

LOVE, WITHOUT RETENTION OR RESTRAINT: Exploring Homoeroticism in *Twelfth Night*

*"...My desire
More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth,
And not all love to see you- though so much
As might have drawn one to a longer voyage-
But jealousy what might befall your travel,
Being skillless in these parts, which to a stranger,
Unguided and unfriended, often prove
Rough and unhospitable. My willing love,
The rather by these arguments fear,
Set forth in your pursuit." (3.3 4-13)*

William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* deals with a variety of romantic entanglements, both homosexual and heterosexual in nature. A great deal of its dramatic tension is provided by the implications of these relationships. Through this work, Shakespeare conducts a fascinating examination of the nature of desire outside the bounds of binarism. While the comedic genre of the play demands resolution at the end, the central action of the plot is fraught with anxiety over the alternative outlets of desire. These conflicts reflect recurrent homosocial and homoerotic themes in literature and history. Ultimately, the conflict in *Twelfth Night* between homoeroticism and the more acceptable outlets of desire is displaced onto Antonio, whose clearly expressed passion for Sebastian goes unrequited for the sake of maintaining a societal status quo.

Crucial to understanding the context of Antonio's desire within a more general framework is an examination of the importance of status and service in such desire. An argument persistent in classical literature states that true friendship is only possible between equals, or rather, two people alike in virtue, so that neither is using the other for

the gratification of some need. Historically implicit in this argument is the notion that true friendship can only exist between two men, as the general inferiority of women yielded them unable to maintain a friendship with a man free from neediness.^a Male-Male friendship is often depicted as being so strong that it bridges the gap between the hetero- and homo-erotic. A certain subtle ambiguity exists in the embraces of friends when given the intimacy attributed to the pure male bond as described throughout history.^b The merging of sexual relationships with this friendship is paradoxically impossible (in that it precludes the equality of the friends) and inevitable (given that it is presented as the height of intimacy). The inverse of the argument of equality in friendship is the assertion that sexual desire involves an inherent quality of submission. This idea brings up new possibilities in the realm of male friendship. As a means of maintaining the patriarchy, the homoerotic often mingles freely with purer forms of mentorship. Obviously, most relationships between men and boys remained chaste. However, in a society which was rigidly organized by status and age, the resulting theme of men pursuing boys and boys learning from men can be seen in history and literature.^c Men, through

^a While I found this argument in a variety of sources, notably in Montaigne's "On Friendship," it was clarified and applied to Shakespeare in an extremely helpful way in Bruce R. Smith's *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*.

^b "In Plato's account, male friendship and sexual attraction, far from being opposites, are two aspects of the same bond" (Smith 37). Furthermore, "Effeminate lust is debilitating; masculine love inspires virtuous action" (Smith 38). In other words, to lust after a woman is humbling because of their innate inferiority. However, relationship with another male in a similarly submissive societal role does not carry that same connotation; rather it is an act which serves to strengthen the male society.

^c For example, Sedgwick mentions Dover quoting Pausanias in Plato's *Symposium* as saying "that is would be right for him [the boy] to perform any service for one who improves him in mind or character" (4).

actively possessing younger boys, actually initiate them into the male power structure; also, they are able to co-opt the innocence of youth.

As these homosocial^d politics illustrate, sexuality inherently involves the mastery, metaphorical or otherwise, of one party over the other. The household structure of Shakespeare's England was such that the unmarried woman and the young man held similar positions of servitude, and this made them equally sexually available. For example, in prostitution, a female is made sexually available through purchase; the buyer obtains temporary ownership, and therefore sexual rights. Similarly, a young male employed in a household would have been subservient, and therefore in many cases sexually subservient to his master. Therefore, the cross-dressed young male or female represents the scope of possible sexual fantasy.^e This form of desire in which genders roles are confused and both males and females are included in the sexual hierarchy as objects of conquest is emancipating in settings where it is allowed to flourish. However, when the homosocial male bonding rituals implicit in a patriarchal society come into conflict with more overt homosexuality, tensions arise.^f

The adolescent boy, embodied by Sebastian in

Twelfth Night, becomes the subject of specific desire as it described in topos of the Shipwrecked Youth.^g Unlike the love involved in strong friendship and comradeship between men, this form of lust is specific and homosexual, rather than homosocial, in nature. Sexual appetites which cannot be expressed within the strictures of society become possible when the action is moved to a foreign or temporary space. Young men have a place in the discourse of desire as things of beauty where the burgeoning sexuality of adolescence is coupled with mystery and vulnerability. However, what is permissible in the transitive environment of the Shipwrecked Youth becomes dangerous and impossible once the participants are returned to land, metaphorical or otherwise. Indeed, the expression of this desire could have potentially dangerous consequences; for most of Shakespeare's life, homosexuality was a transgression punishable by death, especially if the contact involved force,^h as was often the case between older men (masters) and the more androgynous youth (servants).ⁱ As a result, societal pressures often tempered, or at the very least influenced, the expression of homosexual desire.

All of these historical and literary realities are manifested in some way in Antonio and his relationship with Sebastian. The two men clearly share an intimacy

^d While it is obviously a simplification, for the interests of this essay, the term "homosocial" refers to the bonds exclusive to members of the same sex, and can take a variety of forms (This terminology is influenced by Sedgwick's work). It can potentially coincide with the "homosexual", but it is less specific. In contrast, "homosexual" desire implies a clearly focused desire for sexual intimacy with a member of the same sex.

^e This passage was influenced by Lisa Jardine's essay "Twins and Travesties," in which she compares the notions of service and sexual availability. I was particularly interested in her conclusions regarding the implications of cross-dressing in society as well as in theater. Our arguments diverge to some extent however, because where I focus primarily on Antonio, she is interested most in Viola's predicament. Also, she includes an account of a young apprentice who accused his master of sodomy, describing how the master took it for granted that the apprentice would accept his place in the household without protest.

^f This argument is described in Sedgwick's work *Between Men*, and while she does not specifically apply her statements to Shakespearean drama, the sociological and critical theories she proposes were extremely helpful in my attempts to categorize (insofar as it is possible to place something so complex as desire) the relationships in the play. According to Sedgwick, this homoerotic anxiety is produced when the boundaries between male friendship and male love coincide, and the natural corollary to this is homophobia.

^g This literary topos is defined in Smith's *Homosexual Desire*. Therein he describes a common theme in dramas contemporaneous with Shakespeare's. He theorizes that certain expressions of desire which would be socially prohibited in general become permissible, or even inevitable, in liminal spaces (for example, a sea voyage from one port to another). The chaos of a shipwreck and the vulnerability of a shipwrecked youth seem to invite the subverted norms implicit in the topos, and indeed, in *Twelfth Night*, they do.

^h While the term "force" as it is used here and the conventional term "rape" are by no means mutually exclusive in my argument, "force" also could indicate the roles required of men and boys by the Elizabethan social infrastructure.

ⁱ The societal implications of homosexuality are spelled out in the groundbreaking *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* by Alan Bray. Published in 1982, it was one of the first comprehensive explorations of the topic published, and not only did the book form a foundation for this realm of study, but it is still a key text in the field.



Allison Kirby, *Lost*, mixed media, 2005

which could potentially be interpreted, at least on the part of Sebastian, as close friendship. For example, together they spend “three months.../ No int’rim, not a minute’s vacancy. / Both day and night” (5.1 90-92). While the specific inclusion of “night” in this description has homoerotic undertones, it is not clear that this undertone indicates the actual nature of their previous relationship; all that Shakespeare makes clear is that the two men have an extremely deep relationship. Also, Sebastian, as an exemplar of the Shipwrecked Youth character, is intended only as object of desire; he is not required by the topos to requite Antonio’s affections. That he has a nearly identical female counterpart only highlights the interchangeability of gender within this topos. Likewise, the relationship between Sebastian and Antonio contains the imagery of master-servant desire. Sebastian is specifically referred to as a boy in the play, while Antonio is more experienced and worldly. When Antonio “took [Sebastian] from the breach of the sea” (2.2 15), he in essence gave him new life, and this places Sebastian in his debt (though Sebastian, grieving for Viola, seems to view it differently). Antonio’s conferment of his purse to Sebastian symbolically implies that Sebastian is dependent on him. Upon bestowing the purse on Sebastian, Antonio says: “Haply your eye shall light upon some toy/ You have desire to purchase; and you store/ I think is not for idle markets, sir” (3.4 44-46). This passage has a wealth of meanings - first of all, the wording creates an image of Sebastian as a youth desirous of “toys,” with Antonio as one capable of providing for his flights of fancy. The emphasis on their disparate means once again highlights Antonio’s power and Sebastian’s subsequent availability. This quote has further implications as a description of Antonio’s view of Sebastian; Antonio has “desire to purchase” Sebastian’s affections, and will do so through money, if necessary.

However, just as Sebastian is subject to Antonio in terms of worldly goods (though not necessarily in terms of rank, as Antonio is an outlaw), Antonio is subject to his desire and its implications. When he says to Sebastian, “If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant” (2.1. 26), he is turning the master-servant rhetoric of desire on its head. Not only could the fulfillment of his desire lead to actual execution in a historical context, but he more specifically places himself in danger for the sake of his love for Sebastian by following him to Illyria. The word “murder” in this context also implies that the homoerotic attraction he is describing could have negative

repercussions beyond merely the arm of the law, if only for him. Antonio wants Sebastian to want him enough that Sebastian would want Antonio’s presence even in dangerous circumstances. However, Antonio cannot will Sebastian to requite his love, and the impossibility to this amounts to a murder of desire. Despite the intimated peril, Antonio follows Sebastian, saying, “But come what may, I do adore thee so/ That danger shall seem sport, and I will go” (2.1. 35-36). In order for Antonio to maintain his erotic fantasies in the face of danger, he must be on some level be seen as “sport,” thus allowing him to overlook the mortal peril he faces for following someone who does not seem to requite his affection.^j

The intensity of Antonio’s feelings is apparent in the preceding passages; indeed, it can be argued that his love for Sebastian is the purest and most heartfelt in the play. Furthermore, their relationship is the only one which does not involve some kind of deception. When, in Act 4, Antonio believes that Sebastian is betraying him while he is actually talking to Viola, his passionate response belies the sincerity of his emotions. Having saved Sebastian from the shipwreck, he says: “[I] Relieved him with such sanctity of love, / And to his image, which methought did promise / Most venerable worth, did I devotion” (3.4. 302-304). In this speech, Antonio equates his love for Sebastian to religious worship through the words “sanctity” and “venerable.” These specific words imply that his affection is secure from profanation, which ironically subverts the conventional view of homosexuality as being inherently profane. By making the most pure and selfless love be one which is stereotypically viewed as morally repugnant, Shakespeare highlights the tension of genuine homoerotic desire. When Antonio describes his relationship with Sebastian to Orsino, his purity of heart is unambiguously outlined: “His life I gave him, and did thereto add / My love, without retention or restraint, / All in his dedication. For his sake / Did I expose myself- pure for his love- / into the danger of this adverse town” (5.1. 68-72). Once again, he describes his love as pure, disassociating it from the homosexual lust it accompanies. Further, while he mentions that he “gave” Sebastian his life, he does it not to emphasize the debt Sebastian should consequently owe him, but rather to demonstrate the total generosity of his love; it is “all in [Sebastian’s] dedication.”

Another characteristic of Antonio’s love speeches are their assertive lusty masculinity; instead of being passive and effeminate, his homosexual desire is

^j The discussion of the psychological dangers of the homoeroticism of *Twelfth Night* is covered in more depth in Valerie Traub’s *Desire and Anxiety*. She makes some especially interesting conclusions regarding the convergence of the Viola/Cesario plot and the Antonio/Sebastian plot, saying that when Viola is threatened with actual destruction, “crucially, it is Antonio who saves her/him, thinking he is defending his beloved. His entrance at this moment enacts the central displacement of the text: when the ramifications of a simultaneous homoeroticism and heterosexuality become too anxiety ridden, the homoerotic energy of Viola/Cesario is displaced onto Antonio” (p.133).

expressed in potent, phallic language. Sir Andrew seems to seek alliance with Olivia to fulfill a societal heterosexual demand, and his inability to defend himself against Viola/Cesario, who will not even defend her/himself, renders him only ostensibly heterosexual. Orsino seems to be more in love with himself and his ability to love than with Olivia; his persona has an emasculate undertone. Finally, Malvolio, the play's other pursuant male, is depicted from beginning to end as a romantic joke.^k All these men can be contrasted sharply with Antonio, who says, "My desire, / More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth" (3.3. 4-5). His words evoke a picture of something hard and sharply erect. The word "spur" has a penetrative quality in keeping with the potent sexuality of his language. When he says to Sebastian that at the Elephant "There you shall have me" (3.3. 42), Antonio's language to this point seems to insist that the word "have" to some extent must denote carnal possession.

Antonio also asserts his love in a potent fashion when he fights Sir Andrew on Viola's behalf, thinking that she is Sebastian. It is significant that Viola is unable to behave violently; this is what seems to fundamentally separate her from her alternative male persona. When Antonio comes to the rescue, it highlights the difference between the cloudy homoeroticism between Viola/Cesario and Olivia and Orsino and the unequivocal masculine homosexual lust of Antonio. The fight scene demonstrates how the tension of Viola's assumption of a male identity is displaced onto Antonio, this time in a literal sense. As a woman, she seems essentially unable to fight; therefore, Antonio instantly appears to assume her role. Additionally, in once again appearing dramatically to rescue "Sebastian," Antonio reasserts himself as a figure to be depended on.^l While his willingness to assume a potentially mortal responsibility further demonstrates the total extent of his commitment to Sebastian, his obvious skill makes him more masculine, in a sense, than his heterosexual adversary. Paradoxically, the virility implied by his potent words and deeds is contradicted by homosexual lust and love.

It is interesting to compare the state of Antonio's relationships with his state as a fugitive. As an outlaw, he exists in a liminal space where he is free not only from the bonds of law, but also of the societal limitations on his desire. His decision to come to Illyria after Sebastian, who "Being skillless in these parts, which to a stranger / Unguided and unfriended, often prove / Rough and inhospitable" (3.3.9-11) is crucial because Antonio's concern for Sebastian is so great that he enters a setting where societal exigencies expressly outlaw his desires. The words "rough" and "inhospitable" refer not only to the land's treatment of strangers—in a more subtle sense, they also indicate the treatment of explicit homoeroticism, and Antonio understands this. Ironically, one of the acts which most clearly shows the depth of Antonio's love for Sebastian ultimately leads to the intentional exclusion of Antonio at the play's end, when he is re-captured.^m

Given all the gender confusion and sexual tension in *Twelfth Night*, Antonio serves to anchor and give voice to a desire that is only hinted at by Viola/Cesario. Given that femininity on Shakespeare's stage was something conceived and presented by males, it follows that to some extent, even in "heterosexual" theatrical pairings, a certain amount of potential homoerotic tension existed. The fact that it is not clearly delineated gives the audience license

to interpret the representations of desire at their will. Antonio provides an outlet for the subtle homoeroticism of females being portrayed by males, voicing an ever-present erotic possibility of Shakespeare's day. The fact that these males were probably young only serves to make them potentially more desirable as innocent, biddable, and

androgynous. Significantly, despite the fact that similar actors would have played both Viola and Sebastian, there is no overlap in Antonio's affections. This indicates that it is not merely androgyny that he appreciates, but Sebastian specifically. Comparatively, the relationships between Orsino and Viola/Cesario and Olivia and Viola/Cesario exist primarily in the far more ambiguous homosocial realm.



Jackie Topol, *Cabaret 1*, digitally-altered color photograph, 2004

^k The tendency to view heterosexual desire as emasculating can be seen in a variety of Shakespeare's plays, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. An extension of the idea of homosexual desire as having a martial force is exemplified in the relationship between Coriolanus and Aufidius in *Coriolanus*. These examples are more fully developed in Traub's book.

^l Again, as per Jardine's argument, the dependence this suggests signifies homosexual availability between Antonio and Sebastian.

This is not the only way in which Antonio serves as a receptacle of tensions created by the plot. As Sebastian famously says, “nature to her bias drew” (5.1.245), and the tensions of the plot must ultimately be eased in order to maintain the comedic structure of the play. The conflicting relationships between Orsino, Viola/Cesario, and Olivia would be headed for inevitable tragedy if not for the convenient appearance of Sebastian, and the creation of traditional, “appropriate” heterosexual pairings. Emotionally, it seems that Olivia is coming between Antonio and Sebastian instead of the other way around. However, in order to achieve an overall happy ending, Antonio’s love must be sacrificed and the unrequited homosexual nature of the interactions of Olivia and “Viola” and Orsino and “Cesario” are displaced onto Antonio. It is as if, since he will inevitably be unable to satisfy his desire, he must also assume the burdens of the other impossible desires in the play. In the face of his passionate claims of love for Sebastian, the officers decide that, “The man grows mad. Away with him!” (3.4. 372). Rather than being mad, Antonio is recognizing a genuine love for another man. However, given the context and repercussions of his love, society labels him as such. There is no comfortable place for Antonio in the structure of the play, and therefore he is marginalized. The phrase “nature to her bias” describes the creation of legitimate sexual relationships, “legitimate” being an appropriate word to the extent that heterosexual pairings ease reproductive tensions. Heterosexual pairings seem natural because they can reproduce, but again, there is irony in the fact that despite the impotence of homosexual pairings, Antonio expresses his desire in virile, generative language.

However, the idea that tensions are neatly displaced onto Antonio is not totally satisfactory. The same Sebastian who weds Olivia with phenomenal speed and celebrates the “natural” aspect of the pairing also proclaims, “Antonio, O my dear Antonio! / How have the hours racked and tortured me, / Since I have lost thee!”

(5.1. 215-217). His words are by no means void of undertones of desire. Similarly, to some extent, Viola allows and even encourages Olivia’s affections - for example, she asks to see Olivia’s face, though it is “out of her text” (1.5. 180). Ultimately, desire is shown to be more complicated than explanation via simple natural conventions will allow. While tension is eased by the end of the play, in great part through Antonio’s marginalization, some uncertainty remains. One example of this lies in Orsino’s refusal to see Viola/Cesario as a woman until she has donned her “maiden’s weeds” (5.1. 252); acknowledging the gender blending created by expressing love for a woman while she looks like a man. The uncertainty is somewhat homophobic-for Orsino to openly admit love for Viola before she looks like a woman would be to admit that it was there before he knew she was a woman.

Despite these lingering anxieties, for the most part, the primary heterosexual couples are left to happily assume their roles in a conventional reproductive society. Those left on the fringes are those who do not fit into the structure of this society. Sir Andrew and Feste, the true fool and wise fool, are presented as being primarily asexual. For them, the end of the play is not necessarily tragic. However, Antonio seems to be an unfortunate man caught being the main tragic figure in a comic plot. Intensely passionate, he is denied an outlet for his passions, and marginalized as mad. While he is released from his physical imprisonment at the end of the play, he is eternally damned to a prison of unrequited love. Based on the social context of the play and the more immediate context of his plot, for him there is no happy ending, no third gay sibling of Sebastian and Viola. And even if there were, given the apparent purity of his love, this might not be a comfort to him.). Despite its pronounced relish for exploring gender and desire, *Twelfth Night* ultimately refuses to validate explicit homosexual desire, and Antonio’s love for Sebastian is sacrificed as a result. ❖

All Shakespeare quotations are from *Twelfth Night: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Bruce R. Smith. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001.

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^m Referring again the Smith’s work on the Shipwrecked Youth, he says that this story and others with the same motif “ordinarily [engage] desire only to deny it” (156). Shakespeare uses Antonio as a forceful endorsement of legitimate homoerotic desire, but ultimately refuses to sanction it in the end. According to Smith’s research on historical sources, Antonio is fortunate; often “the most usual way of negotiating the inevitable clash between sexual fantasy and social reality is the death of one or both of the amorous protagonists” (134). In practical terms, however, it may be argued that Antonio’s exclusion at the end of the play is tantamount to his death, in terms of the plot.