

Thesis Proposal for HNRS 499

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To Be Directed by Dr. Celia Lewis, under the Advisement of Dr. Rick Simmons, Honors

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I. Tentative Title

Deconstructing the Instances of Homosexuality in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

II. Objectives

In this thesis I plan to examine and ultimately refute the validity of scholars' claims that homosexuality and homoeroticism are dominant themes in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Because several situations throughout the play throw same-sex characters into romantic situations, scholars quickly take these situations and evaluate them superficially to establish a theme that is considered applicable to the entire work.

Homoerotic desire features heavily in Shakespeare's sonnets, in the first 126 of 154; yet while these sonnets are dedicated to "Mr. W. H." and the narrator specifically addresses a boy in Sonnet 126, he (the narrator) shifts his attention in the next twenty-six sonnets to a dark and mysterious woman, abruptly terminating the underlying homosexuality and distinctly shifting to heterosexuality. However, Shakespeare's plays are significantly more ambiguous, especially *As You Like It*: though it possesses cross-dressing and gender confusion, the "proceedings of Hymen," the god of marriage, suddenly and magically restore heterosexuality (Traub 135).

I will consider each instance of homoeroticism in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, removing the ambiguity and the seeming homosexuality that hovers over these instances and "prevents the reinstatement of heterosexuality" (135). As I expound upon these, I will illustrate that in each same-sex scenario, a character of the opposite sex appears, or in the case of

“Ganymede,” is created, without fail. This thesis will argue that the dominant theme in *As You Like It* is actually heterosexuality by demonstrating that as each possibly homosexual scenario arises, it is thwarted in some way, allowing heterosexuality to resume.

III. Related Research

Upon the subject of homosexuality and cross-dressing in *As You Like It*, there is by no means a dearth of scholarship. In her article “The Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy,” Valerie Traub addresses the uncertainties raised by Rosalind’s cross-dressing and becoming “Ganymede.” Traub also analyzes the god Hymen’s appearance, positing that Hymen brings “only an ambivalent closure” (135). The author directly states that she is not “arguing that Rosalind or Orlando or Phebe ‘is’ ‘a’ ‘homosexual,’” but that they “temporarily inhabit a homoerotic position of desire,” the central point of her arguments on *As You Like It* (141).

Phyllis Rackin focuses heavily on cross-dressing and its implications both within *As You Like It* and during the Middle Ages. Rackin posits in “Boys Will Be Girls” that Rosalind’s “cross-dressed disguise is central to both the complication and the resolution of the plot” and that her disguise complicates the ability to mark a character as heterosexual or homosexual (74). In “The Place(s) of Women in Shakespeare’s World: Historical Fact and Feminist Interpretation,” Rackin illustrates the importance of clothes, emphasizing that “women’s clothing was clearly distinguished from men’s” to help differentiate between the sexes (28).

In “The Unqueering of *As You Like It*,” Ryan Tracy compares Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* to a Brooklyn Academy of Music production of the play in 2010. Tracy argues that the director, Sam Mendes, attempts to “suppress the homosexual dynamics that are inherent in Shakespeare’s play” (26). However, according to Tracy, the director goes further and uses the homoerotic instances to instead evoke an “eerie sense of homophobia” (26).

In her introduction to *As You Like It*, Jean Howard discusses Rosalind's cross-dressing and medieval perceptions of the sexes. Stating that "Rosalind's disguise...complicate[s] her representation," Howard exposes the medieval view that men's and women's genitalia were similar, emphasizing the importance of "behavioral differences and...distinctions of dress" in determining a person's sex (1619).

IV. Research Need

Many scholars analyze homosexuality and homoeroticism in *As You Like It*, but few argue against its thematic strength. Focusing on Orlando's courtship of the false "Rosalind," behind who is really the male "Ganymede," scholars allow this to overshadow the irrefutable fact that the real Rosalind is who Orlando truly courts; thus, Orlando is either courting "Rosalind" or Rosalind but never Ganymede directly. Scholars also attribute the dissolution of the homoeroticism and the restoration of the heterosexual "norm" to the appearance of Hymen, the god of marriage, at the end of the play, while the constantly thwarted and disrupted homosexual scenes actually maintain that heterosexuality throughout its entirety.

In my thesis I will demonstrate that the disruption of the homosexual and homoerotic behaviors has been largely ignored in research on *As You Like It* and will strengthen the allegedly unstable heterosexual interactions throughout the play. In effect, I will take the arguments in favor of homosexuality and dismantle them to expose their instability.

V. Methodology

This thesis will have five chapters. Chapter one will dispel the tone of homosexuality in *As You Like It* between Rosalind and Celia before they run away to the Forest of Ardenne, the principal setting where much of the apparently homoerotic behaviors occur. Research and discussion does not only focus on Orlando and "Ganymede," but also on Celia's homoerotic

obsession with Rosalind. I will demonstrate how each of Celia's attempts to create a homosexual relationship with Rosalind is foiled by the appearance of a male: first, Celia's father; next, Orlando; then, Ganymede. I will use Acts 1 through 3, focusing on Rosalind and Celia's conversations, Celia's questioning of Rosalind's sudden feelings for Orlando, and Rosalind and Celia's decision to run away to the Forest of Ardenne.

Chapter two will concentrate on "Ganymede" and Orlando's dynamic within Ardenne. Once in the forest, the lines between the sexes are blurred, exposing Orlando to homoerotic tendencies as Ganymede convinces him to treat and court him (Ganymede) as "Rosalind." I will prove both Orlando's insistence on only courting "Rosalind" and never just Ganymede and Celia/"Aliena's" inability to contribute to the deepening of this homoerotically-tinged charade leave no support for an argument in favor of homosexuality. I will cite Acts 3 through 5 and will use Orlando and Ganymede/"Rosalind's" conversations and the mock marriage in Act 4, Scene 1.

Chapter three will return to female homosexual desire and examine the relationship between "Ganymede" and Phoebe the shepherdess. Ganymede does not even momentarily entertain or encourage Phoebe's affections; in fact, he harshly and bluntly repulses them. Phoebe's ability to be easily bargained from her love of Ganymede and to be swayed to accept Silvius the shepherd, whom she has spent all of her time denying, illustrates the weakness of the current with which homosexuality runs through the play. I will cite Acts 2 through 5, specifically Ganymede and Phoebe's interactions and Scenes 3 and 4 of Act 5.

Chapter four will highlight the less-addressed scenes of male intimacy experienced between Orlando and his servant, Adam, and among Duke Senior as his men. The interactions within these groups of men, especially the love expressed between Adam and Orlando, are not

homosexual but, rather, homosocial. Because the Forest of Ardenne is often the setting for homoerotic situations, I will expel this possibility by proving homosociality between Orlando and Adam before they enter the forest and among Duke Senior and his men since they have been banished there. I will examine Orlando and Adam's relationship in Acts 1 and 2 and Duke Senior's relationship with his men in Acts 2 and 3.

Chapter five will be a conclusion, summarizing my claim against homosexuality as the dominant theme of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. I will reiterate my argument for heterosexuality as the main theme, maintaining its strength and validity.

VI. References

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