

The Fair Unknown and the Lost Lady Found: Secret Identity in Shakespeare's Romances

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Abstract

As David Bevington notes in his introduction to *The Winter's Tale*, "all the late romances feature journeys of separation, apparent deaths, and tearful reconciliations" (1527). In his last plays, Shakespeare turns to literary devices derived from medieval romance and fairy tales to set in motion the potentially tragic plots and to call into question assumptions about class and gender. Both *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* make use of characters whose identities have been lost or hidden. The medieval trope of the Fair Unknown involves a knight who hides his identity and is thus mistaken for a member of the lower class, but whose natural nobility emerges as a means of identification. Similarly the plot mechanism of the lost child or lost wife constructs a narrative that necessitates bringing the secret to light. Imogen, Perdita, and Hermione are lost and found, not in order to transform themselves, but to enable a re-vision of the husbands and fathers who lose sight of them. An examination of *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* reveals the redemptive force of secrets.

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