

# Feste, the clown and his songs

In Tudor times music was developing in style and complexity. As the kings and queens were great supporters of the arts and encouraged its development, it was a valued profession in which performers' skills and talents were enjoyed by everyone from monarchs to labourers. With no electricity or technology, music was a type of entertainment which was portable, accessible, and delighted everyone.

The musicians themselves had their own ranking which depended on the type of instrument they played. For example, instruments like the harp which have a gentler and softer sound were thought to be a higher ranked instrument than a drum or trumpet.



Feste, the clown in 'Twelfth Night' is very talented as he can sing, play instruments and use word play and riddles to entertain others in the play. He plays the pipe and tabor.

A tabor is a type of hand-held drum and usually played either with the hand or two drumsticks. The word "tabor" comes from the Latin word for drum.

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In Shakespeare's time, plays often included at least one song. Feste has five songs in 'Twelfth Night'.

Feste is employed by the lady Olivia to entertain her household with witty comments and songs, but he also travels to Duke Orsino's court to sing there when requested. When asked to sing by Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Feste asks them if they would rather hear a song about love or "good life", to suit their mood. Another time he sings a mournful song for the melancholy Orsino on request.

This was typical of professional musicians from Shakespeare's time, who would often be called upon to play at different venues, including in the homes of the gentry and possibly to provide theatrical music in the playhouses. The musicians had to be ready to play a range of music.



As in films nowadays, the songs and music in Shakespeare's plays not only provide entertainment but also help set the mood. In 'Twelfth Night', music reflects the characters' thoughts and feelings but also adds comedy.

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When Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew, and Feste are making merry in the middle of the night, singing popular songs, or “catches” (songs sung together in rounds), they are interrupted by Malvolio, the disapproving steward. Sir Toby and Feste share a noisy duet, singing over Malvolio as he attempts to hush them.

Other songs sung by Feste are sad and contrast with the comedy in the play.

Feste's five songs are:

- “O Mistress Mine” (Act 2, Scene 3) – a cheery song about falling for a sweetheart.
- “Come Away Death” (Act 2, Scene 4) - a sad song about a lover who dies of a broken heart.
- “Hey Robin, Jolly Robin” (Act 4, Scene 2) – a song, interrupted by Malvolio, about a love that is not returned.
- “I am Gone Sir” (Act 4, Scene 2) – a playful song used to tease Malvolio.
- “When That I Was and a Little Tiny Boy” (Act 5, Scene 1) – the final song closing the play with each verse describing the stages of life.



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When Orsino actually finds true love at the end of the play with Viola, he isn't melancholy at all – and the desire for sad music seems to vanish. His desperate love for Olivia suddenly seems empty and foolish.

Some people wonder if Feste's songs may have been originally meant for Viola. However, as Viola doesn't sing at all throughout the play, there is an idea that the young apprentice boy, who would have been playing Viola (teenage boys always played the women's roles), may have had to give up his songs as his voice had broken by the time he was supposed to perform.

Feste's role as fool would have fitted well with the profession of a travelling musician. He would have been familiar to Shakespeare's audience as a professional merryman, and his character is used in 'Twelfth Night' to liven things up.



## Activity:

Write a song for Feste to sing in court. What sort of song will it be, happy, sad, funny, or a ballad and tell a story? Will it be about life, love or something else?