The concept love and its depiction

Literature, Russian Literature

William Shakespeare’s The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice depicts an odd juxtaposition of love in the romantic sense with wealth in the monetary sense. The characters in the text acknowledge both senses as valuable virtues, yet comparatively, said virtues are measured against each other to determine (or at least broach the question of) which is more valuable. Arguably the most significant quagmire in measuring these virtues against one another is the credibility of love’s representations in the text, and with regard to specifically Antonio, a merchant of Venice, and Bassanio, his closest friend, the nature of their kinship as compared to Bassanio’s interactions with the heiress, Portia, detracts from the tenability of what characters claim love to be. The following ultimately argues that Shakespeare deliberately or inadvertently depicted a common aspect of male personas that was, in his time, completely unaffected by contemporary ideas of sexual orientation but would presently be viewed as homosocial behavior; consequently, relations between a man and a woman in Shakespeare’s time are depicted as mere tradition and irrelevant to homosocial intimacy.

The element of the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio that impinges upon the credibility of Bassanio’s alleged love for Portia is the level of intimacy Bassanio shares with Antonio. The text provides ample examples of this intimacy, and frequently, it is represented as a closeness that exceeds the intimacies of any other relationship in the play. These examples begin as early as the first scene of the first act wherein Antonio, Solanio, and Salerio converse with one another. Antonio admits to being sad without knowing the cause of his sadness, and his two friends assure him that his sadness stems

from the great risk of his current investments and that this is a natural proclivity for any merchant risking as much as Antonio is risking; nevertheless, Antonio explains that their assumptions are inaccurate. In response, they presume that the only other logical conclusion is love.

When Antonio says his merchandise at sea is not the cause of his sadness, Solanio suggests, “ Why then, you are in love”; to which Antonio vaguely replies, “ Fie, fie,” which is too abstruse to be concretely interpreted for any single emotion (1. 1. 46-7). One can argue based on the connotation of the archaic interjection, fie, that Antonio is utterly disgusted with the, perhaps, insipid idea that love is the cause of his sadness, but Shakespeare’s punctuation does not necessarily support that interpretation. The comma after the first utterance and period after the second almost suggest that Antonio’s line could just as easily be interpreted as indifference toward the idea. This is the first line to exemplify the ambiguity of love’s representation in the text, and the rest of the play informs this early conversation in a way that suggests Antonio protests too much, so to speak, and is, in fact, in love.

Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Graziano join the conversation, entering the scene, and Solanio says, “ Here comes Bassanio, your most noble kinsman, / Graziano, and Lorenzo. Fare ye well. / We leave you now with better company” (1. 1. 57-9). On one hand, Solanio seems to simply be cordially apathetic to Antonio’s sadness because, though they are friends, he is only willing to invest so much into Antonio’s discomfort at the moment. On the other hand, Solanio’s words are not entirely to be taken lightly because he singles Bassanio out and establishes early that there must be an intimacy

between Antonio and Bassanio that is lacking in the other relationships represented in the scene.

Later in the same scene, Antonio and Bassanio are left alone, and Antonio chooses this time to say, “ Well, tell me now what lady is the same / To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage, / That you today promised to tell me of,” indicating that Antonio has known since prior to this scene that Bassanio is pursuing a woman, which qualifies this (though proving nothing in and of itself) as a possible cause for the aforementioned sadness (1. 1. 119-21). Bassanio’s response is pregnant with suggestive implications for a myriad of reasons. First, it is important to note that Antonio has only asked that Bassanio identify the woman he is courting, and the significance of this is that Bassanio begins his response with explanation as to why he pursues the woman in question at all rather than answering the question. This type of response suggests that Bassanio feels the need to justify his pursuit to Antonio as though it is not simply enough that Bassanio is a man who has found a woman worth courting.

Answering the quoted question, Bassanio reminds Antonio that he has accumulated significant debt by living beyond his means, and he even admits that his debt has not affected his inclination to live exuberantly. “ But my chief care,” he says, “ Is to come fairly off from the great debts / Wherein my time, something too prodigal, / Hath left me gaged” (1. 1. 127-30). Bassanio’s primary concern is escaping his debt. Then, curiously, Bassanio appears to be preoccupied with reassuring Antonio of their own love, still within his initial response to Antonio’s question about the yet unnamed lady

Bassanio wishes to pursue. “ To you, Antonio, / I owe the most in money and in love,” Bassanio says, maintaining the juxtaposition of money and love (1. 1. 130-1). In the context of the woman Bassanio intends to pursue, he finds it pertinent to explain that his love for Antonio is superior to any other.

Antonio answers that, if Bassanio’s plan to relieve his debt is viable, “ be assured / My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions” (1. 1. 138-9). Antonio’s denotations simply state that he will do whatever Bassanio needs him to do for Bassanio’s sake, but formally, the syntax creates an almost homoerotic connotation, specifically in choosing the following words: person, extremest, lie, and unlocked. The term, person, very likely is chosen for its sense, body, especially because this also foreshadows the reality that, later in the play, a pound of Antonio’s own flesh is owed to Shylock for a loan Antonio acquired on Bassanio’s behalf. In other words, Antonio does, in fact, spend his money (purse), body (person), and life (extremest means) for Bassanio. The idea that Antonio’s body lies unlocked to Bassanio, though, is easily interpreted a sexual double entendre, especially given Shakespeare’s affinity for wordplay. Much later in the same conversation, Bassanio finally answers Antonio’s question as late as line 161. He begins, “ In Belmont is a lady richly left, / And she is fair, and, fairer than that word, / Of wondrous virtues” (1. 1. 161-3). Bassanio substantiates his discursive preamble about his financial plight and the need to live extravagantly in finally answering Antonio’s question with the solution to his own problem. The first and presumably most important feature about Portia, whose name finally comes three lines later, is that she is a wealthy heiress, and Bassanio has maneuvered this conversation in such a way that suggests

he believes Antonio needs to and will see the pragmatism of his plan. In fact, his speech privileges money over all, and in terms of sequence, what follow are complexion, virtue, and hair respectively. Bassanio and Antonio have a love that is so intimate that it seems to the modern reader to be romantic in that Bassanio feels compelled to explain his reasoning for romantically involving himself with someone else, and it is telling that a simple attraction to a woman does not suffice in explaining his actions.

In the second scene of the third act, Portia is prolix in expressing her hopes that, in essence, the love between she and Bassanio is real. Speaking of allowing Bassanio to choose between the three chests, she says she wishes he would not choose yet because she is scared of the idea that he may choose incorrectly and forever be without her, but then, she says, " There's something tells me—but it is not love— / I would not lose you; and you know yourself / Hate counsels not in such a quality" (3. 2. 4-6). She wants to give Bassanio clues, unfairly favoring him, but she resists so as not to be any less virtuous.

Portia continues, " Beshrew your eyes, / They have o'erlooked me and divided me. / One half of me is yours, the other half yours—" (3. 2. 14-6). Here, Portia's syntax is pregnant with meaning as well because it is arguably the greatest evidence that Shakespeare has, in writing this play, tapped into an incredible insight into a social constructivist perspective of gender as well as a comparison of homosocial interactions with heterosocial interactions. She uses the word, overlooked, which Stephen Greenblatt equates with the word, bewitched, in this context, and in that sense, Portia is saying that

Bassanio’s eyes have enchanted or delighted her, perhaps even going so far as to say they have cast a metaphorical spell on her. This introduces a concept contemporary theory calls the male gaze, and it suggests that, if Shakespeare could have been insightful enough to depict the male gaze (albeit without contemporary terminology), his insight could just as easily have identified in the men of his reality this then unquantifiable aspect of the male persona that binds men to each other so closely that they prefer their heterosocial bonds to any relationship they could form with a woman; moreover, without the modern concepts of sexual orientation, Shakespeare would not have considered this to be deviant or unnatural behavior.

Portia’s words take on greater meaning when the metaphorical spell is examined more closely for what it could be, relative to contemporary literary theories that, of course, were not even being discussed in the sixteenth century when Shakespeare was writing. It would seem unsubstantiated to suggest that Shakespeare tapped into this insight of his own accord long before the theories were officially published were it not for the consistencies throughout the play to validate the idea that Shakespeare may have, indeed, lacked only the modern terminology to describe contemporary concepts that he contemplated on his own. For Portia to say that Bassanio’s eyes have cast this spell over her and, in turn, divided her strongly alludes to the theoretical concept in feminist studies of experience (the Lacanian variant on feminist literary criticism) called the male gaze, which was first introduced in Laura Mulvey’s essay, “ Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in 1975. Mulvey argues: Pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the

female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 808-9). Mulvey's theory asserts that Bassanio's eyes do not merely see Portia but also superimpose upon her appearance a " to-be-looked-at-ness" in the sense that she is passive and devoid of desire as well as an objectification in the sense that she is only a signifier for male desire. Portia is (women are) divided into these two incredibly narrow, patriarchal representations, and as Portia goes on to say, both halves are for Bassanio (men).

Shakespeare even incorporates Mulvey's male/active female/passive binaries, using them to characterize Portia inasmuch as only men are active in the play. " An active/passive heterosexual division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure. […] Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen" (Mulvey 810). Portia remains at home for the majority of the play, and her suitors come to her; moreover, everyone acknowledges the rules her father established for winning her hand, including Portia herself, despite the fact that he is dead and unable to enforce these rules, suggesting that, even in death, men are at the center of all action, and a father's law is infallible. She exhibits trust in the heteronormative social codes her father taught her regarding how her hand is to be given, which represents her adherence to Lacan's concept of the Law of the Father " because it is the father who enforces cultural norms and laws" (Dobie 71). By this point, Shakespeare is

employing the multifaceted concept of the male gaze while maintaining consistency with contemporary, psychoanalytic literary criticism, and his adherence to these concepts both affirms the theories themselves and indicates a level of insight on Shakespeare's part that simply carried an in-depth understanding of people, which is further supported by the popularity of his plays. It stands to reason that Shakespeare could only write so affectively if he genuinely had an abnormal gift for understanding people.

In an alternate articulation of this concept of the male perspective dividing women against their will and, thus, halving their perceived value in both sexuality and humanity, Mulvey draws conclusions about earlier sections of her article, explaining how it is women in film are subjected to this division of self. She characterizes it in terms of cinema and uses a Freudian approach (as opposed to the Lacanian approach of the previous quote), but most of the aspects of cinema she references also pertain to any artistic rendering of man or woman as he or she relates to his or her world: Sections II. A and B have set out two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation. The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. Thus, in film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination of the sexual instincts, the second of ego libido. This dichotomy was crucial for Freud. […] Both are formative structures,

mechanisms not meaning. In themselves they have no signification, they have to be attached to an idealisation [sic]. (Mulvey 808)

The Freudian significance of this is that, on one hand, the male perspective in general (not just Bassanio's) objectifies Portia as merely an item of aesthetic value to be viewed and to stimulate libido, " the source of our psychic energy and our psychosexual desires" (Dobie 58). On the other hand, both the male and female contingents of the audience viewing Shakespeare's play identify with Bassanio, idealizing his interaction with Portia by critiquing how worthy he is of possessing her (on the merits of his masculinity or, more appropriately, his adherence to the male role) and how worthy she is of being possessed. This means that the character, Bassanio, assumes the role of the audience's ideal self (ego) whereas the female character, Portia, assumes the role of the ideal object of " displacement—moving one's feeling for a particular person to an object related to him or her, much as metonymy uses the name of one object to replace another with which it is closely related or of which it is a part" (Dobie 60). In none of this is Portia representative of a " self." She does not serve the audience's ego; rather, the male gaze views her as a sexual object and simultaneously a part of Lacan's Other—" those remaining elements that exist outside the self" (Dobie 71).

Bassanio finally says, " Let me choose, / For as I am, I live upon the rack," which refers to an instrument used to torture traitors; he likens the delay to such torture (3. 2. 24-5). Portia carries the metaphor further, asking that Bassanio " confess / what treason there is mingled with [his] love" (3. 2. 26-

7). The conversation grows increasingly ambiguous, as does the nature of Bassanio's love, because he answers, " None but that ugly treason of mistrust / Which makes me fear th'enjoying of my love" (3. 2. 28-9). Greenblatt qualifies the word, mistrust, likening it to the word, uncertainty, so Bassanio's uncertainty could be in regard to which chest to choose, fearing or doubting the verity of his love since Portia suggests that, if his love is true, he will choose correctly; however, he could just as easily be alluding to Antonio as his most profound love and, thus, to the treason of the love he has professed to Portia. Shakespeare writes Portia's part in the play in such a way that he seems cognizant of the concept of the male gaze, which makes it that much more believable that he, indeed, simply wrote with a unique understanding of the human psyche. None of this is to say that Shakespeare deliberately depicts gay lovers torn apart by circumstance; rather, he depicted an aspect of homosocial behavior and interaction that he recognized in his time—a time in which people were not particularly aware of what modern socialites call homosexuality—as a level of intimacy between men that could not be compared to the relatively inferior intimacy a man has with a woman; therefore, what signifies homosexuality in the twenty-first century did not in the sixteenth and could long ago be deemed natural in the minds of men who saw homosexuality as something so unnatural that they presumed their intimate feelings for male friends to be little more than great friendship.

The nature of Antonio's inexplicable sadness juxtaposed with Bassanio's pursuit of a woman as well as the suggestive uncertainties of Bassanio's words to Portia even imply that there may have, at some time, been a

closeness between Bassanio and Antonio that was of such intimacy that they saw no reason for female companionship. They privilege their own relationship over all else, which suggests that the discourse of Shakespeare's time was nearly devoid of the concept of homosexuality, to some extent, inclusive of the notion that women were simply functional like property, serving sexual and aesthetic needs only. After all, if a man does not perceive women as his intellectual equal, then someone else must satiate his yearn for a kindred spirit of equal value.

With all these contentions in mind, it is logical to consider that Shakespeare, ingeniously knowing human personalities so thoroughly, was able to recognize, capture, and perhaps exaggerate in The Merchant of Venice this aspect of the male perspective that privileged men's homosocial relationships over any other relationships. If only the second scene of Act III exhibited any characteristics of the male gaze, then perhaps it could be said that it was an isolated occurrence in the text, not indicative of any special insight on Shakespeare's part; however, Portia's character is fluidly depicted under this lens throughout the play. After Bassanio has chosen correctly and won her hand, Portia says in complete accordance with the conclusions drawn earlier from Mulvey's assessment of the male gaze: You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, Such as I am. Though for myself alone I would not be ambitious in my wish To wish myself much better, yet for you I would be trebled twenty times myself, A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich, That only to stand high in your account I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends, Exceed account. (3. 2. 149-57) Portia's desires, whatever they may be, are not acknowledged in the text with the exception

of the one desire that is relevant to Bassanio, and that is precisely how the male gaze operates. All that matters about Portia in the minds of Shakespeare's audience are the attributes that concern Bassanio—her " to-be-looked-at-ness," her stagnant (inanimate) quality as a possession, and additionally for Bassanio's unique circumstance, her inherited fortune.

Proving Shakespeare's adherence to the concept of the male gaze serves the purpose of exhibiting that such insight could also understand people in such depth that he was aware of that homosocial element of men's relationships that, for some, would be said in the twenty-first century to encroach upon their perceived heterosexuality. Shakespeare highlights this extent of those homosocial relationships that some men reached that was admirable for the depth of its love and intimacy and profoundly progressive in that it was not faulted for affecting the public perception of a man's gender. The nature of Antonio's and Bassanio's relationship was common knowledge, as Solanio and Salerio indicate, and neither Antonio nor Bassanio were deemed any less masculine in the eyes of any of the text's characters, including Portia, which is significant in the final acts of the play. As such, to the same end of exhibiting Shakespeare's insight, it is pertinent to examine Portia's short speech at the end of Act III, scene four, explaining a plan to Nerissa. She explains that they will sneak up on their husbands, and Nerissa asks if they will allow themselves to be seen. In response, Portia:

They shall, Nerissa, but in such a habit

That they shall think we are accomplished

With that we lack. I’ll hold thee any wager,

When we are both accoutered like young men

I’ll prove the prettier fellow of the two,

And wear my dagger with the braver grace,

And speak between the change of man and boy

With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps

Into a manly stride, and speak of frays

Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies

How honourable ladies sought my love,

Which I denying, they fell sick and died.

I could not do withal. Then I’ll repent,

And wish for all that that I had not killed them;

And twenty of these puny lies I’ll tell,

That men shall swear I have discontinued school

Avobe a twelvemonth. I have within my mind

A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks

Which I will practise [sic]. (3. 4. 60-78)

The only time Portia betrays the active/passive binary is when she also betrays the male/female binary. Shakespeare depicts her passivity throughout the first half of the play, and when she becomes an active character, it is by way of impersonating a man. In composing the plot, it was not strictly necessary for Shakespeare to involve Portia in Bassanio's affairs with such an active role beyond Bassanio winning her hand, yet he chooses to add her to the center of the action in the play; furthermore in so doing, he elects to have her impersonate a man so that her presence at the center of the action is not conspicuous, which indicates that, even without having been exposed to the concept of the male gaze, he was cognizant of both men and women viewed an idealized man, an idealized woman, and an idealized relationship. He was aware of how to appeal to the ego, the I-self, of his audience by giving them all the opportunity for " identification of the ego with the object on the [stage]" (Mulvey 808). After dividing Portia according to sexual instincts (one half) and ego libido (another half), Shakespeare uses the character in a way that showcases his understanding of male and female personas.

Theories like psychoanalytic literary criticism and the male gaze, though they are convoluted, would be disproven if literature that predated them never upheld them. They are valid as observable features of literature because they do, in fact, appear in literature naturally; writers are predisposed toward certain patterns that these theories expose. Shakespeare had to be keenly observant of the nature of people in general to understand his audiences well enough to write such successfully evocative plays. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that his depiction of Antonio and

Bassanio may have been intended to capture the element of homosocial friendship that, as he might have plainly described it, curiously mirrored (or even exceeded) in the intensity of its intimacy what husbands felt for their wives and, thus, imposed upon love what modern readers consider to be ambiguity.