

How does William Shakespeare's use of satire and mistaken identity/disguise contribute to the error and confusion in the comedy *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will*?

In this essay, I will examine the manner through which William Shakespeare uses satire, mistaken identity and disguise in order to relate to the comic elements of the play *Twelfth Night*. In order to achieve this, I will firstly consider Sir Phillip Sydney's definition of comedy in the book 'An Apology for Poetry' and its relationship to *Twelfth Night*. In addition to this, I will also analyse the definition and theories of satire that was put forth by the Roman poets Horatius and Juvenalis during the Renaissance. Secondly, I will examine the examples of satire in the play by focusing on the following: the concept of love at first sight professed by the poet Francesco Petrarch, the norms of heterosexual relationships, the relationship between satire and cross-dressing and homoeroticism, as well as the social behaviours and expectations of the Elizabethan court. Thirdly, I will examine how mistaken identity and disguise are used in *Twelfth Night* by the characters Viola/Cesario and Sebastian. Fourthly, I will analyse Shakespeare's happy ending and correlate it to the structure of comedy in the Renaissance. Finally, I will conclude this essay.

Phillip Sydney in the book the 'An Apology for Poetry' defines comedy as the 'imitation of the common errors of our life, which [is] represented in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such one'.¹ *Twelfth Night* follows this in that it is a romantic parody and a discourse on love— and to some extent infatuation— presented by unconventional, absurd and witty characters who deploy hilarious schemes and strategies as they pursue the object of their passions. The absurdity of the Duke Orsino's attraction to Olivia and her subsequent affection for Viola, who is disguised as a man by the name of Cesario presents the case for the error and confusion within the play. Cloaked under the guise of formality and royalty, Shakespeare captivates the readers with the Kingdom of Illyria, by creating an upside-down world where everything is not as it seems. Essentially, the play displays flexibility with regards to its role reversals, cross dressings and freedom of expression within the social construct of the characters which is a rightful representation of its alternative title *What You Will* and a contributor to the nonsensical scenes.

Satire is defined as the use of humour, irony, exaggeration or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues. Ultimately, the goal of satire is to cause the subject of ridicule to improve his folly. Shakespeare's use of satire can be described as indirect as his true intentions, that is the object of the ridicule, were realized within the narrative of the play through the use of the tone and style. During the Renaissance, there were two main influences of satire that were put forth by the Roman Poets Quintus Horatius Flaccus and Decimus Junius Juvenalis. Horatius' definition is used to classify the gentle aspect of satire that uses mockery and playful wit to scorn folly. It is usually done without malice and is based upon a moral concern on the part of satirist.

This form of satire is mainly done to arouse laughter and as a result the tone alternates between solemnity and joyfulness. On the other hand, Juvenalis' definition was predominantly motivated by

¹ Phillip Sydney, *An Apology for Poetry or The Defence of Poesy* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1973), p. 117

rage and was more focused on using satire as a means of breaking the silence concerning moral issues. This form of satire is mostly associated with Tragedies and Epics. *Twelfth Night* follows Horatius' playful and gentle definition of satire with its comic and mocking scenes on the ideas of romanticism, gender and its portrayal of sexuality.²

The first satirical instance depicted in the play is with regards to Duke Orsino, who misappropriates the concept of love at first sight. He idealizes the Countess Olivia and makes her the centre of his obsession by placing her on an unrealistic pedestal. He exclaims in lovestruck ignorance that her beauty possessed healing abilities and likened his heart to a beast 'O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first/ Methought she purged the air of pestilence;/ That instant was I turned into a hart/ And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds/ E'er since pursue me' (I.i.18-22). The lovestruck Orsino displays the frame of mind of one who is in love with the idea of romantic love throughout the play. Irrespective of the Countess' unrequited love, he continuously pines and mourns over her lack of affection though he seems to know very little concerning her. In the opening lines of the play, Orsino confirms his obsessiveness with love by stating 'If music be the food of love, play on/Give me excess of it that, surfeiting/ The appetite may sicken and so die' (I.i.1-3).³

Shakespeare utilized the character of the Duke to ridicule the nature of love professed by Medieval poet Francesco Petrarch. The poet developed the canon of 'courtly love' and the idealization of the object of one's affection. He stipulates that this love must be attached to some form of frustration or suffering in order to realize its success. Moreover, Petrarchan love often entailed a lack of communication between the beloved and the professor of the affection and this was due to an incapability to express the depth and intensity of the passion.⁴ While his sonnets are similar to the storyline of Orsino and Olivia, Shakespeare deviates from it so that he can indulge the reader in the world of satirical humour against the Duke's folly. By using satire in such a way, Shakespeare develops the plot of the play by diverting both Orsino's and Olivia's affection towards a central point— Cesario. It is through this that the playwright develops the foundation for much of the latter errors and confusion of the play, as well as, how the characters reveal within themselves the need for transformation from their self-deception.

While Shakespeare readapts the stories of Petrarchan love, he undoubtedly intertwines it with satire to mock and ridicule the norms of heterosexuality and the inconclusiveness of the perception of homosexuality in the theatre and Elizabethan court. There is some ambiguity that exists between the intention that Shakespeare wanted to convey to the reader with regards to the presentation of the relationship between homoeroticism, cross dressing and satire. This is because gender roles were reversed in the play and a fluid exchange of different identities were granted to the characters.

During the Elizabethan era, there were predetermined roles for males and females, and the importance of this is conveyed by the way in which different genders interacted with each other as well as the limitations which were imposed upon females. Traditionally, Elizabethan society was patriarchal. Men were expected to pursue women and this is displayed in *Twelfth Night* through

² Ruben Quintero, 'Understanding Satire', in *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 1-13

³ William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd edn., ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 721

⁴ Aldo Scaglione, 'Petrarchan Love and the Pleasures of Frustration', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58.4 (1997) 557-572 (p. 559)

Orsino's relentless pursuit of Olivia, by sending his male messengers to woo her. However, it was also a society that was both homophobic and misogynistic and Shakespeare used satire to ridicule those conceptions.

Illyria does not conform to the strictness of the Elizabethan social expectations. Instead, it cultivates a free form atmosphere that plays with the manner through which love is pursued. Essentially, the majority of the characters in the play manipulate language in order to facilitate this process, almost in a game like fashion⁵. Shakespeare entangles the norms of heterosexual love and courtship between genders with a web of satirical affections between the characters. Fuelled by the conventions of the theatre, the playwright explores this attraction by playing with the purpose of the theatre— to create a new world through visual and sometimes auditory means that serves to inform the audience of the playwright's motives. By this I mean that since women were not allowed to perform in the theatre, boy actors were used to portray female characters. Therefore, the character Viola is performed by a boy actor who is pretending to be a woman, who is pretending to be man. Shakespeare's use of satire here could be deemed as one that plays upon the irony that humans are attracted to what they see as a representation of gender identity. Shakespeare is implying to the audience that gender is not based upon your sex at birth but rather on the appearances. Alternatively, Olivia is attracted to Viola dressed as Cesario because of the identity that has been created.

When Shakespeare adds love to the mixture of gender fluidity and identity, he intentionally caused the characters to partake in homoeroticism. Orsino is attracted to his servant Cesario though he does not know that she is a woman in disguise and at the end of the play it is still unclear if his attraction is towards Cesario or Viola. Olivia is attracted to the appearance of a man who does not exist and thus has an attraction to a woman. And Sebastian, Viola's twin brother and the captain Antonio who rescued him, share a homoerotic passion towards each other. Overall, these instances of cross-dressing and homoeroticism add to the error and confusion of *Twelfth Night* in that it prolongs the self-deception of the characters and creates an identity crisis that extends towards the theatre.

The Elizabethan court maintained a strict hierarchy that was regulated by legislation, and rigid social expectations. Olivia follows this norm until she encounters Cesario, at which point she forsakes them and becomes a fool— not for mourning over her brother who is in heaven as Feste suggested— but rather for the affection of Cesario. She deploys the tactic of trickery by sending her servant to 'run after that same peevish messenger/ the County's man. He left this ring behind him' (I.v.290-291) and thus put her reputation 'at the stake' in hopes of winning his love.⁶ Shakespeare uses this to satirize the patriarchal Elizabethan court and to add depth to the ongoing use of role reversals in the play. Olivia's display of independence in her courtship shows the errors of Orsino's Petrarchan love. He is attracted to a woman who follows the same pattern of love at sight to the very man sent to win her affection. This error contributes to the confusion between Cesario and Olivia, as well as the Duke's subsequent and short-lived mistrust of Cesario later in the play.

Malvolio, Olivia's Steward, falls under the expectations of the Elizabethan court, but his obnoxious nature, pride and gullibility makes him susceptible to trickery that presents him as a fool. He is

⁵ Robin Headlam Wells, 'The Game of Romantic Love' in *Readings on Twelfth Night* ed. by Tanja Notkoff (California: Greenhaven Press, 2001), p. 126-137

⁶ Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, p. 725

infatuated with honour, dignity and respect but renders himself to the opposite in appeasement of the instructions of a love letter that he believes was written by Olivia. In reality, it is a trick that is being played on him by Olivia's gentlewoman, Maria as a revenge subplot and bride price to Olivia's uncle Sir Toby. Shakespeare not only satirizes the norms of the court by placing Malvolio in yellow gathered stockings adorned with a radiant smile, but he also satirizes the absurdity of the ideas of love between a cocky servant and his master.

The instances of mistaken identity and disguise in *Twelfth Night* are to be attributed to the twins Viola and Sebastian. While the plot is predominantly driven by Viola as Cesario, the emergence of Sebastian contributes to the comical scenes of mistaken identity in the play. Viola's disguise not only challenges the sexuality of Orsino and Olivia, but it also causes hilarious moments where she is forced to act the role which she plays. She is forced into a physical combat to the death with the Sir Andrew Aguecheek in a prank played on him by his companion Sir Toby. Rightfully, she attempts to resist their insistence that Sir Andrew is committed to doing so and becomes fearful at the descriptions of Sir Andrew's as a 'knight dubbed in with unhatched rapier and on carpet consideration, but he [is] a devil in private brawl' by Sir Toby.⁷ While she doesn't reveal her identity, she explicitly states that she 'Pray[s] God will defend me/ A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man' (III.iv.293-294).⁸ Her prayers are answered shortly after when her brother's companion Antonio, rushes to her defence believing that she is Sebastian. Her honest rejection of ever knowing him after he is arrested for causing a disturbance— and as a means of punishing him for his old crimes— attest to the relationship of appearance, homoeroticism and love. Sebastian is the object of Antonio's affection and the idol that he has lovingly pledged his devotions. Yet before his eyes, he is being rejected along with his adoration.

Orsino's relationship advice to Viola about the woman to whom her guise has gained the affection of is as a direct result of her deceptiveness. Though it is innocent, she soon learns that real love cannot be concealed and blatantly confesses her love while in her disguise 'After him I love/ More than I love these eyes, more than my life/More by all mores than e'er I should love wife' (V.i.132-134).⁹ Her confession created confusion within the play because Olivia, upon hearing this believes that she is hated and beguiled by Cesario who previously agreed to be her husband. In reality, it is Viola's brother, Sebastian—who she thought was deceased— that has accepted her proposal.

Sebastian is tossed into the upside-down world of Illyria and entered as the last candidate in the game of love. He is unaware that his sister is alive and disguised as a male sent to woo a mistress for her master. He is planted in the midst of ongoing pursuit of Cesario's affection by Olivia and he believes that the madness he now sees cannot be distinguished from reality 'What relish is in this? How runs this stream? / Or I am mad, or else this is a dream/ Let fancy still my sense in Lethe sleep/ If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep (IV.ii.59-62) and his acceptance of her request to be ruled by her stuns the Countess¹⁰.

Moreover, he is constantly mistaken for Cesario by the other characters such as Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Sir Toby and even Feste the fool. Brandished with their battle scars, both Sir Andrew and Sir Toby run to Olivia to notify her of the attack they suffered at the hands of her fiancée Cesario.

⁷ Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, p. 735

⁸ Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, p. 736

⁹ Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, p. 740

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, p. 737

Viola denies this by making references only to their prior encounter, to which the devoted and now heart broken Sebastian defended her. The denial by Viola perplexes the other characters who all can verify that they suffered at her hands until Sebastian enters and clarifies their confusion.

Feste adopts another identity through disguise as Sir Topas in the subplot with Malvolio. His role develops the climax of the jest that has been played upon Malvolio; and he executes it well as he navigates between an advocate and an accomplice. Arguably, it is Malvolio's maltreatment of the other servants that contribute to harsher satiric tone of the play. Had this not been a romantic comedy, it may have been interpreted as a tragedy. Shakespearian comedies typically end with the forgiveness of wrongs or injuries by the victim, repentance by the wrong doers for their actions and a happy marriage. Shakespeare only satisfies two of those conditions and allows all of the other characters except Malvolio to go through transformational change. Malvolio remains cold and to some extent sinister in the final act of the play as he begrudgingly pledges to 'be revenged on the whole pack of you' (V.i.374) before storming off the stage.¹¹ Shakespeare used the subplot in order to show us the character of Malvolio so that the reader would be able to form their own interpretation of him¹². It is also through this that an alternative insight to this play can be drawn that not everything or everyone will end up with a happy ending. Whether this is a harsher interpretation of the Stage Puritan character is essentially up to the interpretation of the reader however, it does not erase the comic atmosphere and the game of love being played in Illyria.

In conclusion, I have analysed Shakespeare's use of satire, mistaken identity and disguise and its relationship to error and comedy. I have presented Phillip Sydney's definition of comedy and related the concept to the play and the theories of satire prevalent during the renaissance. I have also presented the ways in which *Twelfth Night* uses satire to ridicule and mock the notions of love of first sight, heterosexuality, homoeroticism and cross-dressing. In addition, I have presented the norms of social behaviours and Illyria's rejection of Elizabethan ideals. I have also shown how mistaken identity and disguise contribute to the error and confusion of the play. Lastly, I have looked at Shakespeare's happy ending and the revenge subplot on Malvolio.

¹¹ Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare*, p. 742

¹² Linda Anderson, 'Malvolio's Ill Will as cause for revenge' in *Readings on Twelfth Night* ed. by Tanja Notkoff (California: Greenhaven Press, 2001), p. 109-120

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