

Shakespeare produced openly homoerotic writings accepted by the lower and upper classes of his period at a time understood to be virulently homophobic. With constant analysis devoted to the homosexual undertones of William Shakespeare's writings, critics hypothesize that Shakespeare himself may have been homosexual, along with a number of his characters. The question that remains is how could Shakespeare produce homosexual themes and allude to such relationships without fostering animosity among the contemporary viewers of his plays. Further complicating the answer, Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote plays for all male casts where young male actors would cross-dress to play the female characters. These plays had elaborate flirtation, wooing, and romantic involvement between male and female characters regardless of the gender identity of the actors. Audience acceptance of these actions and topics appear to contradict the culture of the Elizabethan period. Though *As You Like It*, I intend to show how through the patriarchal dominance in society, the guarantee of returning to the status quo, and cultural affinity for ancient Greece and Rome, audiences were willing to accept, if not overlook, homoerotic themes in Shakespearian plays.

First, looking at the historical context of homosexuality during Shakespeare's time provides hints as to how audiences and Shakespeare himself viewed the practice. The most important fact is that homosexuality was not considered a practice. The word, homosexuality, was not even coined until 1868 by Austrian-Hungarian writer, K. M. Kertbeny, in a private correspondence with Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, both early gay rights activists. Kertbeny first used the word publicly in a letter speaking out against Prussia's

proposed law banning acts of sodomy between members of the same sex, laws that England had enforced since 1533 when King Henry VIII had Parliament pass 25 Henry 8, Chapter 6, which stated

Forasmuch as there is not yet sufficient and condign punishment appointed and limited by the due course of the Laws of this Realm, for the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery committed with mankind or beast.

The law went on to define sodomy, known as “buggery,” as a felony, punishable by hanging. King Henry VIII passed the law after succeeding from the Catholic Church as a sign of England’s independence. The Catholic Church had called any sexual act aside from vaginal intercourse a sin but chose to deal with violations of the law themselves. To prove his point, King Henry VIII passed the statute three more times in 1536, 1539, and 1541. Subsequent monarchs repealed and reinstated the statute based on their religious affiliation. King Edward IV repealed the statute, only to reinstate it in 1548. Queen Mary repealed it in 1553, followed by Queen Elizabeth reinstating the law in 1563.¹ Few hangings actually took place under the charge of buggery, even though almost no material evidence was needed. Possibly, monarchs used the law as a method of coercion for their subjects. Ironically, King James, who became King in 1603 for a portion of Shakespeare’s career, had numerous openly homosexual affairs apart from his wife. King James even arranged for his male lover, George Villiers, to be buried next to him.

While acts of sodomy between men were illegal, men were kept together throughout their childhood and adolescents, until marriage where men married women, but continued to work with men. Sir William Segar, in *Honor, Military, and Civill*

¹ Sodomy in England was not made legal until 1967.

(1602), outlined two areas that men enter: honor and business. Following the path of honor, a boy goes to an all-male school followed by an all-male college. The boy then will studies law at an all-male inn-of-court in London. Shakespeare likely followed the business path by attending an all-male school and then working in an all-male apprenticeship with a merchant or craftsman. Though homosexual acts were banned, these obligatory single-sex communities emphasized close bonding between males leading to possible homoerotic feelings with or without physically consummating the emotions. No statistics exist regarding homosexual activity during Shakespeare's time, but correlations can be made with the famous 1948 study by Alfred Kinsey who showed that 37% of men had a homosexual experience to the point of orgasm. This study was conducted in the United States when homosexuality was similarly persecuted and considered immoral and illegal in many states.² Until this study was published, homosexuality was believed to be abnormal and rare. Also worth noting, punishment from the law historically failed to deter homosexual activity as seen in America, the Middle East, and limited examples in Renaissance England.. One can infer that homosexual activities were more common than Shakespeare's contemporaries believed.

Working in the theater did not exempt men from the all-male business world. Theater had a bad name as a profession, so actors were considered servants to nobles. This did not remove the stigma that Elizabethan England had for actors. In Ben Jonson's play, *Poetaster*, a Ovid Junior wants to become an actor. His father, Ovid Senior, says "What? Shall I have my son a stager now? An ingle for players?" (1.2.13-14). Ingle

² United States sodomy laws were struck down by the Supreme Court in 2003, in the case *Lawrence v. Texas*. Fourteen states still enforced sodomy laws at the time.

was a slang term for homosexuals and Jonson's usage represents the contemporary view of homosexuality. Also, the quote shows audiences were aware of the homosexual connotations of the theater, excluding ignorance as a reason for the acceptance of Shakespeare's homosexual themes.

Writer Philip Stubbes criticized the popular culture of theater, as part of his book, *Anatomie of Abuses*, attacking the social practices of his contemporaries as being un-Christian. He writes

Flocking and running to Theaters and curtens, daylie and hourelly, night and daye, tyme and tyde, to see Playes and Enterludes; where such wanton gestures, such bawdie speaches, such laughing and fleering, such kissing and bussing, such clipping and culling, Suche winckinge and glancinge of wanton eyes, and the like, is used, as is wonderfull to behold. Than, these goodly pageants being done, every mate sorts to his mate, every one bringes another homeward of their way verye frendly, and in their secret conclaves (covertly) they play the Sodomits, or worse. And these be the fruits of Playes and Enterluds for the most part (Stubbes).

Stubbes looks at theater as bawdy, sexual escapades reflecting on the public viewing the plays. He even makes a specific reference to "sodomitical" dangers of theater, showing that not all of Shakespeare's contemporaries condemned homosexuality in theatrical productions. Historians now use Stubbes as a commentator of morals during the 16th Century, but Stubbes' perspective is understood to be extreme Puritan values, not a representation of the mainstream. As evidenced by Shakespeare's work and its acceptance, the mainstream was more accepting of sexuality on stage.

Shakespeare took advantage of the presumed stereotype of the stage, using homosexuality as both a theme and as a plot device. *As You Like It* exemplifies homosexual themes while also using gender confusion and cross-dressing to add conflict

to the plot. To analyze *As You Like It*, particular definitions need to be outlined. Acts of homosexuality refer to the performing sexual acts between members of the same sex. Most of what is discussed in this essay refers to homoeroticism, meaning the feelings of sexual desire and attraction to members of the same sex. Few examples appear in Shakespeare where acts of homosexuality occurs, but a substantial number of events show elements of homoeroticism between men and between women; a point that may explain why Shakespeare was able to write relationships as he did.

Shakespeare uses comedy and fantasy to lessen the blatant homoeroticism in *As You Like It*. Rosalind, a female character played by a young boy, dresses like a man once she enters the forest. Forests, in Shakespeare's time, were a symbol of magic and mystery. Rosalind's cross-dressing toys with the influence of the forest setting, as she returns to her female garb before returning to the city.

During the 16th century, which *As You Like It* was written at the end of, a cross-dressing female would have had a vastly greater impact on the audience than at the present (Smith). By dressing as a man, Rosalind opened herself to an entire world once closed to her. She, as a he, could own property, which she, as a he, purchases in the forest. More importantly, she, as a he, can woo a mate instead of waiting for a man to initiate. Rosalind uses this to her advantage when meeting the object of her affection, Orlando, in the forest. In the forest, Rosalind, played by a boy, dressed as a woman, and pretending to be a man, asks Orlando to think of her as a woman so as to practice wooing Rosalind. At a time when gender roles are specifically outlined even in the laws, this comedic situation can be read as incredibly disturbing, gender bending, and homoerotic.

The fantasy of a woman acting like a man helps allow this association to be palatable to the audience. Audiences knew a man was playing the part of Rosalind/Ganymede and could see irony in the gender identities. Further, Shakespeare provides further irony for the audience by having Rosalind name her male-self Ganymede after the boy in Greek Mythology who becomes a lover of Jove. Ganymede was also another slang word for homosexual. Shakespeare wanted some understanding of Ganymede being homoerotic; Ganymede took part in the all male world of business and courtship by purchasing land and wooing Orlando. There is question as to whether Orlando knows Ganymede's true identity or just enjoys flirting with a young boy. At the end of the play when Ganymede reveals herself to be Rosalind, Orlando says he thought Ganymede was Rosalind's brother, noting that he acknowledge physical similarities he did not allude to earlier. This leads to some ambiguity as to Orlando's own feelings within the homoeroticism of his association with Ganymede. Nevertheless, Orlando happily marries Rosalind even though she has been masquerading as a man, breaking the gender roles and courting him. Orlando has become emasculated and does not care. By sheer absurdity, given the time period, Shakespeare likely manages to keep this relationship entertaining instead of disturbing. Additionally, the mystism in the forest ends once the characters leave and return to the city. After the adventures and confusion in the forest of *As You Like It*, the characters return to the status quo at the end as if nothing happened to change the social order. By not making an issue of something, it never becomes an issue. Thus, Shakespeare's audience may have seen immoral homoeroticism or even homosexuality, but relied on the convention that the status quo of man and woman would return in the end.

The epilogue of *As You Like It* uniquely targets the status quo, breaking its conventional use. Epilogues in Elizabethan theater summarized the themes of the play, tied up loose ends, and asked the audience for applause. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare had Rosalind say an epilogue where her character gender (female) and her actor gender (male) become further confused and intermingled instead of reassured. As opposed to simply asking for applause and gratitude from the audience, Rosalind tells the audience that she/he will not beg for gratitude or even claim to have performed a good play. Instead, Rosalind speaks about the audience members loving each other, and then proposes her/his own romantic involvement with the audience.

My way is to conjure you; and I'll begin with the women.
I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of
this play as please you: and I charge you, O men, for the love
you bear to women;—as I perceive by your simpering, none of you
hates them,—that between you and the women the play may please.
If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that
pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied
not; and, I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces,
or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy,
bid me farewell (V.iv.197-205).

There is question about who is speaking, Rosalind, Ganymede, or the actor, which Shakespeare purposefully manipulated. Though the script gives the epilogue to Rosalind, the character says “If I were a woman” (V.iv.202) before flirting with the men in the audience. The Rosalind character lowers the illusion of her gender after the audience thought the status quo returned and expected to with a summary to end their theater experience. Instead of closing the play with a contented audience, Shakespeare stresses his theme of gender confusion and pushes the issue of sexuality, hetero or not, onto the audience. Taking into account the already prevalent humor of the situation, Rosalind’s

flirtation with the audience taunts their sexuality. Because the true speaker of the epilogue is the boy actor playing Rosalind, audiences accepted the boy to male flirtation because of the society's influence from ancient Greece.

Shakespeare structured *As You Like It* in the vein of pastoral literature from ancient Greece. Further influence from ancient Greece comes in the relationship of men with young boys. In ancient Greek culture, society considered acts of homosexuality with young boys favorable and even emphasized the relationships. It is reasonable to assume that Shakespeare's audience shared similar views of men with young boys, though were likely more conservative in this belief as the homosexual relationships were not stressed as a cultural requirement. Critic Ann Thompson discusses the man/young boy relationship in terms of Shakespeare's time.

Male homosexual desire in the Renaissance period is often represented as something which involves an age difference if not a sex difference: it is seen as the desire of adult men for 'boys', and the use of such terms for the younger partner as 'ganymede', 'catamite' and 'ingle' all testify to this. The boy actor of women's parts has been the focus of considerable interest to gay critics as well as to feminist critics in recent years. At the same time, a more general interest in transvestism as a widespread social phenomenon not exclusive to the Renaissance is shown in two recent books (Thompson).

The homoerotic relationship between Ganymede and Orlando channeled the Greek tradition, with Orlando courting the younger Ganymede. Even though Ganymede is truly a female character, the actor is still a young boy, gendering bending all the roles in-between. Thompson's reference to transvestism calls to the cross-dressing³ requirement

³ For the sake of political correctness, members of the present-day Transgender community recognize cross-dressing as a practice separate from homosexual acts. Further, cross-dressing only refers to dressing in clothing not socially accepted for one's gender and has nothing to do with gender identity. Transsexuality refers to people who feel they are a different sex than they were born as.

in Shakespearian plays and social acceptance of the act. Shakespeare, at times, used cross-dressing to make homoerotic relationships appear humorous, and thus acceptable.

As shown in the aforementioned quote from Ben Jonson's play, *Poetaster*, the theater profession was viewed as a "homosexual" profession. Shakespeare's use of cross-dressing appeared almost exclusively to the comedies where, in the end, men ended up with female characters. Conversely, homoeroticism in the tragedies contributed too much of the suffering - cross-dressing was not needed to lighten the dangerous subject. David Cope writes about Shakespeare's strategy to use cross-dressing to affect his audience.

The transvestism of the English renaissance theater creates a "space of possibility" for "structuring and confounding culture" as well as enacting a "category crisis" which reflects a potential destabilization of the dominant hierarchy (Garber 16, 17⁴). [Stephen Greenblatt]⁵ points out that the enactment of such difference is an instrument to increase audience anxiety before reifying the normative and conventional in the play's resolution, a pattern played out in *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night* (Cope 2).

Cope sees the use of cross-dressing as a challenge to the status quo of Elizabethan England, which almost all the theater of the time aimed to reconcile. Both Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies give the characters the objective to restore whatever alterations have been made to the status quo, the difference being that the status quo returns in the comedies and is often different if not bittersweet at the end of the tragedies. Because of the vast difference in gender rights, cross-dressing severely threatened the societal status quo, making it a powerful plot device regardless of sexual connotations. The sexual

⁴ Cope's citation - Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992.

⁵ Cope's citation - Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1988.

connotations only added to the conflict and threat, but therefore likely make for excellent entertainment.

In contrast to *As You Like It* and Shakespeare's other comedies, Shakespeare's tragedies handle homoerotic relationships differently, but help to emphasize the public's that man and woman will prevail in the end, if anything. Shakespeare's tragedies provide more ambiguous homoerotic relationships where much is left to interpretation. In the tragedies, characters who pursue or appear to want homosexual relationships find their own tragic ends. Mercutio, in love with Romeo, dies defending Romeo's honor, propelling the love story into a point-of-no-return tragedy. Iago, in love with Othello and jealous of Othello's wife, drives Othello insane, causing him to kill his wife and himself. No one ends happily in tragedies, and part of the blame can be attributed to homosexually spawned jealousy. While the comedies reveal homosexuality in a humorous light, the tragedies attribute manipulation and insanity to the practice. Shakespeare never handled homosexuality in a straight-forward manner. Elizabethan England seems only able to view a fantastical presentation of homosexuality, whether extremely entertaining or extremely depressing, but nothing in the middle.

Homophobia during Elizabethan England targeted society and the threat to societal norms. Using homosexual and homoerotic themes served as powerful additions to his plays, but were received by the audience as plot devices meant to add to the conflict of the plot. The status quo society appreciates always returns in Shakespeare's plays in that man and woman are the only open partners on stages. Regardless of cross-dressing and undertones, the audiences of Shakespeare's time appreciated his work as mainstream entertainment and not high class art. Deep interpretations are left to future

scholars. For Shakespeare's time, these plays provided humor, intrigue, and excitement, and homosexuality made the return to normality all the more pleasurable.

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