

# The functions of comedy in twelfth night

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Salinger (1974) calls *Twelfth Night* a “ comedy about comedy” in which Shakespeare demonstrates his “ fundamental debt to the earlier Renaissance tradition of comic playwriting and his abiding sense of detachment from it” (pg 242), and it is from this point that this essay will discuss functions of comedy in regards to Shakespeare abiding and deviating at various points from traditional Renaissance comedies and into which category of comedy *Twelfth Night* can be placed. It will also discuss how realism aids the function of comedy in the play in the particular case of *Twelfth Night*, that function being primarily a celebration of both joy and of Shakespeare’s comedy for its own sake. Traditional Renaissance comedy is clearly present throughout the text, such as the derisive laughter aimed at Malvolio cross-gartered in yellow stockings or Sir Andrew unsuspecting in the mock duel. The audience laughing at Malvolio serves to ridicule him further for his folly, but also serves comedy value in distinctly Shakespearian terms; we laugh at Malvolio to cast him out and show our dislike of him because he ruins the fun. This is what Charlton (1966) picks as definitive of a Shakespeare comedy, that the characters “ inspire us to be happy with them; they do not merely cajole us into laughing at them” (pg 277) and so our ridiculing of Malvolio is not so much as a condemnation of his character but a way of siding the audience with the fun-lovers of the play, notably Sir Toby who claims many comic highlights in the play despite his comparatively flawed character when considered against the puritan Malvolio. Malvolio is ridiculed as he represents puritans of the time (for example, by his dress); as puritans were largely against the comedy tradition in theatre (Barton 1972, pg 164) Shakespeare represents them as against merrymaking and fun in

general. We therefore side with Sir Toby and against Malvolio not because of their character, but because as an audience we do not want the fun to end. The characters, too, are desperate for the fun to continue and to seek new pleasures, something which for Shakespeare involves marriage as the ultimate goal when it is accepted that love has great power to awaken the spirit to newfound pleasures (Charlton 1966, pg 277). This, for Charlton, sets Shakespeare's plays as more imaginative than his rivals', instead of seeking out existing pleasure and maximising enjoyment Shakespeare has his characters constantly striving for ideals and, due to love/marriage, become "finer and richer representatives of human nature" (Charlton 1966, pg 283). The primacy of love for enrichment of spirit and opening of new avenues of pleasure, as discussed in the previous paragraph, is influential in Twelfth Night's comedy as, if music is "the food of love" (Shakespeare 1993, pg 29), then much music is required to nourish the spirit and this is the most musical of Shakespeare's plays. Music therefore plays a major role in the play from the duke's players to Clown's songs and adds to the carnival, boisterous mood that the play itself is a celebration. Much of the farce (paragraph below) adds to the comedic celebration on stage, for example Malvolio's humiliation scene and the transvestite farce of Viola would be a joy to perform as much as they are to behold. Tillyard (1958) categorises comedy into three sections; farce and two variations of Picaresque comedy. Twelfth Night can be argued to fit into any and all of these categories to some extent. Farce comes from the many laugh-out-loud moments in the play provided by the pranks and Clown's wry humour. The fact that Twelfth Night is also a transvestite comedy adds further farce to have the multiple

disguises of a male actor playing a female character who is in turn playing the role of a male. Add identical twins that are less than identical, the boisterous mood created by music, and the pranks mentioned above and all the elements of a farce are there to see. Farce, however does not serve the primary function of this play as there is little celebration of joy in a farce. Whilst an audience may laugh heartily, the comedic devices described below need to combine with intense realism if the play is to have any effect on its audience; that is to say, an unbelievable farce cannot bring the audience into celebration with the characters because the empathy simply is not present in a large enough quantity. The first variety of Picaresque comedy, effectively focusing on the underdog, Tillyard argues to be absent in Twelfth Night but the principals remain; Clown is our underdog who is left alone (unmarried, but also literally left alone on stage) and the collective group, excepting Malvolio and his threat of revenge, fulfils the underdog role of just “and only just” (Tillyard 1958, pg 6) surviving disaster. This feeling is heightened during the final confrontation when Shakespeare suddenly changes from prose to verse to link with Sebastian arriving with a solution to rush on with the happy ending. Again, this does not fully provide the play with the celebration of joy that is its primary function. Certainly one can empathise more with the fool without necessarily pitying him (and perhaps even seeing him as a bridge between Illyria and the everyday world) but there is still not the sense of belonging that the audience has with, for example, Sir Toby. For this, Shakespeare requires a blend of comedic strategies, and it is Tillyard’s (ibid) second variation of Picaresque comedy that is the more obvious for Twelfth Night, being The desire to shed the burdens of duty to self and

society without paying too severe a price...[recognising]...perhaps ruefully, that you cannot get away with it forever, that holidays are holidays only because they end, that mankind has after all to toe the line, and that duty has the last word...[but also finally persuading the reader that evasion has]... had a long enough innings and that duty must now reassert itself(Tillyard 1958, pg 6)which, whilst not providing as much convivial laughter as pure farce, is used by Shakespeare to lighten the mood and spirits of his audience. Whilst duty and the real world gets the last word, it is a refreshed reality into which we enter. The title itself refers to a “ festive and critical passage of time” during which the characters are “ swept out of their previous selves and brought into a fresh harmony with a natural order and sequence in life” (Salinger 1974, pg 13), that is to say the numerous marriages promise a harmonisation with natural order but also, crucially, a return to the normal state of affairs. All that has been removed from the characters by disguise, deception, the “ season of misrule” (Salinger 1974, pg 8) and tragedies of shipwreck is wonderfully restored with added value; for example, Viola not only regains her brother but also a lover. Viola’s trust in natural forces and human nature when she leaves it to time to untie the knots which she cannot (Shakespeare 1993, pg 48) puts a trust in the natural balance having the ability to regenerate and, through the ending, give something extra to those with spirits enriched by love (see earlier discussion). Here, then, the audience finally gets to celebrate joy with the characters now that the wholeness of the play and its range of comedic strategies has added to its realism. Whilst realism serves to add to the celebration of joy that is the function of comedy in Twelfth Night, comedy

also serves reciprocally to add realism to the play whilst also providing what would be termed today a suspension of disbelief; just as a tragedy teases the audience with false hope before the disaster, so Twelfth Night teases us with false disaster before the happy ending. This, according to Barton (1972, pg 164) adds to the realism of Twelfth Night whilst keeping true to the conventional social viewpoint of a comedy. In Twelfth Night the false disaster suggested during the deadlock in the final act comes when reality starts to re-enter the play and the celebration comes to an end. For Sir Toby, he is denied the surgeon he needs because the surgeon is drunk. We are finally seeing Tillyard's (1958, pg 6) reassertion of duty; it is through the nightly excess and celebration in which Sir Toby was so instrumental that he is now denied the practicalities of medical care that was not necessary in the utopia of misrule. Moreover, Barton (1972) suggests that Sir Toby marrying Maria is comparable to Sir Andrew's repentance; they are both paying for their holidays in "ways that have real life consequences" (pg 175). Thankfully, for the audience and characters, the disaster never comes. However, the realism provided by acknowledgment of its possibility makes the ending easier to accept whilst also giving the feeling of dodging disaster (Tillyard's first division of Picaresque comedy, see above). This relief, again felt by both audience and characters, adds to this celebration of joy; instead of accepting Barton's argument that the knights are forced to pay for their holidays, it can be argued that the opposite is true and that Sirs Toby and Andrew actually celebrate that most satisfying and joyful of human feelings – getting away with doing something wrong. The comedy value here is only increased by Malvolio's final cursing and promise of revenge, Sir Toby (and his

sympathetic audience) have once again got the better of him even when it is dubious whether he deserved to or not, after all Sir Toby is reliant on others like Malvolio to keep him in his life of leisure. Even though Clown's final song refers to marriage becoming tedious and the passing of time painful, audience optimism is maintained despite this realisation; the couples of the play may be in the distant and mysterious Illyria but that place is brought back into the reality of the audience now that the festive period is ending by virtue of the aforementioned realism that Shakespeare brings to this comedy. Barton (1972, pg 164) describes the period of the title as a time when the world is turned upside down and there is a constant holiday spirit. At the start of the play, it is the captain that introduces Illyria as a place in which to expect madness but it is during Clown's song that Illyria comes closer to England; the disguises and deception fall away and natural order (and, arguably, rule) restore with the characters intact with redeemed spirits and happy endings. By maintaining realism throughout the play in such a distant location, Shakespeare can bring this optimism home through his mix of Tillyard's comedy variations. In conclusion, comedy functions in Twelfth Night to provide convivial laughter/celebration of joy and an optimism of human nature and the capacity for regeneration. The particular blend of comic styles adopted by Shakespeare does not fit neatly into any one category but the function can be clearly shown by its effect; the added realism dimension despite an implausible ending, and a symbolism of marriage as renewal and rebirth following necessary disruption, carnival and "madness" (Barton 1972, pg 164) of the festival. Given that Twelfth Night is commonly held to be Shakespeare's last comedy of its type, Tillyard (1958,

pg 17) states that the play “ is not so sure of itself as comedy and may also be on the way to something else”, what Salinger (1974, pg 242), as mentioned in the introduction to this essay, calls a “ comedy about comedy”. From this perspective, the widespread happy ending and good fortune can be interpreted as an intentional farewell, in which case the comedy devices in Twelfth Night serve primarily to focus the audience on Shakespeare’s celebration of joy and good times as discussed throughout this essay. Shakespeare is using such a diverse and far-reaching blend of comedy with the primary function being a celebration of not only Renaissance comedy but also his own comedy heritage and legacy of plays. Bibliography Barton, A. (1972). *As You Like It and Twelfth Night: Shakespeare’s Sense of an Ending*. In: Bradbury, M. and Palmer, D. [eds.]. *Shakespearian Comedy*. London: Edward Arnold. Charlton, H. (1966). *Shakespearian Comedy*. London: Methuen. Salinger, L. (1974). *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Shakespeare, W. (1993). *Twelfth Night*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd. Tillyard, E. (1958). *The Nature of Comedy and Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press