Sometimes, a director will re-imagine a work that isn’t science-fiction, like Carl Cofield using Afrofuturism to inspire his production of a seventeenth-century Shakespeare play.

**Afrofuturism in popular culture: Black Panther**

The 2018 motion picture *Black Panther* is an example of Afrofuturist storytelling in contemporary popular culture. This film is largely set in Wakanda, a fictional African nation that was never conquered by European colonial powers. Free from colonial meddling and violence, the nation developed the most advanced technology on earth. During the film, the people of Wakanda and their king, T’Challa, must decide how to use this power. Should they...
use violence or diplomacy to lift up other continental Africans and the African diaspora? Questions of global Black solidarity, difference, alienation are all themes that Afrofuturist stories often explore.

The design of Wakanda also exemplifies the Afrofuturist practice of blending technology and African or Black designs. In order to depict a history of technological creation largely independent of European influence, the designers of Black Panther did what many Afrofuturist artists do: They took inspiration from the cultures and philosophies of peoples from Africa and the African diaspora for their stories, settings, costumes, and props. Sometimes, the inspiration is direct. For example, Ruth E. Carter’s costume designs for the Merchant tribe in Black Panther specifically refer to the clothing of the Tuareg of northern Africa, including their veils and their use of indigo dyes. Other objects and costumes that make up Wakanda are more loosely drawn from the Black diaspora. The comic book artist Brian Stelfreeze notes that the Kimoyo beads that Wakandans use to communicate are based on mass-produced jewelry he noticed other Black people wearing around the world. The way specific and general references are woven together in Black Panther is common throughout Afrofuturism, partly because the movement’s aims for reshaping storytelling and imagination are so large. It requires both reshaping our present and past and imagining a new future.

Why envision new futures?
Afrofuturism is part of the work Black people have done to write themselves back into history after being forcibly erased from, or left out of, the records written by scholars from colonial nations like the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands. But how can you fix a historical narrative by telling speculative stories? And why tell stories about the future instead of unearthing and telling Black stories that were erased or submerged?

Afrofuturist creators often note that stories about the future tell us who is important in the present and past. By casting an eye to the future, Afrofuturism hopes to counter or prevent erasure. Instead of allowing all stories of the future to be populated by white characters from a dominant culture, Afrofuturism helps audiences imagine a world populated with Black people, stories, and characters. This shapes our vision of the future. This kind of intervention works alongside those that expose holes in our historical record or provide necessary corrections to narratives of the past.

Because Afrofuturist artists center Black characters, because these characters are often given the freedom to express themselves, and because hearing these characters and their stories allows audiences new possibilities in the past and what’s to come, Afrofuturists help create a better future for Black people.

—PATRICK YOUNG
What’s so funny about Twelfth Night?

Catherine Sheehy, Resident Dramaturg at Yale Rep and Chair of the Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism program at Yale School of Drama, is an expert on comedy. Below is a peek into her notes on comic theory and what makes us laugh in popular culture and literature.

**Disinterest:**
**“The Momentary Anesthesia of the Heart”**

Philosopher Henri Bergson posited in a 1901 essay that laughter is occasioned by an anesthesia of the heart. That’s a complicated way of saying that comedy requires a distance between you and the person or character you are watching. Empathy is the enemy of comedy—a disinterest is required for us to be able to find something funny. Often, this requires us, the audience, to understand or recognize that a character will be safe in a dangerous situation; we know that the character will ultimately be resilient so we can “numb” our hearts to the treacherous trials along the way.

**Example: The Simpsons**

In a scene from the *The Simpsons*, a group of folks are gathered for a defensive driving class, and we see their reactions to the horrible carnage of drunk-driving accidents. We see them, eyes wide, mouths agape, retching. Then we see Homer Simpson, who bursts into laughter and says, “It’s funny because I don’t know him.”

**Mechanical:**
**“The Mechanical Encrusted on the Living”**

This idea is also from Henri Bergson, that comedy arises when the mechanical is encrusted on the living. To be alive is to be in constant reaction to your environment, to everything that’s around you. That means noticing a banana peel in your way; you are alert to life and the physical world, notice the banana peel and avoid slipping on it. If a person is daydreaming—like the stereotypical absent-minded professor—he doesn’t see the obvious in front of her and slips on the banana peel.

**Example: Gulliver’s Travels by Jonathan Swift**

In Swift’s novel, in the land of Laputa, the elite have become so smart, so obsessed with their intellectual concerns, that they have forgotten how to breathe. There is another class of people—of inferior intellect—that hit the smart people with pig bladders on the end of sticks. These people’s job is to hit the smart people to remind them to breathe; being so smart has disconnected them from their bodies in such a dramatic way that they can no longer do the involuntary things to sustain life.

**Twelfth Night Connection**

Toby, Maria, Aguecheek, and Feste play a trick on Malvolio; they set him up to act in a ridiculous way (wearing crossed garters, spouting delusions of grandeur) to make it seem like he has gone mad. It’s important for the comic engine of *Twelfth Night* for the audience to feel that Malvolio won’t suffer permanent harm from the torments he suffers. He has to be built up as a character who will be able to survive, and we have to numb ourselves to what could seem like horrible, painful torture.

Orsino is a great example of this condition; he is in love with the concept of love. He’s not in love with Olivia—but he’s in love with his idea of being in love. To Orsino, he and Olivia would be the perfect match. He’s the most beautiful and powerful man in Illyria; Olivia is the most beautiful and powerful woman. He runs Illyria; she runs a prosperous household. He imagines that she must love him as much as he loves this idea of their union. Olivia, on the other hand, is an outsize portrait of grief. Her grief over her brother’s death is so extreme that she can’t think about life. She’s shut down all opportunities for sexuality, reproduction, and furthering society.
**Selfhood and Identity**

Our sense of selfhood and identity distinguishes us as human beings. If our unique identities are questioned—or there's a possibility that we aren't unique after all—it destabilizes us and forces us to question our beliefs and our sanity. Comedy is filled with mistaken identities—ones that cause us to question deeply about identity, personhood, and the uniqueness of the human condition. An audience can approach these questions in a calm manner in comedy: it's a safe space. Mistaken identities might make things go terribly wrong, but an audience has every confidence that everything will eventually end up very right. The spectator also relies on dramatic irony—that they know more about what's going on than the characters do—to be assured of the direction the plot will take.

**Example: The Comedy of Errors**

Shakespeare's play _The Comedy of Errors_ is based on an ancient Roman play by Plautus, _The Menaechmi_. Plautus's play centers on the antics of a pair of twins. Centuries later, Shakespeare adapts the play but doubles down on the plot and the laughs: he adds a pair of twin servants! The play's comedy relies on the audience's knowing who's really who and how the mistaken identities are causing chaos. A happy ending can't occur until, finally, all the siblings are revealed and all the “errors” corrected.

**Twelfth Night Connection**

In the play, when Sebastian meets Olivia, she thinks he's Cesario (Viola in disguise). Sebastian is confused and destabilized. It's funny: the most beautiful woman in Illyria immediately falls in love with him! Later, when Antonio's arrested, he thinks he is pleading to Sebastian for his money and to aid him. However, it's Cesario, who has no idea about this money or that Antonio has saved his (her!) brother. In this moment, Antonio’s belief in the world, in what is real and good, is shaken. He thought that Sebastian was good and risked himself to save this man. Now, it seems like this same man betrays him. In a tragedy, things might go very, very badly for Antonio.

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**The Triumph over Life's Enemies**

Tragedy is about what sets humans apart, but comedy is about how we live together. A comedy is about the triumph of life over death and a celebration of all that is robust. (Comedy revels in bodily function, too! It shows the limit of the “human machine.”) At the end of a comedy, we look forward to celebrating the characters’ happiness.

**Twelfth Night Connection**

Malvolio is a Puritan, someone who is against dancing, drinking, and carousing. Meanwhile, Toby, Andrew, Maria, and Feste dance, drink, and sing into the wee hours; Malvolio is an enemy to cakes, ales, and song. In _Twelfth Night_, we side with the merrymakers, not the person who's opposed to revelry. Ultimately, after Olivia learns that Malvolio was the butt of a cruel joke, she tries to make amends, but Malvolio can’t be happy. He doesn’t fit in this happy world, so he must go.

Today, we might question the marriage of Sebastian and Olivia. Is it a happy ending for her—a smart, witty, capable heroine—to end up married to a man she doesn’t know? To see how their union is a happy one, we have to think about Viola and her disguise as Cesario. When Viola “becomes” Cesario to survive in Illyria, her model for being a man is her brother, Sebastian. As Cesario, Viola is playing Sebastian. We know that Sebastian is a good man, because Antonio, a perfect stranger, immediately trusts him and sees his virtue. When Olivia marries Sebastian, he’s not a stranger, because Viola has done such a great job impersonating her brother.
Imagine that you’ve just been cast as Viola in a production of *Twelfth Night*. How do you go about learning to speak all that poetry? Actors put a lot of work into analyzing and studying their lines—work that helps them best understand what they are saying, and that, in turn, helps the audience understand. Actors mark the meter, look up words that they may not know, and think about how the lines go together with other characters’ lines. Below is how you might start to dig into Viola’s lines.

—CHARLES O’MALLEY

**Act I, Scene V**

**VIOLA:**

Make me a willow cabin at your gate,

And call upon my soul within the house;

Write loyal cantons of contemned love

And sing them loud even in the dead of night;

Halloo your name to the reverberate hills

And make the babbling gossip of the air

Cry out ‘Olivia!’ O, You should not rest

Between the elements of air and earth,

But you should pity me!

**OLIVIA:**

You might do much.

Olivia finishes Viola’s line; she speaks the final two iambs of the speech.

Listen to the Beat

The word *beat* can make us think about music: what’s the rhythm of a song? Can you find the beat? Poetry—and even the way we speak in everyday life—always has a meter to it. Shakespeare wrote the poetry of his plays in *iambic pentameter*, which mimics the way we talk. An *iamb* is a “metrical foot” that includes one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. (Think: daDUM.) This type of verse, then, would have five feet, or ten beats!

Shakespeare mostly sticks to lines that follow the rules—but sometimes there’s a change or an irregularity. Often, this disruption of a beat calls our attention to a word or phrase. Or it might mean something about what the character is thinking or feeling. And, sometimes, characters share lines of verse and pick up each other’s lines. Talk about being *in sync*!
Performing Gender in *Twelfth Night*

Women were not allowed to perform in Shakespeare’s England. Not only did boys play all the female roles, but Shakespeare commented upon this cross-dressing in his plays, which saw some characters cross-dress, too. In this time, theatrical companies customarily took between two and five pubescent boys—ranging in age from about 14 to 18—as apprentices. Due to their slight physiques and unbroken voices, they were often cast as female characters. In 1669, writer Samuel Pepys said of one boy actor, Edward Kynaston, he is “the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life—only her voice not very good.” The practical difficulty of playing against one’s own gender made female characters far scarcer than male characters in Shakespearean dramas.

In many cases, the boy actors weren’t just asked to play women—they were asked to play women playing men. In several of Shakespeare’s comedies, female characters cross-dress as young men and, over the course of these elaborate impersonations, develop romantic chemistry with other male characters, suggesting a coy awareness of the actors’ actual genders. Do we see a boy, playing a woman, playing a young man, or do we just see the young man? In cases where romance may have blossomed between the older actors and the young apprentices, is there a parallel between their secret relationships and their relationships on stage? This is the case in *Twelfth Night*, where Viola, impersonating the eunuch Cesario, develops relationships with both Orsino and Olivia, both of which challenge notions of traditional couplings between men and women. Practically, Viola’s identity as Cesario allows her to travel independently in Illyria and find her way into Orsino’s court. Also, practically, Viola would have been played by a boy actor who spends much of the play cross-dressing as a castrated man.

Shakespeare often played with gender in his texts—he knew that his female characters were played by men. The main character of *As You Like It*, Rosalind, like Viola, spends much of the play disguised as a man. In Shakespeare’s day, she would have been played by a boy. In her final speech, she admits this: “If I were a woman,” she says to the audience, “I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me.” These original audiences would have been in on this joke; they would have understood that the boy cast as Rosalind was speaking to them. It wasn’t until the Restoration, nearly half a century after Shakespeare’s death, that women were allowed to act on England’s stages.

—AMY BORATKO, ASHLEY CHANG, AND CHARLES O’MALLEY

*Performing Gender in *Twelfth Night***

There are a lot of characters in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* that make us laugh. The merry band of Sir Andrew, Sir Toby, and Maria are clowns that feed the comic engine of the play. Feste, meanwhile, is the character known as the “fool.” Today, we might think that fools and clowns are all the same—but there’s more to this name than just being funny! Although the Shakespearean fool is a character type of the playwright’s own creation (and one he uses all over his comedies—and even in some tragedies!), fools served a popular role in real life in cities and in the court. The position of fool, or jester, has existed all over the world from as early as the second century BCE. The first recorded fools had spots at the table of the Emperor of the Western Han Dynasty in China and appeared at political events in Ancient Rome. By the seventeenth century, when Shakespeare was writing, some version of the fool had popped up in nearly every European country, as well as in India, Japan, and the Ottoman Empire. Across all of these centuries and all of these countries, fools generally fell into two categories: the natural fool and the artificial fool.

The natural fool was a person chosen by the court due to his physical or mental disability. This fool would be cast (often cruelly) as the butt of the joke—forced to become adept at using disabilities for comic effect.

The artificial fool was a figure of great wit. Unlike the natural fools who were usually plucked from among servants, serfs, or beggars, artificial fools would often work their way up to court life, making a profession from their talents in wordplay, music, and acrobatics. These fools had the permission to speak freely before lords, ladies, and royalty—a very unique kind of liberty in Elizabethan times—and were often held in high esteem despite coming from lower classes.

Shakespeare used men who were known artificial fools to play the fools in his plays, and he wrote the characters around these men’s personalities and talents. In the early years of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Will Kemp played Shakespeare’s fools. Kemp, well-known and highly successful in his own right,
TAKING THE FOOL SERIOUSLY

was known for his outrageous buffoonery onstage. He improvised, spoke directly with the audience, and would go on tangents whenever he felt like it. The fool roles Shakespeare wrote for Kemp made use of his clowning and physical comedy and were often natural fools (Bottom in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Dogberry in Much Ado About Nothing were both roles written to be performed by Will Kemp).

In 1599, Robert Armin replaced Will Kemp as the fool in Shakespeare’s company. It is with Armin that Shakespeare started really testing out what role a fool could take in his plays. Armin’s fools were still sometimes clownish, but more often than not, they were a new kind of fool: the wise fool. Though they held some resemblance to artificial fools in real life, these characters took it one step further and became brainy masters, outwitting both the audience and their fellow characters. The role of the fool stepped beyond entertainment to become a confidant and advisor. The Shakespearean wise fool does not simply make jokes freely to royalty but actually uses their jokes to speak truth to power. Feste—one of Armin’s first roles in Shakespeare’s company—is every bit the wise fool. Of all the characters in Twelfth Night, he knows the most of what is going on. He sees through deception, passes through both Olivia and Orsino’s households, and convinces the rest of the characters of the folly in following social conventions. “Good Madonna,” Feste says to Olivia, “give me leave to prove you a fool.” (Twelfth Night 1.5.51-2). And during the course of the play, Feste does just that—speaking truth to power with Shakespeare’s own unique form of wit.

The Shakespearean fool was a unique character in his day, helping to make Shakespeare’s comedies a genre of play that audiences in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England had never seen before. But since that time, the Shakespearean fool has been the inspiration for all sorts of modern comedy and characters. From Homer Simpson’s take on the natural fool to John Mulaney and Russell Brand’s standup-comedy take on the artificial fool, the trope that Shakespeare created in characters like Feste has continued to influence the way we laugh to this day.

—MADELINE CHARNE

OPPOSITE: British, Fools; or Jesters, 1813 by John Augustus Atkinson, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.
ABOVE: Will Kemp doing the jig, from Nine Days Wonder, 1600; Robert Armin from The History of the Two Maids of More-Claeke, 1609.
When you first read one of Shakespeare’s plays, you might feel like it’s written in a different language. Many of the words seem unrecognizable or distant to the vocabulary we contemporary Americans use in everyday life. In some cases, that’s true: there are many jokes (and some so bawdy that they could make you blush) drawn from the way Shakespeare and his peers in Elizabethan England spoke. But, there are many other words in Shakespeare’s plays that were new to his audiences, too! Some scholars estimate that the playwright invented over 1700 words that we use today. Filled with sixteenth-century slang, newly coined turn-of-phrases, and words in common use, Twelfth Night has a rich and varied vocabulary. Below are a few examples of some words to listen for in Twelfth Night.

### COXCOMB
**a conceited man**
Sir Toby: “Will you help? an ass-head and a coxcomb and a knave, a thin-faced knave, a gull!”

### DISSEMBLING
**hiding away, concealing**
Orsino: “O thou dissembling cub! what wilt thou be when time hath sow’d a grizzle on thy case?”

### MALIGNANCY
**direness, badness, desperation**
Sebastian: “My stars shine darkly over me: the malignancy of my fate might perhaps distemper yours; therefore I shall crave of you your leave that I may bear my evils alone.”

### MIDSUMMER MADNESS
**insanity, ridiculousness**
Olivia: “Why, this is very midsummer madness.”

### NONPAREIL
**having no equal**
Viola: “O, such love Could be but recompensed, though you were crown’d the nonpareil of beauty!”

### PESTILENCE
**illness, plague, infection**
Orsino: “O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first, Me thought she purged the air of pestilence!”

### PRATTLE
**to speak incessantly about unimportant things**
The Sea Captain: “And then ’twas fresh in murmur—as, you know, What great ones do the less will prattle of. That he did seek the love of fair Olivia.”

### RECOMPENSE
**a gift or action of apology**
Viola: “I am no fee’d post, lady; keep your purse: My master, not myself, lacks recompense.”

### REPROVE
**to scold**
Olivia: “There’s something in me that reproves my fault; But such a headstrong potent fault it is, That it but mocks reproof.”

### SOVEREIGN
**royal, of or belonging to the ruler**
Orsino: “These sovereign thrones, are all supplied, and fill’d, Her sweet perfections with one self king!”

### SURFEIT
**excess, overindulgence**
Orsino: “If music be the food of love, play on; Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting, The appetite may sicken, and so die.”

### WEEDS
**clothing**
Orsino: “Give me thy hand; And let me see thee in thy woman’s weeds.”
Disguises
Viola dresses as Cesario, and Feste dresses as Sir Topas, the priest.

Objects sent to declare love
Olivia’s ring and Maria’s forged letter

Kind sea captains who rescue separated shipwrecked twins from the water
Viola’s unnamed sea captain and Antonio

Siblings in mourning
Olivia, Viola, and Sebastian, though the latter two later realize they were mistaken

Men in love with Olivia
Orsino, Sir Andrew, Malvolio, and eventually Sebastian

Act in which the audience learns Viola’s real name
Act 5, scene 1, line 237, to be precise

Shakespeare plays in which shipwrecks impact the plot

(predictably) Days after Christmas that Twelfth Night was first performed
Twelfth night, the night before the feast of the Epiphany, twelve days after Christmas day, was a great celebration in Elizabethan England. The play was likely written for a performance on this day.

In Elizabethan England, performances were held in public playhouses and would start in the mid-afternoon to take advantage of the sunlight. In these theatres, commoners would pay a penny to stand close to the stage: these folks were known as “groundlings.” Wealthy theater-goers would pay more to sit in the stands surrounding the stage. Audiences would interact loudly and frequently with the actors, creating a theater-going experience entirely different from those today.

Now audience members often sit in the dark and feel the need to be quiet. But, even if a show doesn’t have hearty and loud interaction between the performers and the viewers, the audience is still a key and active part of the theatre experience. Here are a few things to think about before you go to Yale Rep:

- The performers are in the same room as you and can hear and see everything you do. Please keep discussions with your friends in the audience to a minimum. But do laugh, cry, sigh, cheer, or clap if the action on stage moves you to do so. The actors are feeding off of your energy and responses to tell a story.

- Cell phones are distracting to the performers and other audience members. Wait until the show has ended to talk, text, or otherwise use your phone. Even the light from texting or checking your Insta feed can be seen by someone on stage.

- WILL POWER! performances are often followed by talk backs: save your burning questions and observations for after the show and ask the actors!

- Even though Elizabethan audiences probably enjoyed food during performances, keep your munching to a minimum. Everyone can hear wrappers crinkling and chips crunching.

- Enjoy yourself! As it was in Shakespeare’s day, theater is meant to be a joyous, social event.

Countless instances of misinformation that almost lead to catastrophe

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