

The Positive Side of Imposture in *Twelfth Night*

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We are taught from childhood that lies have negative consequences, but Shakespeare has them often result in happy endings. We want to know why, in Shakespearean comedy, lying can be good. In reading *Twelfth Night*, we wanted to understand why leading characters tell lies, and why those lies so often end favourably. What is Shakespeare really saying by having lies not necessarily be a bad thing? To achieve our goal, we employed primary textual analysis, a review of published critical analyses, and heuristic reasoning. We continue to be interested in what motivates a leading character in a comedy to want to lie, and what are the consequences for her doing so.

In *Twelfth Night*, characters' choices and their outcomes to demonstrate that the deception a person commits can lead to positive outcomes for almost everyone involved. As prime examples, Viola's deceit with Olivia and with Orsino both involve to increasing anxiety and unease; yet both produce largely positive outcomes and apparently loving relationships. Fooling both Olivia and Orsino provides the needed inception and stimulus toward a larger comic resolution. Disguised as Cesario in order to move freely in Illyria, Viola deceives first Orsino and then Olivia into thinking that she is a man (Brown, Lohmer). As the decisive, eloquent Cesario, Viola teaches Olivia how to get over the pain of losing her own brother and learn anew to trust and love. The imposture appears to set up the likelihood of unpleasant outcomes for Olivia, who falls in love with a woman she thinks is a man. It confuses Olivia why Cesario struggles to accept and reciprocate her love, but in the

process she learns how to be passionate and persist with her love to the point that she decides marriage is the answer. The impending disappointment of discovering Viola is resolved through the accidental substitution of Viola's lost brother Sebastian, whom Olivia thinks is Cesario. The two get married within the day, which becomes the play's happiest error. Persisting in deluding Olivia, Viola avoids and defers negative consequences, until by happy accident, Olivia's hopes and desires are fulfilled.

Viola's disguise also deceives Orsino into disclosing his inner feelings about love. Orsino tells this "good youth" the "book even of [his] secret soul" (1.4.14, 13); as his trust deepens, he even advises his young confidant(e) to "let thy love be younger than thyself" (2.4.39). As Cesario, Viola can set him straight by asserting that women "are as true of heart as we" (2.4.91)—and the double meaning is apparent to the audience only. This intimate conversation ends promisingly in that as "Cesario," Viola has awakened Orsino to the strength and integrity of women's affections. S/he has also shown him a way out of egotism and into the true meaning of love (Schalkwyk, Williams). Deceit as an action still carries negative connotations, as is plain from Olivia's consternation and Orsino's anger at the moment they both realize Cesario has tricked them. In Viola's hands it has become effectively a tool for resolution and for building positive relationships. In this way, as long as lies have a noble intention, they can be a force for good. This is important because we are taught from an early age that lies are always bad, but Shakespeare shows us a different perspective in *Twelfth Night*. In romantic comedy, imposture motivated by love seems bound to overcome all such rigid lessons.

Works Cited

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