Shakespeare in (same-sex) love

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NO AUTHOR writing in English has been the subject of more critical attention and speculation than Shakespeare, England's "person of the millennium," so dubbed by the BBC. Among the many theories and interpretations that have been applied to Shakespeare's admittedly enigmatic and multi-layered plays and poems, relatively few have delved into the subject of homosexuality in the playwright's life or in the theatrical world that he inhabited, while in the plays themselves this theme continues to be glossed over and rarely given the attention it deserves.

Shakespeare defied the constraints of the Elizabethan era in numerous plays, such as Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Troilus and Cressida, and Twelfth Night, which feature characters who violate the norms of gender or sexual behavior in their romantic relationships or their individual personae. In his cross-dressing comedies, such as Twelfth Night and As You Like It, gender rebellion and same-sex love are joyously intertwined.

Resistance to exploring these themes in Shakespeare's life and work had, at least until recently, been a longstanding tradition throughout the history of both performance and criticism. Even today, discussion of these themes by Shakespeare scholars is often confined to GLBT circles, and even here there is resistance to the attribution of gay elements--"gay" being a strictly modern concept that has no applicability to the playwright's times.

Shifting to popular culture, consider the film Shakespeare in Love (1998), winner of seven Oscars, including Best Picture. Directed by John Madden, the movie invents a heterosexual love affair between the young playwright and the fictitious Viola de Lesseps, played with luminous abandon by Gwyneth Paltrow. The screenplay was written by the playwright Tom Stoppard in collaboration with Marc Norman. The omission of references to homosexuality and bisexuality is surprising coming from Stoppard, author of the 1966 play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, a dark comedy that pulls two characters from Hamlet into the limelight and reveals a homoeroticism at the core of their symbiotic connection.

In contrast, Shakespeare in Love is relentless in removing all traces of homoerotic interest from the playwright's life and world. The all-male acting companies of the time are presented as opportunities for male bonding in brothels rather than as venues where cross-dressing male youths hinted at same-sex love in many of the plays. The film focuses on a critical period in the young author's emotional and artistic development, his early years as a struggling playwright in London, having left his wife Anne Hathaway back in Stratford-upon-Avon. In London he forged a new identity for himself in the tumultuous world of London's theatres. Enchanting as Shakespeare in Love undeniably was, especially in its presentation of the hardscrabble backstage world of the Elizabethan theatre, there is a fundamental dishonesty in its creation of a heterosexual love story at precisely the time when Shakespeare was composing the sonnets and living in an all-male world that was no stranger to homosexuality (think Christopher Marlowe).

The long narrative poems "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece," published by the poet in 1593 and 1594, were both dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, the young Earl of Southampton. The dedication to "The Rape of Lucrece" includes the following effusive language: "The love I dedicate to your Lordship is without end." The young, handsome Earl of Southampton with his long, flowing brown hair was androgynously attractive. His fondness for Shakespeare's poetry and the latter's courtship of the earl as a patron may well have evolved into a romantic relationship between the poet and his muse, one that included a physical component that could not be committed to print. Nevertheless, the first 126 of Shakespeare's sonnets are clearly directed to another man, probably Southampton, and speak of a fondness and admiration that transcend any definition of platonic friendship.

The mysteries surrounding the life of Shakespeare may be more closely connected with homosexuality than has been generally acknowledged. Expressing same-sex love, whether artistically or personally, could compromise your reputation but could also land you legal hot water. In 1563, only a year before the playwright's birth, Parliament passed a law that made sexual acts between males a felony. Men convicted of engaging in homosexual acts could be put to death. (By the way, the absence of women in anti-gay policies hardly indicates a more tolerant attitude toward women, but instead testifies to a more general control over women's sexual behavior.)

In such an environment, Shakespeare was taking some degree of risk by alluding to homosexuality at all. But if his declarations of love for another man in these sonnets weren't incriminating enough, he even explored the nature of sexual oppression. The start of one of his most famous sonnets, number 29, expresses the painful isolation of being forced to love someone in silence:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes I all alone beweep my outcast state, And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, And look upon myself, and curse my fate, Wishing me like to one mere rich in hope ... \*

The sonnets hold a mirror up to Shakespeare's sexual imagination--his longing for physical intimacy with another man and his yearning for a romantic love that will last forever, immortalized through his poetry. Shakespeare probably began Writing the sonnets around 1593, when in his late twenties. The vast majority of them, numbers 1 to 126, are addressed to a beautiful young man with whom the poet seems to be deeply in love. The rest (sonnets 127-152) are addressed to a "dark lady" with whom the poet has a more explicitly erotic obsession. Taken together, the sonnets reveal Shakespeare in love with both a man and a woman, and they demonstrate the fluidity, not to mention the intensity, of his unconventional sexual nature.

His plays provide an even richer, more sexually charged, and more psychologically complex presentation of homosexuality and same-sex love than do the sonnets. In several of the best-known plays, themes of cross-dressing and homosexual relations are played out in diverse settings, from ancient Greece to Renaissance Italy and 15th-century England. A brief look into a few plays with these themes offers a glimpse into this range of possibilities as he endeavors to address a social taboo in whatever guises he could muster.

HAMLET

Of the many interpretations to which Shakespeare's greatest tragic character, the doomed Prince of Denmark, has been subjected, one that's especially defensible is to see Hamlet as a homosexual man struggling with alienation and loneliness in a hostile world. The corruption in Elsinore and the grotesque marriage between Hamlet's mother Gertrude and his uncle Claudius are observed from Hamlet's gloomy perspective, offering portraits of the disillusionment that lies ahead if he follows a conventional heterosexual path.

Hamlet's love for Ophelia, initially presented as an alternative to the despair and nothingness of the kingdom, never blossoms into anything real, and it is Hamlet himself, not her meddling father Polonius, who holds the couple back from sexual consummation. Any love Hamlet feels for Ophelia is platonic and philosophical, and he pushes her away without offering any real explanation for the rejection, hinting at a secret reason for avoiding her bed. Then, too, there is Hamlet's general condemnation of womanhood throughout the play, starting with: "Frailty, thy name is woman."

Deeper, more real, and sweeter to Hamlet is his abiding love for Horatio. The intensity of his affection encompasses the love that Shakespeare idealizes in the sonnets. When Hamlet says to Horatio that "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (I, v, 166-67), he seems to be groping for a soul mate. Horatio, in turn, evinces a depth of affection that goes beyond mere tolerance of Hamlet's love for him. In his famous farewell speech, while holding his prince's body in his arms, Horatio gives a sense of missed possibilities, of what might have been had they inhabited a different kingdom and a different realm of being. "Goodnight, sweet prince,/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (V, ii, 348-49).

Hamlet engages in literature's most famous and beautifully worded soliloquy, and the issue of his sexuality is everywhere implied. His introspective nature, his inability to act on his plan for revenge, and his perennial sadness lyrically express the plight of someone unable to articulate, much less act upon, an unfulfilled desire. Unable to accept Ophelia as his mate because he feels no sexual attraction to her and seems disgusted by her sexuality ("Get thee to a nunnery!"), unable to act upon his romantic feelings for Horatio, Hamlet sees no way out. Ironically, this most articulate and philosophical of men is never quite able to express the truth hidden in his own heart.

ROMEO AND JULIET

In Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio has the otherworldly quality of a man living apart from society, and his deep bond with the young Romeo strongly suggests a homoerotic attraction. Disenchanted with feuding and macho brawling, Mercutio is a poet, like Shakespeare, and profoundly isolated because of a secret longing that can never be openly expressed.

This interpretation of Mercutio was bolstered by the 1968 release of Franco Zeffirelli's film version of Romeo and Juliet. Zeffirelli casts a homoerotic aura over much of the film, and the camera's perspective is distinctly homoerotic, with as much attention paid to the men's colorfully designed codpieces as to Juliet's bodice. Without shortchanging the famous love story, Zeffirelli lingers over the dreamy, physical beauty of Leonard Whiting as Romeo. The celebrated nude scene between Whiting and Olivia Hussey, which surprisingly managed to escape most criticism despite the youth of the actors--Hussey was sixteen when the movie was made, Whiting seventeen--artfully achieves a fusion of heterosexual and homosexual elements that is characteristically Shakespearean.

The boldest of Romeo and Juliet's forays into homosexuality was John McEnery's depiction of Mercutio, which is played with bravado and pathos and brings to the fore Mercutio's love for the young Romeo. The latter's seemingly unexplained rejection of Mercutio suggests that he may be retreating from a relationship that was getting dangerously intimate. In growing frustration and despair, Mercutio resorts to conveying the love that can't be named through enigmatic, fantastical speeches. Aware of the bind he's in, Mercutio speaks to Romeo of his yearning for a dream that will never be fulfilled (I, iv, 96-99):

True, I talk of dreams, Which are the children of an idle brain, Begot of nothing but vain fantasy, Which is as thin of substance as the air ...

Like the narrator in the sonnets--like Shakespeare himself, quite possibly, at this early stage in his career--Mercutio is obsessed with an irresistible but unobtainable young man.

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

In Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare draws upon the legends and culture of ancient Greece to bring the subject of homosexuality out into the open through the romantic relationship between the vaunted warrior Achilles and his partner Patroclus. This relationship rivals that of the historical Edward II and Piers Gaveston in Christopher Marlowe's Edward 11 for its depiction of an explicitly same-sex relationship.

The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in Troilus and Cressida is characterized by tenderness, loyalty, and deep affection. Their affair is also admirable because it gives them the strength to repudiate the Trojan War, a senseless, ten-year campaign. The two men have shunned the battlefield, preferring to sequester themselves in Achilles' luxurious tent, where they presumably make love and enjoy the delights of the senses. The same-sex love story enriches the anti-war theme of the play.

The inspiring qualities of the love between the two men do not shield them from the disapproving eyes and comments of the macho warrior culture that surrounds them. Thus Achilles and Patroclus are forced to live in the closet, and the lovers become increasingly fearful of public censure in the course of the drama. Achilles alludes to the secret of his homosexuality and his fear of rejection when he says to Ulysses (III, iii, 189-190): "Of this my privacy/I have strong reasons." Achilles knows that concealment is necessary if their affair is to survive. The weight of social opinion is against the lovers, and eventually they cave to pressure from their fellow warriors and rejoin the campaign against Troy, sacrificing the private romantic world they've long enjoyed.

For both Achilles and Patroclus, returning to the conformist fold brings only tragedy. In the bloody battle between the Greek and Trojan armies, Patroclus is killed by Hector, Troy's greatest warrior. With the death of Patroclus, Achilles reacts with a rage and vengeance that go well beyond what might be expected for a fallen comrade-in-arms, raging against Hector (and even Hector's corpse) with the fury of one whose heart has been torn asunder. Although Achilles does not die at the end of Troilus and Cressida, as the prince in Hamlet and Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet do, he is spiritually dead without his lover.

TWELFTH NIGHT

The romantic comedy Twelfth Night revolves around the amorous adventures of the cross-dressing heroine Viola, who disguises herself as an androgynously beautiful youth named (by herself) Cesario. In one of literature's most ingenious love triangles, Shakespeare uses Viola's gender disguise to bring about two same-sex romances: one between the two women, Viola/Cesario and Olivia, and the other between two men, Viola/Cesario and Duke Orsino. In Twelfth Night, Shakespeare shows the depth of passion that grows between the two women, Viola and Olivia, especially in the beautiful poetry and romantic ardor of the scene in which they meet and exchange words of love for the first time.

Viola's cross-dressing was particularly resonant for Shakespeare and his colleagues in The Lord Chamberlain's Men, the acting company for which he wrote most of his plays. For the many gay and bisexual actors in Elizabethan times, the chance to cross-dress and play the women onstage liberated these men from the prohibition against homosexuality. Given the cruelty of the laws, the theatre must have seemed like paradise to gay men. For the actors who played women onstage, there was the opportunity to play love scenes with other men: to hold hands, to kiss, and to speak about love.

Masks, cross-dressing, and exploration of bisexuality ultimately bring about the happy ending of Twelfth Night. Viola is one of Shakespeare's most memorable characters, and she ultimately triumphs as a modern woman who defies feminine stereotypes and adventures boldly into the territory of homosexual expression.

In Twelfth Night, Shakespeare cleverly utilizes the framework of comedy to disarm the censors, delight his audiences, and successfully communicate a socially subversive message about sexuality and cross-dressing. The lesbian romance and the male homosexuality that result from Viola's disguise liberate all the major characters from the compulsory heterosexuality of conventional society. For Shakespeare himself and for many of his fellow actors, Twelfth Night must have provided a magical opportunity to act out their own homosexual fantasies, under the cover of comedy and using the protection afforded by the fantastical realm of the stage.

SHAKESPEARE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Discomfort with the subject of homosexuality in literature has restricted and diminished the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays in the past. And while this resistance has not entirely disappeared, the time has never been more propitious for the realization of gay themes in the performance and study of Shakespeare. As a new generation of GLBT people moves into positions of influence in the academy and in the arts, they will have the power to claim Shakespeare, proudly and without reservation. Shakespeare in the 21st century has the potential to be transformed by the GLBT studies movement, invigorating scholarship as well as infusing new life into theatrical, academic, and cinematic interpretations of many of his most celebrated plays.

By portraying the beautiful aspects of same-sex love as well as the bittersweet qualities resulting from the search for self-understanding in response to social disapproval, Shakespeare hinted at the possibility of living honestly by rebelling against social constraints. It is deception, after all--and often self-deception--that brings down most of Shakespeare's greatest heroes, while equilibrium is restored only when the characters are true to themselves.

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\* It may be worth reminding the reader of the entire text of Sonnet 29, which is full of sexual puns that suggest a passion well beyond the purely spiritual, not exluding sexual arousal ("my state ... at break of clay arising/From sullen earth"):

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, I all alone beweep my outcast state, And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, And look upon myself and curse my fate, Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, Featured like him, like him with friends possessed, Desiring this manic art and that man's' scope, With what I most enjoy contented least; Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising, Haply I think on thee, and then my state, (Like to the lark at break of day arising From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate; For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

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