

Twelfth Night and Christmas

Christmas in Shakespeare's time was focused around the twelve day period from Christmas day on 25th December to Epiphany on 6th January, which marks the day when the wise men visited baby Jesus according to the nativity story.

The twelfth night after Christmas was a holy day celebrated in January, along with Plough Monday which marked the return to work after the Christmas celebrations.

Twelfth Night, also known as 'Epiphany Eve', marked the end of the extended twelve-day Christmas celebrations. During these celebrations, all work would stop apart from looking after the animals. It was also a final chance for merriment ahead of the harsh winter days to follow.

During the period between Christmas Day and Twelfth Night it was the tradition to keep an open house for everybody regardless of social standing. People could knock on doors and join the celebrations.



It was not uncommon on each of the twelve days for those living in grand houses to have to feed upwards of fifty people twice a day.

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These twelve days were filled with all kinds of social activity, such as carol singing and decorating households. In those days evergreen plants like holly, ivy and bay were used for decoration.

Foods at the celebrations would include meat pies, a large variety of meat from different animals, and lots of dishes of salads, vegetables, and desserts. Written evidence shows that a good part of each summer and autumn was spent gathering food for the Christmas season.



Festivities on the twelfth night after Christmas included singing, dancing, playing games and performing plays.

One of the most important parts of the celebrations was a special baked, spicy fruit cake containing a dried bean and a pea for the King and Queen of the Revels. Whoever found one of these in their slice became the “rulers” of the festivities. The bean identified who would be “king” and the pea who would be “queen” for the night. If, however, the bean was found by a woman, she could choose the king and if a man found the pea, he chose the queen. The “king” was known as the Lord of Misrule.

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The Lord of Misrule would oversee the fun and games. During the festivities social status was temporarily forgotten and everyone joined in the fun. At the chime of midnight the celebrations would cease.

The first recorded performance of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night was on Candlemass (2 February) 1602.



Though the plot is not directly about Christmas, the play 'Twelfth Night' makes reference to these Christmas traditions and Shakespeare makes use of mischief-making and "misrule" in his story. Examples in the play include the trick played on Malvolio, which ends with him dressed in yellow, cross-gartered stockings, as well as Viola pretending to be a boy and, although she too comes from a wealthy family, working as a servant to Duke Orsino.