The Emotional Carriage of Fabrics in *Twelfth Night*

Mr. Rahul

Research Scholar

Maa Shakumbhari University

Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

rahulkharb8435@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the semiotic, psychological, and socio-political function of costume in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* within the cultural framework of the Elizabethan era. In a theatrical environment characterized by minimal scenery, costume emerged as a crucial narrative device through which identity, hierarchy, and emotion were communicated. Drawing upon the context of sumptuary laws and theories of material culture, this study argues that clothing in *Twelfth Night* operates not merely as an indicator of social rank but as a "psychological barometer" that externalizes inner emotional states. Through close textual analysis of key characters—Olivia, Malvolio, Viola, Orsino, Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste—the paper demonstrates how Shakespeare strategically employs colour, texture, and fabric to dramatize grief, ambition, desire, deception, and identity instability. From Olivia's transparent cypress veil to Malvolio's disruptive yellow stockings, costume becomes a site where emotional excess and psychological imbalance are visibly enacted. The paper further engages with theoretical perspectives from semiotics and New Historicism to situate costume as a performative construct that both reflects and destabilizes early modern social structures. Ultimately, the study reveals that the resolution of emotional disorder in Illyria is symbolized through a return to sartorial harmony, suggesting that authenticity lies in aligning one's external appearance with internal truth.

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The Elizabethan stage functioned within conditions of visual minimalism, where elaborate sets were absent and the burden of representation fell heavily upon language, gesture, and costume. In such a theatrical environment, clothing was not merely ornamental; it was deeply embedded within the semiotic system of performance. Costumes communicated class, profession, gender, and, crucially, emotional states. In William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the materiality of fabric becomes a powerful dramaturgical tool through which inner psychological conditions are externalized and social hierarchies are negotiated.

This paper argues that costume in *Twelfth Night* functions as a complex semiotic and psychological system that reveals emotional imbalance and critiques social ambition. By analyzing the symbolic use of colour and fabric, the study demonstrates how Shakespeare transforms clothing into an expressive medium that bridges the gap between internal emotion and external performance. Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist perspective further enriches the understanding of costume as a cultural artifact embedded within power relations. Greenblatt observes:

"Renaissance identities were not fixed essences but were fashioned and refashioned through a complex interplay of social forces, performances, and symbolic practices. Clothing, as one of the most visible markers of identity, played a crucial role in this ongoing process of self-fashioning."

This concept of "self-fashioning" is central to interpreting the characters of *Twelfth Night*, who continuously construct and reconstruct their identities through costume.In early modern England, clothing was governed by strict sumptuary laws that regulated what individuals could wear based on their social rank. These laws transformed fabric and colour into visible markers of hierarchy, ensuring that social distinctions remained legible. Thus, attire

was not a private choice but a public declaration of identity and status. The Elizabethan audience, therefore, possessed a highly developed visual literacy; they could "read" a character's costume as readily as they could interpret dialogue. From a theoretical perspective, clothing can be understood through semiotics as a system of signs. Roland Barthes conceptualizes fashion as a language through which meaning is constructed and communicated. In *The Fashion System*, Barthes famously observes that clothing operates as a signifying structure, noting that "fashion is a system of signs, a language in which garments are the vocabulary." This assertion foregrounds the idea that dress is not merely material but communicative, functioning within a structured network of meanings.

The significance of Barthes' formulation lies in its ability to transform our understanding of costume from a passive object into an active semiotic agent. If garments constitute a "vocabulary," then the act of dressing becomes analogous to speech, where individuals articulate identity, emotion, and social positioning through visual codes. In the context of *Twelfth Night*, this perspective allows us to interpret costume as a form of discourse. Olivia's black attire, Malvolio's yellow stockings, and Viola's neutral disguise are not arbitrary aesthetic choices; rather, they are deliberate "utterances" within a visual language that communicates psychological states and social ambitions.

Furthermore, Barthes' theory emphasizes that meaning in fashion is culturally constructed rather than inherently fixed. A particular colour or fabric acquires significance only within a specific historical and social context. For instance, black signifies mourning within Elizabethan culture, while yellow may connote festivity or eccentricity. Shakespeare exploits these culturally embedded meanings to create dramatic irony, as the audience recognizes the dissonance between a character's intended message and the interpretation it produces. Malvolio's yellow stockings, for example, are intended as a sign of romantic desirability but are received as evidence of absurdity and madness.

Thus, Barthes' insight provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding the semiotic richness of costume in *Twelfth Night*. By treating clothing as language, Shakespeare transforms the stage into a site of visual communication where meaning is continuously produced, negotiated, and contested. According to Barthes, garments function as signifiers that produce cultural meanings beyond their material existence. In the context of *Twelfth Night*, costume operates as a coded language through which emotional states, desires, and anxieties are externalized. The colour of a garment, its texture, and even its historical relevance contribute to a layered system of meaning that the audience deciphers in real time.

Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist framework further deepens this analysis by situating costume within the power structures of early modern society. Greenblatt argues that literary texts are embedded within networks of social energy, where cultural practices such as dress both reflect and reproduce systems of authority. In this sense, costume in *Twelfth Night* does not merely depict hierarchy—it actively participates in its negotiation and subversion. Malvolio's attempt to transcend his class through clothing, for instance, reveals the instability of social boundaries in a period increasingly defined by mobility and aspiration.

Additionally, Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation offers a useful lens for understanding costume as performance. Goffman suggests that individuals construct identities through "performances" in social contexts, using external markers such as dress to manage how they are perceived. In Shakespeare's Illyria, characters consciously and unconsciously engage in such performances, often with comic or tragic consequences. Costume becomes the "front stage" apparatus through which identities are projected, manipulated, and, ultimately, exposed.

Thus, the intersection of semiotics, New Historicism, and performance theory reveals costume in *Twelfth Night* as a dynamic and unstable system. It is both a tool of self-fashioning

and a site of psychological tension, where the desire for authenticity collides with the pressures of social conformity.

As Anthony Gerard Barthelemy argues in his influential essay on costume in *Twelfth Night*, the use of clothing in the play often destabilizes rather than reinforces identity. He notes:

"Costume in *Twelfth Night* does not merely clothe the body; it displaces identity, creating a theatrical space where appearance and essence exist in productive tension, and where garments become instruments of both revelation and deception."

This observation is particularly relevant to Olivia's character, whose mourning attire simultaneously conceals and exposes her emotional state. Olivia's character is defined by her self-imposed mourning, symbolized through her consistent use of black attire. In the cultural context of the Elizabethan period, black signified not only grief but also dignity, restraint, and withdrawal from social engagement. However, Olivia's mourning extends beyond conventional limits, suggesting that her attire functions as a performative shield rather than a genuine expression of sorrow. Her vow to remain in mourning for seven years is psychologically excessive and socially performative. By cloaking herself in black, Olivia constructs an identity that protects her from external pressures, particularly the romantic advances of Duke Orsino. Her clothing thus becomes a barrier between the self and the world, enabling her to control her emotional exposure.

The most significant element of Olivia's costume is her cypress veil—a thin, transparent black fabric. The materiality of this veil is crucial, as its translucence suggests that her grief is not entirely opaque or impenetrable. Instead, it is a fragile and permeable state, open to disruption. When Viola, disguised as Cesario, asks Olivia to remove the veil, the act becomes both literal and symbolic. The unveiling represents a shift from emotional concealment to exposure, revealing the possibility of transformation.

As Olivia transitions from mourning to love, her rigid attachment to black begins to dissolve. Although she may retain her mourning attire for social propriety, her actions reflect a renewed emotional vitality. This contrast highlights the tension between external appearance and internal change, reinforcing the idea that costume serves as a dynamic indicator of psychological state.

Peter Stallybrass, in his work on material culture, insightfully comments on the relationship between clothing and social aspiration:

"Clothing in the early modern period was never simply a covering but a site of intense social anxiety, where the boundaries between classes could be both asserted and transgressed. To wear the garments of another rank was to risk both ridicule and punishment, for it threatened the very fabric of social order."

This perspective illuminates Malvolio's transformation, where his adoption of yellow stockings becomes a visible act of social transgression. Malvolio's transformation is one of the most striking examples of costume functioning as a psychological and social signifier. Initially, he is associated with dark, austere clothing that reflects his rigid moralism and self-discipline. His attire reinforces his identity as a steward who values order, hierarchy, and propriety. However, beneath this controlled exterior lies a deep-seated ambition and desire for upward mobility. When he is deceived into believing that Olivia loves him, Malvolio adopts yellow stockings and cross-gartering—an act that symbolizes his attempt to transcend his social position. In the context of Elizabethan fashion, yellow was associated with both festivity and eccentricity, making it an inappropriate choice for a figure of his status.

The cross-gartering further intensifies this visual absurdity. By adopting an outdated and exaggerated style, Malvolio exposes the gap between his self-perception and reality. His costume becomes a visual manifestation of delusion, revealing the instability of identity constructed through external markers. Moreover, the physical discomfort associated with cross-

gartering mirrors his psychological turmoil. The restriction of blood circulation metaphorically represents the obstruction of reason, suggesting that his attempt to transform himself through clothing leads to both mental and physical imbalance. Ultimately, Malvolio's downfall underscores the dangers of using costume as a means of social reinvention. Unlike other characters who achieve resolution, he remains trapped within the illusion created by his attire, highlighting the limits of performative identity.

Viola's disguise as Cesario introduces a different dimension of costume as a tool for survival and adaptation. Unlike Olivia and Malvolio, whose clothing reflects emotional extremes, Viola's attire is characterized by neutrality. Her muted colours—blues, greys, and teals—position her as a liminal figure who exists between identities. This neutrality allows other characters to project their desires onto her. Orsino sees in Cesario a confidant and emotional mirror, while Olivia perceives a romantic ideal. Viola's costume thus facilitates a fluid identity that challenges fixed notions of gender and selfhood. At the same time, her disguise conceals her true emotions, particularly her love for Orsino. The tension between her internal feelings and external appearance highlights the complexity of identity as a performative construct. Unlike Malvolio, whose costume leads to delusion, Viola's disguise enables clarity and resolution.

Viola's cross-dressing complicates the relationship between costume and identity by introducing the theme of gender fluidity. In the early modern theatrical tradition, female roles were performed by male actors, adding another layer of performativity to Viola's disguise. Thus, the audience witnesses a boy actor playing a female character who disguises herself as a male page—a multi-layered performance that destabilizes fixed categories of gender. Costume becomes central to this instability. By donning male attire, Viola gains access to spaces and forms of agency that would otherwise be denied to her. Her clothing allows her to navigate Orsino's court, engage in intimate conversations, and influence the emotional trajectories of

other characters. However, this empowerment is accompanied by internal conflict, as she must suppress her own identity and desires.

Furthermore, Viola's costume exposes the constructed nature of gender roles. Her ability to convincingly perform masculinity suggests that gender is not an inherent essence but a socially produced identity sustained through external markers such as dress, gesture, and speech. In this sense, *Twelfth Night* anticipates modern theories of gender performativity, demonstrating that identity is fluid rather than fixed.

Ultimately, Viola's return to her "maid's garments" at the end of the play signifies not a rejection of fluidity but a reconciliation of her multiple identities. Her journey illustrates that costume can both conceal and reveal, functioning as a medium through which individuals negotiate the complexities of selfhood.

Orsino's costume reflects his aristocratic status through the use of rich colours such as purple, crimson, and gold. However, these colours also signify emotional excess and instability. His self-description as having an "opal" mind suggests a constantly shifting emotional state, characterized by intensity rather than depth.

His attire reinforces his identity as a lover of love rather than a lover of Olivia. The richness of his clothing mirrors the theatricality of his emotions, suggesting that his passion is performative rather than genuine. By the end of the play, Orsino's emotional volatility stabilizes as he recognizes Viola's true identity. This shift is accompanied by a movement away from excess toward balance, aligning his external appearance with internal reality.

The secondary characters in *Twelfth Night* contribute to the play's exploration of costume through their distinctive colour associations. Maria is linked to warm tones such as red and russet, reflecting her wit, energy, and assertiveness. Her clothing contrasts sharply with Olivia's black, highlighting her role as an agent of disruption.

Sir Toby's attire is characterized by earthy, disheveled tones that reflect his indulgence and rejection of social norms. His clothing embodies the spirit of festivity and excess, positioning him as a figure of comic rebellion.

Sir Andrew, in contrast, is associated with pale and artificial colours that emphasize his lack of substance. His attempt to appear fashionable through "flame-coloured" stockings underscores his insecurity and superficiality, reinforcing the theme of appearance versus reality.

C. L. Barber, in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, highlights the role of festive inversion and its connection to costume, arguing:

"The festive world of Shakespearean comedy allows for a temporary suspension of social norms, where roles are reversed, identities are fluid, and the boundaries between wisdom and folly are deliberately blurred. Within this framework, the fool occupies a privileged position, revealing truths that others cannot perceive."

Feste's motley costume must be understood within this festive logic, where multiplicity of colour reflects multiplicity of truth. Feste's motley costume represents the most complex use of clothing in the play. As a patchwork of colours and fabrics, it symbolizes a fragmented yet adaptable identity. Unlike other characters, Feste is fully aware of the performative nature of costume and does not mistake appearance for reality. His statement that clothing does not define the self highlights the central theme of the play: the instability of identity constructed through external means. By wearing every colour, Feste transcends the limitations imposed by costume, achieving a level of emotional and intellectual balance that others lack.

In *Twelfth Night*, costume functions as a powerful semiotic system through which Shakespeare explores the complexities of identity, emotion, and social hierarchy. The interplay of colour, fabric, and texture reveals the inner states of characters while simultaneously exposing the limitations of external representation. Each character's relationship with clothing reflects a distinct form of emotional imbalance. Olivia's black attire represents performative

grief that ultimately proves permeable; Malvolio's yellow stockings embody the dangers of social ambition and self-delusion; Viola's neutral disguise illustrates the fluidity of identity and the tension between concealment and authenticity; and Orsino's opulent garments signal emotional excess and instability. The secondary characters further enrich this spectrum, demonstrating how costume can function as a vehicle for both comic and critical commentary.

The movement from rigidity to harmony in the play's conclusion suggests that emotional balance is achieved not through performance alone but through an alignment of external appearance with internal truth. Characters who successfully reconcile their inner and outer selves—such as Viola and Olivia—are rewarded with resolution, while those who remain trapped in illusion, such as Malvolio, are left in a state of alienation. Moreover, the play's exploration of costume resonates beyond its historical context, offering insights into contemporary discussions of identity, self-presentation, and social performance. In a world where appearance continues to shape perception, Shakespeare's Illyria serves as a reminder that the garments we wear are never neutral; they are imbued with meanings that both reflect and construct who we are. Thus, Shakespeare transforms costume into a visual epistemology—a mode of knowing through seeing—where truth is simultaneously concealed and revealed. The emotional carriage of fabrics in *Twelfth Night* ultimately underscores the fragile boundary between appearance and reality, inviting audiences to question the authenticity of both.

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