

Twelfth Night: Lady Olivia

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Lady Olivia enters *Twelfth Night* as an exercise in extreme grief. Her father and brother have both died, and she has vowed to mourn her brother for seven years: wearing a veil, refusing all visitors, and watering her room daily with tears. She is determined to shut herself away from the world, and especially from Orsino, whose love she has already rejected and continues to reject. She fails spectacularly. By the end of Act 1 she is in love with a stranger she has met once. By Act 4 she has proposed marriage.

Olivia is not simply comic: she is also one of the play's most emotionally honest characters, and one of its most bold.

Who She Is

Olivia is wealthy, well-spoken, and in control of her household. She manages her uncle Sir Toby (or tries to), defends Feste against Malvolio's dismissal, and handles Orsino's repeated approaches with consistency and dignity. She is not weak: the grief is sincere and the refusals are clear.

Her intelligence is visible from her first scene. When Feste argues that she is the real fool because she weeps for a brother whose soul is in heaven, she laughs rather than defending herself. When Malvolio says she should not encourage him, she rebukes Malvolio for his self-love and keeps the fool. She knows genuine wit from pompous performance.

What she cannot control is feeling. Love arrives against her will, quickly, and completely. She describes it as catching the plague: sudden, not chosen, impossible to reason away. Her response once she accepts it is not to manage it but to pursue it as boldly as she pursued her grief.

Her Arc

The vow: Olivia has promised seven years of mourning. The vow is genuine in intention: she loved her brother deeply. But Feste's proof that grief is misdirected (if he is in heaven, she is crying in the wrong place) cracks the posture within minutes of her first appearance. The vow, it turns out, does not survive actual contact with feeling.

Falling for Cesario: Olivia grants Cesario an audience because the young man's persistence interests her. Cesario delivers Orsino's suit without flattery and without yielding. The willow-cabin speech, in which Cesario describes what passionate love looks like in practice,

does what all of Orsino's messages could not: it catches Olivia's attention. She sends a ring after Cesario leaves, claiming it was left behind. She invents a polite fiction to initiate what she cannot openly acknowledge.

Direct confession: In Act 3 Olivia abandons all pretence. She tells Cesario directly that she loves him. The confession is remarkably clear and remarkably bold. She is a countess speaking first, to a servant, about a feeling she was supposed to be suppressing. Cesario refuses her gently but unambiguously.

Proposing to Sebastian: In Act 4 Olivia takes the step no Elizabethan woman was expected to take: she proposes. She finds Sebastian (whom she believes is Cesario) and asks him to commit to a formal betrothal before a priest, because she is afraid he will change his mind. He says yes. She has chosen her husband and arranged the ceremony herself.

Key Quotes

Quote	Scene	Significance
"Even so quickly may one catch the plague?"	1.5	Love as sudden disease: not chosen, not welcome, impossible to refuse
"Methinks I feel this youth's perfections / With an invisible and subtle stealth / To creep in at mine eyes."	1.5	Love as theft: Cesario has taken something without permission
"I am not what I am." exchange	3.1	She tells Cesario she thinks he is not what he appears; Cesario confirms it; neither understands what the other means
"Blame not this haste of mine."	4.3	She knows she is moving fast and names it directly; the self-awareness is part of her character
"By innocence I swear" (Cesario's reply)	3.1	Olivia's declaration extracts the play's most layered response: true on every level, decipherable on none

Dramatic Techniques

Dramatic irony surrounds Olivia throughout. She believes she is in love with a man. The audience knows she is in love with a woman in disguise. When she marries Sebastian, believing he is Cesario, the irony resolves in her favour without her understanding how: she gets what she wanted in a form she did not expect.

Gender role reversal is Shakespeare's key technique for Olivia. She initiates. She confesses first. She proposes. These are all actions that Elizabethan convention assigned to men, and Olivia performs them without embarrassment or hesitation. This mirrors Viola's transgression in the other direction: both women act with more directness and decision than the men around them.

Parallel with Orsino: Shakespeare builds Olivia and Orsino as mirrors. Both commit to an emotional posture (grief, love) that cannot be sustained against actual feeling. Both fall quickly and completely when feeling arrives. Both redirect without apparent difficulty at the end. The parallelism shows that impulsive, self-constructed love is not gender-specific.

Thematic Significance

Olivia's grief is the play's clearest example of emotion as performance. She has constructed a seven-year vow of mourning as a public posture: it signals her loyalty and keeps the world at a distance. It collapses in one conversation. Shakespeare is not suggesting the grief was fake: Feste's argument is sound, and Olivia accepts it. The point is that emotional commitment, however sincere, cannot be imposed on feeling in advance.

Her boldness in love raises questions about gender and social expectation. Olivia does what Orsino claims he does, pursues love directly and without constraint, but her pursuit is the one that actually produces results. Orsino's messages fail; Olivia's direct declaration, her ring, her proposal, all succeed. The play quietly suggests that the bold approach to love is more effective than the performed one.

Exam Tip

Questions about grief, love, and gender all run through Olivia. For grief: trace how quickly the seven-year vow breaks and what this suggests about the relationship between genuine feeling and public performance. For love: compare her sudden, impulsive attraction with Orsino's elaborate performance and Viola's patient endurance. For gender: her proposal to Sebastian is the play's most direct challenge to Elizabethan gender norms.