Jenna Calamai

Shakespeare I

Dr. Susan Staub

9 December 2013

Interpretation and Analysis of Homoeroticism in *Twelfth Night:*

Jack shall have Jack and Ne’re Go Back

Love is the most powerful and complex emotion that humans possess. Love can be one of the most beautiful and satisfying emotions of human experience, but it can also be the most dangerous and most destructive of all emotions. Love does not favor sides, nor does it set boundaries, and it can strike whenever and wherever without any warning. Love, in its most confusing form, seems to strike almost every character in William Shakespeare’s comedy, *Twelfth Night*. In all of Shakespeare’s early comedies, the main reoccurring theme is “Jack shall have Jill and not shall go ill.” Falling in and out of love, besting the trials of love, and “getting the girl” are minor themes and subplots enforcing traits to the major solution. However, many, if not all, of Shakespeare’s plays incorporate doubled and hidden meanings that spark the interest of many critics today.

In review of *Twelfth Night*, some critics argue that there are circumstances in the comedy that suggest, obviously, “Jack shall have Jill” but also “Jill shall have Jill” and even “Jack shall have Jack.” In this rhetorical and literary analysis, I plan to scrutinize the seemingly homoerotic relationships between the male characters in *Twelfth Night.* In context of analyzing the text for underlying homoeroticism, I will also briefly emphasize the importance of madness and identity, which are two characteristics that love umbrellas.

Historically, Twelfth Night was the night before the Epiphany holiday, which celebrates the arrival of the three kings to the Christ child. Twelfth Night, in England, which is still celebrated to this day, is similar to “April fool’s day” that is celebrated in the United States. Everything on this night is filled with jokes, games, and madness. Francis Bacon, another writer during the Elizabethan era, wrote a collection of essays that comment on the civility and morality of men. In one of his essays, “Of Love” Bacon states that “…love is ever a matter of comedies, and now and then of tragedies; but in life it doth much mischief; sometimes like a siren, sometimes like a fury” (Bacon 27). This quote essentially states that love is powerful and does not need to make sense so fits perfectly into the circumstances of *Twelfth Night,* a play in which, no one knows any absolute truths about any character’s identity and even gender.

Almost every character in *Twelfth Night* is related to madness, or possesses attributes of madness in some way, though the characters themselves are not truly victims of actual insanity. Some critics attribute the nonsensical actions and emotions of these characters to the madness of place. *Twelfth* Night, unlike many of Shakespeare’s plays, contains only one physical setting. Illyria is the setting in which the plot unfolds and all of its trouble resides. With the characters limited to one physical place, love is also contained to this physical place and should not encounter any kind of encumbrance; however, the name of the setting suggests just the opposite. The word lyrical brings to mind a few words such as, “harmonious” and “rhythmic”, but the pretext, “ill” alters the meaning of the word to mean “dysfunctional” and “turbulent”. The actual name of the place, Illyria, as argued, predetermines the chaotic nature of the plot.

The title of the play and the setting of the play suggest discourse and chaos but the characters are also victims of love, adding yet more levels of madness to *Twelfth Night*. Love leads these characters to create and preform acts of madness. For example, Orsino, who is smitten by the beautiful Olivia, sends messengers to bid the Lady for his love. Malvolio, the strict and serious Puritan, is fooled into believing that if he acts certain ways and dresses certain ways that he will win Olivia’s heart. The most interesting case of madness that infects the characters of this play would be the madness that inflicts actions of the character, Antonio, in regards to Viola’s lost twin, Sebastian.

When Sebastian tells Antonio that he is leaving his care and heading into Illyria to find work Antonio wants to go with him. Sebastian tells his friend that he needs not to follow him farther into the country but Antonio replies, “The gentleness of all the gods go with thee! I have many enemies in Orsino’s court; else would I very shortly see thee there. But, come what may, I do adore thee so that danger shall seem sport and I will go” (Shakespeare 2.1. 32-36). Antonio’s interest in shadowing Sebastian into the city is both endearing and dangerous. Antonio and Orsino share bad blood from an old battle fought between the two men, in which there was much blood shed. The audience is simply informed that it would be dangerous, under the penalty of imprisonment or even death, if Antonio were to enter lands governed by the Duke. The audience learns later in the play, when Sebastian and Antonio enter Illyria, that after much arguing, Sebastian has allowed Antonio to travel with him. Antonio replies,

I could not stay behind you. 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 longer voyage —

But jealousy what might befall your travel,

Being skilless in these parts, which to a stranger,

Unguided and unfriended, often prove,

Rough and inhospitable. My willing love,

The rather by these arguments of fear,

Set forth in your pursuit.

(Shakespeare, 3.4.4-13)

In this passage, Antonio states that he felt inclined to follow Sebastian into Illyria because he feared for his safety. Towards the end of the play, Antonio is arrested by some of the Duke’s men who recognize him on the street when Antonio mistakes Cesario for Sebastian. The officers bring Antonio to see Orsino to await his punishment. When Orsino asks why Antonio had come to Illyria, Antonio replies, “A witchcraft drew me hither” (5.1. 64). The witchcraft that Antonio refers to is the reason why he follows Sebastian into dangerous territory.

Antonio is driven and guided by the love for his friend, enforcing the idea that love cultivates madness. Francis Bacon states that in is essay, “Of Love” that “…there was never proud man thought so absurdly well of himself as the lover doth of the person loved; and therefore it was well said, that it is impossible to love and be wise” (Bacon 27). audience also learned, in the beginning of the play, through the concerns of Viola creating a new start in an unknown land that the Duke, Orsino, was hiring men into his service. In general, determined by his sex, Sebastian would have had an easier time finding employment in contrast to his sister who was forced into disguise. This natural ability of males then deems Antonio’s justification of following his friend into the city illogical.

The simple consideration of the fact that Sebastian is male and would have been able to make a new start for himself much more readily than his twin, brings to light the mere existence of Antonio in *Twelfth Night.* Shakespeare may have included Antonio in the play just to add another level of madness and uncertainty, but if Antonio were left out of the play’s entirety, there would have been no effect on the plot. When Viola spoke of her twin brother, lost at sea, in the beginning of the play, the audience already knows that the no matter how chaotic the play will become, there is a solution. Sebastian could have washed up on shore and could have been discovered by anyone who could have easily taken him into Illyria, but Shakespeare chooses to include Antonio’s character.

There is an acknowledged argument that Shakespeare included this character that suggests the idea of homoerotic love and homosexual relationship. In a play where a girl becomes a boy and falls in love with a man, and where a woman falls in love with a girl pretending to be a boy, where the intermarrying of classes or the wish to marry above or below social class is eminent, the idea of a man falling in love with man does not seem as outrageous an idea as it would if it were to stand in isolation. It is also interesting that the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian is the only relationship in *Twelfth Night* that is not based upon social gains, monetary gains, or deceit. It could be possible that Shakespeare was investigating and questioning the socially deviant behaviors and forbidden interactions between men during the Elizabethan era.

I believe that it is important to call attention the actual name “Antonio”. Interestingly enough, Shakespeare uses this name in another one of his plays, in which, these two characters are very much paralleled. In *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*, both Antonios are closely bonded to a male friend. The relationships developed and matured between the two couples resemble a master and servant dependency. In *The Merchant of Venice,* Antonio is bound to his dear friend Bassanio and Bassanio is monetarily indebted to Antonio, giving Antonio the role of master and Bassanio the role of servant. In *Twelfth Night,* Sebastian is physically indebted to his Antonio for saving his life. However, the most important parallel between these two characters is that these bonds are severed at the end of their affiliated plays by the dominance of the heterosexual sphere.

At the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio relinquishes his relationship with Bassanio to Portia. The underlying tones of jealousy that ran within the subtext and whitespace between the two characters fighting for Bassanio’s affection ended when Antonio gave his ring to Portia in order to save Bassanio’s marriage. In *Twelfth Night,* Sebastian, when he sees his friend imprisoned, is now recently married to the fair Olivia, who still believes that Sebastian is Cesario. Antonio is, to an understanding, still under arrest when the rest of the characters have smoothed out the confusion concerning the identities of Sebastian and Viola. Shakespeare, in many of his plays, closes off any social inquiry that could possibly result in historical and physical trouble in reality. The ideas that he may have been exploring concerning homosexual interaction are terminated when Bassanio and Sebastian are married to members of the opposite sex. There can be different interpretations through reading the play but when viewing the play. The Antoinos are still on the stage while the other characters celebrate the endings in natural and naive bliss. Here, Shakespeare manages to leave a door that he held wide open to a simple crack that could leave his audience questioning the losses of both Antonios.

During Shakespeare’s time, “the term ‘homosexual’ did not exist in 1611” according to the research of Alan Bray who wrote *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*. There was no term in existence during that time that alluded to any sort of homosexual identity but there were terms in regards to the physical acts pertaining to homoeroticism. Homosexuality as an identity is a very recent idea that sprouted during the 1890s and is on its way to maturity as a population.

To bring this interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* into a full circle, concerning the interest and pursuit of homoerotic relationships, I would like to draw attention to one of the major themes of the play (lack of identity) in relation to the historical outlooks on homosexuality in the Renaissance. I believe that the relationship of Antonio and Sebastian, and maybe even Antonio and Bassiano, is not further developed in the play because there was no way to classify homosexual identities. This could correlate to an idea of lack of identity in the fictional world to lack of historical identity in the actual world.

Works Cited

Bacon, Francis. “Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral.” *The Harvard Classics.* Ed. Charles W. Eliot. Danbury: Grolier Enterprises Corp, 1980. 7-140. Print.

Bray, Alan. *Homosexuality in Renaissance England.* London: Gay Men’s Press, 1982.