

Down the Rabbit Hole to Illyria: An Analysis on Shakespeare's use of comedy and fictional realms in Twelfth Night to present critical reflections on society

Sharing many similarities with the classic children's tale "Alice in Wonderland", Shakespeare's play "Twelfth Night" seems to throw readers into a land where everything is not as it seems and madness rules over all. Women dressed as men, mistaken identities, and a comedy becoming almost a tragedy. This almost dreamlike land of Illyria has constantly thrown everyone that stumble onto its shores into a state of confusion. Looking into the world Shakespeare has created may confuse even the readers at times, but going deeper it is clear he has a purpose to his transcribed madness. In comparison to the stories message, Illyria is not just the chaotic world it externally appears to be. In actuality, Shakespeare is attempting to use a false exterior of comedy and an outlandish world in order to disguise his demonstration of the dynamics of society's refusal to accept philosophical darkness by purposefully focusing on superficial appearances. The mistaken character identities are actually society's dependence on the exterior, and the comedic implications that display how societies use laughter to hide the dark and serious undertones. Both of these points are vividly reflected in the characters. The characters of Viola, Feste the Fool, and Malvolio are the three characters within this play that demonstrate the plays central messages of society's ability to hide from the truth and/or create falsehoods.

The use of disguises and mistaken identity play the role of the plots main motivator. Shakespeare takes these misconceptions as a representation of how society places its faith in the

exterior of others then that of the internal virtues. The three main types of eternal falsehoods are that of gender, class, and stability. The central plot follows a girl named Viola who is left alone in a strange place and forced to hide away her own gender and dress as a male in order to gain the support of the Duke Orsino. "Conceal me what I am, and be my aid For such disguise as haply shall become The form of my intent.(1.1.)". Her internal desires did not match her outward appearance, so in order to fit into this new land she changed knowing that others will only judge her by her gender otherwise. Men hold power and are respected, and without any male assistance Viola had to produce her own support by externally appearing as a male and gaining what she required to move forward in this new world. By just looking like a male she opened up more doors for herself, and was able to become practically self-sufficient and even appreciated. Shakespeare use gender here as a means to explain how without looking the part one cannot gain successes in society. No matter if you are internally correct to be one thing, if you do not externally show it, it is unacceptable. Even in the end she never made the transformation back and her inner aspiration to be the Duke's wife were put on hold till inside matched the out. Society takes most things at face value, and Shakespeare centered his play around that truth. It is easier for one to judge someone on what can be seen, then what cannot.

Just as comedy disguises some serious topics in this play such as having to hide your true identity from others, Viola disguising herself is a physical representation of hidden truths. Viola despite being the one with the most to hide is actually one of the most truthful figures in the play. On two or more occasions she even in a sense tells her deception. "I am all the daughters of my father's house And all the brothers too. (2.4.119-120)" This is a clear example of how she is able to speak the truth while still making what she means unclear. "And yet, by the very fangs of malice I swear, I am not that I play. (1.5.166)." Here she is clearly trying to hint that she does not

wish to fool people, by admitting to her falsehood in a roundabout method. Being a symbol of external falsehood while still maintaining an honest morality highlights Shakespeare's desire to create conscious confusion about the meaning of truth, and the reasons one hides. Viola hides herself and suffers much through-out the play for it due to her desire to be an honest person, but knowing that her external role is more important and is forced into deception.

Another external deception that Shakespeare produces is from two of the secondary characters, Malvolio and Feste. Malvolio at the start of the play is displayed as the embodiment of straight laced, and practical man. After discovering he may have a chance with Olivia though, his true nature is revealed. He takes on a mental as well as physical transformation. By the end of the play he is on the edge of madness. Malvolio has maintained and clearly has taken pride in his appearance, but Shakespeare shows how quickly appearances can be broken, and how quickly people will turn on you once they are. Feste on the other hand makes a literal living off of being a fool, but it becomes more apparent as the play progresses that he is actually the most intellectual and trustworthy of all the characters. "This fellow is wise enough to play the Fool, And to do that well craves a kind of wit. (3.1.61-62)" By using him as a character Shakespeare again is making reference to how society forces people to hide a part of themselves, such as playing dumb, in order to continue to prosper in society. Both of these characters as well as Orsino and Viola are revealing harsh truths about society and the importance of it places on the external and how damaging that can become.

Feste's role in portraying the deeper meaning of this play is that of reflecting wisdom where one would normally never look. He externally plays the fool, but being the liberated character he is also the most wise and outspoken, giving him a stronger understanding of society. "Better a witty fool than a foolish wit. (1.5.32)" He is stating here that he would rather externally look the part

of a fool and still be wise, then a man who believes himself to be wise but is proven false. He is Shakespeare's way of explaining the importance of internal truth, and the lack of it society has. Feste says many hard truths, although joking, all are things to make audiences contemplate them more deeply. "Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage. (1.5.17)" Feste may sound as though he is kidding and to an extent Shakespeare probably intended this to be just a classic version of the horrors of marriage dark humor jokes that are often heard today, but the use of the word hanging suggests a more serious note of darkness. Considering the play ends in multiple marriages makes this an even more gloomy statement. Another time he makes a strangely truthful yet externally comedic state is when he discusses friendship with the Duke. "Marry, sir, they praise me and make an ass of me, now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass. So that by my foes, sir I profit in the knowledge of myself, and by my friends, I am abused. (5.1.15)" He is basically saying here that because his friends praise him and make me look like an idiot, while my enemies tell him frankly that he is an idiot. He is saying that it is actually the people that dislike him that make him grow as a person, and his friends are holding him back and letting him be the fool. Internally he may not desire to be seen as the fool by his friends, but externally it is what they praise him for, and so he continues to play his part. Feste is truthful and wise, but is only referred to as clown or fool, Shakespeare makes him a human symbol for internal, and comedic truth, while forcing him to play the part of the rambling fool, for if he spoke with serious truth he would not end up singing at the conclusion, but be laughed at instead of with before being cast away such as Malvolio.

Not many would delve into of a traditional comedy that ends in the classic marriages and describe it as melancholy or dark, but Shakespeare has set up some dark humor to be presented in "Twelfth Night". Shakespeare leaves audiences laughing while exhibiting many darks

undertones, just as society tries to force others to appear as if things are blissful, but in reality situations are fairly serious or even grim at times. Shakespeare uses comedy as a tool to show harsh truths. Just as Viola disguises herself in order to be accepted in her surroundings, Shakespeare disguise his work. One of the biggest moments is when Malvolio is literally locked in a dark room, and deemed a mad man. Though Malvolio is a character not many like, it is clear that this was a prank gone way too far. The horrors of being called mad enough to not be able to function in society in this time period were comparably much worse than even being considered a criminal today. Locked in a dark room with nothing but your thoughts would make a mad man worse off and a sane man mad himself. So when this trick is pulled on Malvolio it can be seen as metaphorically and literally a dark moment in the play. Another dark moment is when Orsino almost kills or sends Viola to her death after thinking she married the girl he was chasing after. One can even find it slightly dark how Viola is having issues with her mixed feelings of being a woman trapped as a man. She is, as fair as one can tell, a very mature and truthful person other than this ruse and fooling a lady who she feels is a kindred soul to her own must hurt her. Forcing a man into madness, Playing with death, and mistaken betrayal are all dark themes presented in this apparent comedy. This is a reflection on the difficult truth that even people today face with attempting to deal with the dark or serious by overshadowing it humorous anecdotes and light hearted fun. Shakespeare as a writing was no fool in the art of using comedy to lighten the blow of serious topics, just as it is today referred to as dark humor.

Being the only character who never receives a happy ending of sorts, Malvolio is the most tragic of all the performers. That being the case he is also the most capable of displaying the messages of darkness that Shakespeare intended. “Go hang yourselves all! You are idle shallow things; I am not of your element. (3.4.113)” Getting right to the heart of the external dependency of

others, he makes use of the words shallow and idle to speak to the other characters. Shallow being people who only focus on the external, and idle meaning those who do nothing about it. This is the heart of the play. Society has a need to focus on what can be easily seen in order to hide itself from deeper truths in fear they could be too dark to process. That being said, even those that are not unconsciously doing this are idle, and would rather keep things that way. Also the fact that he mentions hanging oneself is also a fairly tragic statement itself, highlighting his desire to be the reminder of tragedy. He also is refused a happy ending, and possibly that need to be the reminder is the case. He is teased, tortured, driven mad, and after being laughed out is completely driven away. This is the fate of those who are unable to be lighthearted and desire to embrace a more serious social setting. Leaving with only the words "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you. (5.1.384)" he is also a reminder that even when ignored or laughed at, despair always has the possibility of returning. Unlike with Viola and Feste, Shakespeare uses Malvolio not as a symbol or truth, but a warning of tragedy that audiences often forget within the humor.

Shakespeare was a skillful playwright, and was just as skillful at understanding the society he lived in. "Twelfth Night" is not just simply a comedy about cross dressing and romance, it is a deep reflection on social order and how it is often something that is covered in falsehoods. Changing appearances and even gender in order to be properly respected, as well as placing blind faith in titles. Finally there is the constant need for society to cover up dark realities by using humor as an outlet. Society is just as chaotic and misleading as Illyria, and although there are no mad hatters, or Cheshire cats, this is quite the rabbit hole and humanity is still falling down it.