

Lies and deceit in "measure for measure" and "twelfth night" essay

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



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William Shakespeare often examines questions of morality within his works. In “ Twelfth Night” and “ Measure for Measure” he uses the themes of lies and deceit to examine character motivations and question societies understanding of morality. By examining these two works, one can gain a better understanding of how deceit can result in diverse outcomes.

Lies and Deceit in “ Twelfth Night”

William Shakespeare’s “ Twelfth Night” is a strong example of how lies and deceit can get out of hand to the detriment of the liar.

Deceit about gender is prevalent within this play. Viola, pretending to be a man, falls in love with Orsino but can’t profess her feelings because of her act. Olivia, though adored by Orsino, falls in love with Viola who she thinks is a man. This ongoing confusion is meant to be entertaining in a comedic

scene but it also is a revelation in the exploration of gender identity and the implication of lies. "Twelfth Night" mixes love and comedy to explore concepts of deceit. This insight into the psychological process of telling lies opens our minds to examine why humans feel compelled to tell untruths.

Viola and her Alter-Ego Cisero

In the case of Viola, it may be to escape the oppression of her gender. She states, "There is a fair behavior in thee, captain /And though that nature with a beauteous wall /Doth oft close in pollution, yet of thee/I will believe thou hast a mind that suits/With this thy fair and outward character" (1. 2. 43-47). It is clear that she would like to be judged as a person equal to any other, not by her gender. She also is expressing her concern that outward appearances are not always reflections of the inner person. Throughout the play, we see how fathers, not the ladies, get to choose their daughter's husbands, much to their dismay (Shakespeare). Viola decides to take her fate into her own hands, but she is only able to accomplish this by deceiving others.

Viola also uses her alter ego to express her true feelings about herself (Viola). She states, "A blank, my lord. She never told her love, "But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud." (2. 4. 107-111). By speaking in a third person male voice she is able to express what she wants to say, without being dismissed as a silly female by those around her. However her plan runs amiss when the female character Olivia falls in love with her male persona. To spare Olivia's feeling she is finally forced to admit, "I am not

what I am" (3. 1. 131). Shakespeare uses this humorous situation to show that the truth is always eventually revealed.

Additional Lies in “ Twelfth Night”

Viola is not the only one to tell a few lies throughout “ Twelfth Night”.

Sebastian also strives to hide his true identity from others. He tells a blatant lie to Antonio, going so far as to give him a false name to mislead him.

Sebastian’s dishonesty is a result of his distrust of others. He states, “ But I perceive in you so excellent atouch of modesty, that you will not extort from me/what I am willing to keep in; therefore it charges me in manners the rather to express myself./ You must know of me then, Antonio, my name is Sebastian,/which I called Roderigo” (2. 1. 10-14). Again he also is forced to admit his lies.

Even Feste pokes fun at deceit when he suggests “ Well, I'll put it on, and I will dissemble myself in't, and I / would I were the first that ever dissembled in such a gown.” (4. 2. 4-5). Feste jests that if he donned another costume even he could be whomever he wished. Shakespeare uses this light hearted statement to back up Viola’s feelings that outward appearance doesn’t reflect one’s true self.

Olivia’s intentions are also called into question because of the deceit of others. When Maria forges a letter to Malvolio, Olivia is forced to take the blame even though it is obvious to the audience that Malvolio is mistaken. She defends herself by stating, “ Alas, Malvolio, this is not my writing,/ Though, I confess, much like the character/But out of question 'tis Maria's

hand" (5. 1. 333-335). This instance of the forgery illustrates how misunderstandings can develop and harm innocents.

Lies and deceit in “ Measure for Measure”

Deception is also a key theme in Shakespeare’s “ Measure for Measure”. The complexity of the interwoven lies told by the main characters make “ Measure for Measure” a lesson in not always believing that everything is as it at first appears. Shakespeare frequently uses the term “ counterfeit” as a metaphor for the falsehoods put forward by the main characters.

Pretending to be Someone Else

Throughout this work, Shakespeare seems to allege that outward appearances are often the greatest indicator of how identity is perceived in the eyes of others. Duke Vincentio goes under disguise as a friar to expose truths. He uses the trust that others have in the un threatening friars to affectedly spy on others. It is through the use of this disguise that he discovers the lies of Angelo, who states, “ O my dread lord,/I should be guiltier than my guiltiness/To think I can be undiscernible,/When I perceive your grace, like power divine,/Hath look'd upon my passes. Then, good prince, /No longer session hold upon my shame, /But let my trial be mine own confession./Immediate sentence then and sequent death.” (5. 1. 365-373). Vincentio takes advantage of the trust given to him based on his appearance and uses it to his own advantage. Even he eventually seems to realize that his deceit is sinful. His failure to save Claudius based on his selfish desire to maintain his disguise seems to haunt him. However, he is still unable to admit his wrong doing to others and continues his lies to

Isabelle by stating,

“ And now, dear maid, be you as free to us./Your brother's death, I know, sits at your heart;/And you may marvel why I obscured myself,/Labouring to save his life, and would not ratherMake rash remonstrance of my hidden power/Than let him so be lost. []But peace be with him!That life is better past fearing death,/Than that which lives to fear.” (5. 1. 48)

The Art of Substitution

Substitution trickery is also prevalent within this play. Isabella, who fears sex sends Marina as her substitute to Angelo's bed. She sets up her ruse by stating, “ Haste you speedilyto Angelo. If for this night he entreat you to his bed, give him promise of satisfaction.” (3. 1. 259-261). She seems to have adequate reason to dislike the sexist Angelo, who threatens Isabella frequently by imposing his maleness on her. Angelo states, “ Who will believe thee, Isabel?/ My unsoil'd name, the austereness of my life,/My vouch against you, and my place i' th' state.” (2. 4. 154-158). He uses his position in society as a respected male to intimidate Isabella, whose status as a woman is lower and thus not as respected in society. However, it would seem that Isabella got the last laugh when she out smarts Angelo by sending Marina to his bed. Shakespeare's willingness to show women as clever was truly unique compared to other literature of the time.

When Angelo calls for Claudius' execution, once again an elaborate ruse is played on him. Another prisoner is put in his place and thus beheaded. It is suggested that death equalizes all humans, it is stated, “ O, death's a great disguiser; and you may add to it. Shave the head, and tie the beard, and say

it was the desire of the penitent to be so bared before his death; you know the course is common." (4. 2. 171-174) The use of substitution trickery also ties into the "counterfit" theme.

Escalus eventually exposes Angelo for the scoundrel he is. He is able to look past Angelo's outward persona to glimpse the truly rotten person inside.

Even though Angelo is the victim of most of the lies told, the audience does not pity him as he has clearly brought on his own fate by his unscrupulous actions. Escalus states, "I am sorry, one so learned and so wise/ As you, Lord Angelo, have still appeared, /Should slip so grossly, both in the heat of blood /And lack of temper'd judgment afterward." (5. 1. 468-471) Likewise Duke Vincentio was behind most of the deceit throughout the play, but the audience is generally willing to forgive him because his motives were to help others. Shakespeare argues the morality of deceit, asking the audience to question in their own minds what is truly right and wrong.

Conclusion

In summary, the works of William Shakespeare often revolve around the themes of lies and deceit. His psychological journey through the minds of his character questions the morality of their actions and examines the results. Usually his works end with the characters facing the repercussions of their deceit, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. "Measure for Measure" and "Twelfth Night" are thoroughly entertaining tales with a moral message.

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