

It's All Greek to Me: The Love Triangle of Shakespeare's Sonnets and its Parallels in the Social Anxieties of Gender, Homoeroticism and Fidelity in Ancient Greece

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ABSTRACT This paper refutes the common interpretation of the Sonnets as a revelation of Shakespeare's homosexual desires, and instead posits that they are better read as an endorsement of hierarchical conceptions of sex and gender dating back to Ancient Greece. From Antiquity to Renaissance, gender was seen as a social and cultural role, not a medical or biological category. Furthermore, social structures relied on regulating female sexuality and shoring up the masculinity of powerful men, so Ancient and Renaissance societies developed huge anxieties surrounding the female libido, echoed in Shakespeare's Dark Lady. The lust of women posed the issue of illegitimate births, while the lust *for* women destabilized reason and distracted from manly pursuits such as war and civic duty. This framework rendered women inherently dangerous, resulting in general acceptance of, and even preference for, homoeroticism. Sonnets 129, 135, and 147 clearly demonstrate the anxiety surrounding the danger of lust, while Sonnet 116 endorses male homosocial and homoerotic relationships. Viewed through this historical framework, concern about the speaker's sexual orientation is hugely misguided—the homoerotic desire for the lovely young man and the shame and disgust associated with the Dark Lady clearly uphold the social and sexual anxieties of Shakespeare's time.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have traditionally posited that a moral crisis exists at the heart of Shakespeare's Sonnets in the form of the homoerotic relationship between the speaker and the 'lovely young man.' However, this view is largely a product of a binary-gendered society that has projected the category of the homosexual back in time onto the characters of the Sonnets. When Edmond Malone revisited the 1609 quarto of the Sonnets in 1780, he produced a new edition and sparked the now centuries-old debate over the meaning of Shakespeare's speaker's affection for a fellow man. Perhaps the original seeds of the enduring conflation of Shakespeare's own personal desires with those of his speaker lie in Malone's editorial work; perhaps we are inclined to merge Shakespeare and his speaker into one for other literary reasons, but it can at least be stated that Malone's work was directed by the beliefs first that the Sonnets revealed something about Shakespeare's inner life, and second that it was Malone's duty to draw out the man behind the poems and to present that man to the reading public. In his essay, 'Editing as Cultural Formation: The Sexing of Shakespeare's Sonnets,' Peter Stallybrass explores editorial commentary and criticism of the Sonnets be-

ginning with Malone and his quest to uncover Shakespeare's person:

Malone was intent upon rescripting Shakespeare's poems to show the contours of the man behind them. That is, Malone was inventing the character 'Shakespeare' as he is still now visible to us. And in inventing this character he turned above all, as de Grazia has argued, to the Sonnets, which he believed gave a crucial key to Shakespeare's inner life. ...Having created the 'authentic' character of Shakespeare, that character steps into the spotlight as a potential sodomite. (77)

From this initial casting of Shakespeare into the role of a possible homosexual stemmed centuries of literary criticism and evaluation attempting to in some way resolve the crisis of Shakespeare's moral compass. I argue that, contrary to traditional criticism, the sexual implications of the Sonnets are better seen as an endorsement of hierarchical conceptions of sex and gender dating back to Ancient Greece than as a problematic declaration of Shakespeare's homosexuality.

The misattribution of later frameworks of sexual morality onto the Sonnets fails to consider how the basic categories of gender and desire were constructed in Shakespeare's England, and thus misidentifies the ho-

moerotic dynamic between the speaker and the lovely young man as a crisis of morality, when it was more likely seen as normative and perhaps even positive. A sexual revolution occurred in the late eighteenth century, and Shakespeare worked in a society that conceptualized sex and gender entirely differently than the societies of later critics of his work. Indeed, the love triangle of the Sonnets expresses the same social anxieties surrounding gender, fidelity, and sexuality that were common in the society of Ancient Greece—quite different from the sexual anxieties of societies much closer temporally to Shakespeare’s. As a result, post-Enlightenment interpretations of the sonnets have been highly anachronistic.

FLUID GENDER, HIERARCHICAL SEX

The society in which Shakespeare lived and wrote still operated under the same assumptions about gender as the societies of Antiquity. In his book, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laquer explores at length the ways in which societies formulated sex and gender throughout history, and he finds that from the Greeks up until a grand restructuring of beliefs around the time of the Enlightenment, western conceptions of sex and gender did not change very much at all. In the second century A.D., Galen, a physician and philosopher, developed his treatises on gender and the reproductive organs, which held that male and female genitalia were homologous structures, and specifically that female genitalia were inverted versions of male genitalia. That is, the female vagina was an inverted penis, the testicles when inverted became ovaries, the fallopian tubes were inverted vas deferens, and the labia were the inverted versions of the foreskin (Laquer, 4). In this system, conception occurred when both the male and female released seed upon orgasm, and the ‘strength’ of the seed determined the gender of the child. Men were seen as producing more “vital heat” than women, a sign of their greater perfection, and if the seed from the father produced more heat (that is, was stronger) than that of the mother, the developing sexual organs in the fetus would push outward, resulting in a male child; whereas if the mother’s seed was stronger, the sexual organs would remain inverted (Laquer, 4). Viewing gender as a matter of degree rather than dichotomy allowed for the formation of a sexual hierarchy based on binaries of dominance and submission, rather than binaries of male and female:

To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place

in society, to assume a cultural role, not to *be* organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category. (Laquer, 8)

Shakespeare wrote before the shift from sociological to ontological, and that distinction is incredibly important when reading the speaker’s affection for the lovely young man—the speaker would not have seen the object of his desire as a member of the same immutable gender category as the speaker himself; the idea of the homosexual as a category actually did not exist. Desires were for bodies, not for genders, since gender was seen as constantly socially constructed rather than inherently physical.

The fluidity of masculine and feminine sexual roles has its roots in the one-sex model of Antiquity, and can be further explained through the ‘penetration model’—in which sex acts are defined and judged by the interaction of an active, penetrating partner and a passive, penetrated partner. In Ancient Greece, the dominant sexual partner was considered masculine while the submissive partner was effeminate, regardless of the biological sex of the participants. In her book *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* Marilyn Skinner delineates how the penetration model allowed sex to be categorized within the same patriarchal framework as society itself: “The intrinsic superiority of the adult citizen male to females, prostitutes of both sexes, slave males, younger males, and those men alleged to prefer the passive role was confirmed in his use of their bodies for his own gratification” (Skinner, 7). The adult citizen male was the only true male. Through this lens, Shakespeare’s speaker—the older male actively pursuing the young, love object—takes on the male role in his relationship with the lovely young man. The claim that the speaker is taking the dominant, masculine role in the relationship rests on the language of the poems that conveys the image of an older speaker admiring a pure and beautiful youth, with the underlying assumption that the partner who takes the active role in establishing a romantic connection would take the active role in sexual relations as well.

Stephen Orgel joins Laquer in asserting that Renaissance England still subscribed to Galen’s theories on sex, arguing that they also viewed gender as more fluid than we do today. In fact, in Shakespeare’s time it was quite common for no distinction to be made between the dress and appearance of male and female children. Orgel’s article “Nobody’s Perfect: Or Why Did

the English Stage Take Boys for Women?” touches briefly on this subject: “In the medical literature we all start as women, and the culture confirmed this by dressing all children in skirts until the age of seven or so, when the boy, as Leontes recalls, was “breeched,” or put into pants, and began to be trained as a man” (14). After the breeching ceremony, an effort was made to keep boys from associating with females to inhibit the development of effeminate qualities and feelings of lust. The concern with lust did not derive from any wish to protect women from unwanted sexual advances, but rather from a concern for the male character: “lust effeminates, makes men incapable of manly pursuits; hence the pervasive antithesis of love and war” (Orgel, 14).

LUST AND THE DANGER OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

The antithesis of love and war was central to Greek constructions of masculinity as well, in that the gender/sex hierarchy associated excessive sexuality with femininity; therefore, the possibility of men giving in to excessive lust actually threatened the very essence of masculinity and thus the gender hierarchy itself and man’s precarious position on top. Men proved their manliness through prowess in battle and through exercising the virtues of self-mastery, or *enkrateia*, and moderation, or *sôphrosynê* (Skinner, 17-18). Men were coached in the development of virtue beginning in boyhood and taught to control their desires, never letting them interfere with their reason (Skinner 17-18). Although sexual desire was the chief object of anxiety, men could abandon *sôphrosynê* and become addicted to other pleasures of the flesh, such as food or drink. Lust, then, was housed in a lack of self-control and seen as something shameful and effeminate, belonging to wanton woman and always needing to be carefully controlled. Female insatiability was seen as housed in the womb, which the Greeks characterized as a pit always seeking to be filled. The imagery of the hungry womb is echoed in Sonnet 135, in the description of the woman whose “will is large and spacious,” equating her sexual desire with a physical space, presumably the uterus, and emphasizing how much room she has to fill there. The speaker then compares the Dark Lady’s sexual appetite to the ocean in its infinite capacity: “The sea, all water, yet receives rain still,/and in abundance addeth to his store;/so thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will/One will of mine, to make thy large Will more.” Shakespeare’s

Dark Lady is the manifestation of society’s worst fears about women—her womb is never sated in its appetite for seed, and furthermore, she has filled her womb with seed from numerous men—the speaker asks to add only *one* will of his to her already large supply gathered from others.

Across ages and societies, the idea of the uncontrollable lust of women played a large role in the formation of gender hierarchies, reinforcing the doctrine of male supremacy and feeding fears about the destabilizing power of sexual desire. These fears still deeply resonated in Shakespeare’s time, which Orgel describes as “an age in which sexuality itself is misogynistic, as the love of women threatens the integrity of the perilously achieved male identity” (14). This also reflects the central reasoning of the Greeks behind the huge anxiety surrounding the issue of lust—excessive sexual appetites led to the abandonment of reason for passion, to the rejection of discipline and civic duty in favor of debase and effeminate sexual pleasures (Skinner, 17-18). The triumph of passion over reason was political as much as it was personal: lust posed the keenly felt threat of the breakdown of the civic order and thus social structure of Ancient Greek polities. Sonnets 129 and 147 reflect the effects of excessive lust on the psyche of a man who is being governed by his passions. In 129 the speaker acknowledges his “expense of spirit in a waste of shame”—spending his seed in sodomitic (nonprocreative) sexual acts with the Dark Lady. He has given in to lust and soon begins to feel mad, “past reason hunted; and no sooner had,/Past reason hated, as a swallow’d bait.” His desire for his mistress has usurped his reason and discipline, and although he hates himself for submitting to his sexual urges, he cannot stop: “Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;/Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.” His lust has overtaken him completely—he will go to any lengths to pursue sexual gratification. In 147, the speaker describes his love as a “fever... feeding on that which doth preserve the ill... Desire is death.” Like a modern-day drug addict, the speaker gives into his desires only to build up a tolerance and experience ever more frequent and intense cravings. His discipline has abandoned him, and he cannot be treated—his lust is actually life threatening. He has entered an uncontrollable spiral in which his sexual appetite feeds off of itself and is never satisfied: “Past cure I am, now reason is past care,/And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;/My thoughts and my discourse as madmen’s are.” In his

dogged pursuit of sexual pleasure, the speaker's mind has become completely unhinged. He is no longer in possession of his faculties; he is "frantic-mad" and constantly distressed. Again, lust is threatening the very essence of manliness, and if men cannot remain manly, they cannot maintain their place at the top of the social hierarchy. The speaker is echoing long-held concerns about the formulation of gender and its relationship to social structures, concerns that shaped both Ancient Greek and Renaissance England perspectives on homoeroticism.

HOMOEROTICISM IN CONTEXT

So among all this preoccupation with the destructive forces of lust, is any anxiety prescribed to the speaker's male object of affection—the lovely young man? Here we see another parallel with the society of Ancient Greece and its institution of pederasty. Pederasty existed as an institution through which older, citizen males—called the *erastês*—would cultivate close, often romantic, sometimes consummated, relationships with young boys who had not yet achieved citizenship—called the *erômenos* (Skinner 14). There is a very important distinction between the sexual use of a boy who was not eligible for citizenship (such as a slave or a prostitute), and one who would one day play an active role in civic life. A pederastic relationship did not serve simply to gratify the desires of the *erastês*. Actually, the interaction took on a quality of mentorship—the *erastês* coached the *erômenos* in proper masculine conduct, philosophy and intellectual discourse, and civic duty (Skinner, 14-16). It was an institution that functioned to uphold and entrench the elite male class, and it did so under strict rules. The age of the *erômenos* varied from around 13, at the absolute youngest, to up to 18 years old, with the strict qualification that once a boy grew a full beard, he was considered to be an adult and any sexual aspect of the relationship had to cease, as the adult male citizen body was legally inviolable and could not be penetrated (Skinner, 14). At this point, the relationship would continue without a sexual component—the two men would share a lifetime 'philia' or deep affection (Skinner, 18). Above all, the Greeks feared that the *eromenôs* would become accustomed to taking the passive role in sex, and would not successfully make the transition into masculine adulthood (Skinner, 18). While this was certainly not a concern for Shakespeare's speaker, who seems to want the lovely

young man's romantic and sexual affections indefinitely, neither the Greeks nor sixteenth-century Englanders saw a problem with male-male emotional attachment. In 1579, English poet Edmund Spenser published *The Shepherdes Calendar*, which includes the story of Hobbinol and Colin—Hobbinol is an older shepherd who unsuccessfully courts the young Colin, but Colin rejects him to pursue a fair maid Rosalind. Margareta De Grazia quotes E.K.'s editorial note in defense of the story, on the grounds that "paederastice [is] much to be preferred before gynerastice, that is the love that inflameth men with lust toward womankind" (103).

Returning then to the idea that women house excessive sexuality that is a danger to the individual psyche of men and to the collective structure of society—this as opposed to the pure, "marriage of two minds" (Sonnet 116) between men—it is clear that in both Ancient Greece and Renaissance England, anxieties about female fidelity carried far more practical weight than anxieties about homoerotic desires. Orgel finds concrete evidence for this in studies of ecclesiastical court cases in sixteenth-century English cities, in which the majority of defamation suits filed were aggravated by either of the terms cuckold, whore, or whoremaster (18). Furthermore, Orgel finds that cases involving female sexual intercourse out of wedlock were prosecuted far more frequently than cases involving homosexual behavior. He contends that this is because adultery resulted (potentially) in illegitimate births, which, aside from threatening a social hierarchy built on bloodlines, also created the civic burden of orphans, "whereas, unless the activity involved coercion or malfeasance, there was rarely anything in homosexuality worth bothering about" (20). De Grazia likewise argues that Elizabethan law more harshly prosecuted male-female sexual relations than male-male sexual relations, because "nothing threatens a patriarchal and hierarchic social formation more than a promiscuous womb" (105). As in Renaissance England, adultery was a crime severely punished in Ancient Greece—if a man caught his wife and another man engaged in a sexual act, he was legally allowed to kill either or both of them on the spot (Skinner 168-169). Both Ancient Greece and Elizabethan England had hierarchical social structures built on the assumption of male superiority and these hierarchies were also built on entirely different assumptions about what constitutes "male." As a result, they were far more concerned about issues such as female fidelity and male

performance of proper gender roles than they were about homoerotic desire.

CONCLUSION

Although Shakespeare lived and wrote some two thousand years after the height of Classical Greece, it is remarkable how similarly both cultures formulated gender, sexuality, and sexual anxieties. Both societies construct gender on a scale in which women (and, to a certain extent, boys) are lesser versions of males rather than complete versions of a separate gender. In navigating homoeroticism, both societies rely on the assumed superiority of the male gender to normalize and even regulate their homoerotic behavior. And in keeping with this distrust of and (conscious or unconscious) desires to subjugate women, both societies viewed women as profligate threats to male identity and to the established social hierarchy. The Renaissance was indeed the resurrection of the culture of Classical Antiquity, and the love triangle of the Sonnets perfectly exemplifies the social anxieties that Shakespeare's time inherited from their Greek ancestors. Both of these societies viewed gender and sexuality in ways that do not justify focusing on the homoeroticism of the sonnets, which tell us far more about the politics of gender and the sexual anxieties of a past culture than they do about William Shakespeare's personal life.

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