

May 2015

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Recommended Citations

MLA:

Heist, Sara "Brotherly Love in Twelfth Night," *The Kabod* 1. 2 (2015) Article 7.
Liberty University Digital Commons. Web. [xx Month xxxx].

APA:

Heist, Sara (2015) "Brotherly Love in Twelfth Night" *The Kabod* 1(2 (2015)), Article 7. Retrieved from
<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabod/vol1/iss2/7>

Turabian:

Heist, Sara "Brotherly Love in Twelfth Night" *The Kabod* 1 , no. 2 2015 (2015) Accessed [Month x, xxxx].
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ENGL 215-003

12 November 2014

Brotherly Love in *Twelfth Night*

William Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* explores love in several of its forms. Hardin Craig confirms that *Twelfth Night* addresses "romantic and ideal love" (159). One form of ideal love in the play is the Elizabethan idea of amity, which entails "concepts of benevolence, gratitude ... loving friendship, ethical union and relationships connected by the soul and by God" (Price and Finnerty 1). In the context of *Twelfth Night*, amity seems to be practically defined as a loving, sacrificial bond between two people. Amity appears by itself in the sea captain Antonio's devotion to Sebastian. In Viola's service to Orsino, amity is mixed with romance, another form of love. Antonio serves to illustrate a typical amicable relationship, while Viola shows how amity and romance blend may be seamlessly expressed in one character. The parallels and contrasts between the relationships of Antonio and Sebastian and Viola and Orsino are striking. Shakespeare uses the comparison of the motives, characteristics, expectations, and transience of the two characters' amicable relationships to illustrate the nature of amity.

The motive for Antonio's love is one of the more controversial topics of the play. The vast majority of critics, including Thad Jenkins Logan, infer certain homosexual overtones in Antonio's devotion to Sebastian (233). Casey Charles, in his article "Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*," goes so far as to call the play "one of the major textual sites for the discussion of homoerotic representation in Shakespeare" (121). Many commentators turn to this explanation for Antonio's devotion to Sebastian because they cannot seem to think of any other possible

motivation for his dedication. L.D. Salingar maintains that “[Antonio’s] love for Sebastian is irrational” (131). Thus, apparently, his love must be attributed to some subconscious urge. This viewpoint misinterprets the Elizabethan amity presented in the play. Either attributing Antonio’s love for Sebastian to homosexual desire or dismissing it as madness cheapens the quality of his love, making it nothing more than a product of base impulses. Rather, Antonio’s love and devotion flow from the generosity and good feeling that Price and Finnerty describe. Cynthia Lewis concurs with this interpretation, asserting that Antonio “embodies and acts out the play’s highest standard of Christian love” (187). The Bible bears out Lewis’ claim, for Christ says, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (NKJV, John 15.13). Antonio demonstrates just such a love by putting his life in jeopardy for Sebastian in the play. The love Christ describes is motivated not by impure desires, but rather by a pure, generous spirit. Antonio himself testifies to the purity of his motives. He describes his love in nonromantic terms, using words such as “sanctity” to refer to his love (Shakespeare 3.4.311). Antonio loves Sebastian out of his own generous nature. Lewis insists, “What distinguishes Antonio’s love for Sebastian is precisely that it is unearned” (190). Sebastian himself recognizes that he is indebted to Antonio: “I can no other answer make but thanks, / And thanks, and ever thanks. Too oft good turns / Are shuffled off with such uncurrent pay” (Shakespeare 3.3.14–16). Shakespeare holds Antonio up as an ideal of amicable love because he has pure motives for loving Sebastian.

The characteristics of amity that Shakespeare illustrates in Antonio are less controversial than Antonio’s motivation. Antonio is generous, constant, and self-sacrificing in his love for Sebastian. Porter Williams, Jr., refers to Antonio as “the model of generous friendship” (42). The play bears out this claim. The captain’s generosity begins when he rescues Sebastian from drowning. After nursing the young man back to health, Antonio gives him “[his] love without

retention or restraint” (Shakespeare 5.1.71). His generosity extends beyond emotion and time to his finances. When Sebastian arrives in Illyria, Antonio meets him and gives him money to buy souvenirs (3.3.41–9). Apparently, this is all the money the captain possesses, for when he is taken by the officers, he pleads with Viola for his purse (3.4.287). He is willing to give Sebastian every penny he has. Shakespeare, through Antonio, implies that ideal brotherly love is generous, holding back nothing good from the beloved. On top of generosity, Antonio adds constancy to his love. From the time he saved Sebastian from the ocean to the final scene at Olivia’s estate, he doggedly remains by Sebastian’s side. He tells Orsino that he has been with Sebastian “for three months before... / Both day and night did we keep company” (5.1.84, 86). Through every difficulty, Antonio has remained by Sebastian’s side. Not even the danger of Illyria could break his love. The final ingredient of Shakespeare’s ideal amity is self-sacrifice. Antonio is willing to sacrifice his life for Sebastian. He demonstrates this willingness on two occasions, the first of which is his coming to Illyria. When he meets Sebastian in that hostile country, he tells him, “My willing love, / The rather by these arguments of fear, / Set forth in your pursuit” (3.3.11–13). In other words, Antonio’s love for Sebastian overcame his fear for his life. Antonio further jeopardizes himself when he rescues Viola, whom he mistakes for Sebastian, from the duel with Sir Andrew. Lewis draws a parallel to substitutionary atonement in this scene, quoting Antonio’s impassioned declaration that “If this young gentleman / Have done offense, I take the fault on me” (Lewis 188; Shakespeare 3.2.61–2). As an example of amity, Antonio demonstrates in this scene that brotherly love ought to reflect Christ-like self-sacrifice. Shakespeare draws his ideals for brotherly love together in Antonio, presenting amity as generous, constant, and self-sacrificing.

The single shortcoming of Antonio's love for Sebastian is his expectation of return on his love, because such a desire is incompatible with the complete selflessness of Christ-like amity. Jesus described the highest possible love as the giving of one's life (John 15.13). That level of sacrifice leaves no room for any self-interest. Unfortunately, Antonio learns this truth by painful experience in *Twelfth Night*. After mistaking Viola for Sebastian and nobly offering to rescue her from the duel, Antonio is taken prisoner by Orsino's men. This situation provides Shakespeare with the opportunity to reveal Antonio's desire for reciprocating love from Sebastian. Because he has been generous with his time, love, and purse, Antonio expects Sebastian to be generous to him in return. But Viola does not have the purse that Antonio gave to Sebastian, and she certainly does not understand when he accuses her of ingratitude. He cries to Viola, "Thou hast, Sebastian, done good feature shame. / ... None can be called deformed but the unkind" (Shakespeare 3.4.316, 318). Though Antonio loves Sebastian from pure motives, he still expects reciprocal devotion and loyalty for his love. When he is disappointed in his expectations, he exhibits "a strong sense of disillusioned friendship" (Leech 74). Antonio's expectation of return is a disappointing but realistic flaw in his amicable love.

Antonio's unreasonable expectation for his amity sets him up for grave disappointment when he discovers that amity is not an indissoluble bond. Just as Viola disappoints Antonio by not returning his amity unreservedly, so also Sebastian does not fully reciprocate his love in the final scene. Although Antonio expects to be repaid with similar devotion, Sebastian marries Olivia instead, giving his love to her rather than Antonio. The playwright demonstrates through this event that Antonio cannot expect Sebastian to love him more than Olivia because ideal amity is neither exclusive nor binding. Shakespeare reminds his audience that the only "contract of eternal bond of love" is marriage, as the priest affirms (5.1.154). Antonio is an example of

typical Elizabethan amity, which professed to be an “exclusive, intimate, affective bond of friendship” (Price and Finnerty 1). Through Antonio Shakespeare demonstrates that expecting exclusivity in an amicable relationship is unreasonable. Amity, while pure, admirable, and Christ-like, is not a binding contract like marriage. Antonio discovers this unfortunate reality as the play closes. Thus, through Antonio’s disappointment Shakespeare shows that even the most devoted amity may not last forever.

The other example of loyal amity in *Twelfth Night* is Viola. While Sebastian and Antonio are both male, Viola and Orsino’s amicable relationship is complicated by the fact that Viola is a woman in disguise. This difference is no accident. Lewis, who views amity as a Christ-like love, observes that Viola is proof that “Christian love can inform romantic love” (197). Obviously, then, Viola’s motivation for loyalty to Orsino is necessarily more complex than Antonio’s, being mixed with another kind of love. A portion of her loyalty and devotion flows from the romantic love she bears Orsino. Salingar refers to Viola’s wooing of Olivia as “love-service” to Orsino (118). Yet to attribute all of Viola’s loyal service to romantic love is unreasonable. Williams writes that Viola possesses a “free and generous nature” (39). Her amity is motivated by generosity, much like Antonio’s. Viola is loyal and devoted to the duke’s command despite her romantic love for him. As she contemplates wooing Olivia, she murmurs to herself, “Whoe’er I woo, myself would be his wife” (Shakespeare 1.4.44). She is going against what romantic love would dictate and acting according to amity as she woos Olivia. Orsino himself recognizes her devotion in the final scene of the play, telling her that it was “against the mettle of your sex, / So far beneath your soft and tender breeding” (5.1.312–3). Viola loves Orsino from pure motives, acting according to amity even when its obligations contradict those of romantic love.

The characteristics of Viola's love parallel Antonio's. Viola is generous, constant, and selfless in her amity. Upon entering the service of Orsino, she freely and wholeheartedly gives him her help, hearing his confidences and listening to him expound his love for Olivia (Shakespeare 1.4.11–2). While Antonio gives to Sebastian in financial, emotional, and temporal ways, Viola is emotionally generous toward her beloved. Interestingly, she, unlike Antonio, does not recognize her own generosity. When Olivia tries to pay her during her visit to her estate, Viola responds, “My master, not myself, lacks recompense” (1.5.237). She feels fulfilled in her generous service to the beloved. Lewis affirms the generosity of Viola's devotion: “Her willingness to woo another woman for the man she loves also indicates her magnanimity” (194). Viola's love is also constant. Like Antonio, Viola refuses to abandon the one she loves in any circumstance. Even when Orsino travels to Olivia's estate to beg for Olivia's hand in person, Viola is steadfastly by his side. Such a motion reinforces that she is acting according to amity, not romance. If Viola acted according to the dictates of romantic love, she would be unwilling to assist Orsino in courting Olivia. Viola eloquently describes her constancy before Olivia: “[I go after] him I love / More than I love these eyes, more than my life, / More, by all mores, than e'er I shall love wife. / If I do feign, you witnesses above, / Punish my life for the tainting of my love!” (5.1.127–31). Viola herself recognizes that the love she bears Orsino would overcome the love she would bear to a spouse. Because Viola does love Orsino romantically, this statement cannot be understood as an assertion of the supremacy of amicable love over romantic love. It is rather a statement of the influence of amity on her romantic love. Amity has brought a constancy to love that is not usually present in “giddy and unfirm” romantic love (Shakespeare 2.4.4). Finally, Viola's love for Orsino is selfless. She, like Antonio, is willing to sacrifice her life for her beloved. Indeed, Orsino threatens to take her life when he suspects that Olivia loves Viola

instead of him. Believing he has been betrayed, Orsino declares, “I’ll sacrifice the lamb that I do love / To spite the raven’s heart within a dove” (5.1.122–3). The lamb is Viola, whom Orsino is prepared to sacrifice for her perceived faithlessness. Viola meekly responds, “And I most jocund, apt and willingly, / To do you rest a thousand deaths would die” (5.1.124–5). Viola demonstrates Christ-like self-sacrifice in her love for Orsino. Lewis points to the obviously sacrificial significance of the word *lamb* to emphasize Viola’s selflessness (196–7). Viola views her life as far less important than Orsino’s happiness. Salingar calls this scene Viola’s “culminating gesture of self-sacrifice” (131). If her death will do Orsino good, she is ready to lay down her life. This self-sacrifice conflicts with her romantic love because if she dies, she will never marry Orsino. Nevertheless, she is willing to die. Viola’s generosity, constancy, and selflessness merge together into an amity much like Antonio’s, except that it is intermingled with romantic love.

Unlike Antonio, Viola expects nothing in return for her love. While the captain expects Sebastian to love him in response to his devotion, Viola has no such expectation for Orsino. She is willing to give endlessly without any personal return on her love. In fact, the one thing she desires to realize through her faithful service is to win Olivia’s love for Orsino (Shakespeare 3.4.178). Viola’s goal in amity is the happiness of her beloved. This has already been somewhat explored in the selflessness of her devotion. If Orsino will be happy by marrying Olivia, Viola will act as his messenger. If Orsino will be happy in her death, Viola will lay her life down joyfully, even if she receives nothing in return.

Viola’s amicable relationship with Orsino changes at the end of the play, just as Sebastian and Antonio’s relationship also changes. When Orsino realizes that she is a woman and that Olivia has married Viola’s brother, he offers Viola his hand in marriage. Amity has acted as a precursor to romantic love, as Williams describes: “[It] is Viola’s love for Orsino that

secretly teaches...Orsino the true meaning of love” (40). The love that instructs Orsino is amity, in all its generosity, constancy, and selflessness. The result of the instruction is his marriage to Viola. The amicable relationship between Viola and Orsino transforms into romance at the end of the play. Amity, while still present, becomes less dominant in the relationship. Lewis believes that Viola’s character “permits spiritual and romantic love to be linked” (197). The consummation of the amicable relationship between Viola and Orsino is the contracted bond of marriage. Amity is again shown to be dissoluble, not eternally binding. In *Viola*, Shakespeare reinforces that because amity is not a covenantal bond of love, it may be transient.

Through *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare demonstrates that amity alone, with its expectations of reciprocation, will lead to disillusionment, as Antonio unfortunately discovers. In *Antonio*, the playwright illustrates pure amity, with its sometimes unrealistic expectations of reciprocation. Viola completes the portrait as the embodiment of a medley of amicable and romantic love. While Shakespeare honors amity for its pure and admirable traits and recognizes that it has a place in human relationships, he also includes a reminder that amity is not a sacred covenant like marriage and cannot expect a similarly unwavering devotion from the beloved. The reader develops a clearer concept of amity through the exploration of the motives, characteristics, expectations, and transience of amicable relationships in *Twelfth Night*.

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