

# Twelfth Night: Feste

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Feste is Olivia's fool, but he belongs to no household exclusively. He drifts between Olivia's house and Orsino's court, accepted everywhere and owned nowhere. His job is to make people laugh. His actual function is to tell the truth. Of all the characters in *Twelfth Night*, Feste is the one who sees every other character clearly, names what he sees, and suffers no consequences for it because the label "fool" gives him licence to say anything.

He is the only character who is never deceived.

## Who He Is

Feste is a licensed fool: a professional comedian whose role gives him permission to mock, contradict, and expose the pretensions of the people around him. In Elizabethan households this was a real position, not a metaphor. The fool's licence meant he could say things a servant or a guest could not.

What distinguishes Feste from a simple court jester is his intelligence. He knows exactly what he is doing. When he proves Olivia the fool by logical argument (if her brother's soul is in heaven, there is nothing to mourn), he is not being clever for its own sake: he is identifying the gap between her performed grief and the actual situation. The argument works because it is correct.

He is also, beneath the wit, something melancholy. His songs are not the cheerful songs of a happy entertainer. "Come away, come away, death" is about dying for unrequited love. "When that I was and a little tiny boy" ends the play with a verse about rain and futility. Feste laughs at everyone and finds none of it particularly funny.

## His Arc

**Defending his absence:** Feste's first scene is a threat to his position. He has been absent without explanation, and Olivia is not pleased. He talks his way back into favour by making her laugh and proving she is the fool who should not be mourning. He survives on wit because wit is all he has. He has no rank, no property, no status beyond what his intelligence earns him.

**The accurate diagnostician:** Across the play Feste offers the clearest readings of the other characters. He tells Orsino his mind is "a very opal": constantly shifting colour, unreliable, not to be trusted. His exchanges with Viola in Act 3 show a fool who recognises genuine intelligence and matches it, rather than performing for someone who cannot keep up. His response to

Malvolio's contempt is to demonstrate, in front of Olivia, that Malvolio understands wit less than the fool he is dismissing. Every diagnosis is accurate. None of them land.

**The dark room:** In Act 4, Feste visits the imprisoned Malvolio disguised as Sir Topas, a priest. He denies Malvolio's reality: the room is not dark; he is mad; his complaints are unfounded. This is the cruelest scene Feste participates in, and he participates willingly. He is also, without the disguise, speaking to Malvolio from behind the door in his own voice. The discomfort of the scene is partly that Feste, the truth-teller, is here the agent of a sustained lie.

**The final song:** Feste closes the play alone on stage, singing about rain and the passage of time. "The rain it raineth every day." It is not a comic song. Everyone else has paired off, resolved, reconciled. Feste has nothing to resolve and no one to pair with. He steps forward and speaks directly to the audience: "But that's all one, our play is done." The play ends where it began: with a fool who sees everything and belongs nowhere.

## Key Quotes

Quote	Scene	Significance
"Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun."	3.1	Foolishness is universal; wherever Feste goes he finds it; he does not create it, he only observes it
"A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit."	3.1	Words can be turned inside out; meaning is flexible; Feste understands language as performance
"I am indeed not her fool, but her corrupter of words."	3.1	Self-description: he does not pretend to be innocent entertainment; he knows his function is to unsettle
"Thy mind is a very opal." (to Orsino)	2.4	The most accurate single line of character analysis in the play; Orsino does not register it
"And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges."	5.1	Said at Malvolio's release: time turns, things return; the line lands harder because Feste contributed to the wrong he is now watching be righted

## Dramatic Techniques

**The fool's licence** is Shakespeare's structural device for Feste. Because he is labelled a fool, he can say what no one else can. When he tells Orsino his mind is an opal, Orsino laughs rather than taking offence. The label "fool" creates a protected space for truth. Shakespeare uses this to position Feste as the play's most reliable commentator while simultaneously ensuring he is never fully heard.

**Song** is Feste's most important dramatic tool. "Come away, come away, death" performs Orsino's situation back to him as entertainment. "O mistress mine" argues for seizing pleasure before time passes, to an audience of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew who are doing exactly that. "When that I was and a little tiny boy" retrospectively frames the entire play as a sequence of seasons leading to rain. Each song is a commentary that functions also as a mood.

**Wordplay** runs through all of Feste's dialogue. He turns sentences inside out, finds meanings that others miss, and uses language itself to demonstrate how unreliable appearances are. This mirrors the play's central preoccupation with disguise: Feste, like Viola, is never quite what he appears to be.

**Marginalisation** defines his dramatic position. He is always slightly outside the action: watching, commenting, moving between houses. This outsider position is what allows him to see clearly. He is not invested in any of the play's plots, which means none of the play's self-deceptions work on him.

## Thematic Significance

Feste is the play's study in the relationship between wisdom and foolishness. Shakespeare inverts the expected hierarchy: the character labelled fool is the most perceptive in the play, while the characters with rank and status consistently deceive themselves. Malvolio, who dismisses Feste with contempt, cannot see the trap that is already closing around him. Orsino, who applauds Feste's song, does not recognise himself in it.

He also represents the limits of intelligence. Feste sees everything and can change nothing. He describes Orsino accurately, and Orsino continues. He tells Olivia she is the fool, and she still falls for the first interesting stranger she meets. Knowledge, in *Twelfth Night*, does not protect you from feeling. It only allows you to watch yourself and others more clearly.

His final song is the play's most honest moment. The marriages have happened, the disguises are resolved, the revelations are complete. And then Feste stands alone and says: the rain comes regardless. Not as nihilism, but as fact.

 **Exam Tip**

Feste is most useful in essays about truth, appearance and reality, or the nature of comedy. For truth: he is the only character who consistently speaks accurately about others, and the only one no one fully listens to. For appearance and reality: his disguise as Sir Topas in Act 4 turns the truth-teller into a liar, which is the scene's point. For comedy: the contrast between his wit and his melancholy songs raises the question of what laughter is actually for. Always connect a quote from Feste to what it reveals about the character he is describing.

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