

"If music be the food of love..."

Twelfth Night

Act 1 Scene 1

Orsino, Duke of Illyria, has fallen head over heels in love with the Lady Olivia. Unfortunately she does not love him back. He has only seen her at a distance and not even spoken to her yet. He keeps sending messengers but she won't see them.

Orsino seems very unsettled by his own emotions and not sure what to feel about all this love business. He's probably a lot happier in command of a ship or leading an army on the battlefield.

In this speech, which opens the play, he addresses his court musicians and anyone else who is prepared to his feelings about love.

Orsino:

If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.

Commentary

Orsino asks his musicians to play more music so that it will feed his love so much that he will become so full he will lose his appetite for love.

That strain again! it had a dying fall:
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound,
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour!

He hears and describes particular phrase in the music that he loves

Enough; no more:
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

He abruptly tells them to stop because the phrase no longer sounds as sweet as it did before.

O spirit of love! how quick and fresh art thou,
That, notwithstanding thy capacity
Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,
Of what validity and pitch soe'er,
But falls into abatement and low price,
Even in a minute: so full of shapes is fancy
That it alone is high fantastical.

He complains how feelings of love swallow everything else up like the sea and make it seem worthless.