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The Two Gentlemen of Verona: The Homosocial World of Shakespeare's England

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The homoeroticism of Shakespeare's plays has become something of a cliché in modern American theater and scholarship. Characters such as Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* and Bassanio and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* are assumed to have a homosexual relationship. The key words in this point of view, however, are "modern" and "assumed." The twenty-first century reader often takes it for granted that any intensely personal relationship must include a sexual element. Yet Shakespeare's characters may be more accurately viewed from the English Renaissance perspective of a homosocial public structure that exalted male friendship over any other relationship. While homoeroticism expresses same-sex love and desire in narrow, personal terms, homosociality extends beyond individuals into the social order. Homosociality reveals male relationships as an unstable balance of power, rivalry, and non-sexual intimacy. It excludes women, not because they are sexually undesirable, but because women are a commodity to be used in establishing male dominance.[1] Modern western society places the highest value on the romantic love between a man and woman, but Shakespeare's culture most valued the equal and morally uplifting platonic relationship of two men.

It has been suggested that *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* could be used as a how-to guide for proper young gentleman in the seventeenth century,[2] portraying not only appropriate manners, but also feelings suitable to their station. As such, the intense male relationship it chronicles classically illustrates the homosocial nature of Shakespeare's world. While Proteus and Valentine's romantic love for the women is central to the plot's development, their homosocial love for *each other* is the central theme. From the

beginning they refer to each other as "my loving Proteus" (1.1.1) and "sweet Valentine" (1.1.11).[3] They spent their childhood in close company (2.4.62-63) and, upon parting, promise to maintain that closeness with letters (1.1.59-62). Yet Proteus's relationships with the women force him to question, and eventually betray, the bond with his friend, a serious breach of societal trust, according to the customs of Shakespeare's day.

A proper young gentleman of the English Renaissance was expected to keep his word at all costs, particularly with his homosocial relationships. As such, when Proteus falls in love with Sylvia, he is more remorseful for falsehood to his friend than to his former lover. He laments, "To leave my Julia, shall I be forsworn. / To love fair Sylvia, shall I be forsworn. / To wrong my friend, *I shall be much* forsworn" (2.6.1-3, emphasis added). The homosocial relationship is so dominant, in fact, that when Proteus's attempted rape of Sylvia is thwarted, he offers his apology to Valentine rather than to the victim herself:

> My shame and guilt confounds me.
> Forgive me, Valentine. If hearty sorrow
> Be a sufficient ransom for offense,
> I tender 't here. I do as truly suffer
> As e'er I did commit. (5.4.78-82)

In a homosocial order, Valentine controls Sylvia's virtue. It is Valentine's honor that has been threatened and Valentine whose forgiveness must be sought—which, as a proper young English gentleman, Valentine grants immediately:

> Then I am paid,
> And once again I do receive thee honest.
> Who by repentance is not satisfied
> Is nor of heaven nor earth, for these are pleased;
> By penitence th' Eternal's wrath's appeased.
> And that my love may appear plain and free,
> All that was mine in Sylvia I give thee. (5.4.83-89)

Homosocial primacy was taken for granted in Renaissance England, and the homoerotic reading of Shakespeare's plays that is so dominant today is of fairly recent origin. Jane Thomas maintains that classical literature was used by "campaigning homosexuals in the late nineteenth century to provide strategic evidence, a language and frame of reference for the expression of prohibited desires and experiences."[4] Establishing precedents in the literary canon could (and did) promote a wider acceptance of homosexuality. However, such readings may be more reflective of

our own culture than of Shakespeare's. During the Victorian era, for example, the puritanical Malvolio was considered the hero of *Twelfth Night*. In the late seventeenth century, Thomas Rymer believed that *Othello* was good advice for housewives.[5] Until the mid-nineteenth century, the tragedy of *King Lear* was given a cheerful resolution to suit audience expectations. It is in this vein that modern theater and academia have promoted a homoerotic subtext to Shakespeare's plays. While it is natural for individuals to lean toward their own perceptions, readers must be wary of imposing their own philosophy upon texts created in a different age and culture. One should question the claim that "homoerotically charged male bonds were a *central* aspect [my emphasis] of (England's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century) culture," particularly when simple male friendship is considered one of the "homoerotic practices."[6] Understanding the homosocial nature of Renaissance England should temper broad assertions.

Part of the difficulty arises from the language used for friendship at that time, phrasing that seems hyperbolic by our standards. Ace Pilkington explains that Shakespeare's England had yet to experience the "Victorian deep freeze" that later limited the public expression of emotion. He says, "It was possible to say things in Elizabethan and Jacobean England that sound overblown to modern ears. . . Everybody [made] extreme statements about emotion."[7] Modern American language reserves intimate pronouncements for romantic love, while pre-Victorian English used the same terms for both friends and lovers. As such, it was considered appropriate for Michel de Montaigne to say of his friend, "It is I wot not what kind of quintessence of all this commixture which, having seized all my will, induced the same to plunge and lose itself in his; which likewise having seized all his will, brought it to lose and plunge itself in mine with a mutual greediness and with a semblable concurrence."[8] Earlier, the twelfth-century monk St. Anselm wrote lovingly to relatives joining the priesthood, "My eyes eagerly long to see your face, most beloved; my arms stretch out to your embraces. My lips long for your kisses; whatever remains of my life desires your company, so that my soul's joy may be full in time to come."[9] The same highly charged, emotional language applied to all relationships.

That this language was not used to denote homosexual relationships is evident from Montaigne's writings. In his essay "On Love," he rejected homosexuality, in particular the practice of pederasty, as "justly abhorred by our customs."[10] The nature of homosociality, in fact, proscribes homosexual relations.[11] In *The*

Two Gentlemen of Verona, Proteus and Valentine are not jealous of their companions' lovers, but supportive. Valentine teases Proteus for his devotion to Julia, yet then encourages him by saying, "But since thou lov'st, love still and thrive therein / Even as I would when I to love *begin*" (1.1.9-10, my emphasis). He is not already in love with his friend, but expects a future romantic relationship. When Sylvia questions Proteus's loyalty to the homosocial relationship now that he has a romantic one, Valentine assures her that "love hath twenty pair of eyes" (2.4.95) and can simultaneously encompass both romantic and homosocial ties. When Proteus arrives at the Duke's court, Valentine sincerely inquires after Proteus's love life (2.4.129). Only when Proteus humiliates his friend with attempted cuckoldry, inverting the social ascendancy of homosocial love over romantic, do the relationships compete. Justin Matthew Gordon, who portrayed Valentine in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2008 production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, maintains that Renaissance dueling over women developed to resolve such competing loyalties by eliminating the primary male relationship altogether.[12]

Arthur Quiller-Couch criticizes Proteus and Valentine's homosocial relationship for elevating male friendship "out of all proportion" to the modern primacy of romantic love.[13] He roundly condemns Valentine for offering Sylvia to his friend, declaring, "There are now *no* Gentlemen in Verona!"[14] Isaac Asimov, however, points out that in relinquishing Sylvia, Valentine maintains the ascendancy of the homosocial relationship.[15] Indeed, such a strong attachment was in perfect keeping with Renaissance expectations. Women had their role in procreation and social climbing, but they were not expected to inspire the same attachment as that shared by two equal men. True friends were so close to one another that they were intellectually and spiritually the same person. Montaigne wrote, "If a man urge me to tell wherefore I loved him, I feel it cannot be expressed but by answering, 'Because it was he, because it was myself.'"[16] In 1631 in *The English Gentleman*, Richard Brathwait declared friendship to be "two hearts . . . so individually united, as neither from the other can well be severed."[17]

Such friendship derived its superiority from its equal and freely chosen nature. According to Montaigne, marriage would not answer because it was a forced relationship based upon social expediency rather than emotional completion.[18] Kinship could not reach the high level of homosociality since it and its attendant duties were imposed rather than chosen. Montaigne noted that the love that brothers bear for one another was not only required, but also easily

contaminated by competition, particularly at the time of inheritance.[19] He believed that filial love also fell short of ideal in that it required an equality considered inappropriate between parent and child.[20] Francis Bacon insisted that friendship must be between men of equal status and intellect because "a man cannot speak to his son but as a father; to his wife but as a husband; to his enemy but upon terms: whereas a friend may speak as the case requires, and not as it sorteth with the person." It was taken for granted that wives and other family members "could not supply the comfort of friendship." The term "friend" was reserved for "private men."[21]

The homosocial relationship also claimed the advantage over other ties by its effortless simplicity. Montaigne avowed that friendship comes about from a natural inclination between similar personalities.[22] His own great friendship with Stephen de la Boétie, he said, established itself with joyous ease:

> We sought one another before we had seen one another, and by the reports we heard one of another, which wrought a greater violence in us than the reason of reports may well bear. I think by some secret ordinance of the heavens we embraced one another by our names. And at our first meeting, which was by chance at a great feast and solemn meeting of a whole township, we found ourselves so surprised, so known, so acquainted, and so combinedly bound together, that from thence forward nothing was so near unto us as one unto another.[23]

When compared to the torment required to establish an unsteady romantic love, it is easy to understand the presumed superiority of male friendship. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine mocks Proteus's efforts to woo Julia when he says,

> To be in love, where scorn is bought with groans,
> Coy looks with heart-sore sighs, one fading moment's mirth
> With twenty watchful, weary, tedious nights;
> If haply won, perhaps a hapless gain;
> If lost, why then a grievous labor won;
> How ever, but a folly bought with wit,
> Or else a wit by folly vanquishéd. (1.1.30-36)

Homosocial love, according to Renaissance theory, was an easy path to happiness; romantic love required deceit, labor, and foolishness, and might not lead to happiness at all.

From the modern standpoint, extraordinary affection rightly belongs to lovers. Modern marriage books and seminars are filled with advice on how to be best friends; and indeed perfect companionship within marriage was desired by some in

Shakespeare's day as well. Montainge yearned for a union that provided both the mental and emotional blissfulness of homosociality and the physical elation of romantic connection.[24] However, Renaissance men despaired of forming a powerful bond with women because they considered women incapable of doing so. Montaigne insisted that women could not maintain the intellectual strain of powerful friendship.[25] Bacon considered a wife and children to be barriers to male success by virtue of their financial dependency.[26] Under this premise, Thomas Mallory's Arthur laments, "And much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company."[27]

The natural inferiority of women to men made them unsuitable as gentlemen's companions, as even the servants expound in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Lance states unequivocally that "to be slow in words is a woman's only virtue" (3.1.335-36) and that pride "was Eve's legacy and cannot be ta'en from her" (3.1: 339-40). Woman's illogical nature is underscored when Lucetta explains why she prefers Proteus to Julia's other suitors: "I have no other but a woman's reason: / I think him so because I think him so" (1.2.23-24). Women were thought to be so illogical, in fact, that they did not even know their own minds. When Proteus sends a love letter to Julia, she haughtily refuses to read it despite her strong love for him. Her pride prohibits her from obtaining the thing she most desires, and she blames her maid for her own failing:

> And yet I would I had o'erlooked the letter.
> It were a shame to call her back again
> And pray her to a fault for which I chid her.
> What fool is she that knows I am a maid
> And would not force the letter to my view,
> Since maids in modesty say "no" to that
> Which they would have the profferer construe "ay"!
> (1.2.53-59)

Despite her inward repentance, she maintains her haughtiness with her maid and even destroys the precious letter. Then she mourns,

> O hateful hands, to tear such loving words!
> Injurious wasps, to feed on such sweet honey
> An kill the bees that yield it with your stings!
> I'll kiss each several paper for amends. (1.2.112-15)

Julia's irrational opening scene validates Valentine's later assurance to the Duke that "a woman sometimes scorns what best contents her" (3.1.93).

With such a negative view of women, it is no wonder that any relationship with them was viewed as corrupting. Bacon observed that the madness of romantic love weakens and destroys even the greatest of heroes, so it should be kept strictly separate from a man's serious actions.[28] In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the uplifting homosocial love Proteus and Valentine bear for one another is corrupted by their romantic love for women. Proteus's love for Julia begins his destruction. It separates him from his ideal companionship with Valentine and debases his own education by keeping him at home:

> Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits.
> Were't not affection chains thy tender days
> To the sweet glances of thy honored love,
> I rather would entreat thy company
> To see the wonders of the world abroad
> Than, living dully sluggardized at home,
> Wear out thy youth with shapeless idleness. (1.1.2-8)

Like other young men his age, Proteus should be at court learning "every exercise / Worthy his youth and nobleness of birth" (1.3.34). Instead, love is ruining his expectations:

> And writers say: as the most forward bud
> Is eaten by the canker ere it blow,
> Even so by love the young and tender wit
> Is turned to folly, blasting in the bud,
> Losing his verdure, even in the prime,
> And all the fair effects of future hopes. (1.1.47-52)

The danger of romantic love, in the Renaissance view, was that it caused a man to lose his self-control.[29] When Valentine teases Proteus for loving Julia, Proteus protests, "So, by your circumstance, you call me fool"; Valentine quips, "So, by your circumstance, I fear you'll prove" (1.1.38-39). Valentine knows it is useless to try to reason with Proteus because love has put Proteus beyond all reason. Valentine questions, "But wherefore waste I time to counsel thee / That art a votary to fond desire" (1.1.53-54). But it is not Proteus who is responsible for abandoning his friend and his studies, but Julia. It is she who has "metamorphosed" (1.1.68) him and love that has overmastered him and made him a fool (1.1.41-43). Romantic love interfered with true friendship by making men inconstant. Proteus bemoans,

> Methinks my zeal to Valentine is cold,
> And that I love him not as I was wont.
> O, but I love his lady too too much.
> And that's the reason I love him so little. (2.4.213-16)

His greatest crime is not his attempted rape of Sylvia, but his betrayal of his friend. He does not feel remorse until Valentine condemns his false friendship: "The private wound is deepest. O, time most accursed, / 'Mongst all foes that a friend should be the worst!" (5.4.75-76). If friendship had primacy over all other obligations, as Montaigne asserted,[30] Proteus's offense lies in devaluing the most important bond in Renaissance society.[31]

The play's closing scene supports the ideology of the day and reestablishes the homosocial structure. Michael Mangan observes that "homosociality . . . works in such a way as to exclude, commodify and/or idealize women,"[32] precisely what Proteus and Valentine learn as they mature in their relationships and become true gentlemen. There is the promise of a double wedding, but friendship is supreme and the women fade into their proper place in the background. As Proteus and Valentine belonged to each other in the beginning (1.1.12), they end as "one house, one mutual happiness" (5.4.186). The women are silent as the men enjoy their conviviality.

The highly emotional language of male friendship in Shakespeare's plays, then, must be taken at face value. *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* notes Shakespeare's empathy for humanity in all its variety, yet concludes that "no distinctly gay characters are evident."[33] Pilkington contends that inserting a homoerotic subtext "is simply not to pay attention to what was going on. Everybody (talked) that way." He cautions that converting homosociality to homoeroticism in Shakespeare's plays would change the entire canon to be about homosexual relationships. Moreover, a homoerotic reading drastically changes the tone of the plays. Comic scenes between heroes and their cross-dressed heroines become earnest love scenes; tales of thwarted ambition become jealous tirades.[34]

Pilkington questions whether the tendency toward homoerotic readings is the result of our own homophobic society, a self-censorship arising from the fear of even appearing to be homosexual. There also appears to be an impulse to impose a homoerotic subtext in order to support personal ideology. Leslie Fiedler attacks the "self-congratulatory buddy-buddiness (and) astonishing naïveté" of homosociality for its assumed lack of a sexual element.[35] Yet to portray Shakespeare's characters homoerotically is also an assumption, inferring a sexual relationship against historical evidence to the contrary. This is not to say that a homoerotic reading is completely without merit as reader-oriented criticism. The timelessness of Shakespeare's plays leaves them open

to a great deal of interpretation, allowing them to touch modern audiences as fully as they did Elizabethan playgoers. The difficulty lies in the hegemonic proportions such a reading has come to take in modern academia. Reshaping the literature to reflect one's ideology is unproductive, however, and creative interpretation should not take precedence over close reading and historical context.

Notes

1. Michael Mangan, *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 221.

2. Jeffrey Masten, "*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: A Modern Perspective," in William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, The Folger Shakespeare Library (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), 213.

3. All references to Shakespeare's plays are from William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, The Folger Shakespeare Library (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999).

4. Jane Thomas, "Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* and 'Comradely Love,'" *Literature & History* 1 (Autumn 2007): 1-15, http://search.ebscohost.com.

5. Curt Zimansky, ed., *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 132-64; cited byAcc Pilkington, telephone interview, February 20, 2008.

6. Masten, "*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*," 201-202.

7. Pilkington, telephone interview.

8. Michel de Montaigne, *Selected Essays of Montaigne*, ed. Walter Kaiser, trans. John Florio (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), 62.

9. Quoted in Nancy Lindheim, "Rethinking Sexuality and Class in *Twelfth Night*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* (Spring 2007): 679-713, http://search.ebscohost.com.

10. Montaigne, *Selected Essays,* 60.

11. Mangan, *Staging Masculinities*, 121.

12. Justin Matthew Gordon, actor who portrayed Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the 2008 Utah Shakespearean Festival (personal interview, August 9, 2008).

13. Arthur Quiller-Couch, introduction to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson, New Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; New York: Macmillan, 1921), xiv; quoted in Masten, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 200.

14. Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Notes on Shakespeare's Workmanship* (New York: Henry Holt, 1917), 67.

15. Isaac Asimov, *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare, Volume I* (New York: Wings Books, 1970) 473.

16. Montaigne, *Selected Essays*, 62.

17. Richard Brathwait, *The English Gentleman* (London: by John Havilant [for Robert Bostock], 1630), 243; quoted in Masten, "*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*," 202.

18. Montaingne, *Selected Essays*, 60.

19. Ibid., 59.

20. Ibid., 58.

21. Francis Bacon, "Of Friendship," in *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral, of Francis Ld. Verulam Viscount St. Albans* (Authorama Public Domain Books, November 2003), http://www.authorama.com/essays-of-francis-bacon-27.html.

22. Montaigne, *Selected Essays*, 60.

23. Ibid., 62.

24. Ibid., 60.

25. Ibid.

26. Francis Bacon, "Of Marriage," *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral, of Francis Ld. Verulam Viscount St. Albans* (Authorama Public Domain Books, November 2003), http://www.authorama.com/essays-of-francis-bacon-9.html.

27. Thomas Mallory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2008), http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/mart/mart476.htm.

28. Francis Bacon, "Of Love," *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral, of Francis Ld. Verulam Viscount St. Albans* (Authorama Public Domain Books, November 2003), http://www.authorama.com/essays-of-francis-bacon-11.html.

29. Ibid.

30. Montaigne, *Selected Essays*, 65.

31. Michael A. Harding, actor portraying Eglamore in the Utah Shakespearean Festival 2008 production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, notes the similarity to contemporary gangs and their primacy of male bonds over all other relationships (pers. comm.).

32. Mangan, *Staging Masculinities*, 121.

33. Wayne R. Dynes, ed., *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), svv. "Shakespeare, William."

34. Pilkington, telephone interview.

35. Leslie Fiedler, *A New Fiedler Reader* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), 4-5.