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Homosexuality in the Elizabethan Era:

Identifying the Male Homosexual During the 1500s

All humans belong to the same family, and though connections may be made based on the grounds of similarities, no two humans are identical. Human identity is what differentiates one person from the next. Identity rules personality, morality, and sensibility. These aspects of human nature, in turn, govern the more physical side of the individualistic lifestyle, such as, occupation and stature. This insinuates that identity vicariously governs external traits as well as internal.

The modern world now views sexuality as a form of identity. One can be heterosexual or pertain to any sort of homosexual affiliation; however, according to Matt Cook, editor of *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*, the associations “…with being a particular type of person, as we tend to do in the Western world now, depended very much on the time and place in question” (Cook, XI). The time and place for this question, concerning homosexuality and the homosexual, centers around the age of Shakespeare during the Elizabethan Era. The following work and research demonstrates the investigative process and provides historical context of how society labeled and identified the male homosexual during the Renaissance. These labels restricted the relationships of males by Renaissance terms and judgments of both physical and societal proportions.

Alan Bray, who wrote the universal referral on the topic of male homosexuality during the 1500s, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, states that “[T]he term ‘homosexual’ did not exist in 1611,’ in fact, ‘[I]t was not until the 1890s that the term ‘homosexual’ first began to be used in English, and none of its predecessors now survive in common speech” (Bray, 13). The terms, Ganymede, Bugger, and Catamite, among many other terms were used to label the homosexual. The most widely used term used to describe homosexual affiliation was the word ‘sodomite’. In modern context, sodomy refers to one particular sexual act; however, during the 1500s, the act of sodomy was used to describe a myriad of sexually deviant activities, including homosexual ones. Matt Cook, editor of *A Gay History of Britain*, includes a chapter dedicated to Renaissance sodomy written by Randolph Turnbach. Turnbach states that “[T]he history of sodomy in England during the Reformation and the Renaissance begins with the passage in 1534 of 25 Henry VIII, *c.6.*This Act of Parliament took jurisdiction over sodomy away from the ecclesiastical courts and gave it to the secular state” (Turnbach, 49).

Under Henry and his son the act of sodomy was forbidden; however, for a short time under the rule of Mary, the Protestant Acts were repealed and the ban on these sexual acts lifted until the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Once the Acts were rewritten under the rule of Elizabeth, the act of sodomy became a crime against the Queen punishable by death. According to Kenneth Borris, editor of *Same-Sex Desire in the English Renaissance*, “[S]odomy ceased being a secular crime until 1583’ as stated above; Borris also states that “[O]nly in 1861 was the resultant death penalty for the anal coitus of males abolished; only in 1967 was private homosexual sex between consenting adult males decriminalized in England” (Borris, 87). Allan Bray also wrote the essay, *Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England*, where he states that “Elizabethan society was one of those which lacked the idea of a distinct homosexual minority, although homosexuality was nonetheless regarded with a readily expressed horror. In principal, it was a crime which anyone was capable of, like murder or blasphemy (Bray, 40).

Though the physical act of sodomy was illegal and those who performed the illegal acts were labeled as ‘sodomites’, “[n]o one in Shakespeare’s day would have labeled themselves a ‘homosexual’” states Bruce Smith, author of *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England* (Smith, 11). The reason for this, is because homosexuality and the identity of the homosexual are extremely modern concepts; this category of self-definition simply did not exist during the Renaissance. Smith states that “[N]othing in Renaissance theory suggests that individuals found their identity this way,’ and that ‘homosexual *behavior* may be a cross cultural, transhistorical phenomenon” (Smith, 12). This relates back to the reason why Allen Bray stated that there was no specific name associated with homosexuality, just general labels for sexually deviant activities.

Humans seek to establish self-security and self-identity throughout the course of life. Reflection of the self and the reflection individualistic morality and internal behavior help the individual make sense of the world around them and how they fit into the makings of such a place. Though self-awareness is an important essence of humanness, creating and establishing connections with other humans is also necessary for survival. Friendship and the ability to make and sustain friendship was just as important during the Renaissance as it is today. The associations and connections that people made back then were used to propel people into realms of power. The image of the Masculine Friend, which was a prosperous candidate for these swelling power relationships, is a well-known bond perceived during the Elizabethan era.

In *Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England*, Bray comments on the idea of the ‘Masculine Friend’ versus the homosexual or sodomite. “The image of the masculine friend was an image of intimacy between men in stark contrast to the forbidden intimacy of homosexuality” (Bray, 42). The Masculine friend, in its definition, is an utterly confusing one. These ‘friends’ are referred to throughout Elizabethan history and literature as strongly bonded, male, same sex partners. These bonds worked in order to benefit men of station and wealth into more advances scenes and back rooms of politics and business endeavors. The Masculine Friendship consisted of “…embraces, and the protestations of love, the common bed and the physical closeness, and physical intimacy. All had their ready parallels in the accustomed conventions of Elizabethan friendship” (Bray, 46).

This sense or type of eroticism between males, for the most part of history, pertaining to the ‘Masculine Friend’, were largely over looked because these types of relationships were normal. However, according to Tom McFaul, author of, *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, informs his audience that “[A]ny friendship that was too private, and threatened social hierarchy, could be regarded as sodomitical; this obviously created a certain anxiety about friendship, and mitigated against the success of private friendship. Worries about sodomy forced friendship into the public sphere” (Macfaul, 17). This is where the lines of the ‘Masculine Friend’ and the ‘sodomite’ become blurred because people chose when to view the relationships between males as sodomitical or not. In *Homosexuality and Male Friendship* by Alan Bray, he also acknowledges the blurring of the lines on this topic. “It was a disturbing fact that the Elizabethans preferred not to acknowledge, but when it suited them it provided a weapon that close to hand; and it left this intimacy more open and less secure in its meaning than the formal Elizabethan essays on friendship would have us believe,” (Bray, 56).

Humans, being curious creatures by nature, seek to understand the reasons for difference amongst community. During the Renaissance, people made judgments about others based on individualist appearances. Kenneth Borris, who also edited *The Sciences of Homosexuality in Early Modern Europe*, explains the science pertaining to physiognomies. Physiognomics was used “…to denote the full range of early modern endeavors to interpret bodily features as signs of personal characteristics, health, fortune, conditions of life and death, and future prospects” (Borris, 139). For example, and individual who had any sort of physical deformity was labeled as a monster deemed unworthy in the eyes of God. These “monster’s” physical deformities also characterized the capacity of mental and physical evil sustained within the individual.

During the Renaissance, people used all kinds of physical appearances to help them understand why others looked and behaved differently outside of societal norms. Borris indicates that physiognomics were also applied to distinguish heterosexuals from homosexuals, or sodomites. Having a high-pitched voice or leaning to the right when walking were some physical traits that showed whether someone was a homosexual. “From physionomical standpoints that posture would have been normatively masculine, since females were supposedly timid,’ Borris continues, ‘that since heat rises and a male is relatively hot, the cinaedus’ bent or leaning posture reflects his leaning from masculine nature toward femininity (Borris, 144). Another physionomical trait of a male homosexual would have been denoted by the effeminate comeliness of the body and face. Small feet and small hands were also physical signs of homosexuality linked to the early modern period in England. Physiognomics was not the only form of “Renaissance science” used to distinguish “abnormal” persons or behavior. Borris also indicates the use and manifestations of palm readings.

The Renaissance called for action and change. The ideas of the old life were changing rapidly due to the conquest of understanding. People were now calling for the identity of self and the physical place of where they were and why they were subject to being there. In this struggle to achieve individual identity, which was not fully reached by all males of the era, the ability to make and comfortably maintain relationships helped smooth the processes of societal law. In conclusion, I believe that Tom Macfaul leaves the audience with a resonating quote regarding the idea of friendship. “Renaissance Humanism had a clear if fragile ideology of friendship as the centre of man’s life, which can be summed up fairly simply: a friend is a second self with whom one shares everything, friends are virtuous and similar to one another, and the friend is chosen after long and careful assessment of his virtues; the purpose of such friendship is the promotion of virtuous of thought and action” (Macfaul, 6).

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