

The Homoerotic Shakespearean Debate

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Scholars hotly debate the impact of cross-dressing on the displays of homoeroticism within Shakespeare's work. Two major historical issues inform the debate: first, sumptuary laws, and second, that only men were allowed on the stage. Sumptuary laws aimed to support the English economy by dictating the textiles and fabric individuals wore based on one's political rank (Lyon, 2017). However, there was an exemption to sumptuary laws: actors could only appear in clothes deemed fit for royalty to play the role of a king or queen. During this same period in England, men were allowed on the stage, but women were not, which meant that young men would have to play the role of the female characters. The rules regarding gender ideals of what women were allowed to do thus applied to Shakespeare's plays and characters, resulting in an even more complicated piece of the puzzle when trying to decipher what the Bard is trying to convey within these plays. Within the current scholarship, cross-dressing has been understood by some, including Valerie Traub (1992), to demonstrate the permissibility of homoeroticism in Shakespeare's day. Others, including Susan Baker (1992) and Jean Howard (1988), argue that cross-dressing allows the female characters to explore the world outside the confines of their female gender. The implication is that homoeroticism is more prominent because the actor is male. If, as is the understanding that within the Elizabethan Era an actor portraying an individual of royal standing was not breaching any sumptuary laws because that actor was filling a role, the scholarship should, therefore, view the male actor playing a female simply as filling a role rather than a display of homoeroticism. Through an analysis of the plays *As You Like It* (1599) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), as well as a review of current scholarship through the lens of Elizabethan Era England, this paper explores the potential anachronisms that are present within the current scholarship and argues that Shakespeare uses homoeroticism independently from the gender of the actor, and instead, as a central plot point that allows same-sex bonds to occur alongside heterosexual marriages.

Throughout existing scholarship, there is debate regarding homoeroticism within Shakespeare's work regarding whether it exists through the actor or to further the heterosexual bonds of the characters. Some, like Jean Howard (1988) and Susan Baker (1992), argue that homoeroticism exists in the relationships between the male characters and the cross-dressed female characters, allowing women to explore the world through their male counterparts. On the other hand, Valerie

Traub (1992) argues that homoeroticism exists not only through characters but through actors. The latter argument is dependent on having male actors play the female characters rather than acknowledging that in England at this time, women were not permitted on the stage. Traub's analysis suggests that homoeroticism within the work "is predicated on, but not identical to, the presence of boy actors playing female parts" (1992). This suggests that there is a difference in the form of homoeroticism when speaking of that which exists between male characters and cross-dressed female characters and between the male actors playing each of the characters. If Traub's assertion is correct that there was a homoerotic connection between the male actors, this would imply that there was a choice. The male actor did not need to play Rosalind or Portia, but Shakespeare chose to do so. This argument applies the standards of another country and today's standards to theatres in England. While one could argue that if sumptuary laws could be bypassed for theatrical reasons and women were allowed to watch plays in the theatre, this should mean that the rules regarding female actors should be bypassed as well; however, this was not the reality for England at this time.

Traub's (1992) assertion could be accurate when viewed solely through the epilogue of *As You Like It* (1599). The epilogue acknowledges the gender of the actor playing Rosalind: "If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me" (Shakespeare, 1599/n.d., 5 Epilogue 17-18). If we were to look at this as the epilogue signalling that the gender of the actor dictated the existence of homoeroticism, the argument is that the male actor was engaging in homoeroticism with the other male actors on the stage as part of the plot of the play, impacting the way it ended. However, this acknowledgment occurs at the end of the play, after resolving the plots and all is well within the characters' lives. It is important to note that the acknowledgment does not change the plot or the characters' actions throughout the play; thus, it is not evidence of homoeroticism. This portion of the epilogue cannot within itself signal homoeroticism as the actor, being a woman, predicates kissing the males in the audience who had beards that pleased them. I would argue that, in this sense, the epilogue is breaking the fourth wall, in which it acknowledges the actor performing their job and convincing the audience that they are Rosalind regardless of their gender. I would also argue that Rosalind's acknowledgment of the reality that she is a male brings humour to the audience and further reduces any leftover tension that may be present due to the homoeroticism within the play.

The emphasis on the theatrical nature of being human within *As You Like It* is summed up through the use of two lines within one of many recognizable monologues in Shakespeare's works: "All the world's a stage and all the men and women are merely players" (Shakespeare, 1599/n.d., 2.7.146-147). This monologue emphasizes how all humans play a role, and how everyone ticks boxes of expectations. Through cross-dressing, the female characters within both *As You Like It* (1599) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) push against the box females are placed into and discover things about their potential partners. Thus, the act of cross-dressing within these plays asserts feminine power and allows female characters to assume the role and preconceived notions of male identity. Baker (1992) claims that in the instance of cross-dressing, "we may be reminded of the extent to which the social order is sexual positioning of the extent to which subjectivity is made by limits on desire" (p. 307). This sexual positioning shows itself when Orlando confesses his love to Ganymede, thus giving Rosalind the power to test his love by asking him to woo Ganymede as if he were Rosalind. Orlando's wooing leads to flirtation on behalf of Ganymede and Orlando, giving Rosalind the power to test Orlando's devotion to Rosalind by conducting a mock wedding within the forest. Through this mock wedding, Orlando confesses that he would like to marry "now as fast as she can marry us" (Shakespeare, 1599/ n.d., 4.1.140). While this statement occurs during the act of Ganymede playing Rosalind, the statement of marriage occurs between what Orlando believes to be two men. Since Orlando truly was convinced that Ganymede was a male, not Rosalind in disguise, and he agreed to marry the male Ganymede, shows the care and devotion given to not only Rosalind but her male counterpart Ganymede.

Similarly, the sexual power given to Portia happens after she saves Antonio when Bassanio believes that he was Cuckold by Balthazar, who was Portia in disguise. In returning the ring, Portia states to Bassanio, "I had it of him. Pardon me Bassanio, for by this ring the doctor lay with me" (Shakespeare, 1599/ n.d., 5.1.277-278). The perception of being a cuckold that Bassanio faces is a form of punishment related to sex because of Bassanio's willingness to trade Portia to save the life of Antonio and his giving away physical manifestations of his love for Portia to Balthazar. This act returns Portia's betrayal to Bassanio and allows her to obtain power that a woman would not have through the perception of infidelity. It also shows Bassanio that an act of betrayal will be met with another act of betrayal and teaches a valuable lesson about the importance of vows. The act of cross-dressing gives the female characters the power to behave outside of their gender and, in turn, allows them to experience the power that males garner in their sexual prowess. Rosalind, as

Ganymede, is capable of being openly flirtatious, and Portia is permitted to feign the existence of sexual infidelity, emasculating Bassanio and gaining some power that she would generally fail to have as a female in Elizabethan times.

During the Elizabethan era, it was inappropriate for individuals to dress outside their gender on the streets or in public; however, Shakespeare's use of cross-dressed female characters allows them freedom in how they behave. In the theatre, dressing outside of the specified gender norm was not only acceptable but necessary due to the laws that dictated the presence of women on the stage. When describing the use of the cross-dressing of the female characters within *As You Like It* (1599), Jean Howard (1988) argues that "Rosalind dressed as a boy engages in a playful masquerade, as in playing Rosalind for Orlando, she acts out the parts scripted for women by her culture" (p. 351). To follow the social script Rosalind plays to the ideals that she believes Orlando would find attractive. She confines how she plays Rosalind as Ganymede to what social order deems acceptable. The existence of the perceived sexual tension could, therefore, be a consequence of Rosalind's behaviour as Ganymede causing an attraction to whom Orlando believes is a male. This attraction leads Orlando to behave in a way that brings the sexual tension of a homoerotic relationship to the stage and allows these two male-presenting characters to explore that tension while still staying within the confines of the social order.

The impersonation of cross-dressing allows the individual to become what they believe society and those they interact with want them to be. In that case, it enables Rosalind, as Ganymede, intimate access to Orlando's feelings and thus gives her an insider view of his intention, which increases the intimacy the two characters share at the end of the play. However, within *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), the sexual tension between two male characters and the act of cross-dressing also allows Portia an insider's view of her beloved's feelings. The insider believes that her beloved would give her up if it meant saving Antonio's life. While Bassanio states his wife is "dear to me," he would also "Lose all, Ay sacrifice them all, here to this devil to deliver you" (Shakespeare, 1600/n.d., 4.1.298-299). Bassanio felt safe confessing this to Antonio in front of the court because, from his understanding, his wife, whom he was willing to give up, was not there. Bassanio bears love for Antonio. While some would argue that love revolves around the bond that the two men share, I would offer that love, in this form, creates tension between the three characters that allows for the acknowledgment of the love between Antonio and Bassanio. Their bond is much

closer than friendship in that most individuals would not give up the woman they love and everything in their world to save their friend. I would argue that their love was a true love shared between two men that occurs alongside the heterosexual marriage to Portia. Shakespeare poses this relationship within the play to create tension but only to the extent that social standards would allow and ultimately uphold social order, keeping the end relationships heterosexual while still acknowledging the love and bond that male characters have.

While less noticeable than the homoeroticism between Antonio and Bassanio, Homoeroticism comes into play when considering the context and importance of a name within *As You Like It* (1599). Rosalind calls herself Ganymede when venturing into the forest of Arden. When asked what name she will take within the forest, she replies, “I’ll have no worse name than Jove’s own page, and therefore look, you call me Ganymede” (Shakespeare, 1599/n.d., 1.3.131-132). In the case of Ganymede, the history of the name is essential; the name within Greek mythology has homoerotic connotations in and of itself. When Zeus saw the young prince of Troy’s beauty, he took Ganymede to be his cupbearer. The story continues as Ganymede’s romantic partner of Zeus, and the love that Zeus held for Ganymede ensured that he would remain within Greek mythology, as he was one of few mortals to be given the honour of immortality (Soni, 2024). While there are varying renditions of this story, one thing is clear: Ganymede was Zeus’s romantic interest, and therefore, a symbol of homoerotic love and passion. Using the name Ganymede signifies that Rosalind wants her name to be that of the mortal man, who was so beautiful and virile that he was worthy of the love of a god. Ganymede symbolizes the homoerotic lust that is evident within the play. Through this, the audience looks at Ganymede as an alter ego of Rosalind through cross-dressing. In that case, it allows Rosalind to explore the existence of male power and emphasizes the existence of homoeroticism seen throughout the play. Further, using Ganymede gives audiences and scholars a hint that homosocial and homoerotic behaviour has always existed within Elizabethan times and, through the story of Ganymede and Zeus, is weaved throughout the fabric of mythology and history.

Shakespeare explores the use of homoeroticism as a plot point for the characters throughout *As You Like It* (1599) and *The Merchant of Venice* (1600). Within *As You Like It* (1599), homoeroticism is a tool to further the heterosexual relationship between Orlando and Rosalind. It allows Rosalind to see the true feelings of the man who claims to love her and to explore the existence of

male power in a way that she would not be allowed to if she presented as a female. In the case of Portia, hearing that Bassanio would trade her for Antonio allowed her to use the threat of infidelity to gain back power and retain the heterosexual marriage. Both plays use plot points that create tension to entice audiences to watch. The only time the gender of the actor playing the female character comes into play is in Rosalind's epilogue. Suppose scholars attribute the existence of homoeroticism within the work to the gender of the actors playing the roles. In that case, it takes away from the plot of the play. It implies that the standards of Elizabethan England are the same as the standards we hold today and fails to acknowledge the confines in which Shakespearean stage productions took place. Shakespeare uses a more subtle approach in that despite these plays ultimately ending in heterosexual marriages, he uses homoeroticism to obtain those marriages. The contribution of this paper adds to the current scholarly work in that it brings a view of homoeroticism within the work without considering the gender of the actors playing the roles. Considering some scholars, such as Traub (1992), view homoeroticism within the work as being predicated on the gender of the actors, this further complicates the debate on deciphering what the message is within the work. Placing the existence of homoeroticism on the actor fulfilling a role takes away from the plot and the characters of the play. It fails to consider that these plays allow an escape for the audience, actors, and even the writer. While there were many layers to cross-dressing that occurs within these two plays, it is vital to look outside the gender of the actor and, instead, take a magnifying glass to the critical parts of both plays and the actions of the characters, which highlight the existence of homoeroticism.

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