

Thou Lov'st Me Not with The Full Weight
That I Love Thee: Homoerotic Potential
in *As You Like It*
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Introduction

As *You Like It* by William Shakespeare is a witty and complex comedy that follows a gaggle of courtiers navigating love, class, and gender structures in a fringe forest. While the main action centres Rosalind disguising as the male shepherd Ganymede to woo courtier Orlando, analyzing the homosexual possibilities between Rosalind and her dearest Celia provides a rich perspective on the art of reading and writing a character. This paper will observe that analyzing homoerotic bonds in *As You Like It*, like all fictional works, is complex because it is a task that hovers near the supposition that the characters are real people whose desires can be extrapolated. Naturally, then, all homoerotic actions must have been designed by the playwright to deliver a homoerotic relationship. Specifically for *As You Like It*, I will preface with the rationale for my argumentation, then will argue that Shakespeare designed a homoerotic relationship between Rosalind and Celia but resolved to make it unrequited in the hands of Renaissance-era heteronormativity.

Background

When analyzing the characters' identities, one must keep in mind their crux: the characters have been fabricated by the storyteller, and any assumptions on their character can only be derived in good faith from the actions the storyteller writes for them. In other words, the characters are neither real people nor people with agency; therefore, postulations made of them need to be derived only from their performed actions. It is presumptuous for readers to assume the characters' thoughts or desires – a textually supported hypothesis is the only appropriate supposition. To assess a character's identity, then, is to comb through the concrete repeated appearances of actions that assemble a disposition. The consequence of this hurdle is that as much as I would love to declare that Celia is lesbian and madly in love with her bisexual friend Rosalind, such a statement would be presumptuous and could not be honourably supposed. This would rightly place me within the category of "lewd interpreters," which Stanley Wells in *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* (2004) scolds as academics who poise under "critical sophistication" but just indulge in "fantasies released in their author's minds by the texts" (37).

When it comes to classifying homoerotic behaviour, discretion is crucial. Especially for a Renaissance play, a contemporary reader cannot expect any overtly sexual or homoerotic scenes to prove their case; instead, Shakespeare must need to have crafted instances that evidence homoeroticism—be it a character’s portrayal of intent or an influential climate. Furthermore, I understand the term homoerotic to incapsulate observable homosexual attraction, with a homoerotic relationship to be a pair of same-sex characters who display this tension, regardless of whether the desires are acted upon or even mutual. In *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (2002), David M. Halperin argues that distinguishing between sexual identities and acts must precede literary analysis of premodern characters. He advises that “before the modern era sexual deviance could be predicated only of acts, not of persons or identities” (Halperin 32). In addition, in *Shakespeare and Queer Theory* (2019), Melissa E. Sanchez states that “to ask whether [Shakespeare’s] characters are homosexual is the wrong question, but not because of the absence of biographic data” (10). It is most deft to first recognize the transformation eroticism of antiquity underwent to modern sexuality and gender identities.

I cannot argue that Shakespeare wrote Rosalind and Celia to be a homoerotic pair; instead, I argue that he crafted a relationship that had the potential to be homosexual but could not actualize it due to the societal standard of heterosexuality. It is also for this reason that I—following the footsteps of scholars queering historicism analyses—employ the term homoerotic rather than homosexual. Bernadette J. Brooten affirms in *Love Between Women* (1996) that “‘Homoeroticism’ has a less fixed meaning than ‘homosexuality’ and is therefore better suited to studying the texts of a culture very different from the contemporary cultures of industrialized nations” (8). Rather than forcing the lesbian agenda over two fictional women, I will analyze their behaviours in order to draw out their homoerotic *potential*, as well as their barriers. The tension will never be stated, but instead implied. This paper will henceforth break down some examples of Celia’s performance of her desires, to conclude that there is space for a homoerotic relationship.

Literary Analysis

The progression of Rosalind and Celia’s relationship through the play’s storyline suggests the possibility that Shakespeare had the intention for a homoerotic relationship that he ultimately had to annul in the face of heteronormative expectations. Rosalind and Celia are initially presented as a madly inseparable duo; before either character appears or speaks a single word, their relationship is cherished when Charles remarks that “never two ladies lov’d as they do” (1.1.112). Later, Le Beau describes the pair “whose loves / Are dearer than the natural bond of sisters (1.3.265-66). His recognition of their closeness generously implies a difference between “natural” and “unnatural” relationships, whereby Rosaline and Celia fair to the latter end of the spectrum. Jan Stirm observes in “Teaching Themes of Sisterhood” (1996)

that “In the early scenes of *As You Like It*, unnatural relationships work better than natural” and so, “the ‘unnatural,’ close, and pleasurable relationship between the female cousins serves as exemplary for natural relationships” (381-82). The couple’s homoerotic love surpasses the degree acceptable for siblings or cousins. They are a disruption of natural heteropatriarchal order, which explains why Duke attempts to separate them.

In the first two acts, major and minor characters alike repeat comments like those by Charles and Le Beau to advertise the women’s profound, non-normative bond. Shakespeare writes it to be unequivocally clear that they are emotionally connected. However, discussions in 1.2 reveal that their relationship is unsteady: when Rosalind refuses to cheer up, Celia bluntly accuses her of “lov[ing] me not with the full weight that I love thee,” for Celia could always be happy as long as “thou hadst been still with me” (1.2.7-10). Shakespeare’s reinforcement of their imbalance stands in opposition to the initial depiction of a mutually happy couple. From this contrast, it is reasonable to claim that the playwright wanted viewers to notice the potential for a homoerotic bond but must ultimately taper it off, which he accomplishes by writing Celia as an unfulfilled admirer whom Rosalind must “friendzone.” Throughout the play, Rosalind and Celia’s relationship despoils from mutual devotion, to imbalance, and concludes as with the pair estranged.

Despite Rosalind’s steadily evolving fate with Orlando, Shakespeare persists in underscoring the strength of Rosalind and Celia’s relationship in the first act. Since viewers cannot truthfully extrapolate the women’s unspoken thoughts, it is a task for the playwright to script the evidence of romantic potential that the audience can gather and decode. I will analyze two instances where Shakespeare composes Celia’s words and actions to discreetly express the potential. First, in 1.3 Celia protects Rosalind from Duke Frederick’s accusation of treason and order of exile. When Duke Frederick states that he initially did not banish Rosalind with Duke Senior for Celia’s sake, Celia begs:

I was too young that time to value her
 But now I know her. If she be a traitor,
 Why so am I. We still have slept together,
 Rose at an instant, learned, played, eat together,
 And, wheresoe’er we went, like Juno’s swans
 Still we went coupled and inseparable. (1.3.74-79)

This declaration provides many hints in favour of Celia’s homoerotic desire for Rosalind, some of which are too meaningful to be a coincidence. Celia first states that she has grown to appreciate Rosalind over time, that “now I know her” (1.3.75). To “know” Rosalind can also lend to the more sexual Biblical meaning, that is “To be sexually intimate with; esp. to have sexual intercourse with” (“know, v.”). Therefore,

although she was telling her father how she had deepened her awareness since Duke Senior's exile, Celia had simultaneously signalled to viewers a double entendre.

Next, she points out how familiar they were by sleeping together so closely that they "Rose at an instant" (1.3.77). Since sharing a bed was common in Renaissance England, merely identifying the act of sleeping in the same bed would be insubstantial evidence of sexual relations. But it is the word "Rose" that flags the preceding line's relevancy: she primarily uses it as a verb, but it doubles as her nickname for Rosalind. Shakespeare emphasizes this second double entendre by breaking the line after "together," to place Rose as the first word of its trochee, and capitalized (1.3.76-77). By inserting the unexpected nickname "Rose," Shakespeare signals the lines as content worth reviewing with a closer eye. I argue that without context, the idea of sleeping together is the tip of the iceberg – "Rose" provides the context to look deeper to uncover the homoerotic suggestion. Celia ends her harangue with another hint that likens the couple's closeness to Juno's swans, the ever-united animals of the Roman God of marriage and birth (1.3.78). With this allusion, Celia suggests that there is profound love and loyalty between them not unlike the mythical epitome of romantic love. Close reading this short passage provides an example of the many inconspicuous – but substantial – instances of Celia expressing her desire for Rosalind. This way, Shakespeare communicates that despite the looming heterosexual mores, Celia embodies her desire.

When not writing Celia as lusting over her beloved, Shakespeare also signals Celia's homoerotic desires when Orlando is present: while Rosalind and Orlando flirt, Celia is off to the side keeping quiet or muttering her jealousy. 4.1 follows Orlando's attempts to woo Rosalind as Ganymede. At this point, it is clear that although Celia knows their love is imbalanced, their relationship had never been threatened by an external love interest. Celia recognizes Orlando as competition. In one of her last speaking scenes, Celia markedly interrupts Rosalind and Orlando's heterosexual flirtation: she mewls "it pleases him to call you so / but he hath a Rosalind of a better leer than you" (4.1.64). Here, she is written to expend her final opportunities for speech to disrupt any leverage Orlando might have over Rosalind's heart. The sarcastic comment implies Celia prefers the Rosalind who used to return her adoration.

Then, after mocking Orlando's poetry in hopes of making Rosalind reconsider her love (3.2.166-255), Celia's jealousy is perhaps most apparent when Rosalind/Ganymede insists that Celia pretend to marry the two lovers: "Pray thee, marry us," Orlando almost begs. Appalled, Celia refuses by curtly stating "I cannot say the words" (4.1.132-33). Celia reasons to the pair that she is not a priest, therefore cannot officiate a wedding, even if it is a childish game. But Celia relents and initiates the pretend ceremony, repressing the playful mood to one of discomfort and tension, which is only prolonged when she remains silent for the rest of the couple's flirting (4.1.138-213). The awkwardness more principally lies in the staging of the scene, as Celia stands to the side and glares at the couple who flirt as if Celia is no longer present. To maintain

decent decorum for the mock courtship, Celia is somewhat obligated to stay by the couple as a pitiful chaperone for her former bosom buddy. Here, Shakespeare uses the power of stage direction to present Celia's longing. Camille Paglia affirms that the playwright "intends this subtext of sexual tension [as proven] by the fact that in his source in Lodge it is the Celia character who merrily invents and urges on the sham wedding ceremony" (202). After an extended period of third-wheeling, Shakespeare ends the scene with Celia berating Rosalind's misconduct. Celia then leaves in a huff, declaring "And I'll sleep" (4.1.214-31), and hereafter says just ten words. With her silence, the play's homoerotic potential is likewise muzzled. And with that, she is reinforced as a woman mourning the loss of her dearest Rosalind.

Despite the displayed romantic potential between Rosalind and Celia, Shakespeare appears to conclude the play with four heterosexual marriages to appeal to heteronormative standards. While the plot's progression elucidates that Rosalind and Orlando were directed to ultimately unite, Celia and Oliver are an especially unexpected coupling. The two had spoken but a few words to each other before the marriage—most of which while Celia was disguised as another woman. Their relationship is underdeveloped, unsubstantial, and arguably, non-consensual, for the silent Celia is never written to consent to her marriage. The pair are connected under the guise of romantic spontaneity, but beneath that, there is Shakespeare who knows he could not end the play with Rosalind and Celia, a queer relationship. In "Sexual Politics and Social Structure," Peter B. Erickson maintains that through Celia's forced silence and submission to Oliver, "the danger of female bonding is illustrated" and "it is made clear...that homoerotic female bonding is taboo and that the authorized defence against it is marriage" (81). I agree that Shakespeare embeds sufficient evidence of their relationship throughout the play but writes it as one-sided, then marries them to men to preserve the required heterosexuality.

The overall spontaneity of the marriage, especially with the fleeting appearance of Hymen, the Greek god of marriage, achieves an artificial wedding that signals a band-aid solution to wed the heterosexual couples. The wedding abruptly begins in the final act and ends more quickly than its introduction lasted (many thanks to Touchstone and Jacques for quarrelling beforehand). The wedding is constructed to be an acceptable social norm that represses the earlier homosexual events. Even after Rosalind and Celia shed disguises, the wedding carries on the performativity. It is too ceremonial to be genuine; even Jacques notices the strange atmosphere when he remarks that Touchstone and Audrey resemble one of the "couples ... coming to the ark," referring to the Biblical story of Noah's Ark (5.4.37). The final coupling is so unnatural to the play's universe that Shakespeare must pull from a popular culture—a trusted story of the Bible—to cushion it; thus, mimicking Noah's Ark gives the absurd arrangement a degree of support and validity. This also reinforces the heteronormativity of the couplings, for Noah's Ark mandated the collections of one male and one female of each species to preserve life on Earth.

Furthermore, the wedding's flimsiness is heightened when Hymen suddenly materializes to officiate the marriages, accompanied by a nearly comical burst of "still music" (5.4.112). As the only mythological creature to appear in the play, Hymen is a suspiciously incongruous addition. Scholars have hypothesized that the marriages are so unsubstantial that a mythological figure is needed to give them a crumb of authenticity; ironically, his transitory appearance only adds to the finale's fallacy. Koushik Mondal cites Slavoj Žižek (1997) in their deconstruction of the weddings to argue that, via the process of "subversion-through-identification" (Žižek 22 qtd in Mondal 266), the masque weddings shield any earlier homosexual expression from the heteronormative society. Therefore, the flimsy projection of heterosexuality to conclude the play is Shakespeare's final flourish to convince his audience that the play is indeed heterosexual, and thus, satisfactory.

Conclusion

This paper has proved that analyzing the bonds between same-sex characters in *As You Like It* is a complex endeavor due to the characters' existence being rooted in merely a performance written by the playwright. To navigate this, I presented close readings of multiple instances of Celia's intimate desires for Rosalind as evidence that critics can only conclude the *potential* for a homoerotic relationship through the progression and implementation of rhetoric, actions, and stage presence. Regardless of whether this proves the characters' sexualities – and whether that is an ethical goal to pursue – reading into the romance between Rosalind and Celia deepens one's reception to Celia who, in terms of the centre plot, mostly exists in Rosalind's shadow.

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