
Classic Aspects Of Dramatic Comedy In Twelfth Night

By effectively manipulating comedy and the satirical use of jokes and humour, Shakespeare successfully managed to comment on certain aspects of Elizabethan society in his play 'Twelfth night'. Through his use of puns, irony, double entendres and satire, Shakespeare manages to entertain his Elizabethan audience whilst commenting on many ideas and values that revolve around their society. Twelfth Night contains many classic aspects of dramatic comedy. Central to its design is a series of tangled love interests (Orsino loves Olivia, Olivia loves Cesario and then Sebastian, Viola loves Orsino, Sir Andrew and Malvolio love Olivia); disguise (the plot hinges on Viola's dressing as a male servant in order to survive after being shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria); mistaken identities (Viola and Sebastian are twins so alike that no-one can tell them apart); trickery and tomfoolery; the lavish use of singing and dancing and an ending where all confusion is resolved and three marriages take place.

Perhaps the most obvious form of comedy in Twelfth Night is the slapstick humour generated by Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek (whose names are themselves a source of humour) and their cronies. The humour is immediately signalled by their use of prose, bawdy language and song that would no doubt have appealed to the working-class audience in the pit. Their buffoonery during their midnight revel in Act 2 scene iii, where they drunkenly carouse, mock Malvolio and sing at the top of their voices, reflects their sense of fun and joie de vivre. Likewise, the physical comedy in the scene where Sir Andrew and Cesario attempt to duel, but prove themselves utterly inept and fearful, is clearly entertaining and invites laughter.

The truly foolish character in the play is Andrew Aguecheek, whom Shakespeare creates to play the 'gull'. Andrew is frequently depicted as cowardly, incompetent and unintelligent. He is unable to understand the simplest of jokes or metaphors, responding to Sir Toby's 'I smell a device' with the literal 'I haven't in my nose, too'. Maria aptly describes him as 'a fool', 'a great quarreller', and one who has the 'gift of a coward'. He is ludicrously led to believe that he could be a potential suitor for Olivia. In this, he proves hopeless, as is evident when he attempts to listen in to Cesario to learn how to woo and thus becomes a parody of the courtly lover. Andrew Aguecheek is a figure of fun central to Sir Toby's revelries and a character whose denigration is amusing for both stage and theatre audiences. In the play itself, Andrew is a knight, who in their society is generalised as being courageous, noble and having great swordsmanship, all of which are characteristics Sir Andrew Aguecheek fails to possess. Shakespeare intentionally depicts him in such a way to challenge the Elizabethan society's views on how nobleman should act within their society. Andrew's cowardness, incompetence and overall unintelligent behaviour are all traits which make him susceptible towards mockery from the audience, particularly the lower class audience and disbelief from the upper-class audience who would see Andrew's behaviour as simply obnoxious and disrespectful.

A predominant figure of comedy is the fool. In the world of Twelfth Night, Feste is a licensed and professional fool. He contributes to the festive spirit, implied by his name, through his creation of music, song and jokes. He is attached to Olivia's household though he is something of a free spirit often frequenting the Duke's palace and singing to him. Feste embodies the spirit of misrule in which the play delights and he is the perpetrator of folly – the antithesis of the serious Malvolio who, as a Puritan, scorns merrymaking. However, it is not merely his witty word-play

that generates comedy. He also exposes truth to the other characters and the audience: he mocks Orsino's lovelorn behaviour; he challenges Olivia's obsessive mourning and, much to Malvolio's horror, proves her a 'fool' in his witty repartee; and he lays bare Malvolio's hubris by publically humiliating him. He thus seems able to see the true nature of those around him, mocking their foibles and flaws, leading to the comic resolution of events. There is also humour in the fact that his role gives him licence to mock his superiors. Despite his status as jester, he is far wiser than his masters ('wise enough' as Viola says 'to play the fool').

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