

Love in Twelfth Night

Desire and Love

Every major character in *Twelfth Night* experiences some form of desire or love. Duke **ORSINO** is in love with **OLIVIA**. **VIOLA** falls in love with Orsino, while disguised as his pageboy, **CESARIO**. Olivia falls in love with Cesario. This love triangle is only resolved when Olivia falls in love with Viola's twin brother, **SEBASTIAN**, and, at the last minute, Orsino decides that he actually loves Viola. The characters' actions are very much dictated to by their feelings toward each other.

Twelfth Night derives much of its comic force by satirizing these lovers. For instance, Shakespeare pokes fun at Orsino's flowery love poetry, making it clear that Orsino is more in love with being in love than with his supposed beloved. This is underscored by the fact that he does not bother to woo Olivia himself, he sends Cesario to do it for him. It is important to note that Viola's love, both for her brother and Orsino, as well as Malvolio's self-love leads both characters to be *proactive*, taking action. Whereas Orsino and Olivia's love results in them being *reactive*, that is, not taking action. At the same time, by showing the details of the intricate rules that govern how nobles engage in courtship, Shakespeare examines how characters play the "game" of love.

Twelfth Night further mocks the main characters' romantic ideas about love through the escapades of the servants. Malvolio's idiotic behavior, which he believes will win Olivia's heart, serves to underline Orsino's own only-slightly-less silly romantic ideas. In fact, he can be seen to be a representation of what could happen to Orsino should he let his infatuation go too far.

Meanwhile, **SIR ANDREW AGUECHEEK**, **SIR TOBY BELCH**, and **MARIA**, are always cracking crass double entendres that make it clear that while the nobles may spout flowery poetry about romantic love, that love is at least partly motivated by desire and sex. Shakespeare further makes fun of romantic love by showing how the devotion that connects siblings (Viola and Sebastian) and servants to masters (**ANTONIO** to Sebastian and Maria to Olivia) actually prove more constant than any of the romantic bonds in the play.

Melancholy and Love

During the Renaissance, melancholy was believed to be a sickness rather like modern depression, resulting from an imbalance in the fluids making up the human body. Melancholy was thought to arise from love: primarily narcissistic self-love or unrequited (unfulfilled) romantic love. Several characters in *Twelfth Night* suffer from some version of love-melancholy. **ORSINO** exhibits many symptoms of the disease (including lethargy, inactivity, and interest in music and poetry) particularly in the opening scene when we see him wallowing in his own love melancholy. Dressed up as **CESARIO**, Viola describes herself as dying of melancholy, because she is unable to act on her love for Orsino. **OLIVIA** also describes **MALVOLIO** as melancholy and blames it on his narcissism (self-love).

Through its emphasis on melancholy, *Twelfth Night* reveals the painfulness of love. At the same time, just as the play satirizes the way in which its more excessive characters act in proclaiming their love, it also satirizes some instances of melancholy and mourning that are exaggerated or insincere. For instance, while **VIOLA** seems to experience profound pain at her inability to be with Orsino, Orsino is cured of the intense lovesickness he experienced for Olivia as soon as he learns that Viola is available.

Madness and Love

The theme of madness in *Twelfth Night* often overlaps the themes of desire and love. **ORSINO** talks about the faculty of love producing multiple changing images of the beloved, similar to hallucinations. **OLIVIA** remarks at certain points that desire for **CESARIO** is making her mad. These examples of madness are mostly metaphorical: madness becomes a way for characters to express the intensity of their romantic feelings.

But the play also has multiple characters that seem to go literally mad. As part of the prank that **MARIA**, **SIR TOBY**, and **FABIAN** play on **MALVOLIO**, they convince everyone that he is crazy. The confusion that results from characters' mixing up **VIOLA/CESARIO** and **SEBASTIAN**, after Sebastian's arrival in Illyria, also leads many of them to think that they have lost their minds.

Source: <http://www.litcharts.com/lit/twelfthnight/>

Edited by S Hume

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