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Navigating fate and agency: A comprehensive study of fatalism in Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night'

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive study of fatalism in William Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," a timeless comedy that delves into the complexities of human nature, identity, and the tension between fate and agency. Fatalism, a philosophical doctrine asserting that all events are predetermined and inevitable, is central to the play's exploration of the extent to which individuals can control their own destinies. Through a detailed analysis of the main characters—Viola, Orsino, Olivia, Sebastian, and Malvolio—as well as the secondary characters—Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian—the paper examines how Shakespeare navigates the complexities of love, ambition, and self-discovery in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

Keywords: Fatalism, human nature, agency, destiny, love

Introductions

"Twelfth Night,"^[1] one of William Shakespeare's most beloved comedies, presents a captivating exploration of human nature, identity, and the tension between fate and agency. At the heart of the play lies a profound study of fatalism, a philosophical doctrine that asserts that all events are predetermined and inevitable, and that individuals have little to no control over their destiny. The characters in "Twelfth Night" grapple with questions of identity, self-determination, and the extent to which they can control their own destinies, offering timeless insights into the complexities of the human condition. Fatalism, as a philosophical concept, raises fundamental questions about free will, determinism, and the nature of human agency.^[2] It challenges us to consider the extent to which our lives are shaped by external forces beyond our control, and the degree to which we can actively shape our own destinies. In "Twelfth Night," Shakespeare explores these themes through a rich tapestry of characters and relationships, each of whom navigates the complexities of love, ambition, and self-discovery in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

This paper aims to provide a detailed study of fatalism in "Twelfth Night," focusing on the main characters—Viola, Orsino, Olivia, Sebastian, and Malvolio—as well as the secondary characters—Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian. By examining the actions, motivations, and transformations of these characters, we will explore the tension between fatalism and agency and consider the implications of Shakespeare's exploration of these themes for the human condition. The study of fatalism in "Twelfth Night" offers a timeless exploration of human nature, agency, and the human condition that remains relevant and significant today. The characters and themes explored in the play continue to resonate with contemporary audiences, providing valuable insights into the complexities of love, identity, ambition, and the tension between fate and agency.

Discussion

In Act 1 scene 2, on the shores of Illyria, Viola's encounter with the captain sets the stage for her journey into a world fraught with uncertainty, loss, and the search for identity. Shipwrecked and separated from her brother, Viola stands at a crossroads where hope teeters on the edge of despair. The captain's account of her brother Sebastian's struggle for survival

¹ Shakespeare, W. (1601–1602). *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*.

² Rice, H. (Winter 2018). *Fatalism*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University: Center for the Study of Language and Information.

introduces an element of ambiguity that permeates the scene—Sebastian may still be alive, clinging to a mast in the unforgiving sea, yet Viola finds herself suspended between hope and resignation. This moment marks the beginning of her internal conflict, where she must navigate the unknown in a foreign land while grappling with the possibility that her brother, her last remaining family, may have perished. It is here that the theme of fatalism begins to surface, as Viola's fate seems inextricably linked to forces beyond her control.

The dialogue between Viola and the captain further deepens the sense of fatalism, as the captain recounts the political and emotional landscape of Illyria. Duke Orsino, the ruler of the land, is portrayed as a man caught in the throes of unrequited love, pining for the Lady Olivia. Olivia, in turn, is enveloped in her own grief, mourning the loss of her brother and isolating herself from the world. Viola, having just lost her brother, finds a kinship in Olivia's sorrow and expresses a desire to enter Olivia's household, where she might hide herself away from the world as well. However, the captain informs her that this course of action is impossible, as Olivia has closed herself off to all, including Orsino. Viola's longing to disappear into Olivia's world of mourning is thwarted, reinforcing the notion that she cannot escape her circumstances; instead, she must adapt and find a new path in the face of adversity.

Viola's decision to disguise herself as a man and seek service with Duke Orsino exemplifies the central tension between agency and fatalism. Stranded in an unfamiliar land with limited options, Viola takes control of her situation by assuming a male identity, a disguise that allows her to navigate the rigid social structures of Illyria. Yet, even as she exercises her own will in crafting this new identity, she remains subject to the whims of fate. The act of disguise itself is a response to the constraints imposed by her environment—both the literal shipwreck and the figurative shipwreck of her former life, in which her brother's potential death looms large. Viola's transformation into "Cesario" underscores the idea that while she may shape her immediate reality, the broader forces of destiny continue to shape her ultimate fate.

Fatalism in this scene is further emphasized by the contrast between Viola's precarious situation and the figures of Orsino and Olivia, both of whom are depicted as being trapped by their own emotions and circumstances. Orsino's unrequited love for Olivia and her withdrawal from society following her brother's death create a sense of emotional stasis. Both characters are caught in cycles of longing and loss, unable to move forward or alter their fates. Viola, in choosing to serve Orsino, unknowingly enters into this web of unfulfilled desire and mourning, where her own fate will become entangled with theirs. Her disguise as Cesario not only facilitates her entrance into Orsino's court but also sets the stage for the intricate complications of identity and desire that will unfold as the play progresses.

Viola's promise to the captain that she will reward him for his assistance in her disguise suggests a transactional relationship, yet even this interaction is colored by uncertainty. The captain, a pragmatic figure, agrees to help Viola, but there is no guarantee that their plan will succeed. Viola's fate, like Sebastian's, remains suspended, subject to the unpredictable currents of both the sea and the social dynamics of Illyria. The captain's willingness to aid her reflects a world where survival and opportunity are

contingent on adaptability, yet even adaptability cannot entirely overcome the forces of fate that govern the play's world.

Thus, the scene on the Illyrian coast introduces a series of fatalistic elements that will reverberate throughout the play. Viola's shipwreck, her brother's uncertain fate, and her subsequent decision to disguise herself all speak to a world where individual agency is constantly at odds with larger, uncontrollable forces. While Viola's actions demonstrate her resilience and resourcefulness, they also highlight the limitations of human control in the face of destiny. In choosing to serve Orsino, Viola unwittingly steps into a narrative shaped by unfulfilled desires and the inexorable pull of fate, a narrative where her identity, love, and relationships will be tested and transformed by the forces at play in Illyria. This scene, therefore, sets the stage for the exploration of fate and free will, with Viola's journey serving as a lens through which these themes are examined in the unfolding drama. Viola's character in "Twelfth Night" stands out as one of the most complex and compelling portrayals of fatalism and agency in Shakespeare's canon. Shipwrecked and believing her twin brother, Sebastian, to be dead, Viola is thrust into a situation that tests her resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination. Her actions and decisions throughout the play provide a rich tapestry for exploring the tension between fate and agency. Viola's decision to disguise herself as a man, Cesario, and enter the service of Duke Orsino can be viewed through the lens of fatalism. She accepts her circumstances and takes proactive steps to control her fate, believing that her destiny is out of her hands. This initial act of disguise and self-determination demonstrates Viola's acceptance of her situation and her willingness to adapt and survive in a foreign and challenging environment^[3].

However, this act of disguise also showcases Viola's agency and resourcefulness. By choosing to take on the role of Cesario and seek employment with Orsino, she actively shapes her own destiny rather than passively accepting her circumstances. Her ability to navigate the complexities of her disguise, maintaining her composure, and effectively serving Orsino highlights her resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination^[4].

As Cesario, Viola becomes a central figure in the play's romantic intrigues, forming a complicated love triangle with Orsino and Olivia. Her interactions with both characters provide further insight into her character's relationship with fatalism and agency.

Viola's growing affection^[5] for Orsino, despite her disguise, demonstrates a form of fatalism where she seems to believe that her romantic feelings are beyond her control. She becomes emotionally entangled in Orsino's infatuation with Olivia, further complicating her own feelings and desires. However, her willingness to act on Orsino's behalf and pursue Olivia's affections on his behalf also demonstrates a significant degree of agency and loyalty, challenging her initial fatalistic view of her romantic feelings. One of the

³ Hodgdon, B. (2002). Sexual disguise and the theatre of gender. In A. Leggatt (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy* (p. 186). Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). Twelfth Night Characters: Viola (Cesario). LitCharts.

⁵ "Francis Hutcheson on the Emotions". (2017, November 19). In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 17th and 18th Century Theories of Emotions.

most pivotal moments in Viola's character arc occurs with the unexpected arrival of her twin brother, Sebastian. His appearance serves as a catalyst for the play's resolution, as their reunion reveals the twins' true identities and unravels the play's various romantic entanglements.

Viola's reunion with Sebastian underscores her agency in shaping her own destiny. Despite the mistaken identities and misunderstandings that have driven much of the play's plot, Viola remains steadfast in her determination to protect and support her brother. Her ability to maintain her composure and navigate the chaotic events leading up to their reunion further highlights her resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination. Viola's character in "Twelfth Night" offers a nuanced and compelling exploration of the tension between fate and agency. While she initially seems to be at the mercy of her circumstances, she ultimately takes control of her destiny and shapes her own future. Her journey throughout the play is a testament to the power of resilience, adaptability, and the ability to find opportunity in adversity. Through Viola's experiences and transformations, Shakespeare presents a compelling study of fatalism and its implications for the human condition. Her character challenges the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions. In the end, Viola emerges as a strong, complex, and resilient character who deftly navigates the complexities of love, identity, and fate, ultimately shaping her own destiny in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances.

Duke Orsino serves as a reflection of the play's exploration of fatalism through his romantic and melancholic nature. His character offers a profound study of the tension between passive acceptance of fate and active agency in pursuing one's desires.^[6] Orsino's passionate and consuming love for the countess Olivia sets the tone for much of the play's exploration of love and desire. His opening lines, "If music be the food of love, play on, / Give me excess of it; that surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken, and so die," express a belief in love as a force that is beyond his control, something that happens to him rather than a choice he makes^[7]. Orsino's romantic melancholy reflects a form of fatalism where he sees love as a consuming and uncontrollable force. He is caught in a cycle of desire and frustration, unable to move on from his infatuation with Olivia. This fatalistic view of love influences his actions throughout the play, as he sends Cesario (Viola in disguise) to woo Olivia on his behalf, believing that fate will eventually bring them together. Despite his initial fatalistic view of love, Orsino's character undergoes a transformation as he comes to realize his true feelings for Viola. This realization challenges his previous fatalistic view and suggests a more active and conscious understanding of his emotions^[8]. Orsino's growing affection for Viola as Cesario demonstrates a shift from fatalism to agency. He begins to recognize and appreciate Viola's qualities and eventually accepts her true identity. His willingness to pursue a relationship with Viola, despite the gender-bending

complexities of their situation, showcases a newfound agency and self-awareness that adds depth to his character and challenges the play's themes of fate and agency.

Orsino's emotional complexity and vulnerability further complicate his character's relationship with fatalism and agency. Despite his outwardly confident and noble demeanor, Orsino is emotionally vulnerable and easily swayed by his passions and desires. His emotional volatility is evident in his quick shift of affection towards Viola (as Cesario) once he believes that she is a man. This suggests that Orsino's feelings are not as deep or genuine as he initially believes them to be but rather a product of his own romantic fantasies and the intoxicating power of love.

Duke Orsino's character in "Twelfth Night" offers a complex and nuanced exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency. While he initially appears to be a victim of his own romantic obsessions and beliefs in fate, his eventual growth and self-awareness add depth to his character and challenge the play's themes of fatalism and agency. Orsino's transformation and self-realization highlight the play's exploration of the human capacity for change, growth, and self-awareness. His character serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of passive acceptance of fate and the potential for growth and self-realization when one challenges their beliefs and assumptions. Overall, Orsino emerges as a complex and emotionally rich character who navigates the complexities of love, desire, and identity in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances. His character's journey adds depth and nuance to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions. Olivia, the wealthy countess in "Twelfth Night," is a complex and emotionally rich character whose actions and decisions throughout the play provide a profound exploration of fatalism and agency. Her character serves as a reflection of the play's themes of love, desire, and the human condition, and her journey offers a nuanced study of the tension between passive acceptance of fate and active agency in pursuing one's desires^[9].

Olivia's initial vow to avoid the company of men for seven years following the death of her brother sets the stage for her character's exploration of fatalism. Her determination to remain isolated reflects a belief in fate and the uncontrollable nature of her emotions, as she seeks to protect herself from further emotional pain and vulnerability. However, despite her initial resistance to Orsino's advances and her vow to avoid men, Olivia quickly falls in love with Cesario (Viola in disguise). Her quick and passionate infatuation demonstrates a form of fatalism where she seems to believe that her romantic feelings are beyond her control. This emotional volatility further complicates her character's relationship with fatalism and agency, as she becomes emotionally entangled in a love triangle with Orsino and Viola (as Cesario).

Olivia's character is also characterized by her assertiveness and determination to pursue what she wants. She is not afraid to take control of her destiny, as demonstrated by her determination to win Cesario's love, despite her initial vow and the gender-bending complexities of their situation.

Her willingness to act on her desires challenges her initial

⁶ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). Twelfth Night Characters: Orsino. LitCharts.

⁷ Mahood, M. M. (Ed.). (1995). Twelfth Night. Penguin.

⁸ Jaynes, J. (2000). The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind (Original work published 1976). Houghton Mifflin. ISBN 0-618-05707-2.

⁹ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). Twelfth Night Characters: Olivia. LitCharts.

fatalistic view of love and suggests a significant degree of agency and self-determination. Olivia's assertiveness and determination add depth to her character and complicate the play's exploration of fatalism and agency, as she actively pursues her desires and challenges her own beliefs and assumptions^[10].

Olivia's eventual realization of her true feelings for Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, serves as a powerful moment of resolution and reconciliation. This realization challenges her previous fatalistic view of love and suggests a more active and conscious understanding of her emotions. Her decision to marry Sebastian, despite the mistaken identities and misunderstandings that have driven much of the play's plot, underscores her agency in shaping her own destiny. Olivia's willingness to challenge her own beliefs and assumptions and pursue her desires demonstrates a significant growth and self-awareness that adds depth to her character and challenges the play's themes of fate and agency.

Despite her assertiveness and determination, Olivia's emotional complexity and vulnerability further complicate her character's relationship with fatalism and agency. Her emotions seem to fluctuate wildly, reflecting a lack of stability and self-control. Olivia is quick to fall in love and equally quick to despair when she believes Cesario has betrayed her by being loyal to Orsino. Her emotional volatility highlights the human capacity for change, growth, and self-awareness and adds depth to her character's exploration of fatalism and agency. Olivia's character in "Twelfth Night" offers a complex and nuanced exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency. While she initially appears to be at the mercy of her circumstances and her beliefs in fate, her eventual growth and self-awareness add depth to her character and challenge the play's themes of fatalism and agency^[11].

Olivia's assertiveness, determination, and emotional complexity highlight the play's exploration of the human capacity for change, growth, and self-awareness. Her character serves as a compelling study of the tension between passive acceptance of fate and active agency in pursuing one's desires, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions. Overall, Olivia emerges as a strong, complex, and emotionally rich character who deftly navigates the complexities of love, desire, and identity in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances. Her character's journey adds depth and nuance to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions.

Sebastian's character in "Twelfth Night" serves as a vital catalyst for the play's resolution and offers a compelling exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency. As Viola's twin brother, believed to be dead by the other characters in the play, Sebastian's unexpected arrival in Illyria adds a layer of complexity and intrigue to the

narrative^[12]. Sebastian's character is introduced as a survivor of the shipwreck that separated him from his twin sister, Viola. Believed to be dead by the other characters in the play, Sebastian's unexpected appearance in Illyria serves as a pivotal moment that drives the plot towards its resolution. His straightforward and pragmatic character contrasts sharply with the more fatalistic and emotionally volatile characters like Orsino and Olivia, adding a sense of order and stability to the play's chaotic narrative.

Sebastian's resemblance to Viola leads to a series of mistaken identities and misunderstandings that drive much of the play's plot. His reunion with Viola reveals the twins' true identities and unravels the play's various romantic entanglements.

Sebastian's role in the unraveling of the mistaken identities adds depth to his character and challenges the fatalistic themes that pervade the play. His ability to maintain his composure and navigate the chaotic events leading up to their reunion highlights his resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination. Despite the mistaken identities and misunderstandings that have driven much of the play's plot, Sebastian remains steadfast in his determination to protect and support his sister, further underscoring his agency in shaping his own destiny^[13]. Sebastian's unexpected relationship with Olivia further complicates his character's exploration of fatalism and agency. Despite the whirlwind nature of their courtship and the gender-bending complexities of their situation, Sebastian's willingness to pursue a relationship with Olivia showcases his agency in shaping his own destiny.

His growing affection for Olivia demonstrates a shift from fatalism to agency, as he begins to recognize and appreciate her qualities. His willingness to challenge his own beliefs and assumptions and pursue a relationship with Olivia adds depth to his character and challenges the play's themes of fate and agency. Sebastian's character in "Twelfth Night" offers a complex and nuanced exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency. While he initially appears to be a victim of his circumstances and the mistaken identities that drive much of the play's plot, his eventual reunion with Viola and relationship with Olivia highlight his agency in shaping his own destiny.

Sebastian's straightforward and pragmatic^[14] character adds a sense of order and stability to the play's chaotic narrative. His ability to maintain his composure and navigate the complexities of his unexpected arrival in Illyria further underscores his resilience, adaptability, and capacity for self-determination. Overall, Sebastian emerges as a strong, complex, and resilient character who deftly navigates the complexities of love, identity, and fate in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances. His character's journey adds depth and nuance to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions.

Malvolio is one of the most memorable characters in

¹⁰ "Twelfth Night - Olivia." (2024, April 18). In eNotes Publishing, edited by eNotes Editorial.

¹¹ Anoosahr, A. (2012). Author of one's fate: Fatalism and agency in Indo-Persian histories. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 49(2), 197-224.

¹² Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). Twelfth Night Characters: Sebastian. LitCharts.

¹³ Raphals, L. (2003, October 4). *Philosophy East and West* (Vol. 53). University of Hawai'i Press. pp. 537-574.

¹⁴ Hookway, C. (2008, August 16). Pragmatism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Spring 2010 ed.).

"Twelfth Night," known for his puritanical demeanor, ambition, and eventual humiliation. His character serves as a compelling study of the tension between fatalism and agency, as his ambition and belief in his own destiny lead to his downfall ^[15]. Malvolio is introduced as the steward of Olivia's household ^[16] and is portrayed as a strict and humorless figure. His ambition and belief in his own destiny to rise above his current station reflect a form of fatalism that leads to his downfall. Malvolio's strict adherence to decorum and his desire for respect and recognition make him an easy target for ridicule and manipulation by his tormentors.

Malvolio's downfall begins with the discovery of a fake letter planted by Maria, Olivia's maid, which suggests that Olivia is in love with him. This discovery fuels Malvolio's self-delusion and belief that his destiny to rise above his current station is finally coming true. His willingness to believe the contents of the fake letter without question demonstrates his susceptibility to self-delusion and adds depth to his character's exploration of fatalism and agency. Act 2 scene 5, in the garden of Olivia's estate, the scene plays out as a finely orchestrated plot of deception, orchestrated by Maria and supported by Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian. At its core, the practical joke on Malvolio serves as a lens to explore the complex interplay between self-deception, ambition, and social mobility, underscored by the theme of fatalism. Malvolio's character, self-assured and full of delusions of grandeur, becomes the unwitting victim of this trick, but his susceptibility to the deception speaks volumes about the nature of human desire and the ease with which people fall prey to their own ambitions. His downfall, though humorous, is framed as inevitable, given his belief in his right to ascend socially. This scene, therefore, subtly critiques the rigid hierarchies of the time while illustrating the inescapable pull of fate in human affairs.

The fatalistic undercurrents begin with Malvolio's soliloquy, in which he fantasizes about marrying Olivia and thus becoming the master of her household. His inner thoughts reveal his inflated sense of self-worth and his belief that Olivia's affection for him is not only possible but plausible. Malvolio's pride is such that he believes the universe is conspiring to elevate him from his current servitude into a position of power and privilege. This sense of destiny, however, is ironic: what he interprets as fate's favor is, in fact, a cruel trick played by those who view him with contempt. His ambition blinds him to the reality of his situation, making him vulnerable to manipulation, and it is this blindness that gives the scene its tragicomic tone. Malvolio's belief in his predestined rise mirrors the kind of fatalism that leads individuals to misinterpret the signs around them, seeing what they wish to see rather than what is truly there.

The letter itself, a key instrument of Malvolio's deception, symbolizes the power of illusion and the fragility of human perception. Maria's craftiness in mimicking Olivia's handwriting and sealing the letter with Olivia's ring makes the document appear authentic, thus reinforcing Malvolio's delusion. He is quick to believe that the message, cryptic

and filled with seemingly personalized hints, is meant for him. The riddle in the letter, particularly the letters "M.O.A.I.," serves as a focal point for Malvolio's fatalistic interpretation. He twists the meaning of the letters to align with his desires, convinced that fate has placed this letter in his path as a sign of his impending rise. This misreading highlights the theme of self-deception, as Malvolio's hubris prevents him from seeing the absurdity of his assumptions. In this way, the letter operates as both a tool of fate and a mirror reflecting Malvolio's internal ambitions, which drive him toward his inevitable downfall.

Malvolio's willingness to comply with the bizarre instructions in the letter further underscores the fatalistic trajectory of the scene. The letter directs him to wear yellow stockings, go cross-gartered, and smile constantly—all actions that are not only out of character for Malvolio but also entirely inappropriate given Olivia's mourning state. Malvolio's acceptance of these ridiculous commands demonstrates the extent to which he is willing to submit to what he perceives as fate. His eagerness to fulfill the letter's requirements reflects a belief that by following these instructions, he will prove his worthiness of Olivia's love and, by extension, his fitness for the elevated social status he covets. However, the audience is fully aware that these actions will lead only to his humiliation, making his fate all the more poignant. His blind obedience to the false signs of the letter mirrors the way individuals can become trapped by their own interpretations of fate, believing that they are acting under divine or cosmic influence when, in fact, they are merely victims of circumstance.

The fatalistic elements of the scene are further reinforced by the reactions of Sir Toby, Maria, and Fabian, who observe Malvolio's behavior from their hiding places with a mixture of amusement and disdain. Their laughter is not merely at Malvolio's expense but also at the absurdity of his belief that he could ever transcend his social position. Sir Toby's comment that he could "marry this wench [Maria] for this device" reflects his appreciation of the wit involved in the deception, but it also suggests a certain inevitability to Malvolio's fate. The characters, aware of Olivia's true preferences—her dislike of yellow, crossed garters, and constant smiling—are confident that Malvolio's actions will lead to his disgrace. Thus, they anticipate the unfolding of events with a sense of certainty, knowing that Malvolio's own misinterpretation of fate will bring about his downfall. Their awareness of the disparity between Malvolio's perception and reality adds to the fatalistic atmosphere of the scene, as it becomes clear that Malvolio's fate is sealed from the moment he finds the letter.

The scene explores fatalism, ambition, and self-delusion. Malvolio's belief in his destined rise to power, fueled by his misreading of the letter, reflects the dangerous allure of ambition and the ease with which individuals can become ensnared in their own desires. His downfall, orchestrated by the very people he seeks to dominate, underscores the play's commentary on the rigid social structures of the time and the futility of attempting to transcend them through sheer will or belief in destiny. The garden setting, a place of growth and transformation, ironically becomes the stage for Malvolio's undoing, as the forces of fate, embodied by Maria's clever scheme, lead him toward a future he is powerless to escape. In this way, the scene presents a layered critique of human ambition and the inescapability of fate, where the line between self-determination and fatalism

¹⁵ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). Twelfth Night Characters: Malvolio. LitCharts.

¹⁶ Post, E. (2007). Emily Post's Etiquette. Echo Library. ISBN 978-1-4068-1215-2.

becomes blurred, and characters are ultimately shaped by forces beyond their control.

Malvolio's humiliation at the hands of Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian is one of the most famous and controversial scenes in the play. It raises questions about the nature of comedy, justice, and the abuse of power. While Malvolio's strict and self-righteous demeanor makes him an easy target for ridicule, the cruelty of his tormentors and the glee with which they carry out their prank can be seen as excessive and disproportionate.

Despite his flaws and the manner of his humiliation, Malvolio's character is also sympathetic in many ways. His ambition and desire for respect and recognition are understandable, and his devotion to Olivia and her household is genuine, if somewhat misguided.

Malvolio's character in "Twelfth Night" serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of self-delusion and the consequences of unchecked ambition and a lack of self-awareness. His downfall challenges the play's themes of fate and agency, suggesting that unchecked ambition and a lack of self-awareness can lead to ruin.^[17] His character adds a darker and more complex dimension to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition. While he is often viewed as a comic villain, his character also invites empathy and reflection, making him one of the most compelling and controversial characters in the play.

Overall, Malvolio emerges as a complex and multi-faceted figure who adds depth and nuance to the play's exploration of love, identity, and the human condition. His character's journey serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of self-delusion and the abuse of power, challenging the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions. The secondary characters in "Twelfth Night"—Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian—play crucial roles in the subplot involving Malvolio's humiliation and contribute to the play's exploration of the tension between fatalism and agency.

Maria, Olivia's clever and cunning maid, is the mastermind behind the plot to humiliate Malvolio. Her character demonstrates agency and resourcefulness, as she takes active steps to challenge Malvolio's strict and humorless demeanor. Maria's motivation for orchestrating the prank stems from her own frustration with Malvolio's self-righteousness and her desire to seek revenge for his disapproval of her relationship with Sir Toby. Maria's role in the prank against Malvolio showcases her wit and cunning. By planting a fake love letter from Olivia to Malvolio, Maria sets the stage for Malvolio's downfall. Her willingness to manipulate the situation and deceive Malvolio highlights her agency and determination to challenge the play's themes of fatalism and agency. Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle, is portrayed as a boisterous and drunken character who enjoys the pleasures of life. His motivation for participating in the prank against Malvolio stems from his own amusement and his desire to challenge Malvolio's puritanical demeanor.

Sir Toby's role in the prank adds a comedic and chaotic element to the play's exploration of fatalism and agency. His encouragement and participation in the plot against

Malvolio demonstrate his willingness to challenge authority and social norms for his own amusement. Sir Andrew Aguecheek, a foolish and gullible knight, is easily manipulated by Sir Toby and Maria into participating in the prank against Malvolio. His motivation for joining the plot stems from his desire to win Olivia's affection and his eagerness to belong to Sir Toby's circle.

Sir Andrew's role in the prank adds a sense of bumbling incompetence to the play's exploration of fatalism and agency. His willingness to go along with Sir Toby and Maria's scheme without questioning the morality or consequences of their actions highlights his own lack of agency and susceptibility to manipulation. Fabian is a servant in Olivia's household who also participates in the prank against Malvolio. His character is less developed than the others but still plays a crucial role in the plot's unfolding. His motivation for participating in the prank is primarily to amuse himself and his fellow conspirators.

Fabian's role in the prank adds another layer of complexity to the play's exploration of fatalism and agency. His willingness to participate in the plot against Malvolio showcases his own agency and his alignment with Sir Toby and Maria's desire to challenge Malvolio's puritanical demeanor and seek revenge for his disapproval. The secondary characters in "Twelfth Night"—Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Fabian—contribute significantly to the play's exploration of fatalism and agency through their participation in the subplot involving Malvolio's humiliation. Their actions and motivations highlight the complex interplay between fate and agency, as they challenge authority, manipulate situations, and seek revenge for perceived slights.^[18]

While their actions are often portrayed as comedic and chaotic, these characters also add depth and nuance to the play's exploration of the human condition. Their willingness to challenge social norms, manipulate situations, and seek revenge highlight the potential for agency and self-determination, even in the face of challenging and unpredictable circumstances. Overall, the secondary characters in "Twelfth Night" add complexity, depth, and nuance to the play's exploration of fatalism and its implications for the human condition. Their actions and motivations challenge the audience to consider the extent to which we control our own destinies and the consequences of our beliefs and actions.^[19]

Conclusion

The study of fatalism in "Twelfth Night" offers a timeless exploration of human nature, agency, and the human condition that remains relevant and significant today. The characters and themes explored in the play continue to resonate with contemporary audiences, providing valuable insights into the complexities of love, identity, ambition, and the tension between fate and agency. The characters in "Twelfth Night" grapple with questions of identity, self-discovery, and self-determination, themes that are highly relevant in today's society. In an era where questions of identity and self-expression are more prominent than ever, the play's exploration of gender, disguise, and the fluidity of identity offers valuable insights into the complexities of

¹⁷ Montesquieu, C. de. (1989). *The Spirit of the Laws*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ Weigel, M. (2013, July 22). *Twelfth Night Characters*. LitCharts

¹⁹ Carus, P. (1910). *Person and personality*. In E. C. Hegeler (Ed.), *The Monist* (Vol. 20). Open Court Publishing Company.

human nature. The secondary characters' willingness to challenge authority, manipulate situations, and seek revenge against perceived injustices resonates with contemporary discussions about power dynamics, social justice, and the abuse of authority. The play's critique of rigid social norms and the consequences of unchecked ambition and self-delusion remain relevant in today's society, where questions of justice, equality, and the abuse of power are ongoing concerns.

The play's exploration of the complexities of love, desire, and relationships offers timeless insights into the human condition. The characters' emotional volatility, vulnerability, and willingness to pursue their desires challenge conventional notions of love and relationships, reflecting the complexities and ambiguities of modern relationships and the human capacity for change, growth, and self-awareness. The tension between fatalism and agency explored in the play remains a central theme in contemporary discussions about free will, determinism, and the extent to which individuals can control their own destinies. The characters' struggles with their beliefs in fate and their capacity for agency and self-determination offer valuable insights into the human condition and the ongoing debate about the extent to which we control our own destinies.

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