

# Disguise and Deception in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

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**Abstract:** *As in most comedies, William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night extensively uses disguises, masks, and mistaken identities to elevate the comical nature of the play. Viola's disguise as Orsino's page, Cesario, becomes essential to the action in the play. Without this important element, the action in the play would slow down dramatically, making the story much less fascinating. Besides, the disguise is also necessary to develop the storyline adding Sebastian, and the confusion that his arrival creates. It is also important to the conflict between Olivia and Orsino, which depends on Viola's disguise to keep things more. Viola's disguise becomes increasingly more important as the events take place. The majority of the story lines depend on the disguise. Without it, the main theme of the play would be the misguide of Malvolio. The confusion that Sebastian creates when he returns would not occur without Viola's disguise. Finally, Sebastian and Viola are reunited, but only after they have already caused a large amount of chaos and have confused everyone. It is only then that everyone begins to discover the extent of Viola's trickery. However, when all of the truth has been told, Orsino realizes what has happened and agrees to marry Viola, with Olivia marrying Sebastian, the next best thing to Cesario. Viola's disguise, and the resulting chaos, are basically the most important elements of the plot of the play and are crucial to the development of the plot.*

**Key Words:** *Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, Disguise of Protagonist, Complications faced, Deception in Disguise, Consequences, Happy love.*

**1. Introduction:** Characters in *Twelfth Night* constantly disguise themselves or play parts in order to trick those around them. Some of the most notable examples of trickery and role-playing in *Twelfth Night* are: Viola disguising herself as the page-boy Cesario; Maria and Sir Toby playing their prank on Malvolio; and Feste dressing up as the scholar, Sir Topas. More subtly, Orsino's rather clichéd lovesickness for Olivia and Olivia's just-as-clichéd response as the unattainable mourning woman bring into question the extent to which these characters are just playing these roles, rather than truly feeling the emotions they claim to be experiencing.

Through the constant performance and role-playing of his characters, Shakespeare reminds us that we, like the characters, may play roles in our own lives and be susceptible to the role playing of others.

Sebastian and Viola are twins. There is a close resemblance between brother and sister. What is more, Viola has disguised herself as a male and goes about in the kind of clothes her brother used to wear. She is under the impression that her brother has perished in the sea. And Sebastian is likewise under the impression that his sister has been drowned in the ocean. Whenever Viola looks into a mirror, she feels that her brother is standing before her, so close is the resemblance. This close resemblance leads to several awkward situations. First of all, Antonio mistakes Viola (or Cesario) for Sebastian, gets involved in a fight, and is put under arrest by Orsino's officials. Viola has been forced into a duel with Sir Andrew by Sir Toby's tricks. Just as Sir Andrew and Viola draw their swords, Antonio appears on the scene. Antonio thinks that his friend Sebastian has got into trouble. So he stops the fight. He says that if his friend has offended anyone he will take the quarrel on himself. He then draws his sword and gets ready to fight. Sir Toby draws his sword to fight this intruder on Sir Andrew's behalf. Just then the officials arrive. They recognize Antonio as Orsino's enemy. They take him into custody. Thereupon Antonio says to Viola:

“This comes with seeking you:  
But there's no remedy: I shall answer it”.

He then demands his purse which he had given to Sebastian. Viola feels surprised by this demand and denies having taken any purse from him. It is Antonio's turn to feel surprised because he thinks that Sebastian is now turning his back upon him. He accuses Viola of ingratitude and speaks harsh words to her. He had thought Sebastian worthy of worship but the fellow has proved to be low and mean. "Thou hast, Sebastian, done good feature shame", he says to Viola, meaning that Sebastian has by his ingratitude, brought discredit to his handsome appearance. When Antonio is led away by the officials, it occurs to Viola that Antonio's mention of Sebastian's name shows that her brother is still alive. But the confusion caused by the resemblance between Viola and Sebastian has greatly distressed both Antonio and Viola. Antonio feels much hurt by Viola's failure to recognize him, and Viola's feels much wounded by Antonio's rebuke.

The next to make a mistake is the Clown. He has been asked by Viola to go to Cesario (that is, Viola in male disguise) and convey her message to him. The Clown comes upon Sebastian and naturally mistakes him for Cesario. Sebastian tries to explain that he does not know the Clown and that he is not the man the Clown is looking for. But the Clown thinks that it is Cesario talking to him and playing a trick upon him. Sebastian asks the Clown to go away and "vent his folly" elsewhere. But the Clown still does not take him seriously and asks what reply he should carry to the lady. Sebastian thereupon gives some money to the Clown to get rid of him. Sebastian warns him not to bother him any more:

"If you tarry longer I shall give worse payment."

The Clown in his witty manner appreciated Sebastian's gift of money. Just then Sir Andrew arrives there. He has been looking for Cesario in order to give him a beating. Seeing Sebastian, he mistakes the young man for Cesario and gives him a blow. Sebastian is surprised by this unprovoked attack and retaliates with a shower of blows. "Are all the people mad?" he asks. Sir Toby and Fabian have by now reached the spot. Sir Toby catches hold of Sebastian but Sebastian shakes himself free. A fight is about to begin, when Olivia appears.

Olivia too mistakes Sebastian for Cesario. She calls out to Sir Toby to check himself. She scolds Sir Toby for his ill-mannered behavior. Sir Toby and his friends quickly withdraw, leaving Sebastian and Olivia together. Olivia, still thinking Sebastian to be Cesario, apologizes to him for Sir Toby's misconduct. She asks him to accompany her to her house where she will tell him about the many mischiefs that Sir Toby has in the past played. Sebastian does not understand the meaning of this kindness from an unknown lady. He thinks that either he is mad or this is all a dream.

“What relish is in this? how runs the stream?  
Or I am mad, or else this is a dream”.

Olivia's mistake continues to puzzle Sebastian. The lady cannot be mad because she is running a big house-hold with authority and dignity. He too is not mad. There is something deceptive in all this. Just then Olivia comes again. She has brought a priest with her. She is unable to keep her passion under control any longer. She has also found that the man whom she thinks to be Cesario is in a more co-operative mood than he has on previous occasions. She, therefore, suggests that they should get betrothed through a ceremony to be performed by the priest. Sebastian has no objection and swears loyalty to her. Thus, mistaken identity in this play leads to much unpleasantness but, in the union of Sebastian and Olivia, it leads to a welcome result. The way is now cleared for the union of the Duke with Viola.

In William Shakespeare's comic play, Twelfth Night, a continual theme is deception. The characters in the play used deception for various purposes. Viola's use of deception involves her disguising herself as a man in order to get a job with the Duke of Illyria, Orsino. On the other hand, Maria, Olivia's servant, writes a letter to Malvolio in Olivia's handwriting to deceive Malvolio and knowing his love for Olivia. While some use deception as a means of survival, others use deception to trick others and make them act foolishly. The play, Twelfth Night has the theme of masking and unmasking. Characters practice deception on other characters, and some characters deceive themselves without realizing that they are doing so. Deception is a conscious and meticulous act, but self-deception is unconscious and involuntary.

Moreover, the Duke's love for Olivia is a kind of self-deception. He professes love for Olivia in outrageous poetic language. He thinks that he loves Olivia more than anything. He speaks about her in glowing terms as 'that miracle and queen of gems.' He parades that his love is a noble passion, while woman's love is mere appetite that suffers profusion and decay. This boastful display of love is a kind of sentimental pose, and it is self-deception. The stereotype of his love at the close of the play when he migrates his love from Olivia to Viola. He has merely deceived himself with the fancy that he is deeply in love with Olivia. Next Malvolio is a self-deceived man. He believes that Olivia is fond of him. Olivia has been kind towards his steward, but this kindness and polite attentions to him are interpreted as love, and as Olivia's desire to acquire him as her husband. It is Malvolio's self-love and vanity that lead him to this kind of self-deception. He begins to look upon himself as 'Count Malvolio' and begins to treat Sir Toby with contempt and the household servants with the severity of a master. His self-deception is pure fiction inspired by his self-confidence and self-conceit. Viola's male dress is a kind of deception- she puts on it for self-protection. It deceives all the characters.

The Duke thinks that Cesario (Viola in male dress) is a handsome young man with pleasing manners and he makes use of him to send his Love messages to Olivia. Olivia is deceived by the male dress of the woman, and she is drawn to Cesario and becomes infatuated. Olivia suffers agony of love because Cesario is indifferent to her. Olivia makes a complete surrender to Cesario and frankly confesses her passion. Viola is puzzled, because she did not forecast this development as a result of her male dress. She puts on the disguise only to protect herself against any possible threat to her honour as a woman in an unknown country. She has intended no harm to anybody by assuming this disguise. Olivia becomes the victim of another deception-resemblance between Viola and Sebastian. She mistakes Sebastian for Cesario and gets him betrothed to her. While Cesario has been unresponsive to her pleadings, Sebastian easily accepts the ardent proposal, although he is puzzled at first. Sebastian's deception is unintentional, and causes no harm-rather it resolves the complications between Cesario and Olivia.

On the other hand, the deception practiced upon Malvolio by Sir Toby and others is intentional and is motivated by the desire for revenge and by a desire to teach him a lesson. Malvolio is a victim of self-deception by his self-love and vanity. So it is easy for Maria to lay a trap for him by forging a letter as if it is written by Olivia. This strengthens and confirms Malvolio's foolish notion that Olivia loves him and desires him as her husband. Thus Maria's deception to Malvolio is aided by Malvolio's self-deception. Malvolio appears before her in his yellow stockings, duly cross gartered and with an endless smile on his face. He cuts a ridiculous figure and is condemned to a dark room for his 'midsummer madness'. Maria's deception of Malvolio is approved by all in the household of Olivia, because they are annoyed with his premature interference in their happy moments. Malvolio is thus a victim of self-deception and of deception practiced on him by others.

**2. Analysis:** Disguise is the key theme in Twelfth Night and this question therefore opens up a discussion with a lot of scope. Details about characters can be mentioned and it can also be linked to other themes. Starting with Viola, the obvious, due to her physical disguise of her gender, you can discuss her reasons for this. Is it because she would not be able to succeed in a world like Illyria as a woman. Is it because she is trying to stay connected to her brother who she assumes to be dead? Viola uses her disguise as a tool to deceive and this opens up a discussion to Olivia who is most predominantly deceived by Viola.

When discussing disguise it is crucial that comedy is mentioned. Twelfth Night is a comedy and therefore Shakespeare uses disguise in this sense to create humour. The deception of Olivia does create hilarity, she has fallen in love with a woman and pines for someone who is cross-dressed. Key quotations of this comedy need to be included in your answer and analysed to prove this point.

Be sure to also look into Feste and how disguise is not always comical. His taunting of Malvolio whilst he is disguised as Sir Topas the curate is unsettling and not light humoured. This is also an interested angle to explore when tackling the theme of disguise.

**3. Conclusion:** Disguise leads to deception that causes misunderstanding. Antonio becomes the victim of deception due to the disguise of Viola. When Cesario and Sir Andrew are about to fight a duel, Antonio appears on the scene and becomes ready to fight on behalf of Cesario whom he mistakes for Sebastian, his friend. He is arrested by the officers of the Duke not only for being involved in a brawl but also because he is an old enemy of the Duke. Cesario refuses to acknowledge him as a friend and Antonio becomes angry and accuses Cesario of ingratitude. This is a kind of deception that causes misunderstanding, complications, errors and distress.

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