

# Mistaken identities and misunderstanding within twelfth night



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Much of the Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night' focuses on misconceptions and the way disguises cause the root of misunderstandings in which mistaken identities arise, a fortuitous device for complicating action. Critic John Hollander described the play to be a 'ritualized Twelfth Night festivity in itself'. The comedic aspect is all due to the privileged position that the audience hold, consuming more understanding of the true situation than the characters themselves. It also manages to expose the habits and pretences people in the modern world take for granted, thus linking to parody.

Reflecting the popular medieval festival The Feast of Fools, a time when rules were subverted through human chaos and masquerade was common, Viola's decision to cross dress inevitably causes misunderstanding, alongside the appearance of her identical twin, Sebastian. It was especially effective for Shakespeare to incorporate twins, as Eric Weitz describes them as a 'kind of human pun', especially as this double identity heightens the comic value, as well as it being a deliberate evasion.

Furthermore, another main concept of misunderstanding is through Malvolio becoming the unconscious victim of the irrational spirit of holiday that he so strongly despises. The festivities, believed to have evolved from the Roman festival Saturnalia, held in honour of the god Saturn, are revealed in the similarity with which all characters overturn societal rules which distresses Malvolio. His anxiety is enjoyed all the more due to double meanings and how he is egotistically trapped in misapprehension.

This can be interpreted as an implication as to how our social manners can cause false representation of our true feelings. The common misconception

from the other characters towards Viola's true identity stems from her decision to take the disguise of a boy. She becomes the central motif of the play from the moment she asks the captain to 'conceal me what I am' in Act 1 Scene 2. Although somewhat improbable, she is thus granted access to knowledge and situations unavailable to her true gender, being given the opportunity of control.

Although this elaborate ploy is unnecessary, it creates a safe guard for her, building up the dramatic device that Shakespeare threads throughout the play. Within the Elizabethan era male dress was considered androgynous. Creating a sense of spectacle, cross-dressing had become an object of visual fascination for the audience. The most notable characteristics displayed were those of bright colours and excessive padding. Historian Harrison claims 'these fashions are diverse, so likewise it is a world to see.. the excess and the vanity' .

In contrast to Harrison believing this fashion is so commonly displayed that it reflects the characteristics each hold, satirist Phillip Stubbes rejects this notion by saying 'there is not any people.. however clownish, rural or British soever, that is so poisoned with the arsenic pride' . He thinks that nobody, not even a true fool, would be so poisoned by their pride to dress in such a way. Consequently, it is Harrison's interpretation that reflects the disguises and dress of Twelfth Night, 'the excess and vanity' later reflected in Malvolio's choice of displaying yellow cross-garters for Olivia.

Alternatively, Viola's words and witty manipulation of others manage to give her character the role of a fool and additionally become an important aspect,

especially when she becomes the catalyst for the upcoming revelry. The classic two-line form that she commonly uses suggests riddles and straight-man jokes, causing the audience to anticipate the oncoming reversal to questions that presume authority. Despite the results of her actions, Viola's efforts are to evade the action, rather than, like Rosalind in 'As You like It', to initiate it.

Although parallel to Viola's character with her decision to disguise as a young man, she contrasts with her boldness and reasons. Viola wishes to serve the duke in order to establish a job and safety, whereas Rosalind's disguise is a prop to woo a man that she loves and change him into a more attentive lover. Her continuity to chastise and challenge other characters with a Platonic ideal, subverts the limitations imposed on her as a woman. Moreover, there is comic appeal from both characters.

Living in a male-dominated society their choices that result in mistaken identity drive the misunderstanding that becomes the foundation of the plays, exploiting gaps between both audience and stage, thus presenting itself with a conspiratorial gleam. When Sebastian appears on shore in act 2 scene 1, he describes to Antonio how Viola 'much resembled me', foreshadowing the trouble this similarity will cause within the next scene. Plautus' play 'Menaechmi', the date of its first showing unknown, is of the comic misadventures of Manaechmus and Sosicles, and links in parallel to 'Twelfth Night' due to the mistaken identity of these twins.

In particular, the concept of love and confusing situations have been influences for Shakespeare and the mistaken identity plots of each, offer the

main element of the theme. Olivia adds to the dramatic irony by mistakenly proposing to Sebastian, believing that he is Cesario. Because of the misunderstanding that Cesario as a hidden character has caused, this comes to result in the behaviour of other characters seeming quite abnormal. Olivia, for example, is assumed by the audience to be attempting to initiate a romantic relationship with another woman unintentionally.

Cesario soliloquizes and rhetorically questions ' I left no ring with her; what means this lady? '. By inserting a caesura the effect of it portrays and emphasises ' his' change in tone, juxtaposing with the image portrayed of a romantic relationship, the passage also being formed of a natural and conversational style. Notably, the gift of the ring shows similarity to the commemoration of the coming of the Three Magi bearing gifts. Epiphany, a Christian feast held on Jan 6th, blessed the revelation of God the Son as a human being . Significantly, gender identity and deceptions cause the romantic complications that are presented.

There is a plot parallel between Shakespeare's play and the Italian ' *Gl'Ingannati*', dated 1531, as the main theme for both is the mistaken identity largely prevalent. Folly and bawdy humour are generated from the sub characters. With Sebastian introduced, the issues of mistaken identity end culminating in sudden marriage. Similarly, Fabrizio returns and everything is rushed in his infatuated based relationship and engagement with Isabella. Through the visual human pun of twins used by Shakespeare in both ' *Twelfth Night*' and ' *Menaechmi*', alongside the Italian ' *Gl'Ingannati*', the siblings manage to tap into an innately human fascination.

Shakespeare incorporates a feminine twist to the action presented from Act 3 Scene 1, later generating Helmut Plessner's belief that comedy comes from desensitization of a character. This is done through Maria, who is the one to lead the men into the gulling of Malvolio in order to expose his pride and presumption. Spelling phonetically and with the use of Italic hand, Maria impersonates Olivia's hand to construct Malvolio's belief the letter is from her. She exclaims ' I can write very like my lady' in an effort convince them she is able to pull it off. Therefore, disguising her letter with the use of fustian language,

she drops it for Malvolio to find, and being the credulous fool that he is, he takes it at face value. Although being in knowledge of Olivia having forsworn male company, the pre-established killjoy manages to indulge in preening of a fantasy that he can never truly fulfil. His self-deluded misinterpretation of this individual letter links in with the Freudian allusion to the hypocritical nature he holds, he is outwardly puritanical and inwardly base. There is an element of extra exploration here into the wider anxieties that contributes to the subversive potential of comedy.

He abandons all principles when he thinks he can see a possibility of self-promotion, assuming that he is attractively virile. Additionally, in believing the letter for something that it isn't, his foolish nature is revealed when he comes dressed in yellow cross-garters and becomes unwittingly and uncharacteristically bawdy, exclaiming ' to bed'. The colour imagery of the yellow cross-garters relates back to Catholic tastes in Henry Tudors' time, contrasting with the puritanical dress code of sombre black . An influential minority of Protestants were dissatisfied with the Elizabethan settlement.  
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This Reformation became more acceptable during the 'golden age', a time period that represented the apogee of the English Renaissance. With the main age of exploration and expansion abroad, Elizabeth 1st was known to be 'in contrast to her father's emphasis on masculinity and physical prowess', and she 'emphasized the materialism theme'. Shakespeare incorporates much of this with his description of yellow cross-garters. The last and longest scene of the play, Act 5, concludes the action that has occurred.

As most of the characters enter the stage, all the confusions and deceptions become resolved because Sebastian and Viola's reunion unravels major deceptions and conflict, thus portraying the ultimate climax of the play. Due to Sebastian's entrance, he is able to take over aspects of Viola's disguise and save her from her identity crisis of 'masculine usurped attire', resulting in freedom to cast it off. Orsino's pun 'when time hath sowed a grizzle on thy case' alludes to Cesario's lack of beard and additionally 'his' real identity, reflecting Orsino's order 'come boy' as he not only asserts rank but also dwells on his age.

However, even after this revelation, he continues to refer to her as a boy and the gender ambiguities her disguise created still persist. As the ending proceeds the structure of the interplay between the characters switches from prose to verse, furthermore Orsino stating 'you are a man', is evident that he is prolonging Viola's assumed male identity, hinting at an ongoing attachment to her masculine potential. Similarly critic Maria del Rosario Arias Doblas has 'no doubt that it is a heterosexual union on Viola's part'.

Furthermore, his declaration of love is strangely phrased through addressing her as a male and raises the unanswered question as to whether he is in love with ' Cesario' or Viola. It has been evident throughout the play that he has been attracted to ' Cesario' from the beginning, comparing ' his' lips not ' more smooth and rubious' ' like Diana's lips' in a seductive manner.

Concluding, the homoerotic attachments that have been a result of the mistaken identity have come to a heterosexual closure, as reality and imagination blur together with the outcome of ' Cesario's' revelation.

Misunderstandings are the root of what audiences of today would have seen as a comic ambiguity. The play revolves largely around the disguises and mistaken identity of the twins, however the subplots incorporated involve further misunderstandings that evoke laughter. From the double identity arises sexual conflict between characters and a tragic potential that could lean into tragedy quite simply and quickly. Consequently, misunderstanding and mistaken identity are the main themes that drive the play.