

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Themes in Shakespeare

REALITY VERSUS APPEARANCE

TWELFTH NIGHT, ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

As you like It, All's Well that Ends Well, A Comedy of Errors: these plays turn either on mistaken identity or startling revealed relationships; in either case the audience is in for discovery before the play is complete. (Shakespeare's problem plays leave you scratching your head, as you leave the theater; his tragedies leave you fascinated, awe struck, and moving powerful weights in your mind, but his conundrum comedies wake you up with discovery.) The discoveries in question are positive in their targeting; they bring families together, lovers together, and turn strangers into old friends: the Shakespeare who so often darkens our universe with tragic characters who have lost their way, turns in these comedies of surprise into an MC heralding in hope. A COMEDY OF ERRORS Personal identity is constantly being mistaken in this play. The result of systematic error, which exists because the principal players are identical twins, as are their servants, is that we are reduced to thinking of identity as inherently questionable. Identity seems meaningless in this play. As readers of Shakespeare we are used to the plays of disguise, and the horseplay depersonalizations which permeate this theatrical opus. In the present play we are reminded that one person can in many cases simply be a replacement for another, rather than an exemplification of the noble concept of 'personality.'

TWELFTH NIGHT The disguise of Viola as Cesario--like that of Rosalind as Ganymede, in *As you Like it*—is the key to the confusions, and gradual resolutions, that follow in *Twelfth Night* from that disguise. So strong is the impression Viola makes, as Cesario, that when her twin brother comes along, at the end of the play, Olivia falls for him, as she had for Viola, without a blip, in perfect continuity. What is the concern for disguise and ultimately reestablished identity in Shakespeare? The major literary source is probably the Roman Plautus, though Shakespeare drew in such sources indirectly, through the immediate contemporary materials he read. Shakespeare was a master of ambiguous identities.

As you like it Personal identity is constantly being mistaken in this play. The result of systematic error, which exists because the principal players are identical twins, as are their servants, is that we are reduced to thinking of identity as inherently questionable. Identity seems meaningless in this play. As readers of Shakespeare we are used to the plays of disguise, and the horseplay depersonalizations which permeate this theatrical opus. In the present play we are reminded that one person can in many cases simply be a replacement for another, rather than an exemplification of the noble concept of 'personality.'

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS Helena, as said earlier, was of a lovely character, but at the same time she was a wit and sassy enough to hold her own in any company. It was her idea to build the trick that enticed Bertram. Though Helena was married to Bertram, he had demanded that she could not truly be his wife without wearing his ring, and bearing him a child. With the help of a young woman friend, who is engaged to Bertram, Helena makes a plan. The lady agrees to make a date with Bertram for one hour of love, in the middle of the night. Helena takes her place, gets herself pregnant, and by arrangement swaps her own ring for the lady's ring, which she has from Bertram. Thus she satisfies Bertram's demands, possessing Bertram's ring and bearing Bertram's child. Helena will go even farther than this, to convince Bertram to marry her, which he finally does, having given in to the extremity of Helena's actions—she even fakes her own death, to win his heart. Unless Bertram is smarter than we think—highly unlikely—he never knows the midnight trick that satisfied the conditions he had imposed on Helena. All's well that ends well