

Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit  
Do give thee fivefold blazon. Not so fast; soft, soft,  
Unless the master were the man. How now?  
*Even so quickly may one catch the plague?*  
Methinks I feel this youth's perfections  
With an invisible and sudden stealth  
To creep in at mine eyes. Well, let it be.

(*Twelfth Night*, I.v.290)

Smitten with Viola qua Cesario, Olivia neglects canonical statement of her metaphor.<sup>1</sup> A remedial summary might run: LOVE IS THE PLAGUE; or perhaps more specifically, FALLING IN LOVE IS CATCHING THE PLAGUE.<sup>2</sup>

This manner of explanation serves to offer a perplexed hearer a blunt hint about how to take the italicized phrase; as we might tell a young child in a first visit to a museum or a concert that it is the content in the frame or on the stage that is the intended object of attention, not the rows of strangers or the gum on the floor; or as we ourselves may need assistance from program notes to make anything at all out of an art more contemporary than we are.

Here we seem to have both a metaphor, and a feature within it, asserted in the one italicized phrase. If eager to find a single hidden proposition to consider assent to, we might take "Love arrives quickly" as the phrase's truth-evaluable content.<sup>3</sup> One could accept the phrase as carrier of this propositional content, but deny the proposition itself: perhaps *really* falling into *real* love requires a longer interval. Yet this is to challenge not just the proposition, but also the situation: in the original, "so" functions demonstratively to indicate *the actual time that it did take* for Viola's

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<sup>1</sup> The stingy may not grant this passage metaphor status. Perhaps we are to take it that Olivia is in no doubt about the speed with which she has acquired passion, and in the italicized phrase is only marveling that the process was even quicker than that by which the [real] plague is spread!

With no pretensions of interpretive accuracy, I here simply discuss the phrase *as a metaphor*, leaving aside the curious (in my view, imponderable) question of whether it *really is* a metaphor. I suspect this metaphor is so common that the use of it here actually serves to further inform the hearer to that Olivia has fallen for Viola. With hindsight we might also consider Sir Toby's oblique foreshadowing of both the love and the metaphor: "What a plague means my niece to take the death of her brother thus? I am sure care's an enemy to life." (I.iii.1).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, the two juxtaposed eventualities in this latter wording are themselves metaphorical; but of the dead idiomatic sort that should not leave one puzzled as the original conceivably might.

ruby lip to enliven Olivia's heart; so if we grant that Olivia is in love, love *has* arrived quickly at least in this instance. One could still debate the propriety of choosing to describe this amount of time as "quick", perhaps by contesting the relevant contrast class. This would be to challenge a central theme of the play, which is full of suggestive jibes about the speedy aspect of love's folly.<sup>4</sup>

But quickness is not the most gripping aspect of the metaphor. Consider the broader themes: there is passivity, relinquishing of control, and inevitability, for love and disease are states that happen *unto* you, without your will;<sup>5</sup> there is violation of isolation, as Olivia's self-imposed quarantine from the world of men is as unsuccessful as a similarly porous quarantine of the plague would be; *and so on*.

Encouraged to speculate, we may venture to explore further what this metaphor *metaphorically means*. It invites or evokes a state of mind in which an open-ended set of general propositions, applicable to loves and plagues, naturally occurs: *X* is extraordinary; *X* is striking; *X* arrives without warning; *X* causes one to go mad; *X* is disruptive; *X* makes it hard to sleep; *and so on*, again. These properties are common connotations of descent into love or plague, contributing to the broad "semantic meaning" of the metaphor as the intersection of the extended senses of its constituent subjects.<sup>6</sup> But not all loves or plagues have all of these properties; and those that *do* share these properties only share them polysemously. Then there are further properties that are not shared at all: love is not notorious for wiping out one quarter of the population of Europe in the fourteenth century; nor is the plague a reliable predictor of sexual intimacy.

The question of truth-content can be reconsidered as a wedge between the metaphor and its paraphrase: which of these paraphrase propositions are we agreeing with if we agree with Olivia? Malvolio might agree that indeed love is a plague, in that love is a curse, a disaster, a problematic mess to be sternly avoided at all costs;<sup>7</sup> while the Duke may agree that love is a plague, in that it is an overwhelming force that drives man to action.<sup>8</sup> Even if there were no

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<sup>3</sup> This is taking the original phrase as a rhetorical question, a type of exclamation.

<sup>4</sup> The Duke starts the first act with melodied talk of the brisk comings and goings of fancy. The charge is later tuned to cite women's proclivity for unwarranted rapid swellings of sentiment. Viola offers similar thoughts: "How easy for the proper-false / in women's waxen hearts to set their forms! / Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we!" (II.iii.29); and her fondness for the Duke provides the parallel demonstration.

<sup>5</sup> Though you may assist by submitting: "Fate, show thy force; ourselves we do not owe. / What is decreed must be – and be this so!" (I.v.311).

<sup>6</sup> Note that the propositions would be available for the converse metaphor as well: "The plague, that most vengeful of loves, swept the breath from the town..."

<sup>7</sup> At least, such may be his attitude before receiving the faked letter from Maria, or again after it led to his mighty abuse, if not in between.

<sup>8</sup> Although, as the Duke demonstrates with his opportunistic swapping of beloveds at the play's end, love is not necessarily a force in any *particular* direction.

disagreement at this first level of propositional interpretation of the metaphor (e.g., with all parties agreeing that it is the property of *being overwhelming* that this metaphor intends), we are still vulnerable to a dangerous regress of potentially differing further interpretations; for something can be "overwhelming" in a good or bad way.

Still more problematic is the question of which of these propositions we are to presume *Olivia* meant. Perhaps on hearing some element of our paraphrase, she enthusiastically agrees; perhaps she gives unreserved endorsement to the idea that both love and the plague strike us at the superficial surface, but proceed to penetrate to our very core. Yet she may not have meant this when she woozily intoned the original line. She may not have had this idea in mind; it might not have occurred to her, or even struck her at the moment as particularly what she wanted to express. (Might Romeo confide in us, "Sure, I agree that everything that matters (or has matter) orbits around Juliet, but that is not *what I meant* when I said she was the sun...?") It is not clear what business we have in taking the speaker to mean other than what the speaker says. The paraphrase itself may be eloquent, containing an insight or a well-turned phrase, just as the abstract metaphor itself could be taken on further journeys than those we feel are licensed by its token occurrence in the text. Debate over who owns a metaphor is like debate over who owns the literal meaning of a word; the argument may rage on, but with no clear authority. Yet unless we have been entranced by some radical externalism, we would like to grant that at least it is the utterer who owns the utterer's intent, and thus settles speaker meaning.

Are *any* individual paraphrase propositions essential to the metaphor, or necessary to our explanation? The metaphor seems not to trigger particular propositions so much as to thrust the hearer into a state of mind amenable to favorably regarding the propositions. Might not each hearer have his own response to the metaphor? A child living at the end of the sixteenth century may be first introduced to the phrase "the plague" by overhearing it in a parent's concerned cry. This initial acquaintance may leave an indelible emotional impression on the child, a sense of surprise, awe, worry, anticipatory exhaustion, and the like;<sup>9</sup> and this impression may precede actual knowledge of what the plague *is*, or of its irksome refusal to stop having periodic flourishes centuries after its heyday. Perhaps this child, on hearing *Olivia's* original line, claims only a "gut impression" of what is being said, a recognition of a plague-associated sentiment, and nothing more specific or explicit or literal than that. Has not the child then "got" the metaphor? (Or consider Dickinson 210: can the reader not have a rich grasp of lace-ness and surge-ness, and of the latter revealed by the former, without a more literal making-sense of just what "lace" or

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<sup>9</sup> Arguably, anything that produces this cluster of sentiments is what the dead metaphor or conventionalized predicate "being a plague" denotes. The OED allows "plague" as "Anything causing trouble, annoyance, or vexation;" but only recorded as an active sense two hundred years after Shakespeare's writing.

"surge" refers to?) We may make none of the inferences that Gass would attribute to us, and yet, when asked to recite the lines as an actor, intone them with perfect pitch for their spirit.<sup>10</sup>

The paraphrase may help the puzzled, if the raw juxtaposition is too severe to bear; it may satisfy post-play conversationalists, who hope to keep the drama alive through their iterated recapitulations of its moments; yet it does not capture, nor even address, the particularity and power of the actual metaphor in action. The metaphor is not equivalent to its paraphrase; each utterance of the metaphor is its own specific conjuring.

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<sup>10</sup> Only do not then ask us to *paraphrase* what we mean by "spirit".