

ENG 373
Journal Entry #5

Love is Pain

In Twelfth Night everyone talks about love as if it were a curse. It is a play about love, however Shakespeare shows that love can greatly cause pain. Unrequited love seems to be haunting many of the characters in this play and from the beginning they express this pain. They feel that they are victims of love. Olivia, Orsino, and Viola all express their frustration with love. Olivia describes love as a plague in Act I Scene V, while in Act I Scene I Orsino describes his love as an appetite that cannot be satisfied, and in Act II Scene II Viola even says, "My state is desperate for my master's love." This suffering even causes Orsino to threaten Cesario because he thinks that Cesario is trying to take Olivia from him. And while these characters end up happily ever after in the end, Malvolio and Antonio are left without anyone. Shakespeare seems to be making a statement that love cannot conquer all. Social status (Malvolio cannot win the affection of Olivia who is a noble mistress) and social norms (Antonio's attraction to Sebastian is unacceptable) stand in the way for these two men. And these two are left victims of love more than anyone else. They are no closer to love as they were in the beginning of the play and they only feel the absence of love more severely now.

Passive Princess or Selfless Wise-woman? Viola in Twelfth Night

Viola has sometimes been criticized as too passive in regard to untangling the love triangle she finds herself in. Perhaps I am biased, as Viola is one of my favorite Shakespearian characters, but I disagree. I think what is sometimes taken as passivity is actually a mixture of wisdom and selflessness. The lines on which the accusation of passivity is usually based are 2.2.38-39 "O time, thou must untangle this, not I. It is too hard a knot for me t'untie." They say that for someone spunky enough to dress up as a man, she's awfully passive when it comes down to it. In my opinion, the apparent contradiction between Viola's liveliness and spunk and this 'passivity' fades if her actions are put into the correct context. What can Viola do that she is not already doing? She is already gently encouraging Orsino to give up on Olivia, trying to help him understand that Olivia never will return his feelings, and speaks of her own love in riddles. She gives Olivia absolutely no encouragement, but steadfastly works to further Orsino's goals, even though they directly obstruct her heart's desire. Conceivably she could work deviously to split the two apart, but that would be selfish- she will obey Orsino and try to fulfill his desires, because she loves him.

*all
good*

Viola is hardly in a position to reveal her femininity at this point. Assuming her disguise was necessary in the beginning, her position has not changed much. If she were to reveal herself, Orsino might very well turn her out through a sense of betrayal, and it is doubtful that proud Olivia would take her in after having fallen in love with her alter ego, thus Viola would lose both her protection and support. If the confusion with her brother had never happened, it is possible that Orsino would eventually have given up on Olivia, at the event of her marriage if nothing else, assuming that Olivia's pride would keep her from chasing Viola forever... if this were to happen, Viola might take steps toward revealing her true identity to Orsino, and without Olivia in the picture to cause instant rejection of any other female, he might have decided to love Viola and marry her, as he certainly already had a great deal of affection for her alter ego. In short, I think Viola chose the wisest course of action considering the circumstances: subtle action. Not inaction, as she still worked to change Orsino's mind about Olivia, and also to convince Olivia to look to Orsino rather than Viola.

*Well considered series of actions, esp.
when compared to Orsino and Olivia?*

October 4, 2007

The transformative power of dress in "Twelfth Night"

"Twelfth Night" is a play about identity – especially hidden or masked identity – and the means by which these identities are misconstrued comes through the transformative power of dress. While it may seem odd to a modern reader that a person's gender could be entirely and unquestionably determined through dress alone, in Shakespeare's time, this concept would have been much more acceptable. Men and women wore markedly different types of clothing, and it was severely frowned upon for a person to dress as another gender, whereas today, many times men's and women's casual clothing have become hardly distinguishable. yes

probably Shakespeare's audience was also familiar with the staging of adolescent boys in all female parts in plays and productions. The illusion that these boys were playing women was convincing enough to quell criticism. As a convention, it was common enough that audiences were swept along with it – they no longer thought of these boys-playing-women as boys at all. So when Viola (who would have been a boy actor) becomes Cesario, audiences would not be surprised by how complete a transformation clothing produces.

Dress is thus exploited in this play to explore issues of gender identity and gender roles. Viola as Cesario is able to gain the trust and the confidence of Duke Orsino without suspicion, which is made possible by her dress as a man, but it also causes her to attract the eye of Olivia, which quickly becomes a problem.

Viola's dress is so convincing that even her statements of love and devotion to Duke Orsino are interpreted by him as merely male expressions of friendship and devotion (which is another matter altogether). Even after Viola reveals she is a woman and Orsino agrees to marry her, he refuses to acknowledge that she is a woman until she returns to the clothing of a woman. Thus, even when the ^{revealed} ~~guise is reveals~~, dress is so associated with gender in the eyes of the players, and likely the audience, that Viola must return to acceptable clothing to regain her "womanhood."

Could dress be taken ~~for~~ as a subversive
metaphor for the possibility that one's identity
can be put on and taken off – changed?

building woman

4 October 2007

The Perils of Cross-dressing in Illyria

I think the most fascinating aspect of Twelfth Night is the aspect of gender roles. There are identity problems that Viola faces that are still relevant today to cross-gender and cross-dressing youth. In the beginning of the play, she takes on the clothes and style of her thought-of dead brother Sebastian, thinking it will be a simple task to serve the Duke Orsino. She learns this is not as simple as she might intend, as she falls in love with the love sick Duke. Taking on a male identity creates more problems for the noble born girl than she anticipated.

Upon reflection of Orsino's character, I hold him in contempt, as he embellishes upon the smallest desire towards Olivia, milking these feelings for the maximum amount of drama, acting self absorbed and condescending. He claims to love Olivia, yet he doesn't even approach her himself until the end of the play. He is condescending towards females in general, remarking to his "man" servant, Cesario, that women cannot possibly hold the strength of emotions to equal that of a man's. He views Olivia as an object that can be wooed and won with pretty words, and later switches his love ficklely to Viola once he comprehends her true gender. I think him shallow and full of himself, flighty and too in love with the idea of love and strong emotions to ever truly feel them naturally, without embellishment. Which I think is pathetic.

well-expressed
critique

Orsino and Olivia seem to have traded traditional gender roles. Olivia is portrayed as usually very sensible, steady, intelligent enough to know her mooching and drunkard kin for what he is, not fooled by his mechanisms. She is strong enough in character and sense to run her own household, without the influence of a male role model since her father died. One could argue that Malvolio is the real mind behind her businesses, but I think him a beard for her disguise, that she uses him as a ruse to keep indignant male minds from tearing her down for female impudence. Meanwhile, Orsino moons around like a love sick calf, seemingly incapacitated by his deep love for the indifferent Olivia. The "masculine" role of being in control of one's sphere of existence in business and household belongs to the fair Olivia, whereas the "female" role of being fickle in love, flighty, self absorbed and vain belongs to the good duke. Despite this, Viola seems to love Orsino, and Sebastian sees Olivia's capability and admires her for it instead of being threatened.

very interesting!

good

Meanwhile, Viola struggles with posing as a man. She is confused by the situations her cross-dressing puts her in, pining for the man she is forced to serve, loved by the woman she is forced to woo for her master. She allows these problems to present themselves to her and makes no move to take matters into her own hands. I know the intention of Viola's character is standard as a victim, but for the sake of argument and cementing ties to modern ideas and problems, let's say she liked being taken for a boy. She is regarded with true fondness and affection by the duke, instead of being objectified as a female as Orsino does to Olivia. She finds freedom in going from place to place without being escorted, there is a sense of power (which she ignores/spurns) in being fawned upon and pursued by the impassioned Olivia. Even though Viola does not

intriguing

identify with these feelings of confusion, wondering where her place is under the shadow of femininity or walking in the light under the guise of manhood; until *after* she dons her disguise, these are issues that many modern transsexual teens struggle with, and might find in her character. The confusion on where one belongs, what gender identity is, masculine versus feminine roles, are psychological issues that are prevalent today. The character who accepts these "deviant" thoughts of questioning desires in himself is Antonio, who accepts his own desire and love for the youth Sebastian, despite the taboo and unrequited delivery of his feelings. Poor Antonio. It's hard to be a gay man in today's society, yet in his situation no one seems particularly offended by his intentions. Perhaps because Greece (the basis for Illyria) is renowned for its long history of homosexual undertones.