English

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The Contrasting Aspects of Love Presented in William Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night"

Seminar paper

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In all of Shakespeare's love comedies, love is presented as a complex, multi-faceted, unstable area of human experience. Using detailed reference to specific elements in the text, identify and evaluate some of the more extreme contrasting aspects of love presented in Twelfth Night.

Over the years, the reception of Twelfth Night has changed significantly. Whereas some 50 years ago the vast majority of readers would agree that it has a "prevailing atmosphere of happiness" (Salingar 117), contemporary critics consider the play a "disturbing and cynical affair" (Lindheim 679). Far from depicting a romantic idyll, Twelfth Night is now being read almost exclusively in terms of its "underlining subtexts of unfulfilled homosexual longing and unappeasable class conflict" (ibid.). But issues of gender and class, however fruitful as a background for criticism, should not be overestimated in their importance: By focusing on terms like "power" and "desire", modern critics run the risk of "distorting a concept [i.e. love] dear to Shakespeare" (Schalkwyk 76). Building on this argument, I want to examine the contrasting character of love in Twelfth Night. In this play, love is presented as a highly ambiguous affair, eventually bringing about the romantic happiness of a triple wedding as well as the bleakness of Malvolio's and Antonio's bitter rejection.

Thinking of love in such binary terms was commonplace in Elizabethan times. As Salingar points out, "Shakespeare could take in his audience for granted not simply a readiness to be interested in romance, but a sense of the opposition between romance and reason" (120). This distinction sets the framework for the way in which love is pictured in Twelfth Night. Here, the pursuit of true love, which is a major theme of all of Shakespeare's comedies (Biewer 508), is not straightforward and logical, but rather discontinuous and fragmented. In the course of the play, the four main characters "all reverse their desires or break their vows before the comedy is over" (Salingar 118-119). In Twelfth Night, Cupid does not approach his prey with prudence, he is "clamorous and leap[s] all civil bounds", in the same way as Orsino prompts Cesario to seduce Olivia on his behalf (1.4.21). In sharp contrast to the overly joyful resolution of the last scene, the process of falling in love is repeatedly equated with falling ill. In Olivia's words, losing one's heart equals coming down with a cold: "Even so quickly may one catch the plague?" (1.5.289). Similarly, Orsino's desires pursue him like a disease, disguised as "fell and cruel hounds" (1.1.22). Carolin

Biewers argues that this symbolism is more than a metaphorical description of falling in love (506). Elizabethans believed that love entered the body through the eyes in form of vapours and infected the body with love-sickness. Tellingly, the part of the body by which Cesario's beauty creeps into Olivia are her eyes (1.5.292). But Shakespeare pushes his portrayal of lovesickness to an almost comical extreme. Right at the beginning of the play, Orsino prefers passing away to a prolongation of his agony: "Give me excess of [love], that, surfeiting, the appetite may sicken, and so die" (1.1.2). This seems hypocritical as, instead of acting on his infatuation, he stays in his court to dramatize his own feelings and pretends to suffer from the melancholy proper to courtly and "heroical" love (Salingar 123). The duke seems so fascinated by being in love that Olivia fades into the background, or as Jami Ake puts it, "his excessive speeches betray his desire not for Olivia, but for love itself and for the poetry conventionally used to profess it" (376). His longing mimics the Petrarchan model of love as an "unattainable ideal", where the lover is usually rejected by the beloved (Biewer 516). Ironically, his grief appears self-imposed, because he readily admits that his appetite for love is impossible to satisfy: "But mine is hungry as the sea, and can digest as much" (2.4.101). The real nature of Orsino's adoration is then revealed when he turns his love onto Cesario with no hesitation in the final scene. And as Salingar argues, this emotional superficiality is not exclusive to Orsino, since Olivia displays a similar "tinge of aristocratic extravagance" in her mourning (125). Apparently, idolization of love is prevalent among the higher social classes of Illyria.

Characters of lower social standing, however, seem driven by a different motivation in their conquests. With its multitude of master-servant relationships, the issue of social elevation resonates prominently throughout Twelfth Night. David Schalkwyk argues that "every instance of desire in the play is intertwined with service" (87). But whereas Sir Toby, Olivia and Orsino do not even raise an eyebrow with their erotic interest in a servant, Malvolio's ambitions are treated quite differently. Being of a roughly similar social standing

as Cesario (89) does not help the servant, who is being ridiculed, declared insane and even locked away in the course of the play. In the final scene Malvolio, bursting with rage, exits with a disquieting threat: "I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you!" (5.1.370). But what motivated Shakespeare's decision to end his play on such a bitter note, so unlike to the comfort and gaiety of the main plot?

Critics are divided on this issue. Some explain it from a societal perspective. Mary Ellen Lamb believes that in its scapegoating of Malvolio, "Twelfth Night draws a line between an acceptably arousing erotics of service and a social taboo", as "Malvolio's desire for power posed a threat both on symbolic and social register" (2). She goes on to argue that, because of patriarchal conventions, "a male servant's use of erotic attraction to advance his status embodied a deeply seated cultural anxiety in the face of the decline and fall of an ideology of service at the core of the neo-feudal system" (21). David Schalkwyk shares her view in that Malvolio's unsympathetic treatment is caused by his occupation, but he puts the blame on the gentry rather than on the servants: "Malvolio's bitter complaint expresses moral outrage at the aristocracy's perceived failure to reciprocate love and service" (96). In contrast, Nancy Lindheim claims that Malvolio is "neither dishonest nor unscrupulous. There is ambition, but so ludicrously presented as to defuse our perception of social or sexual threat" (699). In her view, his fate is motivated by his characterisation as a Puritan and not by his ambition. While his self-love is shared by Olivia and Orsino, it is his moral severity which is inimical to comedy itself (700). Personally, I agree with Lindheim's slant, since overly socio-critical interpretations of Twelfth Night seem to read more into the play than Shakespeare himself wanted to convey. This is underlined by the fact that, as Lindheim rightfully notices, Olivia's household models no historical reality, it is casual in conferring titles and status. In contrast to an often expressed view, the subplot does not depict the lower classes, as all of them are called into gentility (698).

Master-servant relationships are not the only amatory bonds characterised by double standards in Twelfth Night. A similar conclusion can be drawn about its overlapping layers of same-sex love. Whereas the homoerotic attraction between Orsino and Cesario and between Antonio and Sebastian is depicted with a certain sympathy, a possible lesbian liaison between Olivia and Viola is treated indifferently, if not critically. As soon as the audience becomes aware of an emotional sparkle between the two women, the relationship gets discarded as flatly impossible: "I am the man: if it be so, as'tis, poor lady, she were better love a dream" (2.2.25-26). Instead of problematising the psychological conflict of Olivia's sexual orientation, Shakespeare foregrounds Viola's heterosexual identity with numerous asides and also lets Sebastian make his appearance soon into the play as her male counterpart (Lindheim 683). Why does the poet rule out this possibility so readily? In Lindheim's view, lesbianism was barely conceivable as a practice in the period (ibid.). Some critics suggest that Shakespeare even condemns Olivia's newfound attraction for Viola. Apparently, the poet lifted the line "babbling gossip of the air" (1.5.267), which Viola addresses to Olivia, straight out of a contemporary translation of Ovid's Echo and Narcissus myth, a tale about the tragic fate of a much too eloquent nymph (Anthony Taylor in Ake 382).

The same, however, cannot be said about the portrayal of male bonding in the play. Orsino's affection for Cesario seems more genuine than his Petrarchan desire for Olivia. According to Nancy Lindheim, "the intimacy of their conversation and the ease of their being together would not have occurred were Viola known to be a gentlewoman" (688). Their close relationship is exclusionary to women, nurtured by a "boys'-club misogyny" (Schalkwyk 92). Antonio's affection for Sebastian, albeit less chummy and more emotionally freighted, appears in an equally positive light. Given that Sebastian treats the sailor with tenderness until the end of the play, one might ask why Shakespeare endorses homoeroticism and, in contrast, instantly ditches the possibility of female bonding. It seems as if the poet is simply fulfilling the expectations of his audience. In Elizabethan times, a close male bond had quite a different

connotation than today. When Antonio says that he "reliev'd [Sebastian] with such sanctity of love" (3.4.369) and that he did "devotion" his image (3.4.362), there is not necessarily erotic charge to his words. The language considered appropriate between friends has changed significantly since the early modern period, where there was a continuous overlap in vocabulary for all strong positive feelings, be it erotic love, friendship or religion (Lindheim 688). As it turns out, it is again misleading to apply our modern standards of judgement to the relationships in Twelfth Night is misleading. What many modern readings seem to miss is that the play is neither a sociological dissertation nor a study about gender. Instead, Twelfth Night should be appreciated as Shakespeare's "most subtle portrayal of the psychology of love" (Salingar 122), showing love in its most varied guises.

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