

Smiling at Grief

All Your waves and breakers have swept over me

- Psalm 42:7

She crawls onto the shore of an unknown land, now utterly alone for the first time in her life. The sea still seethes behind her. All her hopes of starting a new life with her brother, of moving past the sorrows of their childhoods, are shattered. Instead, she is facing yet another loss. For Viola, the heroine of *Twelfth Night*, it must feel as if sorrows indeed rain “every day” (5.1.379). The world of *Twelfth Night* is not an easy place. As Viola seemingly loses father, brother, and even lover, her ability to find joy in life makes her an unusually courageous and resilient heroine. In this sorrow-filled world, her disguise as a man not only enables her to deal with her own grief, it transforms her into a hybrid character who is able to cross boundaries between the male and female worlds, showing Orsino the reality of grief, and helping Olivia see that life is still worth living.

Although *Twelfth Night* is a comedy, it is filled with an underlying sense of sadness. Personal tragedies may have prompted William Shakespeare to explore the subject of grief during this period in his career, first in *Hamlet*, then in *Twelfth Night*. He had just lost his father when he wrote *Hamlet*, a play in which he considers how young people deal with the death of a parent (Greenblatt “General” 58). Perhaps losing his own father re-awakened old sorrows: five years earlier, in 1596, his son died at age 11, leaving behind a twin sister to mourn him (Greenblatt “General” 46). In *Twelfth Night*, the happy reunion he creates between Viola and Sebastian is likely the ending he wished his own twins could have experienced. While *Hamlet* focuses on mortality, *Twelfth Night* is concerned with how people continue to love in a world where loss is ever-present. How can we feel safe to love, when death claims those we care about? In his introduction to the play, scholar Stephen Greenblatt explains that “desire is repeatedly linked to frustration and loss” throughout *Twelfth Night* (1786). If desire repeatedly leads to loss, it seems the only way to avoid sorrow is to stop loving. When Feste asks, “Would you have a love-song, or a song of good life?” (2.3.32), he implies that they are opposites: if we love, we allow ourselves to be susceptible to grief.

When grief does come, it is as uncontrollable and overwhelming as the roiling sea that shipwrecks Viola. Shakespeare continually links death and sorrow with the sea, which is appropriate considering the play's setting: just as the sea batters the coast of Illyria, sorrows drown the characters who live there. Grief is as fathomless as the ocean, which Sebastian implies when he says that he drowns Viola a second time by weeping for her (2.1.26-27). Death, too, is like the sea, a "blind" force that "devoured" the characters' loved ones (5.1.222). Antonio's description of the ocean becomes a disturbing image of death: he rescues Sebastian from its "enraged and foamy mouth," as if it is a living monster (5.1.72). Contrasted with this "enraged" and powerful force, the characters in the play seem small and vulnerable.

Of all the characters, Viola has suffered the most recent grief, and clings to memories of her family. The detail with which she remembers her father, who died on her thirteenth birthday, shows that she still cherishes his memory: she can even recall the "mole on his brow" (5.1.235). She responds to her brother Sebastian's apparent death with a feeling of deep abandonment; when she asks herself, "What should I do in Illyria?" she is really asking how she can live at all (1.2.3). Her decision to disguise herself as Cesario is more than just a practical necessity; it also serves as a memorial to her twin. She keeps him alive in her mind every time she looks in the mirror, describing the experience as if he is "living" in her reflection (3.4.343-344). The desire to preserve a loved one's memory permeates the play. While Olivia cries for her brother, as if the "brine" in her tears will metaphorically preserve his body (1.1.29-30), Viola literally becomes her twin. In Elizabethan England, Viola's disguise would have had powerful significance; Greenblatt explains that "identity resided in clothing" during Shakespeare's time, so it's not surprising that clothes assume an almost "magical" power in the play ("General" 59; "Intro" 1786). For as long as Viola wears her brother's clothing and imitates his habits, she is Sebastian – and therefore, Sebastian is still alive.

While it serves as a memorial to her twin, Viola's disguise as Cesario also allows her access into a previously forbidden world: the court of Duke Orsino. Although Cesario is allowed to challenge his master's views, Viola would have been denied the freedom to speak "fully and openly in ordinary conversation" with a man (Greenblatt "General" 10). Like most Elizabethan men, Orsino believes that women are too fragile to be intellectual or even emotional equals, for they "lack retention" (2.4.94). His remarks on the inferiority of women are reminiscent of Shakespeare's contemporary, Sir Thomas Smith, who summed up the national view of the sex by saying "we do reject women" (Greenblatt "General" 9). With such a skewed perception of women, Orsino would never have allowed Viola into the "book" of his "secret soul," which he reveals to Cesario after only three days (1.4.13). What appears to be male bonding is actually an opportunity for Orsino to form his first real relationship with a woman, a deep friendship that Greenblatt remarks had once "only seemed possible between men" ("Intro" 1790).

Orsino's relationship with Cesario acquaints him with the reality of grief for the first time. Living a privileged life as the duke, Orsino has a shallow, self-absorbed view of the world. When he hears how intense Olivia's grief is, he does not offer her compassion. Instead, all he can think about is himself: he remarks that if Olivia treats the memory of her brother so well, she will make an excellent wife (1.1.32-35). Perhaps his lack of empathy stems from his scarcity of close relationships. According to social convention, he woos his love with beautiful blazons, but remains at a distance – sending messengers instead of speaking to her himself. Shakespeare emphasizes Orsino's emotional detachment, refusing to give us any scenes between the duke and his friends or family members. It is clear that Orsino has no close friendships, except for his relationship with Cesario, which Greenblatt calls his “only authentic emotional bond” (“Intro” 1790). Because Orsino has never loved anyone, he has never felt the pain of loss. He may take pleasure in Feste's song about death, which is filled with images of black coffins, white shrouds, and pitiful corpses, but readers must wonder if he's actually experienced grief personally (2.4.50-65). Near the end of the play, his threat of sacrificing what he loves rings hollow, for we know that Orsino, unlike Viola, has never had to sacrifice for love (5.1.126).

Because Viola has endured the same disappointments in love that Orsino claims to suffer, she is the only person who can help him understand the true pain of loss. We are given a glimpse into her heartache when she describes Orsino's supposed lovesickness: she calls his passion for Olivia “suff'ring” and a “deadly life,” but her depth of understanding comes from her own experience (1.5.234). Certainly, Viola's secret love for Orsino is yet another “suff'ring” she must bear. Her decision to deny her own feelings and woo Olivia for the duke is not unique to Shakespeare's play; he took it from Barnabe Riche's story “Apollonius and Silla” (Greenblatt “Intro” 1787). Yet Greenblatt claims that Shakespeare allows Viola's character to express her pain more eloquently than the overly-moralizing heroine in Riche's story (“Intro” 1787). Viola's efforts to convey her anguish stem from her desire to help Orsino grow emotionally. After listening to Orsino's favorite song, which describes how a lover can be “slain by a fair cruel maid” (2.4.53), Viola tries to make him understand what it is like to live “smiling at grief” (2.4.114). She feels as if her hidden love is devouring her from the inside, like a “worm i'th' bud,” because she has no way to express her feelings (2.4.110). Orsino seems to be impacted by her tragic story, pestering his friend with questions and showing interest in someone other than himself for the first time. Commenting on the significance of this passage, Greenblatt says that “these simple questions, modest in themselves, are sufficiently distinct from Orsino's usual manner of speech to signal both a curiosity and a responsiveness that he does not manifest with anyone else” (“Intro” 1790). This “responsiveness” to someone else is Orsino's first step towards emotional maturity.

Unlike Orsino, the Lady Olivia does not need to be lectured about grief; she has already experienced it twice. Viola's disguise as Cesario gives her the opportunity to meet Olivia as she woos her for the duke, but it is their common

sorrows that unite them. Since they have suffered similar losses, they are able to bond on a subconscious level. As soon as Viola hears Olivia's story, she immediately identifies with her, which is evident when she cries out, "O that I served that lady!" (1.2.38). She continues to empathize with Olivia, trying to make Orsino understand that when someone is "so abandoned" to sorrow, it is useless to force unwanted attentions on her (1.4.18). Although Olivia does not know about Viola's past, she seems to feel an unusual rapport with the strange young page. When she lifts up her mourning veil, it symbolizes the emotional connection she is forming with her new friend – an intimacy she denies most visitors (1.5.204-205).

Cesario's presence begins to change Olivia's dark perception of the world. Olivia describes the depth of her sorrow as a kind of "madness," a consuming darkness that separates her from the rest of society (3.4.14-15). The only person she tolerates is Feste, perhaps because his presence reminds her of her father, who once "took much delight" in the fool (2.4.12). Her decision to remain single for seven years stems partly from her desire to honor her brother, and partly from a subconscious fear of new grief. She is afraid of loving anyone again. The characters surrounding Olivia offer her unwanted advice about her chosen solitude: while Feste counsels her not to grieve for someone who is in heaven (1.5.61-62), Sir Toby Belch ridicules his niece for mourning her brother overmuch, saying that "care's an enemy to life" (1.3.2). But only Cesario can give Olivia a reason to rejoice and the courage to form a new relationship. Like Olivia, Viola feels her sorrows deeply, but she has a strong "inward principle of hope," as Greenblatt puts it, that allows her to continue living ("Intro" 1790). Although the young women never discuss their grief, it seems as if Viola's hopeful spirit is contagious. After a meeting with Cesario, Olivia declares "methinks 'tis time to smile again" (3.1.118). In context, she means that she will stop playing the "melancholy lover" and no longer pursue Cesario, but her words have a deeper meaning that fits within the rest of the play. For the first time in months, she has found a reason to smile again. Her relationship with Cesario emotionally prepares her for her marriage with Sebastian. She and Sebastian have suffered similar losses as well, and perhaps the young man who lost his father years before will continue to help Olivia through her own grieving process.

By the end of the play, the sea still crashes against the rocks of Illyria, but Shakespeare has reversed its dark symbolism. Because Sebastian returns to his sister, what was once a destructive force is now "fresh in love" (3.4.348). Olivia no longer lives in seclusion, but has learned to love again. Viola, reunited with her brother, can fully rejoice in her union with Orsino. Her disguise as Cesario is no longer needed, either practically or emotionally: now that Sebastian has returned, she is allowed to become herself again. Despite the play's happy ending, Shakespeare does not promise us that his characters' lives will always be easy. Feste's ending song reminds us that "the rain it raineth every day," as it has since the beginning of time: "a great while ago the world begun / With hey, ho, the wind and the rain" (5.1.379-393). Sorrow will come to Orsino and Viola,

to Olivia and Sebastian. Yet, knowing that sorrow is never far away, the characters in Twelfth Night resolve to live and love in an uncertain world.

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