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Writing 5: Friendship and Love-From Plato to Hemingway

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The Plague and Its Funny Side

Modern day romantic comedies are filled with remarkable obstacles on the path towards love. Obstacles that seem terrible for the characters involved, but often provide immense pleasure to the audience. Shakespeare seemed to have a firm grasp of this concept of schadenfreude, the comedic idea that one man's pain is another man's pleasure. Throughout *Twelfth Night*, he includes countless references to the desperation and pain that so frequently accompany love in an attempt to reveal the humorous nature of the whole ordeal. This attribution of pain in concurrence with love leads to Shakespeare coining the phrase, "catch[ing] the plague," in reference to falling in love (I.v.240).

The first instance of love and pain appears in the opening scene where Orsino begs "If music be the food of love, play on. / Give me excess of it that, surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken, and so die. / That strain again, it had a dying fall"(I.i.1-4). Orsino is clearly deep in love. He is at the mercy of his raw emotions, which he reveals to be quite overpowering. Not only are Orsino's feelings excessive, but they also give the sense of danger and madness. For that reason, Orsino wants to be bombarded with music, 'the food of love,' so that he will no longer enjoy music or love, helping him to finally move on. While this image may appear quite dark and dramatic, if played out correctly it can easily take up a different light. After all, the image of a grown man, and a hyper-masculine one at that, being brought to his knees by love, pleading for

music to solve the problems of his romantic life is difficult to take seriously. The over-dramatization of the scene along with its abnormality would make it hard for the audience to avoid laughing, whether at the situation itself or at Orsino and his desperation. This is a stark contrast from the much more serious love that is revealed after whereby "The element itself [Olivia], till seven years' heat, / Shall not behold her face at ample view; / But like a cloistress she will veilèd walk, / And water once a day her chamber round / With eye-offending brine--all this to season / A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh / And lasting in her sad remembrance" (I.i.25-31). Olivia mourns her brother's death to the point of giving up her own life in a sense. Veiling and not revealing herself to any man for seven years is a significant change in lifestyle, especially for someone who owns an estate like Olivia. Nevertheless, Olivia's sense of love is not that different from Orsino's. Even hers is painted with a bizarrely hilarious image of her dead brother as a pickle in her tears. While Olivia's immense pain is perhaps more warranted, both she and Orsino take things too far. Alexander Leggatt describes Orsino and Olivia as "distinguished individuals adrift in a fragmented world, each with his own obsession" (223). "Each individual is locked in his own private understanding, and his ability to escape from himself and share experiences with others is limited" (Leggatt 222). Deep within their own realms, they let their emotions control them and toy with them in a way that severely exaggerates and contorts love in the real world, making the piece as funny as it is.

Shakespeare includes competition between two people over one person's love to add to the humor in the play. Sir Andrew is revealed throughout the first half of the play to be somewhat interested in Olivia, or perhaps her societal standing. He frequently speaks to Sir Toby about Olivia, who he seemingly wants to form a romantic relationship with. However, Sir Andrew realizes that he has no chance of getting Olivia. Luckily for him, he does not seem too

emotionally invested. What is shocking and quite amusing about his situation is that although he is not as deeply in love as Orsino, Sir Andrew is able to be convinced by Sir Toby to do ridiculous things for his insignificant 'love,' including fighting Cesario. After writing a letter challenging Cesario, Sir Andrew hands it to Sir Toby. Sir Toby then advises, "Go, Sir Andrew; scout me for him [Cesario] at the corner of the orchard like a bum-baily. So soon as ever thou see'st him, draw. And as thou draw'st, swear horrible; for it comes to pass oft that a terrible oath with a swaggering accent, sharply twanged off, gives manhood more approbation than ever proof itself would have earned him. Away" (III.iv.142-146). By listening to such advice, Sir Andrew is portrayed as a fool. None of the instructions that Sir Toby is giving seem to be at all reasonable. In fact, it is as though Sir Toby is describing a fight between children, where each one calls the other names until they forget what they were fighting about in the first place. Undoubtedly, Sir Toby realizes just how much of a fool Sir Andrew is. The only one who is not aware of Sir Andrew's foolishness is himself, making the scenario even more ridiculous. Normally, the audience would feel embarrassed on Sir Andrew's behalf, but at this point, because of how naïve he is, one finds it difficult to sympathize. His ignorance almost justifies the pain he goes through. Unfortunately, for Sir Andrew, the humiliation continues beyond the instructions to draw his sword and swear excessively. Leggatt notes the "comic deception" that unfolds when, "Not trusting Sir Andrew to achieve even this much, Sir Toby takes charge of the affair himself, and creates false images of both Sir Andrew and Cesario as valiant fighters…creating two deadly fighters out of words alone" (243). By taking the situation even further, Shakespeare establishes the comedic element of the play. Not only does the slight 'love' Sir Andrew has for Olivia contribute to his appearance as a fool (since he goes after it so strongly despite not caring that much), but his 'friend,' Sir Toby, also takes advantage of this for his own amusement, toying

with Sir Andrew and pushing him to act in ways he normally wouldn't. The scenario is painful to watch, yet it creates a funny scene which ridicules what people constantly put themselves through for love. Shakespeare furthers the comedy by revealing how friends often find humor in each other's romantic endeavors, especially when they are chasing something that is clearly doomed to fail. He provides a relatable instance of a friend being entertained by another's hopeless attempts at wooing a partner. At no point during the play does Sir Toby actually consider Sir Andrew's love seriously. Although he may condone it and even spur it on at times, he only sees it as an opportunity for self-amusement at his friend's pain. In this case, it seems that the only one who is blind to the realization that things will never work out is the lover himself. It is noteworthy that Shakespeare deviates from his usual tendency to employ comic relief, where a tense scene is followed up with a funny one to ease the situation. Rather, Shakespeare creates a funny scenario, with all the empty talk of fighting, followed up by a dangerous scene, when Sir Andrew and Cesario draw their weapons. This is the epitome of Shakespeare's use of schadenfreude in this play. Here, humor and pain have become synonymous in a way that enables Shakespeare to flip the conventions of comedic relief on itself, to achieve just that but in the opposite way that one might call painful relief.

Malvolio is another poor soul who falls victim to the same fate albeit with much worse results. In the aforementioned instance, any speech about dueling between Sir Andrew and Cesario proved to be empty. On the other hand, Malvolio suffers extensively as a result of his love in what makes up one of the funniest portions of the play. It is one thing to act like a fool for the sake of love as Sir Andrew and Malvolio are made to do, but it is another to go as far as looking like a fool as Malvolio also does. It is often easy to be ignorant of one's own actions, but when one "come smiling and cross-gartered to you, / To put on yellow stockings, and to frown /

Upon Sir Toby, and the lighter people; / And acting this in an obedient hope" thinking these instructions are "clear lights of favor," it takes a remarkable level of shamelessness (V.i. 315-319). As is shown here, love can warrant such shame and embarrassment. In hopes of appearing desirable to the beloved, many are willing to appear as fools to all others, in this case literally looking like a clown. However, Malvolio's love not only includes the utmost humor, but also the utmost pain. Sabina Amanbayeva captures this idea of pain when she explains how "Maria advertises the effect of her mock letter on Malvolio by highlighting the prodigious amount of laughter it will produce. If her co-conspirators want to feel the 'spleen' she offers, or the flow of pleasurable emotions associated with amusement; if they want to 'laugh [themselves] into stitches', or experience laughter so violent that they will feel stabs of pain, then they should see Malvolio 'in yellow stockings'" (1). This analysis shows how closely tied pain and laughter are, even in the audience's role of experiencing the humor. The pain which accompanies one laughing too hard becomes a double-edged sword of simultaneously wanting it to keep on and wanting a break. Schadenfreude becomes not just pleasure in another's pain, but pleasure in one's own. For Malvolio rather, pain comes about because he is forced to spend time imprisoned alone and met by a priest to assess his madness or the chance that he has been possessed. In some ways it is fair to say that Malvolio is possessed–by love that is. Love has blinded him so much that he goes through this pain and embarrassment without even suspecting that there is something unusual at hand. As Malvolio attempts to please Olivia, Leggatt explains that "He flings what he thinks are her own words back at her, and she, so far from recognizing them, does not even understand them. To compound the joke, he does not notice her bewilderment; her interjections have no…effect" (242). So it appears that love has not only blinded Malvolio, but also deafened him. Viewing this scene as a whole, because of Schadenfreude, the audience

"clearly delights in the play's skillful 'practise' in constructing Malvolio's emotional arc-his love for Olivia, Maria's cunning exploitation of his desire, and his subsequent comeuppance" (Hutchison and Jellerson 191).

In the last act, the humor reverts back to a similar style as that of the beginning of the play. Rather than make fun of people embarrassing themselves for love, Shakespeare employs a darker humor to laugh at how desperate some people become when they are in love. No place is this humor darker or more obvious than when Viola willingly agrees to die BY, not for, Orsino. After discovering that Olivia loves Cesario, the heart-broken and angered Orsino decides that "I'll sacrifice the lamb that I do love, / To spite a raven's heart within a dove" (V.i.120-121). Unexpectedly, Viola follows, "most jocund, apt, and willingly, ./ To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die…After him I … Punish my life, for tainting of my love" (V.i.122-128). While this portion might prove quite shocking at first, it is important to realize how unrealistic this play is. *Twelfth Night* is filled with scenarios that would never happen in the real world. Of all of these unrealistic situations, Viola agreeing to die at the hands of Orsino is among the most absurd. Nevertheless, Shakespeare uses this lack of realism in order to spin the story into a comedy–a comedy that somewhat ridicules real life by revealing how ridiculous it can seem to be at times. Here Viola does not even attempt to explain to Orsino that she is innocent of the accusations that she has taken Olivia for herself. Rather, she decides to follow Orsino so that he can kill her as though she would rather be killed by him than not receive any affection at all. The image of Viola in some sort of trance, stumbling behind an angry Orsino to her deathbed, with a glazed stare and perhaps even a slight smirk is absolutely ridiculous and seems quite satirical. It pokes fun at how much people forget everything for love. The dark humor of the joke, specifically the idea of Viola being slaughtered in vain, makes it that much funnier because the

scenario is even more unimaginable. Moreover, there is some word-play involved that makes the idea of pain in this context especially humorous. By agreeing to die ‘a thousand deaths,’ Viola implies ‘petite mort’, meaning ‘little death’ which alludes to what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “the loss or weakening of consciousness” that accompanies orgasm (“petite mort”). This perfectly describes why Viola was left in a trance unable to make rational decisions.

While it may not be apparent at first, reading *Twelfth Night* reveals a side of Shakespeare’s play-writing that is not too far away from modern-day humor. Shakespeare builds on the ideas of suffering, pain, desperation, and embarrassment in relation to love in order to bring about quite a jocular work out of things that are normally depressing and gloomy. As Clifford Leech puts it, “We rejoice or delight in the gracefulness of the spectacle that … *Twelfth Night* offers us: the characters may fall into absurdity, and then we shall laugh, but in general we are with them, admiring, almost, the way they live up to their own natures and exert themselves on the stage without impeding the total movement towards harmony in the close” (32). Considering the theory that *Twelfth Night* was made for Queen Elizabeth, the play might have been intended as a satire of romantic love, praising Queen Elizabeth’s choice to avoid marriage. If that is the case, it would add a whole new dimension to how this play would be read, glorifying her divine power and ability to transcend the superficiality of love and men.

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