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ENG 312

5 May 2019

Olivia's Sapphic Will

William Shakespeare is a playwright best known for the ways in which he grapples with humanity, exploring all of the possibilities and intricacies that surround things like love, violence, and death. In his play *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare dives deeper into exploring the various types of love in the form of diverse sexualities. While there are strong themes of male homosexuality in many of Shakespeare's plays, this play is different, as there are hints that point towards female homosexuality. The characters Olivia and Viola, main players in the play's plot, stumble around each other in a maddening dance of confusion and desire. Jami Ake, in her article "Glimpsing a 'Lesbian' Poetics in *Twelfth Night*," makes the claim that Viola acts as the catalyst behind the lesbian desire found within the rest of the play due to her spontaneous ability to reform the traditional male Petrarchism that ultimately turns women away due to its objectivity of the female existence. While it seems that Olivia remains unaware of Viola's true identity until the end of the play and acts as a character that exists purely to be manipulated, her mannerisms and motives reveal that Olivia already knew Viola's secret, and she actively pursued Viola of her own volition, rather than being strung along, and all under the guise of chasing "Cesario."

Upon first encounter with the play, Olivia seems like a simple character, her main purpose being the confused damsel who will fall in love and get married at some point like most other female Shakespeare characters. Olivia does inevitably fulfill this role by marrying

Sebastian, but there is complexity in her actions, making it difficult to believe that she would simply abandon her deep attraction for “Cesario” in order to settle for a lookalike. In the beginning of the play, Olivia is adamant about her mourning, claiming that she will mourn for seven years and no one can change her mind (1.1.26). This is all thrown to the wayside, however, when she encounters Viola as “Cesario.” Upon initial contact, it is a correct interpretation to assume that Olivia truly knows nothing about “Cesario” and thus has no inkling that “he” is really “she.” It is only once Olivia poses the question, “Why, what would you?” (1.5.243) that she truly makes the discovery that Viola is female, based on her more personal and charismatic response. This discovery was only made possible by the fact that Viola, utilizing her own feminine understanding, breaks the tradition of objectifying the female body, which “frees Olivia from her own scripted role as inaccessible sonnet mistress—one she has seemed passively to accept—and stirs her interest” (Ake 378). Olivia, used to encountering Orsino’s objectifying love confessions and “dismembering them” (Ake 379), recognizes that this new language Viola introduces could not possibly originate from male poetics.

While Ake remains certain that Olivia is completely unaware that Viola is a woman and it is Viola injecting sapphic desire into their interaction, one could argue that Olivia possesses more autonomy than credit is given. Despite Ake’s claim, “Viola [...] does not conceive herself as simply substituting for the duke, but as loving ‘in [her] master’s flame’—that is, with the same sort of erotic intensity as Orsino” (380), it is difficult to imagine that Viola is the one pursuing a homosexual relationship with Olivia. First, it is important to acknowledge Viola’s intentions displayed throughout the entirety of the play, as well as her actions in relation to Olivia and Orsino. Second, it is imperative that Olivia’s own agency within the play is analyzed in order to discern whether she acts as a pawn, or a player. Viola, upon becoming Orsino’s servant, is

immediately deployed to Olivia's home in order to deliver a message of love. While Ake makes the claim that "Viola appropriates the pastoral as a space for female, rather than male, homoerotic desire, she imagines a realm for Olivia that promises real erotic reciprocity as its end" (381), it is hard to imagine that Viola has so quickly abandoned her love for Orsino when faced with Olivia's interest. At the time when she was tasked with playing delivery boy, Viola stated, "I'll do my best / To woo your lady. [*Aside*] Yet a barful strife! / Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife" (1.4.39-41). In this moment, Viola displays an essential theme and characteristic that is important to the subsequent events in the play: Self sacrifice. It is understood that the love Viola has planted for Orsino has rooted so deep within her that she has become willing to do whatever it takes to make him happy, even if it means winning the affections of another woman for him. In this way, it is hard to imagine that Viola truly feels homosexual attraction for Olivia, rather than simply fulfilling the role that she has taken on when assuming the persona "Cesario." This defining characteristic of Viola's remains strong even towards the end of the play when she says, "And I most jocund, apt, and willingly, / To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die" (5.1.126-7). Even though Ake makes the argument that "Viola's poetic performance thus provides a fragile emblem for 'lesbian' desire in the play" (382), it is more likely that Viola did not wax poetic to Olivia with homosexual intent. Rather, Viola spoke from the perspective of a woman, in an attempt to better woo Olivia's affections for Orsino, but her attempts backfired, as Olivia made the conscious desire to pursue Viola in recognition of latent homosexual desire.

In order for Viola's intentions to be so completely misconstrued, there must be the belief that Olivia is a free agent, operating as she pleases throughout the play. As much of her findings are dedicated to the objectivity of Petrarchan wooing, Ake makes the agreeable interpretation

that Olivia is self-aware of just how objective Orsino is (379), as Olivia comments to Viola, “*item*, two lips, / indifferent red; *item*, two grey eyes, with lids to them; *item*, / one neck, one chin, and so forth” (1.5.222-4). However, Ake’s interpretation once more switches back to the belief that it is Viola’s intentions that string Olivia along, as she says, “Viola resorts less and less merely to echoing the duke’s Petrarchan text, and the more Viola/Cesario is ‘out of [her] text’ in wooing Olivia, the more attracted Olivia seems” (383). Further on, Ake also states, “Both Viola’s language choices and her performance of those choices play equally crucial roles in the generation of new imaginative and discursive possibilities for Olivia” (383). The contradiction in these two beliefs is found within the implication that despite Olivia being aware enough to recognize being objectified, she is unaware of the way Viola is able to manipulate her and string her along in one-sided homosexual attraction on Viola’s part. Such an interpretation has already been proved false due to Viola’s severe dedication to Orsino, meaning that it is wrong to believe that Viola is the manipulator in this relationship. In fact, a better interpretation of Olivia’s character would be to view her as the one pulling the strings, as there are implications throughout the play that she is entirely aware of who, or what, Viola truly is. Even though Viola believes Olivia to be in love with her after their meeting, bemoaning, “As she (mistaken) seems to dote on me” (2.2.32), she fails to realize that Olivia has quickly donned a facade, one where she appears to lust after Viola’s male counterpart “Cesario” when in fact she is truly lusting after Viola. While their conversation in the gardens can be interpreted in a multitude of ways as a simple conversation of one-sided confusion, another interpretation is the implication that, here, Olivia is revealing some of the knowledge she possesses. While Viola is attempting to be clever by saying, “I am not what I am” (3.1.137), Olivia’s response, “I would you were as I would have you be” (3.1.138) leaves matters ambiguous about what exactly she is referring to. Viola

recognizes this, or at least some of the tone of what Olivia is implying, and makes the equally ambiguous claim, “now I am your fool” (3.1.140). Under the belief that Olivia operates as a free agent in this play, the interpretation drawn from this small exchange is that Olivia has cleverly revealed her knowledge, but under the guise of a different conversation, and Viola is unwittingly following along, believing that she knows Olivia when she actually does not.

The cleverness Olivia displays in her smaller actions is easily overshadowed by her larger acts of obliviousness, an intentional ruse she uses to ensure her freedom in pursuing what she truly desires. Ake is not mistaken when she claims, “Olivia falls in love with Viola’s theater—a performance that includes more than her body or words alone, but his/her speech, actions, and the ‘spirit’ that informs them” (385), but she is false in the belief that this was caused by any intention on Viola’s part. The many claims that Olivia could not truly realize herself until Viola’s shift in the poetic tradition are correct in some ways, but are shallow in others. It is true that Viola possibly needed to act as the catalyst to jumpstart Olivia’s recognition of her own homosexual desire, but her recognition of her homosexual desire was not created nor influenced by Viola’s words and actions. Instead, Olivia possessed latent homosexual desire that she realized she could act upon once she first truly interacted with Viola. Olivia has always been in control of herself, and knows what she wants, so dedicating all of the credit solely to Viola would be dismissive of Olivia’s own autonomy. Once again, it was not Viola’s intent to foster homosexual desire in Olivia because she simply wished to perform the task given her; it was Olivia’s own decision to take what was put before her and run with it that influenced the happenings within the play.

The knowledge that Olivia possesses throughout the rest of the play is also evident through some of her later actions and dialogue, proving that she has been playing the long game

and is fully content to continue playing until she can get what she wants. After her initial discovery of Viola's identity and ambiguous reveal, Olivia continues to pursue Viola in ways that go beyond what Viola's poetics should have inspired. Ake comments on the fact that Olivia begins to "pursue actively her desires by manipulating events rather than simply reacting to others' empty promises of devotion" (386) and this comes about in a few different ways. The first instance would be the ring she sends after Viola, the next is the conversation in the garden, the third is the conversation the two have before Sir Toby attempts to instigate a fight between Viola and Sir Andrew, and then the wedding Olivia sets up for her and her Viola lookalike. Olivia's autonomy was already addressed for the first two events, and so the latter two also require analysis to understand what kind of free agent Olivia is. There is not much note taken to it, but there is a line Olivia tells Viola before leaving her with Sir Toby. Olivia says in parting, "A fiend like thee might bear my soul to hell" (3.4.199). Still under the assumption that Olivia is perpetually confused and unaware of everything going on around her, this line could be interpreted as a simple, off-handed remark towards the fact that Viola is playing "hard to get" with Olivia. However, under the assumption that Olivia is fully aware and manipulating events, this comment leads to the speculation of whether or not Olivia is making a sincere acknowledgment towards the idea that, in Christianity, homosexuality is a sin and automatically condemns individuals to Hell. In this interpretation, Olivia is fully aware of the exact consequences that her desire might have on her in the afterlife. While there was no issue when it came to male homosexuality, the realm of female homosexuality is still plagued by double standards. As a character with meta awareness, Olivia confesses to Viola in an almost bittersweet moment that the sapphic love she holds is strong enough to send her to Hell in the afterlife. Of course, Viola does not recognize this reference that Olivia makes, and instead it is assumed that

she brushes it off entirely as more of Olivia's misguided flirting. This is further proof that shows how Viola, despite her actions and language, does not hold any homosexual intent towards Olivia, and it is instead Olivia who has constructed the homosexual desire between the two of them. If Olivia were not aware of the nature of her desire, such a pointed comment would be found as out of place and somewhat excessive for the flirtatious banter the two share.

Olivia's recognition of her sinful homosexuality opens the play for further interpretation of what the exact game she is playing might be. The idea that Olivia is a free agent, fully aware of herself and the happenings around her, will of course be met with an unsurprising amount of wariness due to how straightforward her character seems upon first read. Ake's interpretation of Viola as the homosexual catalyst and instigator is one commonly found amongst those who explore the theme, but there is little depth in Olivia's motives. The main hesitation that most would encounter concerning Olivia's actions could be summed up in a two part question: If Olivia is aware, why does she continue to refer to Viola as "Cesario"? And why does she accept her marriage to Sebastian? The best answer to the first half of this question stems from what was stated earlier on in the analysis of Olivia's character. Once Olivia became aware of what she wanted out of Viola, she immediately donned a facade and buckled in, prepared to play the long game. Due to the nature of the surrounding society and Viola's own lack of apparent interest, it is safe to assume that Olivia understood that she could not directly pursue Viola as a woman, but it would be acceptable for her to pursue "Cesario" as a man, especially after understanding the importance behind her comment about her soul and hell. The moments in which Olivia seemed to reveal the depth of what she knew are noticeably only during the moments when it is her and Viola, like when she made the comment, "I would you were as I would have you be" (3.1.138) and, "A fiend like thee might bear my soul to hell" (3.4.199). This shows that Olivia is measured

in what she does, and she has calculated her flirtations so that, to the onlookers, it seems that she is simply trying to woo Orsino's new servant boy. To Viola, however, if she were to acknowledge Olivia as anything other than a ditzy damsel, she would recognize the type of subliminal messaging the poor countess is trying to get across. Viola's dense response to Olivia's affections are the biggest obstacles Olivia faces, as she understands that "Cesario" would never agree to marry her, and Viola certainly would not agree unless she knew the truth underneath all of the manipulation. It is like Olivia is a modern day lesbian, using roundabout means to let Viola know her affections, but getting nowhere because the object of her desire does not recognize the true intent behind what she is after.

While playing the long game, Olivia surely factors in the idea of a perfectly disguised marriage as well, waiting for the moment when she can marry "Cesario" and truly claim Viola as her own. Unfortunately, Olivia is not the only one manipulating events in the play, so her idyllic marriage to Viola is ruined thanks to Sir Toby and his unnecessary need to start trouble. In Act 4 Scene 2 of *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby and his cohorts begin to stir of trouble with Sebastian, who they mistake as "Cesario." Before any of them can get truly violent, Olivia rushes into the scene, seemingly out of her mind with worry, and she says, "Hold, Toby! On thy life I charge thee hold" (4.1.39). While it is not explicit what types of actions Olivia takes, it can be inferred that she is blind with panic, her concern towards the individual she loves clouding her senses to the point where she does not recognize that "Cesario" is truly not "Cesario." Assuming that the events of Scene 3 occur at the same time as Scene 2, meaning both happen right after Olivia storms off with Sebastian, it does not come as a surprise, then, that Olivia wishes to marry "Cesario" as quickly as possible. Faced with the mortality of who she believes to be her "Cesario," someone she loves dearly, and still recovering from the death of her brother (1.1.31),

someone else that she loved dearly, Olivia is caught in a moment where her reasoning abandons her, and her manipulation is thrown for a loop long enough for her to make a mistake (though it does not remain a mistake for long). Her declaration, “Then lead the way, good father, and heavens so shine, / That they may fairly note this act of mine” (4.3.34-5) is spoken under the influence of adrenaline and fear, though she masks this for the sake of not scaring off “Cesario.” In the entirety of the play, the accidental marriage between Olivia and Sebastian is the one thing that she did not account for, but that is an attribute of the comedic effect that Shakespeare was aiming for because it is simply no good to have plans that do not go awry, especially when twins are involved.

Olivia, much like the rest of the characters within the play, does not seem to recognize the mistaken identity until faced with the fact that her “husband Cesario” is not actually the “Cesario” she desired. To rectify this, Olivia once again sets about “[pursuing] actively her desires by manipulating events” (Ake 386), and she does this by taking her newfound knowledge of the twins and finding the silver lining within her accidental marriage to Sebastian. Before Sebastian and Viola truly reveal to those around them the fact that they are twins, Olivia makes the exclamation, “Most wonderful” (5.1.216). There is a lot of potential in what these two words could mean in the grand scheme of the play, but in the interpretation of Olivia as a free agent, this is her moment of epiphany. Not only does Olivia realize at this moment that her desired “Cesario” has a twin brother, she also realizes the advantages behind her marriage to the wrong “Cesario.” Despite the dissatisfaction with the fact that she did not ultimately get to marry Viola under the guise of “Cesario,” Olivia recognizes that all of her manipulations were not wasted, as she will still have the opportunity to be close with Viola as her new sister-in-law. When Orsino comments, “Be not amazed” (5.1.255) in response to Olivia’s supposed reaction to the reveal, as

her direct reaction is not included, there are a few different interpretations to make of this. The first, shallow interpretation is that Orsino is simply making a comment about Olivia's simple nature and he is telling her that there is nothing for her to worry about. The second, deeper interpretation is that Olivia's amazed expression (if Orsino is to be trusted in the first place) stems from the epiphany that she had about forty lines ago, and it was simply misinterpreted by Orsino as amazement at the fact that Viola and Sebastian are twins, and not to the idea that she now has a different, more legitimate reason to be close to Viola instead of trying to implant mutual feelings in her and marry under the guise of a heterosexual relationship (It would be interesting to explore whether or not Emily Dickinson read this play and had a similar interpretation as explored in this paper, especially under the theory that she was in love with her sister-in-law). In this manner, Olivia has still ended this play happy, though the characters around her assume her happiness stems from the fact that she is married and it is not to Duke Orsino. In actuality, Olivia achieved her happy ending in a roundabout way that, despite the hiccups, ended up being better for her overall since she could still love Viola freely without the complication of fostering a closeted, one-sided homosexual relationship.

Despite Ake's claims that the homosexual desire found within *Twelfth Night* was started by Viola's own homosexual intention, it becomes clear that the true homosexual intent lies within the character of Olivia. As a free agent, aware of her desires and aware of everything happening around her, Olivia manipulates much of the play as she works towards achieving what she desires. By examining her conversations alongside her actions and motivations, it is apparent that Olivia is the true catalyst for sapphic desire within the play, though Viola is still to thank for acting as a diving board by letting slip to Olivia early on her true identity. Even though there is sense in what Ake argues, it seems too simple to give Viola the credit of opening up the world of

sexual and romantic possibilities to Olivia, especially when Viola really makes no moves throughout the entirety of the play to truly woo Olivia for herself. It seems more befitting that Olivia, the unassuming character that seems completely removed from the chaos occurring, is one of the only ones who truly understands everything that is happening, as she is the one pulling all of the strings.

Works Cited

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