

Free the artist in the guise of a fool: feste argumentative essay sample

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Abstract

“ Twelfth Night” is one of the most coveted comedies written by William Shakespeare. The element of the comic entwined with the tragic, calls for an intriguing plot which, the beauty of which is further enhanced by the accompaniment of music. This paper comprises of a critical response to Shakespeare’s “ Twelfth Night” and the central theme of comedy which permeates the plot. It is a characteristic feature of most of the most of the plays of Shakespeare that what appear to be comic turns out to be wise and the seemingly wise characters, more often than not, end up making a fool of themselves. In this paper, we will discuss how the official Fool and the seemingly serious characters like the servant Malvolio, or Andrew Aguecheek, all contribute to the comedy of the plot in their own ways.

Thesis Statement: In this paper, we will address the argument that foolery is seldom what it is depicted and how does it affect the readers. Shakespeare’s attempt at portraying the “ comic” is often deliberately suffused with a sense of wisdom, which if recognized, can alter the traits of the characters in question. For this paper, we have sought out some relevant and credible sources, which have been cited accordingly.

Introduction:

In order to discuss the concept of foolery in Shakespeare’s plays, one must first ascertain the meaning of the notions of jest which the poet uses in his works. By this, we mean the “ idea” behind portraying a person as a fool and yet endowing some wisdom to his character while on the other hand, the

seemingly serious ones lack the very sense of wisdom so apparently that it becomes quite a challenge for the reader to determine who the fool is after all. This confusion can only be attributed to the skill and humor of the poet and his ability to twist and turn the plot in ways so intriguing that it never ceases to amaze the audience. In order to understand this particular skill better, we will proceed with the character sketch of the official fool and see where his nature betrays his designation.

Feste, in the “ Twelfth Night” is the official Fool of Olivia. He is portrayed as a character whose job is to entertain people with his wit and humor and for that he is awarded his meager “ six pence” which he accepts with a melancholy joy. Feste, like many other Shakespearean Fools is more than what he appears to be. He is a lover of music and we find him singing for others many a times. But his musical abilities are not limited for the entertainment of others. He is a musician in the true sense, and this is made clear by his statement, “ No pains, sir; I take pleasure in singing, sir”; and this is what makes the reader respect him and consider him to be more than what he appears to be. (Bradley) Feste always wants his money for his service, but this is one exception, as it is not in Feste’s nature to malign the dignity of the music he so adores by calling it a “ pain”. His begging for money is considered shameless but that shame is overlooked every time as his way of begging is amusing to others. He entertains everyone with his seemingly funny acts and words, but as the reader knows better, hidden beneath the veil of a simpleton, lives a philosopher and a musician whose fortunes are not that bright enough, because of which he has to live with the

mask or he cannot afford to live at all. This fact is quite evident in Feste's words when he says "Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage." (Shakespeare and Lothian et al.) This is the artistic merit of Shakespeare that we so adore. The ability to create a character with visible traits and invisible personality enhances the subtle beauty of the play. Feste is not to be undermined as a Fool, but is to be admired for playing the part of one so convincingly that nobody gets a hint of his true self. The tragedy, however, lies in the fact that the Fool is often left alone and seldom cared for and this is quite evident when Feste admits that he is a Fool and that is what he will be by saying that "Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb, like the sun; it shines everywhere". (Shakespeare and Lothian et al.) He is not the subject of anybody's affection and he does not even intend to return the favor. Feste keeps to himself and sings for himself even when nobody is listening and he is certainly not getting paid for it.

The Fools in the guise of Knights and Servants: Andrew Aguecheek and Malvolio

Shakespeare is too clever a poet to limit the extent of foolery to the mercy of the official court jester. He extends the heights of naivety and sheer stupidity to characters who, according to their titles and designations, are not expected to harbor such traits after all. The comedy is carried on not only by Feste, the Fool, but also by the prim and proper, and seemingly serious servant, Malvolio, and a coward and preposterous knight, Andrew Aguecheek.

The knight in question appears before us as a suitor for the damsel Olivia, and considering his naivety of actions and notions, it is not a surprise that all

his romantic advances towards the lady is thwarted at the drop of the hat. The comedy of his pursuits is heightened in the scene when he challenges Cesario for a duel, as he considers him to be his rival in the same pursuit. However, Cesario, being a lady in the guise of a man, refuses to humor him and he breathes a sigh of relief, for a short while, as he is aware of how cowardly he is. The brevity that is expected out of him, and one that is disgustingly missing, is revealed to the audience when Sebastian gets the better of him in a dual in the later part of the plot.

In “ Twelfth Night”, Andrew Aguecheek is not the only fool. The notion of careless imprudence is quite evident in the likes of Malvolio. The servant, otherwise orderly and prim, severely lacks a sense of judgment. When told that he would get a chance to profess his desire to marry Olivia if he adorns himself in a ridiculous outfit, that too of a color which the lady despises, he jumps to the opportunity and ends up making a fool of himself, thereby landing himself in prison. It was indeed a prank, which was designed by the truant, Maria, but what is amusing to see in the play is the ease with which Malvolio falls prey to her vicious attacks. A person is considered to be a “ fool” when he lands himself in trouble owing to the lack of knowledge, skill or common sense. And Malvolio, with his portrayal of sheer idiocy, claims the title and deserves it too.

The Purpose behind the Confusion:

As a reader, one may wonder as to why the poet creates such characters whose characteristics contradict their portrayal. And to this, the primary reason that can be fathomed is that the poet in question is far too skilled to

let people get away with only the visible things. The idea is to affect the audience with the seemingly omnipresent traits of individuals which, at the end of the day, make them who they are. The poet could have restricted the comedy of the plot to the actions of the Fool. But, as we have seen in this play, and many others, that the Fool is seldom a fool. It is a parody of human nature that we take things for what they appear to us without often questioning or seeking the meaning which lies beneath the apparent. When it comes to that, Shakespeare is known to create turmoil in the human mind with the help of seemingly common, yet powerful, attributes which he endows on his characters. This is the purpose of the play, or the comedy, to be precise, that one can only appreciate the comic part once one can ascertain the notions of the “comic” at the first place.

Also, it is also important to acknowledge the fact that all the contraptions of the plot have been weaved so meticulously that it is often a challenge to identify traits at the first go. As J. B. Priestley, in his article, “The Illyrians” questions the idea of glorifying the villains to such an extent that they become heroes of the play, and this is something which is quite common in Shakespearean plays. (Priestley) Similarly, the concept of portraying the wise man as the fool and vice versa is also not uncommon in the poet’s works.

Conclusion:

The study of the characters, Feste, Malvolio and Andrew Aguecheek, is instrumental in understanding the craftsmanship of the poet in question. The complexity of these characters speaks volumes about the storytelling techniques used by the poet. It is only reasonable to expect such

harmonious contradictions from a poet of such stature and therefore it is a seldom a surprise that the works of his, like the “ Twelfth Night” are comic and tragic at the same time. Shakespeare is a master of contradictions, and it is quite evident in his portrayal of imprudence and foolhardiness.

Therefore, it would not be incorrect to state that Shakespeare’s portrayal of the “ foolish” is best to be taken as a metaphor in order to understand the underlying meanings of the text. To conclude, we can state that “ Twelfth Night” is a perfect example of the poet’s playfulness with the seemingly mundane and the outrageously comic aspects of the human nature. He is truly a mastermind when it comes to weaving contradictions and proving to the audience that what seems real is seldom real, and what is invisible at times, is all that matters.

References:

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