

Lovers or friends: the mystery of viola and orsino's relationship

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Shakespeare's classic play, *Twelfth Night*, tells the story of Viola, a woman who dresses like a man to find a place in Duke Orsino's court. While working for Orsino, however, Viola falls in love with him, but must hide her feelings in order to protect her new identity and because Orsino is in love with another woman named Olivia. The play deals with ideas of social class, sexuality, and gender, and comments on the roles of these factors in relationships. Through Orsino and Viola's casual physicality and joint activities as well as the setting and music used in their scenes, the movie version of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* portrays their relationship as one of equals and full of sexual tension despite their apparently shared genders, thereby defying the heteronormativity of the era, whereas the play portrays Viola as socially inferior to Orsino and suggests that her love for him will be unrequited as long as she remains disguised as a man.

The casual physical contact between Orsino and Viola in the movie illustrates a relationship of friends or equals in contrast to the play, which shows Orsino to have power over Viola. In the play, when Orsino asks Viola to go woo Olivia for him, he mentions that he chose Viola to "act his woes" because he felt Olivia will "attend it better" due to Viola's "youth" (1. 4. 29). He then goes on to describe Viola's "smooth and rubious" lips, and her "shrill and sound" voice, noting that they are "all semblative a woman's part" (1. 4. 35-37). These lines can be interpreted as demeaning, as Orsino potentially insults Viola's masculinity when he tells her that she looks like a woman. However, the film, which does not change Orsino's lines, uses physical contact between the two to illustrate Orsino's good humored intentions. In one instance, when Orsino describes picking Viola to "act his woes", he puts

his arm around her as a sign of comradery. Similarly, when he speaks of her “smooth and rubious lip,” Orsino teasingly tickles Viola’s mouth. Viola also reciprocates the friendly physicality by playfully shoving Orsino when he compares her to a “woman,” which demonstrates that she was clearly not offended by his remark. Additionally, as Orsino continues to beg Viola to speak to Olivia on his behalf and remarks that her “constellation is right apt for this affair,” (1. 4. 3839) he grabs her hand while lying pathetically on a couch. While the play gives no indication of Orsino’s vulnerability, the movie shows Orsino taking Viola’s hand in his moment of need, which further illustrates the intensity of their friendship. Furthermore, the physical aspect of Orsino and Viola’s relationship in the film renders any direct mention of their intimacy by other characters unnecessary. In the play, Valentine, one of Orsino’s servants, observes to Viola that she is “likely to be much advanced” by Orsino, because even though he has only known her “but three days,” she is “already no stranger” to him (1. 4. 24). However, in the film, these lines are cut, because the intimacy of Orsino and Viola’s relationship is obvious enough without Valentine’s commentary. Similarly, the film cuts Viola’s line where she declares that she wants to “be his wife” (1. 4. 46). because the chemistry between Viola and Orsino in the movie already portrays her love for him. While the play suggests that Orsino sees himself as superior to Viola, the film utilizes their physical relationship to illustrate a meaningful friendship.

The activities that Viola and Orsino engage in in the film also portray their relationship as one of friends and equals, rather than the play, which depicts

Orsino as having a position of power over Viola due to his social class. In the play, Viola and Orsino discuss Viola's love life. When Orsino asks Viola " what kind of woman" she loves, Viola answers that the person is of Orsino's " complexion" (2. 4. 3031). Similarly, when Orsino asks how old the woman is, Viola answers " about your years, my lord" (2. 4. 33). In this scene, Shakespeare uses dramatic irony as a method of humor, as the reader understands that the person Viola is describing is Orsino, while he remains totally oblivious. The film uses many of the same lines, but when Orsino and Viola have this conversation, they are sitting together while playing cards and smoking cigars. While the lines alone suggest that Orsino is interested in Viola's love life, the cigars and card game that the two characters share in the film while having this intimate conversation is indicative of their close friendship. Additionally, in the film, Viola does not address Orsino as " my lord," which suggests that the two are on equal standing as opposed to the play. Viola and Orsino have another meaningful conversation about love later in which they discuss Orsino's heartache. During this conversation, Orsino calls Viola over by saying " come hither, boy," and then tells Viola to " remember" him if she ever " shalt love" (2. 4. 17). The lines stay almost the same in the film, but the two are playing a game of pool while having this conversation which indicates that they are friends. Furthermore, in the film, Orsino's command " come hither, boy" is cut, as the movie aims to depict a relationship of equals while the play portrays Orsino as socially superior. The activities that Viola and Orsino partake in in the film emphasize their close friendship and depicts their relationship as one of equals.

Not only does the film portray Viola and Orsino as friends, but the setting and music in these characters' scenes adds a romantic quality to their relationship that the play does not touch on. In the play, when Orsino convinces Viola to go woo Olivia for him, his lines somewhat portray the intimacy of their relationship, as he speaks of giving Viola "the book even of my secret soul" (1. 4. 15). However, the setting in the film during this scene adds a romantic quality to this exchange, as Viola and Orsino are sitting on cliffs on a beach while having this conversation. By putting the characters in a romantic atmosphere while they have a discussion about love, the film subtly suggests that Orsino and Viola are more than just friends. Similarly, in the play, when Orsino inquires about Viola's love life, he asks for Feste to "play the tune awhile" (1. 4. 1516), but no indication is given about the nature of the music that is playing in the scene. However, the film intersperses this scene with one in which Feste plays a love song for Maria, Toby, and Andrew, while Maria sings along with Feste and gives Toby longing glances just as Viola is doing to Orsino in her scene. The love song that plays during these scenes emphasizes the romantic element in Viola and Orsino's relationship, and the film further comments on a possible romance between Viola and Orsino as it juxtaposes Maria's longing for Toby and Viola's love for Orsino. Viola and Orsino have another emotional conversation later, when Orsino once again begs Viola to convince Olivia to marry him. In the play, Viola's love for Orsino is shown as completely unrequited, as Orsino constantly speaks of his infatuation with Olivia while Viola secretly pines for him. However, by placing Viola and Orsino in another romantic setting while speaking of love, the film continues to imply that there is more to their

relationship than friendship, as the two characters screaming at each other on the beach resembles a couple having a lovers quarrel. Furthermore, the film makes changes to Orsino's lines to insinuate that he is angry at Olivia rather than completely in love with her. In the play, when Orsino speaks of Olivia to Viola, he calls her a "sovereign cruelty," but then goes on to explain that he does not want her "quantity of dirty lands" or "fortune," but is instead attracted to her "nature" (2. 4. 8995). However, the film cuts all of Orsino's lines in which he speaks of Olivia's kind "nature," and instead only includes the line in which he calls her cruel. By omitting Orsino's lines that mention his love for Olivia, the film focuses on the possibility of Orsino loving Viola instead. The setting and music used during Viola and Orsino's scenes in the film creates a romantic atmosphere for the characters while the play portrays a strictly platonic relationship between the two.

As the story continues, the use of setting and music portrays Viola and Orsino's relationship as not only romantic, but also full of sexual tension, which defies the heteronormative stereotypes of the time, while the play portrays Viola's love for Orsino as one sided and unlikely to be returned. In the play, Orsino describes to Valentine how he detests Olivia's disregard for him, as he wonders bitterly if Olivia will finally love him "when the rich golden shaft" of Cupid's bow has "killed" all her other feelings or emotions (1. 1. 3738). In the film, Orsino's musings are made to Viola instead of Valentine, which suggests that Orsino feels comfortable divulging his intimate feelings to her. Additionally, the film places Orsino naked in a bathtub during this conversation while Viola uses a sponge to bathe him,

which introduces an element of sexual tension to their relationship that the play does not have. The sexual tension between the characters heightens during the scene in which Feste sings a song about death for Orsino and Viola, where he tells death to “come away” and asks to be “laid” in a coffin of “sad cypress” (2. 4. 5859). The film uses the same song, but completely changes the atmosphere of the scene by putting Viola, Orsino, and Feste in a dark, deserted barn. Although the lyrics remain sad in the film, it appears as if Feste is serenading the two, and while he is singing, Viola and Orsino’s faces slowly get closer and closer as if they are about to kiss. While the play includes Viola and Orsino listening to Feste sing, the film’s addition of a romantic setting and the suggestion of a kiss adds sexual tension to Viola and Orsino’s relationship. After the song, Feste tells Orsino that his “mind is a very opal,” (4. 2. 82) a stone that changes color. By comparing Orsino’s mind to an opal right after he apparently almost kisses a man, Feste comments on Orsino’s possible change of mind, and insinuates that he loves men now. Although this line was also in the play, the film’s addition of an almostkiss between Orsino and Viola directs the line at Orsino’s sexuality, a distinction that the play does not touch on. While the play includes Viola’s love for Orsino, Orsino does not reciprocate her feelings until he discovers that she is actually a woman. However, in the film, Orsino begins to fall for Viola even while she is under the facade of Cesario. The film’s use of romantic settings and music challenges the heteronormative views of the era by portraying Orsino’s attraction to Viola despite their apparently shared genders.

Viola and Orsino's shared activities and physicality portray the two as friends and equals despite Orsino's higher social rank. Furthermore, the film's use of setting, music, and other general choices to highlight the romance and sexual tension in Viola and Orsino's relationship challenges the heteronormative stereotypes of the era. The different interpretation of Viola and Orsino's relationship that the film presents illustrates the different attitudes towards social hierarchy and homosexuality in Shakespeare's era versus the twenty first century.