Less is More: Courtship in *Twelfth Night*

A play with a plot based on various complications surrounding love—in particular unrequited love—*Twelfth Night* has no shortage of courtship. Indeed, the play is essentially a series of courtships concluding in several marriages at the play's end. Although, courtship is generally considered the preferred means in obtaining one's love object, in *Twelfth Night*, courtship has an alternate role. Contrary to what one may expect, those characters who court their objects of affection and take steps to deliberately woo them are the least successful in winning their affection, often times completely failing to win the affections of their love and even ending up alone. Alternatively, those characters who cannot court or do not court their objects of love seem to be far more successful in obtaining love or marriage than those who do. This is an idea that is demonstrated in the play's main romantic plot: the love triangle between Duke Orsino, Olivia, and Cesario/Viola. In *Twelfth Night*, through a series of failed courtships, Shakespeare takes a skeptical stance on courtship, demonstrating that courtship can be a superficial expression of love and that it is not necessarily conducive to love.

Through Duke Orsino's failed courtship with Lady Olivia, Shakespeare reinforces the superficiality of courtship present in several of the courtships throughout the play. The play opens with Orsino declaring, "If music be the food of love, play on,/ Give me excess of it that, surfeiting,/ The appetite may sicken and so die" (I.i. 1-15). In this moment, Orsino portrays love as something that he desires and craves, but this craving is one that leaves him insatiable at times. Because of this, he would like to have love to the point where he no longer desires it. This is an idea that resonates throughout the play and Orsino's character, as he is constantly seeking love, primarily from Lady Olivia. Orsino

is adamant in his courtship with Olivia and continues to seek out her affection and make exclamatory statements about his love for her, despite her unwavering rejection. However, as the play progresses, it seems that Orsino is more concerned with merely being in love rather than being in love with Olivia specifically. Indeed, in his courtship with Olivia, he never actually does any of the courting himself, but sends out Valentine and Cesario to court Olivia for him while he complains at home. And at the end of the play, Orsino's love proves fickle as his love for Olivia is quickly abandoned, and he selects Viola for a wife instead. Ultimately, Shakespeare demonstrates that Orsino's declarations of love are superficial and his courtship of Olivia is a selfish endeavor. Thus, through Orsino's courtship with Olivia, Shakespeare reinforces the idea that courtship does not translate into genuine love and can merely be a slew of empty words, as there is a distinct difference between what one says in courtship and what one actually does and feels.

Similarly, Shakespeare provides the readers with another example of questionable courtship in the character of Olivia. Despite her passion and declarations of love, Olivia's courtship of Cesario is almost equally superficial and self-indulgent. Like Orsino, Olivia is determined and almost desperate in her courting of Cesario, offering him monetary rewards and fabricating stories, for example, that he has left a ring, to lure him back to her home. However, regardless of how strong Olivia's feelings are, the fact remains that she and her "waxen heart" have fallen in love with an illusion. Indeed, Cesario does not actually exist in reality; he is a character. In this sense, similar to the way Orsino is in love with love itself, it seems Olivia is more in love with the idea of Cesario than Cesario himself. Like Orsino, Olivia also yearns for her object of affection, one who has

adamantly refused her and one she cannot have. However, similar to Orsino, Olivia's courtship of Cesario and declarations of love are not really about Cesario and her love for him, but are melodramatic self-indulgences. Emotionally fickle, Olivia quickly abandons her vow to mourn her brother for "seven years' heat" and immerses herself in a state of lovesickness for Cesario (I.i.25). And ultimately, at the play's close, Olivia's love is quickly transferred from Cesario to Sebastian. Again, in the character of Olivia, Shakespeare demonstrates the self-indulgent nature of those characters that aggressively court and declare their love to others. As the play progresses, the affections of both Olivia and Orsino seem more like dramatized declarations rather than genuine statements of love. In the world Shakespeare creates in *Twelfth Night*, the harder one tries, the more insincere and suspect one's motivations appear (and are). Thus, Shakespeare portrays courtship negatively in this sense.

Additionally, in *Twelfth Night*, there is an element of self pre-occupation and a sense of being out of touch with reality in the characters that take deliberate steps to woo their love interests. For example, Orsino's delusions regarding love are brought to the forefront in the conversation he has with Cesario about the differences between a man's love and a woman's love. He says, "…No woman's sides can bide the beating of so strong a passion/ As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart/ So big, to hold so much. They lack retention./ Alas their love may be called appetite,/ No motion of the liver, but the palate…" (II.iv. 92-97). In this moment, Orsino declares that a woman cannot love with the same passion that a man can. Ironically, in the end, Viola, a woman, has a love for Orsino that is the only instance of genuine, unwavering love throughout the play. Additionally, of the characters in the play, Orsino is the character that lacks the most

"retention," because although he is undoubtedly determined, he easily disregards Olivia for Viola in the end. Although Olivia eventually marries Sebastian, at least she does so under the guise that it is Cesario. Additionally, Orsino's additional instruction to Cesario to "make no compare/ Between that love a woman can bear me/ And that I owe Olivia" reveals his selfishness (100-103). Orsino is so deluded in the splendor of his own love, he has become out of touch with reality. This is a selfishness and delusion that is also seen in Olivia (who has fallen in love with woman disguised as a man) and within the subplot in the characters of Malvolio and Sir Andrew (who both genuinely believe they have a legitimate chance of marrying Olivia and sharing her status). By calling into question the character and rationality of those who court and make deliberate attempts to woo their love interests, Shakespeare further critiques courtship and its role in genuine love.

Alternatively, Shakespeare gives the one character who literally cannot court the one she loves, the most genuine love in the play. Despite the fact that she cannot convey her love of Orsino explicitly through courtship as a result of her circumstances, Viola's love seems to be the truest of the characters in the play. The difference between Viola's love and the other character's in the play becomes especially apparent in Viola's counterargument to Orsino's assertion that women cannot love as passionately as men. She says,

> My father had a daughter loved a man…She never told her love,/ But let concealment, like a worm I'th' bud,/ Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,/ And with a green and yellow melancholy/ She sat like patience on a monument,/ Smiling as grief. Was not this love indeed? (107, 110-115).

In this moment of near confession, Viola is undoubtedly referring to her own struggles as she deals with unrequited love, a problem both Orsino and Olivia have. However, the private nature of Viola's love is a notable difference. Viola's love exists whether or not it

is explicitly expressed through courtship. It is genuine and is not more or less true based on who knows it. This cannot necessarily be said of the love of Orsino and Olivia, as its declaration seems to be one of the few ways in which their love can be thought to actually exist. Indeed, Viola's love does not need to be proclaimed in melodramatic statements or grand gestures. Additionally, Viola is not in love with the idea of being in love as Orsino is or in love with a near fictional character as Olivia is. This characteristic of Viola's love makes it genuine and real in a way that the other characters' love is not. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare also seems to suggest that courtship somehow cheapens or bastardizes love. In giving the character who does not and is not able to deliberately woo her object of affection, Shakespeare further demonstrates that not only is courtship not necessarily a good indication of real love, courtship is also not necessary to have genuine love for someone.

Ultimately, in the play's conclusion, Shakespeare's critique of courtship comes to a head, as each of the various courtships in the novel fail, while other characters, who took part in little to no wooing, find love. Olivia, under the impression that she is marrying Cesario, marries Viola's twin brother Sebastian, who merely accepts Olivia's proposal and gives himself up to love, rather than making any insincere declarations of love to her. Similarly, Orsino does not end up with Olivia as he desires, but rather Viola (formerly Cesario). Thus, Viola, whose love has been genuine throughout the play and who took no part in any courtship, is paired with her object of affection. Additionally, despite ending up with two completely different people than the ones they spent the entire play courting, Olivia and Orsino are perfectly content with their new spouses. This is the ultimate demonstration of the fickle nature of their courtship and love. At one point in

the play, Viola (as Cesario) says, "We men may say more, swear more, but indeed/ Our shows are more than will; for still we prove/ Much in our vows, but little in our love" (II. iv.116-118). Although, Viola says this in a discussion about the difference between men and women, this quote can also be considered a commentary on courtship in general. Throughout the play, Shakespeare demonstrates how those who court their objects of affection "say more, swear more," but "prove much in [their] vows, and little in [their] love."

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare's attitude toward courtship is decidedly skeptical. Through a series of botched courtships, Shakespeare provides a critique of courtship, in which he questions the potentially superficial nature of courtship and the sincerity, character, and rationality of those who take deliberate steps to woo others. As the play progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the characters who do take part in courtships are self-motivated and their love is less than genuine. In the end, those characters are not entirely successful in their courtships. Conversely, those who do not court and deliberately woo others seem to fare better. In particular, through the character of Viola, Shakespeare seems to suggest that true love does not need to rely on courtship. Ultimately, in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare demonstrates that courtship is not an adequate measure of genuine love and is not a necessity in obtaining love and/or marriage.