Let's start with the title. Like *Little Women*, this play has a close association with the Christmas holiday period. What does this play have to do with “Twelfth Night?” How does the subtitle, “Or what you will,” shape our thinking about the play? Writing in 1817, the great Shakespearean critic William Hazlitt called the play “one of the most delightful of Shakespear's [sic] comedies,” before walking back his praise somewhat: “It is perhaps too good-natured for comedy. It has little satire, and no spleen.” Do you find the play “delightful” or cloying? What kind of comedy is this? What makes it work? Is there really “no spleen” as Hazlitt claims? Malvolio, for one, might beg to differ.

In Shakespeare’s day, women were forbidden from appearing on the commercial stage. This stricture has some interesting implications for a play like *Twelfth Night*. With a boy-actor playing the girl Viola disguised as the young man Cesario, the cross-dressing and gender-bending can be wonderfully chaotic. How does this play approach gender roles? Does it accommodate transgression? Enforce boundaries? What do you make of Viola’s revelation at the play’s conclusion?

In 1940, Maurice Evans—perhaps better known today as Samantha’s warlock father on Bewitched or as Dr. Zaius from The Planet of the Apes—played Malvolio in a remarkable Broadway production of Twelfth Night directed by Margaret Webster. (The incomparable Helen Hayes was Viola!) What do you make of Malvolio, the Puritan steward? What’s attractive about this role (Orson Welles played him in 1932; Laurence Olivier in 1955)? While modern readers might have a bit more pity for the ambitious servingman than Shakespeare’s audiences likely had, can he still succeed as the play’s primary blocking figure (i.e. the character who acts to prevent the protagonists from succeeding)? Do we still cheer his fall?

From the play’s opening line to Sir Toby’s drunken ditties to Feste’s magnificent ballads, *Twelfth Night* is a very musical play. If you have time, listen to the 2017 and 2021 renditions of the play’s final song (both performed by Shakespeare’s Globe in London). What do you make of these interpretations? If you can’t access the performances, no worries! What is the experience of reading these songs in the play like? What function do they serve? What do they reveal about the playworld of *Twelfth Night*?

Get your popcorn ready! On Thursday, you’ll have a chance to screen the 2006 film *She’s the Man* (dir. Fickman). The film reimagines *Twelfth Night* in an early-twenty-first-century boarding school. Without giving away too much of the fun (no spoilers here!), which parts of the text do you feel would be most difficult to adapt? Why? What elements of this play resonate easily with contemporary film and theatergoers? Which parts of this play feel, well, somewhat too far removed from our time to be adapted successfully?

To join the Wartburg Book Club, RSVP to Emily Bloom by June 31st

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