

# Masks and Disguises in Shakespeare's Selected Comedies

(Focusing on Twelfth Night, The Merchant of Venice and As You Like It.)

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**Abstract:** "Disguise is defined as the substitution, over laying or metamorphosis of dramatic identity, whereby one character sustains two roles. Involving deliberate or involuntary masquerade, mistaken or concealed identity, madness or possession. Disguise ranges from the simple fun of the quick change artist", by M. C. Bradbrook in his essay on criticism.

Disguise is one of Shakespeare's favourite ploys. He veils the identity of a character and uses this disguise to develop theme, enhancing the comic ambiguity or to make the plot advance. The ploy of masks, disguise, and mistaken identity as a plot device in writing comedies dates back to the times of the Greeks and Romans in the writings of Menander and Plautus. Shakespeare borrowed the device they introduced and developed it into a fine art as a means of expressing theme as well as developing comic relief in his works. The paper deals with the theme of 'Love Disguise', disguise for love or for the loved ones, in the selected plays of William Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies; Twelfth Night and The Merchant of Venice. Masks and Disguises are studied with an emphasis on confusion and chaos created due to role swapping, disguise of dressing, confusion created by mistaken identities. The main purpose however seems to be to explore the differences between outer appearance and inner reality.

As in most comedies William Shakespeare's twelfth night extensively uses disguises and mistaken identities to add comical element to the play. Viola's disguise as Duke Orison's page is crucial to the plot of the play. The disguise therefore creates the important intriguing element, the mystery, confusion and misunderstandings advances the plot and the subsequent sub plot. Sebastian, Viola's twin brother resembles Viola, creates the intended comic confusion on his return. He is also the reason for the conflict between Olivia and Duke Orison. Viola's disguise makes the play exciting as the events unfold. The plot depends on disguise of appearance. The characters fall in love with each other, blind to the gender and to each other's true identity.

Viola Shakespeare's one of the most developed and mature heroines is beautiful, brave, intelligent, masks herself for reasons of her safety, finding herself estranged in an unknown isles. Sir Andrew is an ideal butt, he is the most perfect foolish character ever presented on the stage by Shakespeare. A thorough coward, and believes himself a true match for Olivia. Sir Andrew believes Cesario (Viola disguised) to be his competitor in love for Olivia. Challenges him for a duel, but is saved when confused Antonio arrives searching for Sebastine. Sir Andrew is effortlessly overpowered. The confusion created by disguise and role change is solved only after Sebastine and Viola are reunited. It is only then that everyone discovers their follies and Viola's trickery.

The masks and disguise creates disorder in the play. The female protagonist Viola falls in love with Duke Orsino, who profoundly loves Olivia, who in turn is smitten by Cesario's charms, thus creating a comical love triangle. Olivia admits loving Cesario and tries her best to woo him and Viola, must throughout the play reject her advances. However when the mask is removed, their misunderstandings and conflicts are resolved. When all the truth has been told, Orsino realises his folly and agrees to marry Viola and Olivia marries Sebastine, resulting in festivity and merry ending.

In the Merchant of Venice disguise emerges towards the end of the play, It possesses an aura of love. The goal of disguise here is protection. Portia is beautiful heiress, woman of intellect, decides to disguise herself as a lawyer called Balthazar. Portia insists on protecting her lover's dearest friend, Antonio who is a victim to evil Shylock's bond. Bassanio and Antonio are friends, thus Antonio borrows a large sum to help Bassanio, on a condition that the money should be paid back on the said time. If Antonio fails to return the money on the exact date, the Jew who had lent him the money could cut a pound of Antonio's flesh. Under these circumstances, Portia decides to disguise. Portia's attempt to persuade the Jew to leave the case and to claim for compensation falls deaf ears and Shylock sticks to his ground demanding justice, nothing more or less.

Portia dressed up like a man with a reed voice, with manly strides, speaks like a fine bragging youth. Portia adds certain touches to her disguise to make it convincing and complete. Thus Bassanio her husband also could not recognise her. Portia succeeds in saving the life of Antonio from impending death. She asks Shylock, the Jew to cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body without shedding a drop of blood, which was impossible. Thus bringing the cruel, merciless Jew to his knees. Thus Portia succeeds in overpowering Shylock's deceit, wickedness and conceit.

The masks achieves its role successfully. She decides not to drop the mask, she is determined to use it to check her husband's love. Portia decides to reveal the truth and her true identity only after she has tested his love for her. The disguise of appearance and behaviour occurs in most of Shakespeare's comedies. The disguise therefore plays the role of deceiving and hiding the truth.

Is a Romantic comedy in which Shakespeare reflects on many of his views of the Elizabethan society. The plot is concerned with a love affair that involves a beautiful and idealised heroine, disguised as a man. The course of love is not smooth but overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union. Shakespeare's romantic comedies involve progress from the normal world of conflict to "the green world"-the forest of 'Arden' in As You Like It, or the fairy inhabited woods in Midsummer Night's Dream, in which the problems of the ordinary world are magically solved and lovers united. The play normally ends in wedding, feast and dance.

In As you like it, Shakespeare uses disguise to correct the wrong behaviour, attitude and traditions of his time most prevalent during his time. Disguise in this play is both voluntary and forced, under various grounds like fear, love and protection. Rosalind in her guise confronts many characters that represent many wrong trends in her age. Her disguise helps in correcting such views and also in testing the personality of her lover. Orlando's love for Rosalind exceeds the reality, and he often flies to the world of dream and romanticism. He writes poems and hangs it on the trees like a crazy lover, she decides to cure

his love sickness and foolishness. She announces that her love weighs more than his love and in turn denies her own romantic character for her lover's treatment. Therefore makes full use of her guise to persuade her lover. Perhaps she would have failed without the disguise.

Disguise also emerges in the play for self-protection. Rosalind, the daughter of the banished duke decides to disguise as a man because of her cruel uncle and disguises as Ganymede to gain a safe passage to her father's hideout in the woods. she is sure that without disguise "beauty provoketh to thieves sooner than gold," she thinks the male disguise will offer her protection and give her a golden opportunity to gain freedom, due to masking she is able to shed her feminine inhibitions and reservations. Thus disguised Rosalind is also successful in portraying her role with great dexterity and correcting the follies and trivialities of her age.

Shakespeare exploits the use of Masks and Disguise in many of his plays to highlight the merits and demerits of his theme; like adding certain facilities to human behaviour or hiding their evil appearance under a mask. His Romantic Comedies arouses laughter by reversing the roles, creating confusion, mistaken identities with an underlying larger message. He has been very successful in mirroring the follies

and trivialities of the Elizabethan society. By doing so he seems to be mocking at the societal convention through the feature of hiding the reality, the obvious and forcing the characters to mask themselves to gain freedom of expression. His heroines mainly declare their opinions without fear in their guise. The questions that confronts us is do men/women in the society need masks to speak the truth.

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