

# Twelfth Night: Act 2, Scene 4 - Orsino's Palace

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<CharacterChips characters={"Orsino", "Viola", "Feste", "Curio"} />

## Summary

Orsino is in his palace with Cesario, Curio, and others. He calls for the love song Feste sang the night before: a melancholy song about dying for unrequited love. While someone fetches Feste, Orsino asks Cesario whether she has ever been in love. Cesario says yes. The person she loves is much like Orsino in age and temperament. Orsino does not follow this.

Feste arrives and sings "Come away, come away, death." The song is about a man who wants to die for love because the woman he loves does not return his feeling. Orsino is deeply pleased. He sends everyone away except Cesario.

He tells Cesario to go back to Olivia. He also advises her on love: a woman should marry a man older than herself, because men's desires are more constant. Then, in almost the same breath, he claims that men's passion is so vast and all-consuming that no woman's heart could sustain an equal feeling. Women's love, he says, is appetite: it surfeits and fails.

Cesario responds with the story of "his father's daughter," a woman who loved a man but never told him. She let concealment eat away at her, "like a worm i' the bud, / Feed on her damask cheek." She sat like patience on a monument, smiling at grief. Orsino asks whether this woman's story ended happily. Cesario does not answer directly. Orsino gives Cesario a jewel and sends her back to Olivia.

## Analysis

This is the play's most concentrated study of Orsino. He delivers two positions about men, women, and love in the same scene, and they contradict each other completely. He says women should love older men because men's constancy is more reliable. Then he says men's love is so overwhelming that women cannot match it: women's hearts are too small, their love no more than appetite. Both claims serve Orsino's self-image; neither can be true alongside the other. Feste has already said what is actually happening: "thy mind is a very opal," meaning changeable, unstable, unreliable. This is the most accurate thing anyone says about Orsino in the play, and he does not register it.

The song Feste sings is also a comment on Orsino. "Come away, come away, death" is a beautiful, melancholy piece about a man who wants to die because the woman he loves does

not love him. Orsino loves this song because it confirms his self-image as a tragic, passionate lover. He does not notice that the song describes someone whose love is not returned: which is his situation exactly. He has aestheticised his own rejection into something he finds pleasing.

Viola's "patience on a monument" speech is the scene's emotional heart and its most finely constructed irony. She tells Orsino about "his father's daughter," claiming to report a story, when she is actually describing herself. The woman who loved in silence, who let concealment feed on her like a worm in a flower bud, who sat smiling at grief: that is Viola. She is telling him everything about her own situation in a form he cannot decode. When he asks whether the daughter confessed and whether the story ended happily, Viola evades the question. She cannot answer it directly without revealing who she is.

## Themes

- **Self-contradiction:** Orsino's speeches about men and women are the play's clearest demonstration of his self-serving logic. He uses arguments about love not to understand it but to reinforce his sense of his own superior feeling.
- **Concealment and suffering:** Viola's "patience on a monument" speech describes concealed love as a form of quiet destruction. Concealment is not neutral; it costs something real.
- **Dramatic irony:** Viola speaks about herself in the third person to the man she loves and cannot tell. The audience knows this; Orsino does not. The gap between what is said and what is meant is as wide as it gets anywhere in the play.
- **Performance versus reality:** Orsino uses music, language, and beautiful images to construct an experience of romantic suffering. Viola actually experiences what he performs. The contrast is the scene's central irony.