

Homosocial and homoeroticism in shakespeare

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Consider the relationship between homosocial and homoerotic in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Twelfth Night*. "To talk of an Individual in this period as being or not being a 'homosexual' is an anachronism and ruinously misleading" (Bray, 1982, pg. 16) Before a solid argument can commence the reader has to first distinguish a number of key points of view, and more over understand them. The problem with such arguments is of course the hurdle between contemporary opinions and renaissance beliefs. The majority of modern reader/audiences have an understanding of homosexuality, or it in some way has been visible to them.

This leads to the problem of a modern audience assuming a character is a homosexual based on modern presumptions. However what would be regarded as gay in today's society may not have during the renaissance. Another issue that must be raised when considering this essay is the difference between 'homosocial' and 'homoerotic'. Homosocial is defined by a relationship of a non-sexual or romantic nature between two or more members of the same sex. Homoerotic is defined as sexual attraction between members of the same-sex. There for it is imperative the reader stay objective when considering the notions of homosocial and homoerotic behaviour. The reader must also try to remember the contextual factors in which it was written and the audience/readers estimations.

The first relationship this essay will focus on is the one between Antonio and Bassanio from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. These two share a very strong friendship, so much so that Antonio offers to lend Bassanio a very large sum of money. Antonio being a wealthy merchant however does not have the cash upfront as it is tied up in his merchandise

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off shore. He thus decides to go to a Jewish money lender called Shylock and offers his property as guarantee for the loan. Shylock has been spurned by the Venetian citizens on numerous occasions and quite frequently retells these cruelties. As a result instead of the property he decides he would rather have a pound of flesh from Antonio. Shylock - " In such a place, such sum or sums as are/Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit/Be nominated for an equal pound/Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken/In what part of your body pleaseth me.

(Act 1, scene 3) Antonio - " Content, i' faith: I'll seal to such a bond/And say there is much kindness in the Jew" (Act 1, scene 3) In this exchange between Antonio and Shylock, we are exposed to the great lengths in which Antonio will go to make his friend and confidant Bassanio happy. He is willing to offer his life as insurance. This speaks magnitudes for the " love" these two share, and if you take the image of the flesh it could be said that the friends' fates are now tied to one flesh. Then the man (Adam) said, " This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh... " Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

" (Genesis 2: 23-25) To consider this image as a representation of marriage, this steers the reader/audience to believe that Antonio possibly loves Bassanio more than a friend. It could be implied that there is a romantic connection between the pair and thus that their relationship is homoerotic rather than homosocial. This is especially reinforced by the earlier scenes of the play where Antonio is displayed as a largely melancholic character. Antonio knows Bassanio is in want of a wife; his depression could perhaps be

originated from jealousy. On the other hand it could be argued that Antonio is just upset, because he is now going to be spending less time with Bassanio. One of the main problems with trying to define the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio, is how often their relationship has switches between homoerotic and homosocial undertones. Generally it depends on how the reader takes their exchanges, for example Antonio's melancholy at the beginning of the play could be attributed to his jealousy of Bassanio's want for a wife, or it could be his worry about the friendship in which the two share.

Antonio - " And such want-wit sadness makes of me, / that I have much ado to know myself. " The problem would appear judging by Antonio's description of his sadness that, he is worried about himself. Both Antonio and Bassanio share very close relationships in which both men have grown together their characters are defined by each other. Bassanio seems to have matured to a point where his life needs more than companionship and wishes to get married; Antonio on the other hand is not ready for this change and as result has to do some soul searching. It is Antonio's dismay at this rather than a romantic connection which causes the assumption that their relationship is homosocial rather than homoerotic. When Antonio offers to give shylock a pound of flesh if he defaults on his loan Antonio expects to have the money rather easily so it's a rather empty gesture suggesting a homosocial relationship. However when he does default on the loan Antonio professes to Bassanio.

Antonio - " Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death / And when the tale is told, bid her be judge /Whether Bassanio had not once a love" Antonio is still willing to sacrifice his life for Bassanio and once again professes his love for his friend again suggesting a romantic relationship. The language which Antonio and Bassanio use when talking to or describing each other for a modern audience coaxes them to believe them as being homosexual.

However the cultural differences between contemporary audience's and renaissance audiences allow for a different interpretation. Bassanio - " To you, Antonio, /I owe the most, in money and in love, / And from your love I have a warranty/To unburden all my plots and purposes" (Act1, scene1) For a modern audience if a man says to another man he loves him or talks of the love they share, it would be a safe assumption to label them homosexual or at least expect some type of romantic connection. However if you substitute " love" from this extract for friendship it reads more or less the same and makes perfect sense. This is a difference in language, in Shakespeare's time " love" would be used to describe friendship on a regular basis. The relations between men during the 16th century were very different from they are today, for example it would not thought suspicious if two men were to spend large amounts of time together or even share the same bed.

In general terms it would be very difficult to discern a homosexual relationship from companionship during Shakespeare's time. The reintroduction of the sodomy act in 1565 meant sodomy was now a capital crime and anyone caught being homosexual was punishable by death. Homosexuality its self was not even invented or at least the term was not so sodomy was used to describe this act. Interestingly enough there are no

occasions where a person has been arrested or hung for sodomy alone. It would seem that same sex relations were generally frowned upon but normally ignored. It seems it only became an issue when it threatened social order, the passive male would also be prosecuted more harshly than aggressive male which was perceived by the authorities as a surrendering of his "natural" masculine role in favour of a subordinate feminine one. As mentioned above during the renaissance period there was a large emphasis on the relationships between men.

The thought that a man could find an equal, not in his wife but in a male friend and that bond be stronger than the one capable between men and women. This is true of Shakespeare's plays also he uses sexuality to define his characters. The platter of sexual ambiguity in "Twelfth night" we are introduced to homosocial relationships as well as homoerotic and bisexual tangents. The relationship between Antonio and Sebastian is very suspect. The first we see of Antonio and Sebastian is in Act 2 scene 1 where Sebastian is wanting to leave for Count Orsino's court in Illyria but Antonio has enemies there. Despite the dangers to Antonio he seems adamant to accompany Sebastian, however Sebastian states on more than one occasion he wishes for Antonio to stay. Antonio - "Will you stay no longer? nor will you not that I go with you?" Sebastian - "By your patience, no."

My stars shine darkly over/me: the malignancy of my fate might perhaps /distemper yours; therefore I shall crave of you your /leave that I may bear my evils alone: it were a bad /recompense for your love, to lay any of them on you. " Antonio - "Let me yet know of you whither you are bound. " (Act 2,

Scene 1) As mentioned before “love” is often used within Shakespeare’s language as a substitute for friendship. However the exchanges between Sebastian and Antonio clearly signify something different, Antonio’s desperation to accompany his “friend” leads the reader and audience to assume there is a romantic connection. The fear of danger is outweighed by Antonio’s love for Sebastian and thus he decides to travel to Illyria. The homoeroticism between the two men is clearly evident and is spelt out in laymen’s terms when later in the same scene Antonio says: Antonio - “If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant” “But come what may, I do adore thee so/That danger shall seem sport, and I will go” (Act 2, Scene1) Antonio here also admits his love, sexual desire and submissiveness to Sebastian. Joseph Pequigney describes Antonio’s sexuality in his book such is *My Love: A Study of Shakespeare sonnets* as: “The reason for Antonio’s portrayal as homosexual is that a liaison with him opens space for Sebastian in the diverse bisexual fictions that make up the *Twelfth Night*” (Pequigney, 1985, pg 203) Antonio has clear homoerotic feelings for Sebastian and paints a very clear image of his sexual urges.

Compared to Antonio from *The Merchant of Venice*, whose desire was born from friendship and homosocial. Shakespeare seems to have stepped up on the sexual commentary and made it far more obvious. The progression of Sebastian and Antonio’s “love” is finalised in act 3 scene 3, the audience sees Antonio make several comments regarding his desire for his lover. His love is best displayed by his speech to Sebastian: Antonio -“My desire, / More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth, / And not all love to see you / But jealousy what might befall your travel” (Act 3, scene3) His passion,

desire and lust for Sebastian again clearly visible, later in the scene a discussion of sleeping arrangements leads to a very brave piece of stage writing where Shakespeare clearly refers to the Antonio and Sebastian having sex. Antonio - "There shall you have me," (Act 3, scene3) Very plain and provocative and suggestive writing by Shakespeare, Pequigney as mentioned above declares that Antonio is depicted as quite openly flamboyant homosexual is so Sebastian can part take in the bisexual theme of the play: "While he remains heterosexually virginal, he is unlike the virgins Viola and Olivia or Orsino in that he entertains homosexual impulses that are fully conscious and indulged. Antonio awakens those impulses, initiates him into interpersonal sexuality, and perhaps thereby prepares him to receive the sudden, surprising advances of the Illyrian lady" (Pequigney, 209-10). Pequigney's opinions identify the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian as clearly homoerotic and indeed homosexual/bisexual.

Shakespeare leaves little room for speculation regarding this pair of lovers/friends the nature of their relationship would be clear to an audience of the renaissance and to a contemporary audience. The bisexual subplot in A twelfth Night is continued by the relationship between Orsino and Cesario (Viola). Orsino and Cesario share a similar relationship to Antonio and Sebastian however there are a number of major differences. Cesario is of course a woman disguised as a man. During the exchanges between them we see Orsino refer to Cesario as a man but then juxtapose these with images of a pretrachal sonnet referring to Viola/Cesarios beauty, soft voice and femininity. So essentially the relationship between them both is homoerotic. As there is a clear sexual attraction to each other.

To a modern audience who has knowledge of psychology and a broader understanding of gay society will understand Sigmund Freud's opinion on sexuality which I feel helps explain the attraction between Orsino and Cesario. "A large proportion of homosexuals retain the mental quality of masculinity...and that what they look for in their real sexual object are in fact feminine mental traits." (Freud, 1905) While Freud's view helps us understand Orsino's attraction to Cesario it is still difficult for an audience/reader to catalogue which sexuality Orsino belongs. Essentially the text suggests he is bisexual, Orsino in love with Cesario suggests a homosocial relationship perhaps with erotic undertones. However his love remains unconsummated until Viola reveals herself as a woman and thus their marriage is possible. However Pequigney states: "The love for Cesario could not have changed instantaneously with the revelation of his femaleness; if it is erotic then it would have been erotic before; what does change is that marriage suddenly becomes possible, and hence the immediate proposal" (Pequigney, 2007). If in agreement with Pequigney it would suggest that the relationship between Cesario/Viola and Orsino has always been homoerotic it was only the constraints of society that prohibited Orsino from the actual act of love.

For a Shakespearian audience this must have been a difficult sub-plot to follow as of course women were not permitted to act. There for those audiences would be watching a small boy/young man, play a woman, which was disguised as a man. So their reactions to the performances of A Twelfth Night would be different for modern audiences. In conclusion Shakespeare manages to create a multitude of relationships within the plays The

Merchant of Venice and A Twelfth Night. He crosses the lines between homosocial and homoerotic on a number of occasions. The juxtaposition of quite blatant homoerotic with seemingly homosocial relations keep the audience in a state of uncertainty where by sexuality, love and friendship are clouded. The differences that arise between a modern or renaissance audiences/ readers result in a modern audience being quicker to judge the relationships as homoerotic.

By keeping your mind free of modern social conventions we can gain a better understanding of the world of sexuality that Shakespeare was trying to convey. Bibliography The Merchant of Venice -William Shakespeare the Cambridge university printing press published 1953 The Shakespearian Stage 1574-1642 3rd edition Andrew Gurr Twelfth Night the Macmillan Shakespeare 1972 Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare*s Sonnets. By Joseph. Pequigney. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985 The sexual aberrations S Freud - The Material Queer: A Lesbigan Cultural Studies ..., 1996 - West view Press The New International Version The Holy Bible Homoerotic space: the poetics of loss in Renaissance literature By Stephen Guy-Bray 1982 University of Toronto press <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodomy> http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_LGBT_history