

Twelfth Night: Sir Andrew Aguecheek

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Sir Andrew Aguecheek is the comic subplot's most purely absurd figure. He is a knight, wealthy, and comprehensively self-deceived. He has come to Illyria to court Lady Olivia on the apparently sincere advice of Sir Toby Belch, despite every sign that the suit is hopeless and despite Sir Toby's obvious interest in keeping him present and spending. He mistakes Cesario for a love rival. He writes a challenge letter. He picks a fight with Sebastian and is beaten badly. Almost everything he does is wrong.

Who He Is

Sir Andrew is defined by the gap between his self-estimation and his actual situation. He believes he is a viable suitor, a credible dueller, and a valued member of the revelry. None of this is true. Sir Toby knows it, Maria knows it, and the audience knows it almost from the moment he arrives.

He has the rank and income that Malvolio fantasises about, and he does nothing with either. He is the play's clearest demonstration that status does not guarantee competence or judgement. He dresses well, has money, and holds a title: he is also the most easily manipulated character in the play, except possibly when a rock could be substituted for him and produce the same results.

His vanity is his most consistent quality. He complains about his lack of success with women while apparently having no insight into why. He brags about accomplishments he does not have. He repeats compliments he does not understand. He is not stupid in the crude sense: he is wilfully incurious about anything that would challenge his self-image.

His Arc

Arrival: Sir Andrew's entry establishes him immediately. He misunderstands Maria's greeting, misidentifies what is being said about him, and compensates by claiming accomplishments in languages he does not speak. Sir Toby manages him with practiced ease.

The courtship: Sir Andrew periodically intends to leave, having received no encouragement from Olivia whatsoever. Sir Toby talks him out of it each time, usually by suggesting his departure would be premature and that better things are coming. Sir Andrew is not hard to convince.

The duel: Sir Andrew's challenge letter is so absurd, by Sir Toby's deliberate management, that it cannot be taken seriously. Sir Andrew believes he is writing something threatening. The comedy is that he cannot tell the difference. When he actually encounters Sebastian, whom he mistakes for Cesario, he is beaten without effort and genuinely injured.

The dismissal: In the final scene Sir Toby, himself wounded, turns on Sir Andrew and calls him a fool. It is the first moment the transactional nature of their relationship is stated plainly rather than implied. Sir Andrew has no response. He exits without resolution.

Key Quotes

Quote	Scene	Significance
"I was adored once too."	2.3	The play's most unexpectedly pathetic line: beneath the absurdity there is someone who believes, or once believed, he deserved to be loved
"I'll have an action of battery against him."	5.1	His response to being beaten by Sebastian: he will sue rather than accept he lost; the gap between threat and reality is the comedy
"Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man."	1.3	Unintentional self-awareness: he accidentally diagnoses himself and immediately fails to register it

Dramatic Techniques

Comic irony is the main technique around Sir Andrew. The audience knows from early on that the Olivia suit is hopeless, that Sir Toby is using him, and that his self-assessments are wrong. The comedy is the gap between what he believes and what is true, observed in real time.

Foil function is Sir Andrew's structural role. He exists to make other characters' qualities visible by contrast. His vanity makes Malvolio's self-love look dangerously sophisticated. His incompetence highlights Sir Toby's calculation. His failed duelling makes Viola's impossible position (not wanting to fight, not being able to explain why) more comic.

The pathetic aside of "I was adored once too" disrupts the comic rhythm deliberately. It is a moment when the joke briefly becomes something more complicated: a glimpse of a person inside the caricature. Shakespeare gives him one line of genuine feeling and then the play moves on.

Thematic Significance

Sir Andrew's primary thematic function is to expose the gap between rank and merit. He has the title and the income; he contributes nothing. Malvolio, who has neither title nor inherited wealth, runs Olivia's household with genuine competence and is punished for wanting what Sir Andrew already has and wastes.

The play is not sympathetic about this. Sir Andrew is a comic figure throughout, and the joke is mostly at his expense. But his presence alongside Malvolio makes the social argument visible: the characters who are punished for aspiration are lower-ranked; the characters who have rank and do nothing useful with it are comic and largely consequence-free.

Exam Tip

Sir Andrew is most useful in essays about social class and self-delusion. For social class: contrast him directly with Malvolio. Malvolio has competence and no rank; Andrew has rank and no competence. The play rewards rank and punishes aspiration. For self-delusion: compare his confident wrongness to Malvolio's self-love. Both characters believe things about themselves that are demonstrably false; one is comic, one is pathetic, and the difference is partly about what each one stands to gain.