Close Reading Assignment #2

Almost every character in Twelfth Night manages to fall in love, despite the many disguises, miscommunications, and social barriers that pervade the play. Some characters find themselves incapable of directly professing their love due to these obstacles, while those who openly display their love are portrayed as fools who have been, in some way or another, misled or deceived. Orsino spends his days pining away in his castle, unable to approach Olivia due to the recent death of her brother. Malvolio is easily tricked by Maria’s letter, and acts utterly insane while trying to satisfy “Olivia’s” commands. Antonio openly shows his affection for Sebastian, but is unable to achieve the happily-ever-after-marriage that Shakespearean Comedy is known for. Love is cruel in Twelfth Night; while it *may* offer happiness in the end to some, love only guarantees dissatisfaction, longing, and misery.

Count Orsino sets the tone for love at the very beginning of the play. He lounges about in the company of his gentlemen, bemoaning the follies of love instead of attending to his formal duties. He says:

O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound

That breathes upon a bank of violets,

Stealing and giving odor. Enough, no more!

'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou,

That, notwithstanding thy capacity,

Receiveth as the sea. Nought enters there,

Of what validity and pitch soe'er,

But falls into abatement and low price

Even in a minute. So full of shapes is fancy

That it alone is high fantastical. (1.1.5-15)

Within this speech Orsino’s description of love employs synaesthesia to relay how the “sweet sound” of love gives off an amorous scent, appealing to taste, smell, and sound all at once. Love is not bound to a single feeling but instead overpowers it’s victim, distorting judgement by flooding the senses. Immediately after describing it so fondly Orsino uses an apostrophe to silence love, conveying his sudden realization of love’s subtly encroaching prowess. The longer love goes unreturned, the less “sweet” the idea of being in love becomes. He even doubts the genuinity of “love” when he notes that it is “so full of shapes” that it becomes, by itself, “high fantastical.” Orsino’s melodramatic musings show that, even with little-to-no involvement from a second party, the mere idea of love can bring about painful longing.

Malvolio is an excellent example of how love can cause unrealistic desire or want even when two characters *are* in contact with one another. Malvolio’s character is so narcissistic that he never questions the probability of the deceptive letter Maria has left for him to find. The letter closes:

If thou entertain’st my love, let it appear in

thy smiling. Thy smiles become thee well. There-

fore in my presence still smile, dear my sweet. I

prithee.”

Jove, I thank thee. I will smile; I will do everything

that thou wilt have me. (2.5.175-180)

Maria’s plan to make a fool of Malvolio is impeccable, as it plays upon two incredibly powerful elements: his ego and his dream of climbing the social ladder. Love robs him of the common sense and orderliness that are such a definitive part of his character, allowing him to happily follow the absurd instructions of the letter. Ironically the act of smiling, which Malvolio uses as an outward expression of love, serves as a symbol of *any* action that love causes someone to take. Blinded by love, he follows the instructions without question, despite their queerness, willingly “doing everything / that thou wilt have me". Unfortunately these actions will only bring further pain for Malvolio, as he ends up appearing lunatical and alienating lady Olivia. Love takes prisoners, enslaving even the most rational of minds. Malvolio doesn’t stand a chance against the shenanigans Maria, Toby, and Topas set upon him; he has been rendered totally vulnerable, engrossed by the fantasy of being in love.

While Malvolio and Orsino both endorse love because of what they will gain from it, Antonio’s doting words to Sebastian are some of the most genuine in the play. Orsino is obsessed with the *idea* of himself being in love, and Malvolio seeks to escape his social class, but Antonio has both a sensual attraction to Sebastian and fears for his safety. Antonio convinces Sebastian to let him accompany him, saying:

I could not stay behind you: my desire,

More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth;

And not all love to see you, though so much

As might have drawn one to a longer voyage,

But jealousy what might befall your travel,

Being skilless in these parts; which to a stranger,

Unguided and unfriended, often prove

Rough and unhospitable: my willing love,

The rather by these arguments of fear,

Set forth in your pursuit. (3.3.4-13)

This speech details just how unique and, to a 21st century reader, unorthodox the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian is. Immediately noticeable are the words desire, jealousy, and love - words not commonly used to describe a typical friendship. Antonio metaphorically compares his “desire” to sharpness of filed steel, hinting at eroticism through the use of phallic imagery. Antonio even cares enough to brave the “rough and unhospitable” land of Illyria with Sebastian, despite being wanted as a criminal there. While it may make sense for a friend to watch his buddy’s back, Antonio’s “jealousy” and “arguments of fear” show a more protective intent, revealing a deeper emotional investment. However Sebastian forgets all about Antonio’s feelings after meeting Olivia, taking advantage of the existing reputation his sister has set for him. Antonio is left to watch as the man he loved, and risked his life for, marries a complete stranger. Antonio is not even mentioned after Viola and Sebastian begin to recognize one another; Shakespeare leaves him on stage to be ignored in plain sight. Despite the many dangerous risks Antonio takes on in the name of love, the play ends with him forgotten and alone.

The soaring happiness that is exuberated by the newlyweds in the final scene is undercut by the silent presence of those who are not getting married. Love has turned a cold shoulder to Antonio and Malvolio, each witnessing their heart’s desire take the hand of another. Though Orsino does end up marrying Viola, she was not the woman he believed himself in love with for most of the play. This is a shining example of the fickleness of love, and how it seems to arbitrarily satisfy some while leaving others in despair.