



# “Betrothed Both to a Maid and Man”: Bisexuality in William Shakespeare’s Crossdressing Plays

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“Betrothed Both to a Maid and Man”:

Bisexuality in William Shakespeare’s Crossdressing Plays

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the existence of bisexuality in William Shakespeare's three major crossdressing plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. The past few decades have seen several homoerotic interpretations of Shakespeare's crossdressing plays, but many of these readings argue that same-sex desire is transitional and that because the plays end in opposite-sex marriage, same-sex desire can never be consummated. While a case can be made for these arguments, readings that rely on the heterosexual-homosexual binary overlook the possibility of bisexual identities and desire within the plays.

Historical accounts illustrate that same-sex relationships and bisexual identities did exist during the Elizabethan era. However, I will be examining bisexuality from a modern perspective and, as such, will not discuss the existence, or lack thereof, of bisexual terminology within early modern culture or as it relates to Shakespeare's own sexual identity.

Instances of bisexuality within the plays will be analyzed through the use of romantic language and imagery as seen in three relationship categorizations: same-sex, opposite-sex, and crossdressed. The nature of romantic language and imagery in each set of relationships not only proves that textual evidence exists for a bisexual reading, but that same-sex and opposite-sex desires are fully realized by the end of each play. By comparing the nature of same-sex and opposite-sex interactions, this thesis concludes that same-sex relationships are given the same respect and legitimacy as opposite-sex

relationships, and that same-sex desire does not disappear once a character enters into opposite-sex marriage.

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## Terminology

In this thesis I will be using the terms same-sex and opposite-sex when discussing the relationships of bisexual characters. Homosexual and heterosexual will only be used in relation to characters who are coded that way. The decision to use this terminology comes from my own personal desire to not perpetuate bisexual erasure by labeling bisexual characters as homosexual or heterosexual based on the gender of their current partner.

Furthermore, because the term “queer” is still seen as a pejorative for many people within the LGBTQA+ community, I want to note that I am using it here as it relates to the official school of queer theory. It is not intended in any other manner.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

The emergence of queer theory in the late 20th century led to a significant amount of literary scholars re-examining Shakespeare's works in order to establish a groundwork for homoerotic interpretations. While the first recorded interpretation of Shakespeare's works as homoerotic was in the late 18th century (Neill 400), it can be surmised that John Benson's 1640 decision to re-publish Shakespeare's sonnets with masculine pronouns changed to feminine pronouns was due to concerns about homoerotic interpretation (McLelland 347). Critics have debated for centuries about the existence of homoeroticism in Shakespearean canon, though it should be noted that the term "homoerotic" is often used by queer theorists to reference same-sex attraction and dismiss queer identities, such as bisexuality, that include both same-sex and opposite-sex attraction. While the past few decades have seen a rise in queer interpretations of Shakespeare's works, much of this research is confined to gay and lesbian analyses. Yet, many of the plays examined as homoerotic contain characters who are romantically entangled with members of both genders. By focusing solely on homoerotic relationships, and ignoring the presence of both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships, critics have overlooked the possibility of a bisexual reading of Shakespeare's works.

Shakespeare's "crossdressing plays" – *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night* – all contain relationships that can be viewed as bisexual. In each of

these plays, Shakespeare subverts gender tropes and portrays same-sex relationships that carry the same emotional weight as opposite-sex relationships. This is seen through the use of romantic language and imagery that relies on traditionally romantic tropes, such as the exchange of vows and tokens of affection, declarations of passion, and matrimonial bonds. Through the lens of romantic language and imagery, three different types of relationships will be analyzed in this thesis: opposite-sex relationships (Portia/Bassanio; Rosalind/Orlando; Viola/Orsino, Sebastian/Olivia), same-sex relationships (Antonio/Bassanio; Rosalind/Celia; Sebastian/Antonio), and relationships where one character is crossdressed (Portia-Balthasar/Bassanio; Rosalind-Ganymede/Orlando, Rosalind-Ganymede/Celia; Viola-Cesario/Olivia, Viola-Cesario/Orlando). The purpose of comparing the use of romantic language and imagery in each pairing is to provide an analysis that shows how same-sex and opposite-sex relationships are often used as parallels. That is, the themes and language used in scenes of opposite-sex relationships are often reused in scenes containing same-sex or crossdressed relationships and the same respect and legitimacy is attached to both pairings. This is critical to understanding the nature of bisexuality within the plays, and helps to provide evidence of characters who are textually attracted to the same-sex *and* the opposite-sex.

It is important to note, however, that a different approach needs to be taken for each play. While all three plays contain characters who disguise themselves as men, crossdressing represents different thematic plot points in each play. For instance, compared to the sexually charged relationships and romantic intrigues in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* can be considered the least sexually

adventurous of the crossdressing plays. Crossdressing does not have the same sexual connotations in *The Merchant of Venice* that it does in the other two plays, and instead enables Portia to witness the legitimacy of Antonio and Bassanio's relationship. Likewise, crossdressing in *As You Like It* is used to disrupt heteronormative traditions therefore allowing Rosalind to participate in the act of marriage with Celia and Orlando. While Viola's crossdressing in *Twelfth Night* is the only play within this trio that creates the gender confusion and ambiguity commonly associated with the crossdressing plays, her crossdressing is used as a way to introduce her to Orsino and Olivia's households so that she can seduce them with language rather than with her androgynous appearance. Thus, it is not entirely crossdressing that links all three of the plays together, but the use of romantic language and imagery to portray bisexual identities.

However, crossdressing is still an important aspect of the plays. Existing criticism of homoeroticism in the crossdressing plays suggests that the act of crossdressing and the homosexuality of non-crossdressed characters are temporary states that are erased when characters enter into opposite-sex relationships. I hypothesize that because the use of romantic language for same-sex relationships contains the same level of intimacy as opposite-sex relationships, we might examine bisexuality within the plays as permanent instead of temporary. This is evidenced by scenes depicting attraction to characters in their biological states *and* crossdressed states as well as scenes where crossdressed characters or characters in same-sex relationships engage in traditionally heterosexual romantic rituals, such as participating in a relationship, courtship, or marriage. Equally important is the use of romantic language in conversations about courtship and

connection, especially in regards to promises and declarations characters make about their emotional state or the validity and strength of their feelings for another character of the same or opposite gender. This suggests that same-sex relationships not only exist within and beyond the realm of gender ambiguity and crossdressing, but that although each play ends in heterosexual marriage, this does not erase same-sex desire, thus making a case for realized and permanent bisexual identities.

When talking about bisexuality in the context of these plays, it is important to acknowledge that defining bisexuality in mainstream society and academia has always been a particular challenge as the term means different things to different people. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, I am using one of David M. Halperin's proposed definitions of bisexuality in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bisexual", and classifying bisexuality as individuals who "are sexually attracted to the individuals they are attracted to, whether those individuals are male or female" (452). Furthermore, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, bisexual was a term that did not exist during Shakespeare's era. While a historical background of the term is important, it does not ultimately affect the perception of bisexuality within the plays. My analysis will be conducted from a modern perspective and will therefore not discuss bisexuality as it existed in early modern society or in relation to Shakespeare's own sexual identity.

The goal of this thesis is to offer a reading that uses romantic language and imagery to examine realized bisexual identities within Shakespeare's three major crossdressing plays. With this approach, I am building on nascent scholarship that explores bisexual readings of Shakespearean canon, and moving away from the

heterosexual-homosexual binary that has long defined interpretations of Shakespeare's work. Such an analysis not only offers a broader, more inclusive and more modern view of the plays, but it also allows the academic community to consider the possibility of bisexual readings of Shakespeare's plays.

## Chapter II

### Historical Background

The study of bisexuality and homosexuality during the Early Modern Period is a difficult and often fraught subject. Queer relationships have existed as early as 3000 BCE (Neill 84), and while they certainly did exist during the Elizabethan era, the social, political, and intellectual conventions around them were perceived differently than they are today. Scholars such as Alan Bray, Bruce Smith, and Claude Summers have provided valuable research regarding sexual practices in Early Modern England, such as the fact that though homosexual and bisexual relationships existed during the Early Modern Period, the terms “homosexual” or “bisexual” did not exist until the 19th century (Smith 11). “Sodomy” is the closest terminology the Early Modern Period had for same-sex relationships, and while sodomy was outlawed in Elizabethan England, homosexual or bisexual affairs were common in the courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I (Neill 399-403). Furthermore, as Marjorie Garber states in *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, “men often had sex with other men, and women with other women, without regarding themselves as what we would today call homosexuals. ‘Bisexuality’ is an anachronistic term for early modern Europe, but that does not mean that instances of it are absent from the literary and cultural record” (15). Considering this, it seems revisionist to dismiss the knowledge and existence of homosexual and bisexual desire in Shakespeare’s era.

While an understanding of the social and political climate of the Early Modern Period is necessary when discussing gender and sexuality in Shakespeare's plays, I will be analyzing these plays using a modern understanding of sexual identities. Because the language and interactions Shakespeare used in his plays were indicative of the time in which he was writing, it is difficult to objectively analyze sexuality in these plays without a modern perspective<sup>1</sup>. As Kate Chedgzoy states in "'Two Loves I Have': Shakespeare and Bisexuality", "bisexuality is a crucial concept for thinking about early modern sexualities in ways which simultaneously acknowledge and bridge the divide between our twentieth-century understandings of desire and those which prevailed in Shakespeare's time" (118). That is, I am not attempting to declare that Shakespeare was bisexual or that he intentionally wrote bisexual characters, merely that a bisexual reading posits the idea of a bisexual interpretation influenced by contemporary ideas about sexuality.

One of the reasons a bisexual reading has been ignored, I believe, is because the idea of bisexuality is a relatively modern concept, and one that is divisive and often ignored even by members of the LGBTQA+ community. While the first recorded usage of the term was in the 1890s (Chedgzoy 107), it wasn't acknowledged by mainstream society until the 1970s, and even then was considered more of a chic, titillating experimentation than a true sexual identity (Garber 19). There was a small move away from this stereotype in the 1990s, but contemporary society still has difficulty with the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this subject, see Stanley Wells, Chapter 3: "Just Good Friends?" in *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love*.

concept of bisexuality. A long-standing problem that bisexuals face is the idea that they have “chosen” a sexual identity (that is, chosen to be either heterosexual or homosexual) based on the gender of their partner. Yet, sexual attraction for the same-sex does not disappear when one’s partner is of the opposite sex and vice versa. This reliance on the heterosexual-homosexual binary perpetuates biphobia and bisexual erasure in academia and mainstream society, which is startlingly prominent even with all the societal advances made towards equality and awareness.

Referred to as “a silent sexuality” (Barker and Langdrige 389), bisexuality is often written off as “just a phase” or as an individual being “bi-curious” or “confused” (390), implying that an interest in the same-sex and opposite-sex is a temporary flight of adolescent fancy before the transition to adulthood and decision to choose sexual desire for one gender. Furthermore, “the situation with regard to bisexuality and queer theory is undoubtedly complex and potentially problematic...there has been very little discussion of bisexuality within queer theory in general, with most ‘queer discussion’ remaining focused on lesbian and gay histories, theories, and practices” (391). Queer theory emerged with the intent to challenge the status quo of heteronormative culture, yet many queer theorists still choose to define “queer” as gay and lesbian (Feldman 265). By erasing any mention and discussion of bisexuality, it is insinuated that bisexuality cannot be considered a legitimate identity.



This type of bisexual erasure<sup>2</sup> and stereotyping has led to critics emphatically claiming bisexuality could not exist in Shakespearean canon as anything more than a temporary idea. They often support this statement by saying that in viewing the gender ambiguity of crossdressing, the audience is “meant both to see and to see through the disguise to the other sexual being beneath” (Slights 339) or that “the cross-dressed heroine in early modern drama evokes the specter of illicit sexual practices and interests through her disguise. However, female homoerotic desire is constructed without the threat it will be fulfilled since in the world of romantic comedy the characters are otherwise heterosexually encoded” (Walen 419). These theories indicate that there is no danger of subversive sexual identities because those identities were never intended to be permanent. Categorizing a sexual identity as temporary rather than permanent erases its authenticity and reinforces the idea of a sexual binary. Yet, while each of the crossdressing plays end in heterosexual marriages, the act of heterosexual marriage does not erase same-sex desire on behalf of the characters.

Garber’s landmark *Vice Versa* offered a much needed study of bisexuality in historical and modern society, detailing how people have related to the idea of sexuality beyond the heterosexual-homosexual binary. Her work has made it possible to put forward a bisexual reading of Shakespeare, and her exploration of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity serves as a groundwork for my own research. Garber suggests

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<sup>2</sup> For more on bisexuality and bisexual erasure in academia and society, see "Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Sex/Gender Structure: The Case of Bisexual Women" by Amber Ault, "Queer Ethics: Or, The Challenge of Bisexuality to Lesbian Ethics" by Elisabeth D. Daumer, "Queering Queer Theory, Or Why Bisexuality Matters" by Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell, and "Reclaiming Sexual Difference: What Queer Theory Can't Tell Us About Sexuality" by Susan Feldman.

that Shakespeare has been “reinvented by every generation in its own image” (52), but that a bisexual reading of his works has been ignored because “a bisexual Shakespeare fits no one’s erotic agenda” (515). Garber’s analysis looks at both Shakespeare and the sonnets through a bisexual lens, claiming that academia is comfortable with the idea of a “good bisexual Shakespeare, the Shakespeare who saw equally into the life of men and women” (515-6) whereas “the other bisexual Shakespeare, the Shakespeare who might, like the speaker of the sonnets, have had passionate sexual relationships with both men and women, is a less universal, and less universally welcome figure” (516). Garber’s insistence that critics, and perhaps society, are uncomfortable with the sexual and emotional aspects of bisexuality in Shakespearean canon is something I have noticed in my own research.

A bisexual analysis is important because it subverts the traditional heterosexual-homosexual binary and offers a new perspective of sexuality in Shakespeare’s plays. Furthermore, in examining the existence of bisexuality within the plays my reading moves away from the traditional approaches of the past few decades, and in doing so, not only does a bisexual reading open Shakespearean canon up to a broader audience, but it also addresses the erasure of bisexual interpretation in the literary community. By demonstrating that Shakespeare’s crossdressing plays do contain bisexual content, I hope to prove that analyzing Shakespeare through a modern lens does not tarnish the plays, but rather adds an important perspective to the existing body of criticism. Moreover, I hope to prove that bisexuality is an identity that should be viewed as equal to any other

relationship that falls under the LGBTQA+ umbrella, moving away from the school of thought that ignores, and even outright denies, its existence.

### Chapter III

#### The Merchant of Venice

When discussing sexuality within *The Merchant of Venice*, the relationship between Antonio/Bassanio and Portia/Bassanio becomes the center of the play. The Antonio-Bassanio-Portia relationship is, at its core, a split object love triangle. If we view Bassanio as bisexual, Antonio as homosexual, and Portia as heterosexual, we're faced with a triangle that places Bassanio firmly in the middle with romantic connections to both characters. Bassanio is torn between his love for Antonio and his love for Portia, and his struggle throughout the play is the underlying pressure to choose between them. Yet, this proves complicated as Bassanio cannot court Portia without help from Antonio, just as he cannot save Antonio's life without Portia's help. Bassanio is bound to Portia by marriage, but he is also bound "to Antonio by friendship and even deeper obligations; this is the man whose flesh, his very life, was pawned for him" (Halio 55). Yet, several critics, such as Steve Patterson and Coppélia Kahn, view the Antonio and Bassanio relationship as nothing more than a homoerotic friendship on the basis that the play ends with Bassanio and Portia bound in marriage. As Kahn notes, "In Shakespeare's psychology, men first seek to mirror themselves in homoerotic attachment... and then to confirm themselves through difference, in a bond with the opposite sex—the marital bond" (21). Such a reading ignores the fact that there was no other option *but* heterosexual marriage during the Elizabethan era, as it is unlikely that a same-sex marriage could have ever occurred. This analysis seems influenced by the idea of

bisexual individuals “choosing a side” – that is, that because Bassanio enters into a seemingly heterosexual marriage with Portia, his close bond with Antonio must be platonic or, at most, an unfulfilled homoerotic friendship. Except, Bassanio spends four acts of the play hesitant to extract himself from the love triangle he finds himself in the middle of, and he makes a point of treating his relationship with Portia as equal to his relationship with Antonio. Nowhere is this clearer than the romantic language, imagery, and actions that occur in Bassanio’s scenes with Portia and Antonio. While the delivery and circumstances of these acts and speeches differ depending on who he is interacting with, the romantic language and imagery used in each scene carry the same emotional weight for each pairing.

The relationship between Bassanio and Antonio is the impetus for most of the events of the play. Yet, the insistence of critics to debate the validity of their friendship is important to address. Joseph Pequigney, for instance, is interested in exploring the idea of a same-sex relationship between Antonio and Bassanio, but he states that “neither of the Venetian friends ever makes reference to physical beauty in the other, or ever speaks in amorous terms to or about the other...There is almost nothing to suggest a sexual dimension in the amity of Antonio and Bassanio. This Antonio is not.... ‘in love’, and his love for his friend is *philia* instead of *eros*” (213). Pequigney believes that Antonio and Bassanio share a relationship borne of “male homosocial desire” rather than realized or consummated same-sex love (214). Steve Patterson seems similarly hesitant to ascribe anything sexual to Bassanio and Antonio’s relationship. He states:

Antonio's love is a frustrated sexual desire for Bassanio and, further...his passionate love falls into an early modern tradition of homoerotic friendship, or amity. Amity represented friendship as an identity premised upon the value of same-sex love which codified passionate behaviors between men....Central to

*The Merchant of Venice* is a dramatization of the failure of male friendship in a radically shifting mercantile economy – an economy that seems better regulated by a social structure based on marital alliance and heterosexual reproduction. The play's uncanny resonance comes from the way it anticipates modern romantic ideals by realigning the value and nature of amity's stock literary figures: the male lover and his beloved, the female marriage partner, and the social outcast. (10)

Focusing only on the idea of a passionate friendship demeans the intensity of the emotional reactions Antonio and Bassanio have towards each other at several points throughout the play, especially during the trial scene when Bassanio exclaims, “But life itself, my wife, and all the world, /Are not with me esteem'd above thy life” (4.1.281-2). Additionally, Patterson’s point that Antonio and Bassanio have a failed friendship because they live in a “social structure based on marital alliance and heterosexual reproduction” not only ignores the social and political climate of the era, but it reinforces the idea of temporary sexual identities. Antonio and Bassanio would not be able to perform public displays of love in the same manner of Portia and Bassanio because, as Alan Sinfield reminds us, “sodomy...was condemned almost universally in legal and religious discourses, and the penalty upon conviction was death” (130). Moreover, he continues, it is entirely possible that “the proper signs of friendship could be the same as those of same-sex passion” (134). This theory gives credence to a romantic aspect of Antonio and Bassanio’s friendship, especially in regards to the pair’s more overtly romantic interactions. Such a situation is most prominently displayed during the scene where Salarino and Salanio recount Bassanio and Antonio’s separation in 2.8.:

**Salarino:** I saw Bassanio and Antonio part.  
Bassanio told him he would make some speed  
Of his return. He answered, 'Do not so;  
Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio,  
But stay the very riping of the time;

And for the Jew's bond which he hath of me,  
 Let it not enter in your mind of love:  
 Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts  
 To courtship and such fair ostents of love  
 As shall conveniently become you there.'  
 And even there, his eye being big with tears,  
 Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,  
 And with affection wondrous sensible  
 He wrung Bassanio's hand; and so they parted.

**Salanio:** I think he only loves the world for him. (2.8.36-50)

One of the most important aspects of this scene is that Salarino and Salanio provide a third party account of Bassanio and Antonio's relationship. They describe the relationship in intimate terms, using the phrases "eye being big with tears" (2.8.46) and "affection wondrous sensible" (2.8.48). These phrases are evocative and denote the depth of Antonio's love for Bassanio. Antonio is brought to tears and overcome with emotional gestures due to the pain Bassanio's departure causes him. The fact that these phrases are said after Antonio mentions Bassanio's "mind of love" (2.8.43) and "courtship" (2.8.45) keenly portrays Antonio's misery over Bassanio's marriage to Portia. Likewise, the lines, "Bassanio told him he would make some speed / Of his return" (2.8.37-8) indicates that though Bassanio is eager to see and court Portia, he is also eager to return to Antonio's side as soon as possible. Salanio's added comment of "I think he only loves the world for him" (2.8.50) indicates that Antonio loves nothing else in his life the way he loves Bassanio. These phrases are all indicators of realized romantic love, and show that while "the text of the *Merchant* gives no plain indication that the love between Antonio and Bassanio is informed by erotic passion [it] does not mean that such passion was inconceivable, then; it may well mean that it didn't require particular presentation"

(Sinfield 134). Essentially, romantic relationships are not only identified through physical actions, but through language and emotions. Antonio and Bassanio do not need to have certain physical interactions to prove their love, as their use of language and actions provide enough evidence of their romantic relationship.

Moreover, Salarino and Salanio are not the only characters who notice these emotional and verbal bonds. Portia notices as well. The nature of Antonio and Bassanio's relationship is such that "Portia can be confident that in knowing one she thereby gains knowledge of the other whom she has never met" (Pequigney 211-2). Her speech in 3.4 is the first indication that she considers Bassanio and Antonio's relationship as more than a traditional friendship. She says:

I never did repent for doing good,  
Nor shall not now; for in companions  
That do converse and waste the time together,  
Whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love,  
There must be needs a like proportion  
Of lineaments, of manners and of spirit,  
Which makes me think that this Antonio,  
Being the bosom lover of my lord,  
Must needs be like my lord. If it be so,  
How little is the cost I have bestowed  
In purchasing the semblance of my soul  
From out the state of hellish cruelty. (3.4.10-21)

What is important to note is that she uses imagery relating to spirituality, romantic love, and physical love to describe Antonio and Bassanio's relationship. The word "lineaments" (3.4.15) means physical appearance, and placing this word in a line that reads "there must be needs a like proportion / Of lineaments, of manners and of spirit" (3.4.14-5) is notable. "Needs a like proportion" shows the importance of reciprocity in a relationship and that for two individuals to have such a close and intimate relationship,



they must each have components that will please one another. To use a word that refers to physical characteristics insinuates that Portia may wonder about Bassanio's physical attraction toward Antonio. Portia includes "of manners and of spirit" (3.4.15) in this theory, postulating that in addition to physical attraction, there is also an element of moral and spiritual compatibility in Antonio and Bassanio's relationship. The mention of "whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love" (3.4.13) invokes a romantic image of "wholeness", as well as the idea that because they are complementary, Antonio and Bassanio's lives are not only entwined, but their souls are equal to one another. Portia seems to believe this as seen in the lines, "Which makes me think that this Antonio, / Being the bosom lover of my lord, / Must needs be like my lord" (3.4.16-8). She postulates that because Antonio and Bassanio are so entwined in each other's life, they must therefore be similar in all other aspects of each other's lives. Additionally, the use of "semblance of my soul" (3.4.20) indicates that she believes she and Bassanio share a soul, and that because she shares a soul with Bassanio and he evidently shares a soul with Antonio, the three of them are irrevocably bound together. Portia states the three of them have "a kind of spiritual homology between the male-male and male-female loves, and sees them now composing a triangle" (Pequigney 212). That is, even though she has never met Antonio, she believes she is capable of understanding the importance of his relationship with Bassanio *because* she is bound to Bassanio through the bonds of marriage and love.

This assumption of a shared understanding and shared love for Bassanio proves problematic. While Shakespeare does set up Antonio and Portia as parallels to one another, they also become rivals for Bassanio's affection. The Bassanio/Antonio and

Bassanio/Portia relationships are cyclical for the majority of the play, and “until the trial scene, it might seem that Shakespeare is preparing for a fairy-tale conclusion, in which both Antonio’s and Portia’s claims on Bassanio could be satisfied” (Kahn 21) and Bassanio’s bisexual desires fulfilled. The trial scene, which includes Portia’s crossdressing, is what fractures the unity between the Antonio-Bassanio-Portia triad. Yet, prior to this scene, Shakespeare takes pains to display the resemblance between Antonio and Portia, notably by giving them strikingly similar introductions and by mirroring their respective first meetings with Bassanio. These similarities are representative of Bassanio’s bisexual desires as it shows he is interested in Portia and Antonio for the content of their character, but it also creates an underlying sense of competition between his two love interests.

*The Merchant of Venice* opens on Antonio stating, “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad / It wearies me” (1.1.1-2). In the next scene, Portia is introduced with the line, “my little body is awearied of / this great world” (1.2.1-2). The melancholy of both characters is initially left unexplained, though we soon learn that Bassanio is the cause of their emotional turmoil. Portia’s melancholy is more immediately discovered, as she is unhappy with the casket test implemented by her father. She remarks that she “may neither chose who I / would, nor refuse who I dislike” (1.2.22-23). The suitor she prefers, of course, is Bassanio (1.2.112). Antonio’s melancholy, on the other hand, is more evasive. Antonio says that his “merchandise makes me not sad” (1.1.45) in response to Salarino’s query, and then denies Solanio’s guess that Antonio is depressed because he is in love (1.1.46-7). Many scholars have argued that the reason for Antonio’s melancholy is due to his love for Bassanio (Halio 31), and Joseph Pequigney expands on this debate,

explaining that “Solanio had clearly meant ‘in love’ erotically and heterosexually, which Antonio never is. His ‘fie, fie’ rules out that but not the kind of love he holds for Bassanio. He had known something about his friend’s wife-seeking plans even before the opening speech, and that the pending loss of him was the cause of the initial sadness is implicit” (210-11). By introducing Antonio and Portia in the same manner – they are both suffering from a weariness caused by events outside of their own control – Shakespeare indicates that Antonio and Portia begin the play on even footing in regards to their relationship with Bassanio. The reason for their melancholy is also shared, as Antonio worries over losing Bassanio to marriage and Portia worries that Bassanio won’t be presented as an eligible suitor. A solution to these problems is soon revealed, and unsurprisingly, the solution is also shared.

The solution to both Antonio and Portia’s problems occur during Antonio and Bassanio’s first interaction. Bassanio seeks “the means / To hold a rival place” (1.1.173-4) amongst Portia’s suitors. In describing his plight to Antonio, Bassanio states, “To you, Antonio, / I owe the most, in money and in love / And from your love I have a warranty / To unburden all my plots and purposes / How to get clear of all the debts I owe” (1.1.130-4). While the use of “in love” and “your love” may not necessarily be romantic in nature, it is still an intimate expression, and one Bassanio uses to emphasize not only his reliance on Antonio, but the strength of the bond they share. Antonio’s reply, “My purse, my person, my extremest means, / Lie all unlock’d to your occasions” (1.1.138-9) is even more intimate and firmly romantic. Antonio indicates that the nature of his and Bassanio’s relationship means that he is willing to give Bassanio anything he wishes, no matter the price. Considering the fervor with which he agrees to help Bassanio, it is

possible that Antonio's actions are not only borne out of his love and desire for Bassanio, but also a desperation to keep Bassanio in his life (Sinfield 125). Yet, while his action solves both his own problem of potentially losing Bassanio to marriage and Portia's problem of Bassanio's eligibility as a suitor, it also acts as a catalyst for several of the problems that tie Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia together for the remainder of the play.

The price of Antonio's offer turns out to be a forfeit of "an equal pound / Of [his] fair flesh to be cut off and taken" (1.3.146-7) if he defaults as the guarantor of the loan Bassanio receives from Shylock. Though eager to receive the money that would allow him to wed Portia, Bassanio recoils from this arrangement, stating that "You shall not seal such a bond for me. / I'll rather dwell in my necessity" (1.3.151-2). Antonio is undeterred and states "although I neither lend nor borrow / By taking nor by giving of excess, / Yet, to supply the ripe wants of my friend / I'll break a custom" (1.3.58-61). As we later learn, removing a pound of flesh would kill Antonio. By agreeing to the terms of Shylock's bond, Antonio has essentially vowed to give his life in exchange for Bassanio's happiness. This is in direct parallel to Portia's claim that by agreeing to marry Bassanio, everything in her life now belongs to him. After Bassanio successfully chooses the correct casket, Portia says:

Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit  
 Commits itself to yours to be directed,  
 As from her lord, her governor, her king.  
 Myself and what is mine to you and yours  
 Is now converted.  
 .....  
 I give them with this ring,  
 Which when you part from, lose, or give away,  
 Let it presage the ruin of your love  
 And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (3.2.163-74)

Her ring represents not only her love, but her life, which she gladly gives to Bassanio in exchange for his fidelity and affection. There are several things to unpack from these two sections, most notably the way Portia and Antonio seek and exchange gifts and vows with Bassanio in order to strengthen the bonds of their relationship. The phrases “supply the ripe wants of my friend” (1.3.60) and “her gentle spirit / Commits itself to yours to be directed” (3.2.163-4) are both passionate sentiments. In addition to giving Bassanio what he desires, Antonio and Portia are actively giving Bassanio agency over their lives. The use of words such as “supply” (1.3.60) and “commit” (3.2.164) evoke a sense of surety, which can also be viewed as a play on the term “bond”, indicating that at this point in the play Antonio and Portia are still equal in their relationships with Antonio.

Conversely, the phrases “ruin of your love / and be my vantage to exclaim on you” (3.2.173-4) and “an equal pound / Of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken” (1.3.146-7), are used to indicate the punishment that will occur should Antonio and Portia’s vows be betrayed. Portia and Antonio use their gifts to Bassanio – the ring and the loan – as tokens of affection, but these are tokens that come with an unexpected price. Should Bassanio “part from, lose, or give away” (3.2.182) Portia’s ring and should Antonio fail to repay Shylock, Bassanio loses their presence from his life. The use of “ruin” and “taken”, both harsh, forceful terms, enforce the severity of this potential punishment. Yet, by accepting not only the gift of Portia’s ring and Antonio’s willingness to act as collateral, but the terms that come along with each gift, Bassanio indicates that he is aware of the attached consequences and accepts responsibility for upholding the vows he made in each relationship. The dual symbols of Portia’s ring and Antonio’s loan

portray both characters as willing to fully commit to Bassanio and Bassanio's acceptance is an indication of his willingness to share his life with them.

At this point in the play, the Antonio-Bassanio-Portia triangle is fluid and equal. Antonio and Portia have made promises of equal weight to Bassanio, and Bassanio has accepted them with equal distinction. This equality is interrupted by the emergence of the ring plot, when Bassanio is finally forced to choose between his two relationships. As Coppélia Kahn remarks, "when Antonio's ships fail to return and his bond with Shylock falls due, he sends a heartrending letter to Bassanio which arrives, significantly, just when he and Portia are pledging their love, and prevents them from consummating their marriage. Bassanio's two bonds of love, one with a man, the other with a woman, are thus brought into conflict" (22). Antonio's letter arrives after Bassanio has chosen the correct casket, but before his wedding to Portia. The letter presents a challenge in the sense that Bassanio is now torn between Portia's demand that they marry immediately and Antonio's request to see Bassanio before Shylock extracts his pound of flesh.

Portia's speech occurs first and reads:

Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond.  
 Double six thousand, and then treble that,  
 Before a friend of this description  
 Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault.  
 First go with me to church and call me wife,  
 And then away to Venice to your friend;  
 For never shall you lie by Portia's side  
 With an unquiet soul. You shall have gold  
 To pay the petty debt twenty times over.  
 When it is paid, bring your true friend along.  
 My maid Nerissa and myself meantime  
 Will live as maids and widows. Come, away,  
 For you shall hence upon your wedding-day.  
 Bid your friends welcome, show a merry cheer:  
 Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear.

But let me hear the letter of your friend. (3.2.297-312)

Her speech is followed by Antonio's letter, which reads:

Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit; and since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure. If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter. (3.2.313-19)

While Portia's "call me wife" speech and Antonio's letter both contain traces of romantic language and imagery, Portia's speech is more demanding than the questioning, self-sacrificing tone of Antonio's letter. She directs Bassanio to action, saying "go with me" and "call me" (3.2.301), followed by "then away to" (302) and "you shall have" (304), ending with "come, away" (308) and "bid" and "show" (309). Compared to Antonio's letter, which uses passive declarations such as "if I might" (317), "notwithstanding, use your pleasure" (318), and "if your love do not persuade" (318-9), Portia's drive to action implies that she may feel threatened by Bassanio's obvious concern for Antonio (Kahn 22-4), or that "the seriousness of the love between Antonio and Bassanio is manifest, above all, in Portia's determination to contest it. Simple, she...wants to ensure that her husband really is committed to her" (Sinfield 126). It is more likely, however, that she simply wants to be bound to Bassanio before he departs for Venice, or that she wants to have a bond to Bassanio that can match the one he has with Antonio. This perhaps is why she also uses romantic imagery in her speech, invoking the image of "church" and "wife" (3.2.301), and then a few lines later, "soul" and "gold" (303), before ending her speech in a vow that claims she will live as a maid and widow (309) until Bassanio returns to her. These terms are often used in relation to love and weddings, and Portia uses them in a way that Bassanio cannot easily dismiss and that secures his commitment to her.

Moreover, her sentence, “since you are dear bought, I will love you dear” (3.2.311) implies that because Antonio offers a financial partnership, she will be the one who offers a romantic partnership.

Antonio’s letter, on the other hand, is written with the knowledge that by the time Bassanio receives it, he will undoubtedly be married and may no longer have time for his relationship with Antonio. With this in mind, it’s clear that the gentle tones of Antonio’s letter are meant to be suggestive, but not demanding. The endearment of “sweet Bassanio” (3.2.313) softens the bad news that follows, and proves that though Antonio is not seeking to establish dominancy in the love triangle, he is still willing to reach out to Bassanio and use the strength of their relationship to keep him in his life. In writing “it is impossible I should live” (3.2.316) he calls on tragic romance tropes to entreat Bassanio’s sympathy. Additionally, the plea to “see you at my death” (317) and “if your love do / not persuade you to come, let not my letter” (318-9) works in a similar manner to Portia’s entreaty. Antonio uses romantic tragic imagery of death and lost love in a way that Bassanio cannot ignore.

Though Portia and Antonio’s requests conflict with one another, they are still given equal consideration by Bassanio, and he achieves both of them without causing undue stress to either relationship. He is able to marry Portia before leaving for Venice to save Antonio. His statement of, “I will make haste, but till I come again, / No bed shall e’er be guilty of my stay, / No rest be interposer 'twixt us twain” (3.2.322-4), indicates that he won’t hesitate to hurry to Antonio’s side, but that he also won’t rest until he is reunited with Portia. By comparing Portia’s speech and Antonio’s letter, as well as Bassanio’s reaction to them, we are once again reminded of the equality of Portia and



Antonio's feelings for Bassanio. Each uses romantic language and imagery to bind themselves to Bassanio, and Bassanio, in turn, responds to this romantic language with romantic actions: he marries Portia and attempts to save Antonio.

It is at this point that the play brings us to the trial scene and the ring plot. It is important to note that Portia's appearance in her crossdressed guise of Balthasar does not have any sexual connotations and does not evoke any erotic feelings within Bassanio. Portia dresses as Balthasar in order to gain entry into a male dominated space, but it also provides her a firsthand look at Antonio and Bassanio's relationship. This is crucial because there are two key conversations in 4.1 where Antonio and Portia no longer parallel one another, and where Bassanio's vows and emotional bonds with each of them are tested. The first conversation is:

**Bassanio:** Antonio, I am married to a wife  
Which is as dear to me as life itself;  
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,  
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.  
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all  
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

**Portia:** Your wife would give you little thanks for that,  
If she were by, to hear you make the offer. (4.1.279-86)

This is one of Bassanio's most impassioned moments in the entire play. The fact that he mentions he is married refers to his need to keep his relationship with Portia and Antonio equal, yet Bassanio quickly throws that sentiment away when he chooses Antonio over Portia a few lines later. The use of "But life itself, my wife, and all the world, /Are not with me esteemed above thy life" (4.1.281-2) is the first sign that Bassanio prefers his relationship with Antonio over his relationship with Portia. To willingly "lose" and

“sacrifice” (4.1.83) his “life”, “wife”, and “all the world” (4.1.281) is significant, not only because it provides evidence of Bassanio’s bisexual desires, but it gives us an indication of how, when pressed, Bassanio views his relationships with Portia and Antonio. This speech also parallels the vow he made to Portia when she gave him her ring – “But when this ring / Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence / O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead” (3.2.183-5) – and Portia’s reply indicates that she is very aware of this, and does not approve of the fact that Bassanio has chosen to honor his vows to Antonio over his vows to her.

This leads to the second of the two conversations:

**Bassanio:** Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife,  
And when she put it on, she made me vow  
That I should neither sell nor give nor lose it.

.....

**Antonio:** My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring.  
Let his deservings and my love withal  
Be valued against your wife's commandment. (4.1.440-7)

Prior to this passage, Portia-Balthasar tells Bassanio that she will “take this ring” (4.1.423), and Portia uses it as a way to test Bassanio’s love and fidelity. Bassanio keeps denying Portia-Balthasar the ring, but it is notable that he *only* hands over the ring when Antonio asks it of him. Even knowing what the ring means to Bassanio and that Portia made him “vow / that [he] should neither sell nor give nor lose it” (4.1.441-2), Antonio still asks him to weigh Portia-Balthasar’s worthiness against his own “love withaw” (4.1.446) and to go “against your wife’s commandment” (4.1.447). It is this action that once again proves that Bassanio clearly values Antonio more than Portia, and that his

love for Antonio influences his actions. The ring plot ultimately “emphasizes sexual differences more than it undercuts social and moral ones. It portrays a tug of war in which women and men compete – for the affections of men” (Kahn 26). By denying the romantic connotations of his love for Portia, he is reaffirming his romantic love for Antonio.

The trial and ring scene indicates that Bassanio’s love for Antonio is fully realized, and this is carried over into the last scene of the play. When Portia and Antonio are finally introduced, Bassanio introduces Antonio as someone to whom he is “infinitely bound” (5.1.135), to which Portia replies, “You should in all sense be much bound to him / For as I hear he was much bound to you” (5.1.136-37). Shakespeare uses “bound” as a metonym for “bond” several times throughout the play, and here he uses it not only in regards to the financial bonds that instigated both the casket scene and the trial scene, but also as a play on the bonds of friendship, love, and marriage. Bassanio’s use of “infinitely” implies that his bond with Antonio is unbreakable and incomparable, and while Portia may not be entirely happy with such a sentiment (as seen in her reactions to Bassanio’s outburst in 4.1.285-6 and 5.1.189-91), her statement does acknowledge that Bassanio and Antonio have a bond similar to the one she shares with Bassanio. Still, she continues to tease Bassanio about his supposed infidelity until Antonio interrupts to say, “I dare be bound again, / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will never more break faith advisedly” (5.1.251-3). Antonio pledges his soul as compensation if Bassanio breaks another vow to Portia, attempting to once again come to the aid of Bassanio and help him in his relationship with Portia. Despite the play ending with Bassanio and Portia entering the house to consummate their marriage, Antonio binding his soul to Bassanio repairs the

discord between the Antonio-Bassanio-Portia triangle and once more binds the three of them together.

The use of romantic language, imagery, and actions throughout *The Merchant of Venice* proves not only the similar nature of Portia and Antonio's romantic love for Bassanio, but it also shows that Bassanio considers both of them as integral to his life. These are fully realized relationships, and the reaffirmation of Antonio and Bassanio's souls being bound in 5.1 confirms that the Antonio/Bassanio relationship was not transitional. That is, despite Bassanio and Portia's marriage, Bassanio and Antonio still experience romantic love for each other and are still connected at the end of the play. This, it can be assumed, means that the play does not end with Bassanio choosing to be heterosexual, but rather, choosing to marry Portia and keep Antonio in his life, thus satisfying his bisexual desires.

## Chapter IV

### As You Like It

*As You Like It* is often remembered as the play that ends in four weddings. The theme of love and marriage pervades *As You Like It*, and this theme is used to great effect to portray the fluidity of love, as emphasized through the different relationships seen throughout the play. These relationships fall into three categories: same-sex (Rosalind/Celia), opposite-sex (Rosalind/Orlando), and crossdressed (Rosalind-Ganymede/Orlando and Rosalind-Ganymede/Celia). What is notable about these pairings is that each of them engages in some form of marriage within the play, figuratively or literally, and that Rosalind “marries” Celia and Orlando both when she is in her natural biological state and in her masculine crossdressed guise of Ganymede. *As You Like It* “circulates desire through a cross-dressed heroine” (Neely 309), meaning that Rosalind’s androgynous disguise allows her to consummate her relationships with both Celia and Orlando, which legitimizes her bisexual desires. Moreover, each character’s use of romantic language and imagery, as well as the actions they undertake during their respective marriages, provides a compelling example of love and marriage that transcends traditional gender roles. Within the play, “the gender of love objects may be less important than their age, class, or erotic roles or styles...desire gives characters both male and female momentum and agency” (Neely 303). This is useful in analyzing *As You Like It*, and if we view Rosalind and Orlando as bisexual and Celia as homosexual, there is ample opportunity to examine bisexual and same-sex love within the play. Moreover, *As You Like It* is the only crossdressing play that has a female same-sex relationship that

is not entirely influenced by crossdressing. This is essential as “female homosexuality was rarely linked in popular thought with male homosexuality, if indeed it was recognized at all” (Bray 17). Exploring Rosalind’s bisexuality and Celia’s homosexuality provides an opportunity to discuss female same-sex relationships in a way that is usually ignored within Shakespearean canon. In addition, it will be useful to compare Rosalind’s bisexual desire to the bisexual desire of Orlando, whose use of romantic language, imagery, and actions towards Rosalind and Rosalind-Ganymede are paralleled in Rosalind’s interactions with both him and Celia.

In the case of Rosalind and Celia, it should be noted that Rosalind’s same-sex desires are often described by Celia. Though Rosalind and Celia’s crossdressed disguises of Ganymede and Aliena do play on heteronormative tropes and contain bisexual content, their relationship is perceived as romantic before they enter into their crossdressed states. This is important because “although Rosalind’s appropriation of male power through her masculine disguise as Ganymede appears transgressive, Celia’s verbal displays of her love for Rosalind and her attempts to coerce Rosalind into a homoerotic alliance are more so. Throughout the course of the play, Celia demonstrates no interest in heterosexual relationships and speaks freely of her love for Rosalind” (Neely 117). Because *As You Like It* presents Rosalind and Celia as having a preexisting relationship, many of Rosalind’s lines and scenes focus on her love for Orlando, making Celia’s dialogue, observations, and actions regarding their relationship vital as they contain the only firsthand evidence of Rosalind and Celia’s romantic relationship. Though Rosalind seems a passive participant in their relationship compared to Celia’s more active role, this does not mean their relationship is any less legitimate or fully realized than Rosalind and

Orlando's. While Celia is presented as having only homosexual desires, her use of romanticism is essential in helping to define Rosalind's bisexuality.

Rosalind and Celia's relationship is first presented from an outside perspective when Charles tells Oliver: "for the Duke's daughter her cousin so loves her, being ever from their cradles bred together, that she would have followed her exile, or have died to stay behind her... and never two ladies loved as they do" (1.1.102-7). What is significant about this passage is that it shows us the depth of love and loyalty between Rosalind and Celia before they ever interact in the text. The decision to use "love" twice insinuates that Rosalind and Celia's relationship goes beyond familial or friendly affection. Their relationship is intimate enough that Celia "would have followed her exile, or have died to stay behind her" (1.1.103). Celia's love for Rosalind is so all-consuming that she would prefer death over separation. This sentiment is paralleled later in the play when Le Beau tells Orlando that the love between Rosalind and Celia is "dearer than the natural bond of sisters" (1.2.261). The latter line is imperative because "while both statements are ambiguous, each suggests that Celia's and Rosalind's love for one another surpasses the accepted boundaries of communion between women" (Tvordi 118). To pass beyond the acceptable social boundaries between women implies that Rosalind and Celia's relationship has gone beyond friendship. The next step beyond friendship is, of course, love.

The evidence of this love occurs during the first few scenes in which they interact.

When Frederick banishes Rosalind from court, Celia says:

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. (1.3.69-74)

Celia invokes several romantic images in this speech. The first line implies that their relationship only began once they were old enough to “value” (1.3.69) each other; or, that their romance began at the onset of puberty and burgeoning sexual desires. The following line “but now I know her” (1.3.70) can be seen as evidence that Celia and Rosalind “knew” each other physically, but when looking at the following lines, “know” can also be interpreted as having a double meaning. If Celia and Rosalind know each other physically, then it stands to reason that they also know each other spiritually. When Celia states “I know her” (1.3.70) and then follows it with “if she be a traitor, / Why, so am I” (1.3.70-1), she summons an impression of spiritual bonding, which is an image often seen in romantic poetry in regards to marriage. While “Celia’s transposition thus conflates erotic love and marriage” (Traub 171), it also presents the idea that she and Rosalind are two halves of a whole and where one goes, the other follows. There is a duality and reciprocity in this sentiment that suggests Celia and Rosalind know each other almost as well as they know themselves.

Celia continues to use this idea of spiritual bonding when she describes the ways in which she and Rosalind have spent their life together, but it is the last two lines of her speech that are the most passionate. The use of “coupled” and “inseparable” (1.2.74) are traditionally romantic sentiments associated with marriage, and as Jessica Tvordi notes:

By employing the image of ‘Juno’s swans...coupled and inseparable’ to describe her relationship with Rosalind, Celia suggests that, like swans who have mated for life, she and Rosalind are united in a permanent alliance. If we read Celia’s statement carefully, the possibility emerges



that she views her alliance with Rosalind as not only close, but physical, not only as a pairing, but as a permanent, lifelong attachment. (117-8)

This “permanent lifelong attachment” is a clever way to suggest that Celia sees herself and Rosalind as married. This correlates to the earlier reading of the “I know her” (1.3.70) and “so am I” (1.3.71) lines, and the idea that Celia and Rosalind know each other physically as well as spiritually. Additionally, Celia’s language in the “Juno’s swans” passage “echoes the Anglican marriage ceremony. When Celia claims that she and Rosalind ‘are one,’ she draws upon the image that was at the very heart of the ceremony: the notion of two people uniting to become one” (Fisher 104). This connects to the line later in that scene when Celia says she “cannot live out of [Rosalind’s] company” (1.3.85), which again plays on traditional marriage vows, referencing the idea of “until death do us part”. Celia reinforces this sentiment once more in 1.3 in the following conversation with Rosalind:

**Celia:** Prithee, be cheerful. Know'st thou not the Duke  
Hath banished me, his daughter?

**Rosalind:** That he hath not.

**Celia:** No, hath not? Rosalind lacks then the love  
Which teacheth thee that thou and I am one.  
Shall we be sundered? Shall we part, sweet girl?  
No. Let my father seek another heir.  
Therefore devise with me how we may fly,  
Whither to go, and what to bear with us,  
And do not seek to take your charge upon you,  
To bear your griefs yourself, and leave me out.  
For, by this heaven, now at our sorrows pale,  
Say what thou canst, I'll go along with thee. (1.3.92-104)

It is noteworthy that Celia mentions her willingness to follow Rosalind into banishment three times (1.3.92-3; 1.3.98; 1.3.104), as it confirms the idea of permanence and inseparability that Celia invokes earlier in the scene. It also relates to Celia's aversion to being separated from Rosalind, an attitude that is shown once more in the line "Shall we be sundered? Shall we part, sweet girl?" (1.3.97). These two questions also "ask us to recognize female unity as parallel in its emotional intensity and physical closeness to that of marriage" (Traub 171-2). Furthermore, Celia states that "thou and I am one" (1.3.96), which calls back to earlier in 1.3 when she categorizes their relationship as intimate and binding. She supports her belief in the intransience and reciprocity of their relationship by stating that "do not seek to take your charge upon you, / To bear your griefs yourself, and leave me out" (1.3.101-2). With this line, she is claiming that her relationship with Rosalind is such that any problems or issues Rosalind faces are problems and issues Celia will also face. This passage acts almost as a marriage vow, with Celia pledging to stick with Rosalind regardless of what happens to either of them.

This implied marriage vow is what causes Celia to follow Rosalind to the Forest of Arden after Rosalind has been banished from court. Several things occur once they arrive in the forest. First, Rosalind acquires more agency once she chooses to crossdress, and she takes the name Ganymede, which is a curious decision on Shakespeare's part as the name Ganymede is traditionally associated with "male sexual types" (Traub 167). Second, she chooses to crossdress as a man out of the "danger" (1.3.107) she believes awaits them in the forest, yet "although there is some suggestion of a need for male protection, when Rosalind advises that they take Touchstone along she negates the actual need for a protective male disguise" (Kimbrough 23). Third, she and Celia pretend to be

brother and sister (3.2.322) and buy a cottage from the shepherd Corin (2.5.90-2). Taking all of this into consideration, it is clear that Rosalind truly did not need to dress a man, therefore her crossdressing is less out of a sense of necessity and more out of personal desire. Additionally, Rosalind's choice of masculine name and the house she purchases from Corin become an important marker of her relationship with Celia.

Though Rosalind and Celia present themselves as brother and sister, the actual act of purchasing the house indicates the more homoerotic nature of their relationship. Their conversation about the purchase is as follows:

**Rosalind:** I pray thee, if it stand with honesty,  
Buy thou the cottage, pasture, and the flock,  
And thou shalt have to pay for it of us.

**Celia:** And we will mend thy wages. I like this place,  
And willingly could waste my time in it. (2.5.90-5)

What stands out the most is Rosalind's use of "us" (2.5.93) and Celia's use of "we" (2.5.94), as it suggests that Rosalind and Celia have combined their finances and their household, similar to the actions of newly married couples. They have also taken on a servant, as evidenced in Celia's line "and we will mend thy wages" (2.5.94), as well as adopted the lifestyle of a working couple since they did not only purchase the cottage, but the "pasture, and the flock" (2.5.91). The purchase of a pasture and flock provides them with a source of income, which indicates that if they wished to permanently live in their cottage, they have the means to do so. This idea is not entirely unsupported when looking at Celia's lines of, "I like this place, / And willingly could waste my time in it" (2.5.94-5). The use of "willingly" and "time" (2.5.95) imply that she is already thinking of her

future with Rosalind. A future that, for all intents and purposes, is one where they are “married”. In fact, the very act of setting up a house together is a social indicator that they *are* married since “actions like the ones they perform were often taken as proof that a marriage had taken place. In ecclesiastical courts, for instance, descriptions of a couple’s actions with regard to domesticity or property could be cited as evidence to indicate that they were married” (Fisher 105). Furthermore, Rosalind and Celia are not only sharing a house, but subverting traditional heteronormative tropes. As Will Fisher states:

The two women replicate and transform many of the material practices associated with the heterosexual marriage process.... The point is not, however, that Rosalind and Celia are actually married, but rather that they mimic matrimonial discourse and activities in constituting their own alliance. In the process, they demonstrate how ‘heterosexual’ social discourses and practices might be appropriated as a means of creating a ‘place’ where two women could exist, if sometimes only temporarily, outside parental and patriarchal control. (100-1)

That is, at court Rosalind and Celia may have been married physically and emotionally, but they could never be married socially. By living together in the Forest of Arden as a “heterosexual” couple, they are able to legitimize their relationship and truly become married.

Celia’s use of romantic language and imagery to describe her and Rosalind’s marriage at court, and the connecting imagery and action of Rosalind and Celia’s domesticity in the Forest of Arden, are crucial in pinpointing Rosalind’s bisexuality. While “Celia’s speeches to Rosalind in *As You Like It* are as emotionally and erotically compelling as anything spoken in the heteroerotic moments in these comedies” (Traub 171), it is Rosalind’s willingness to comply with these actions that show evidence of her

bisexual desire. The use of such evocative language and imagery to describe Celia and Rosalind's relationship helps confirm the theory that their relationship is physical, emotional, and romantic. The marital imagery in particular goes a long way towards displaying Rosalind's bisexual desires, as the pretend marriage Rosalind participates in with Celia is also replicated in her relationship with Orlando.

As in her relationship with Celia, Rosalind also participates in two types of marriage with Orlando. She engages in a subversion of heterosexual marriage with him while she is disguised as a man, and she participates in a second marriage while in her natural biological state. Rosalind represents the fulfillment of Orlando's bisexual desires in that he is attracted to her at first sight when he meets her at court, and then is attracted to her male disguise in the Forest of Arden. In both situations, he willingly agrees to marry her and conveys several romantic sentiments and tokens of affection towards her. Her own bisexual desires are fulfilled through their dual participation in both the permanent marriage at the end of the play and the practice marriage when Rosalind is disguised as Ganymede.

During their first meeting, Rosalind and Orlando fall in love at first sight. Rosalind's reaction after first meeting Orlando is to exclaim, "O excellent young man!" (1.2.196), and a few lines later she gives him token of her affection:

**Rosalind:** (*giving him a chain from her neck*) Gentleman,  
Wear this for me— one out of suits with fortune,  
That could give more, but that her hand lacks means.  
Shall we go, coz?

**Celia:** Ay. Fare you well, fair gentleman.

*Rosalind and Celia begin to go*

**Orlando:** Can I not say 'I thank you'? My better parts  
Are all thrown down, and that which here stands up  
Is but a quintain, a mere lifeless block. (1.2.229-35)

Rosalind is so overcome with emotion for Orlando, a man she has only just met, that after offering him her love token, she states that if it were possible she would “give more” (1.2.331). “Give more” likely indicates her hand in marriage, a fact which she refers to in the next scene when she states that her current emotional state is “for my child's father” (1.3.11). Orlando, for his part, is also so overwhelmed by his immediate attraction to Rosalind that he cannot even thank her, stating that he is “all thrown down” (1.2.234) and a “mere lifeless block” (1.2.335). That is, he is speechless at the sight of her and incapable of functioning as normal. As we see later on, “Orlando’s ecstasy is followed by Rosalind’s quieter, more wry acknowledgement of love’s arrival” (Brissenden 118n1). Rosalind’s quieter acceptance of that love, however, soon reaches that same ecstasy once she realizes that Orlando returns her affections.

The Forest of Arden once more provides a way for bisexual desires to be revealed and consummated, especially considering it enables Rosalind and Orlando to act on their same-sex and opposite-sex desires. Before he meets Rosalind-Ganymede, Orlando spends his time nailing love poetry on all the trees in the forest (3.2.1-10), as he believes he is unable to profess his love to Rosalind. These love poems contain romantic sentiments such as “no jewel is like Rosalind” (3.2.85) and “Thus Rosalind of many parts / By heavenly synod was devised / Of many faces, eyes, and hearts” (3.2.144-6), showing the uncontrollable passion that drives his actions. When Rosalind learns of Orlando’s poetry, two things occur. First, she asks “doth he know that I am in this forest, and in man's apparel?” (3.2.221-1), but then “consciously elects to stay in disguise” (Kimbrough 24).

Second, she decides to approach Orlando as Rosalind-Ganymede and says, “I will speak to him like a saucy lackey, / and under that habit play the knave with him” (3.2.286-7).

These two moments are important because it shows that Rosalind believes it is important to approach Orlando as man, rather than as a woman. This, perhaps, could be seen as evidence of Rosalind subverting gender norms and asserting her agency through the use of her crossdressed appearance, but it is more likely that she remains dressed as Ganymede so “that she can educate Orlando about the nature of love” (Strout 288). This education comes in the form of Rosalind insisting that she can “cure” Orlando of his lovesickness.

As Rosalind-Ganymede, “Rosalind is now both male and female. As a man, she is freed from social convention and can speak her *mind*. Also, because of her being a man, Orlando, relaxed in the presence of male company, can reveal his *emotions*. If Orlando knew he was in the presence of a woman, let alone Rosalind, he would once again become as tongue-tied as he had been at court” (Kimbrough 24). Thus, the Rosalind-Ganymede persona allows Rosalind and Orlando to become different version of themselves, and in the case of their sexual identity, it allows Rosalind to fulfill her opposite-sex desires and allows Orlando to fulfill his same-sex desires. There are two key scenes that provide evidence for this, and the first is as follows:

**Rosalind:** Love is merely a madness, and, I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do; and the reason why they are not so punished and cured is that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love too. Yet I profess curing it by counsel.

**Orlando:** Did you ever cure any so?

**Rosalind:** Yes, one; and in this manner. He was to imagine me his love, his mistress; and I set him every day to woo me. At which time would I,

being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something and for no passion truly anything, as boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour— would now like him, now loathe him; then entertain him, then forswear him; now weep for him, then spit at him, that I drave my suitor from his mad humour of love to a living humour of madness; which was, to forswear the full stream of the world and to live in a nook merely monastic. And thus I cured him, and this way will I take upon me to wash your liver as clean as a sound sheep's heart, that there shall not be one spot of love in 't.

**Orlando:** I would not be cured, youth.

**Rosalind:** I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind, and come every day to my cot, and woo me.

**Orlando:** Now, by the faith of my love, I will. Tell me where it is.

**Rosalind:** Go with me to it, and I'll show it you; and, by the way, you shall tell me where in the forest you live. Will you go?

**Orlando:** With all my heart, good youth.

**Rosalind:** Nay, you must call me Rosalind. (3.2.381-412)

Orlando's "madness" (3.2.381) and Rosalind's "counsel" (3.2.384) is a coy way to refer to Rosalind's decision to seduce Orlando. By counseling him in the matter of love, Rosalind can assure herself that Orlando is the man she truly wants to spend her life with, but she can also train him in the method of proper love and courtship. Moreover, Rosalind's example of "counsel" is another play on subverting heteronormative tropes. By stating, "being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles" (3.2.387-9), Rosalind-Ganymede is "performing the stereotypical woman's role" (Neely 311). This double role playing – pretending to be a man who is pretending to be a woman – works to assuage any anxiety Orlando may have about "seducing" a man.



Nathaniel Strout suggests that “from Orlando’s point of view, the dream is to marry Rosalind, the now unsatisfying reality is to pretend that Ganymede is the woman he loves” (289). Yet, Orlando does not show any signs of being unhappy with this arrangement. He does state “I would not be cured” (3.2.405) in response to Rosalind’s story, but when Rosalind presses the issue and tells Orlando that he should woo her as though she is the Rosalind he knows, Orlando readily agrees “by the faith of [his] love” (3.2.408) and “with all [his] heart” (3.2.411). It is not that he is against seducing a man, but more that he does not wish to fall out of love with Rosalind. In this scene, it is crucial to remember that Rosalind appears as Ganymede, so when she tells Orlando “I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind, and come every day to my cot, and woo me” (3.2.406-7), he is consciously agreeing to pretend to court someone he perceives to be a man. If he did have any anxiety or disgust about this, there is no reason for him to agree to Rosalind’s proposal. The fact that he does agree, and that he commits to a practice marriage, indicates his own homoerotic desires for Rosalind-Ganymede.

The practice marriage scene is the second of two important passages, and the one that correlates to the wedding imagery used throughout the rest of the play. The scene reads:

**Rosalind:** But come, now I will be your Rosalind in a more coming-on disposition; and ask me what you will, I will grant it.

**Orlando:** Then love me, Rosalind.

**Rosalind:** Yes, faith, will I, Fridays and Saturdays, and all.

**Orlando:** And wilt thou have me?

**Rosalind:** Ay, and twenty such.

**Orlando:** What sayest thou?

**Rosalind:** Are you not good?

**Orlando:** I hope so.

**Rosalind:** Why then, can one desire too much of a good thing? Come, sister, you shall be the priest, and marry us. —Give me your hand, Orlando. —What do you say, sister?

**Orlando:** Pray thee, marry us.

**Celia:** I cannot say the words.

**Rosalind:** You must begin 'Will you, Orlando'—

**Celia:** Go to. Will you, Orlando, have to wife this Rosalind?

**Orlando:** I will.

**Rosalind:** Ay, but when?

**Orlando:** Why now, as fast as she can marry us.

**Rosalind:** Then you must say 'I take thee, Rosalind, for wife.'

**Orlando:** I take thee, Rosalind, for wife.

**Rosalind:** I might ask you for your commission; but I do take thee, Orlando, for my husband. (4.1.101-23)

If Rosalind-Ganymede and Celia's marriage is based on romantic imagery, then Rosalind-Ganymede and Orlando's relationship is based on romantic language. Here we have an image of two men marrying, which obviously is not allowed in Elizabethan society, something Celia even alludes to in the line "I cannot say the words" (4.1.114), with "words" referencing the actual act of being married by law. Yet, the dialogue in this passage is romantic and intimate in the way that it replicates traditional marriage vows. Orlando's "and wilt thou have me?" (4.1.105) emulates a marriage proposal while his "I

take thee, Rosalind, for wife” (4.1.121) and Rosalind’s “but I do take thee, / Orlando, for my husband” (4.1.122-2) copies marriage vows. Rosalind’s eagerness to go through with this practice marriage is obvious and is paralleled later in the play when she gives her permanent marriage vows – “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4.112) – but it is Orlando’s enthusiasm – “why now, as fast as she can marry us” (4.1.118) – that is striking. Moreover, “conventions are meaningful only if the parties involved mutually accept them” (Strout 286), and Orlando accepting a vow of marriage from Rosalind-Ganymede, however impractical and unbinding it may be, shows that he accepts his same-sex desires. Rosalind’s disguise as Ganymede is meant to trick Orlando into becoming a better lover, but it instead shows that he has same-sex desires, however latent. Previous scenes have shown that Orlando is attracted to Ganymede, such as where he uses the term “pretty youth” (3.2.321), but it is his willingness to enter into a marriage with another man that pinpoints his interest in the same-sex.

Additionally, the “bloody napkin” (4.3.94) that Orlando sends to Rosalind-Ganymede is indicative of this realized desire for the same-sex. After he saves Oliver from a lion, Orlando sends Oliver to Rosalind-Ganymede to recount the situation and explain “his broken promise, and to give this napkin, / Dyed in his blood, unto the shepherd youth / That he in sport doth call his Rosalind” (4.3.155-7). The image of a bloody handkerchief is an intimate gesture, and “a bloody item of clothing is found in other love stories” (Brissenden 202n4), indicating Orlando’s reliance on using traditionally romantic imagery to convey his love. For Rosalind, that romantic imagery is his act of writing love poetry while for Rosalind-Ganymede it is sending a bloody handkerchief. These actions allude to Orlando’s true desire to be bound to both Rosalind

and Rosalind-Ganymede – or, to put it another way, his desire to be involved in relationships with both men and women. This desire is also seen in the use of the term “his Rosalind” (4.3.157), which he uses to refer to Rosalind-Ganymede and which is a passionate and possessive term that he reuses during his actual marriage to Rosalind when he says “if there be truth in sight, you are my Rosalind” (5.4.114). The same note of passion and possession remains in his speech regardless of whether he is speaking to Rosalind or Rosalind-Ganymede.

Orlando’s indifference as to whether he’s marrying Rosalind or Rosalind-Ganymede is paralleled in Celia’s desire to be bound to either Rosalind or Rosalind-Ganymede. Celia’s use of sensual language and Orlando’s use of passionate language tie them to Rosalind, and prove that they are not concerned with the gender Rosalind presents at any time during their relationship. Rather, they are willing to love her for more than her gender, as evidenced by their participation in not one, but two marriages. Furthermore, while Rosalind is more active in her pursuit of Orlando than she is in her relationship with Celia, she participates in the same matrimonial bonds with Celia that she does with Orlando. Rosalind’s acceptance and participation in these marriages – two times over – are evidence of attained bisexual desires. In marrying Orlando and Celia in her biological state and her crossdressed state, she has married them as both a man and a woman. That is, she has participated in both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships that hold equal value.

## Chapter V

## Twelfth Night

The gender ambiguity of Viola's crossdressed state has led to scholars reexamining the relationships within *Twelfth Night* in order to discover queer content. The act of crossdressing has caused some difficulty among critics when it comes to examining the sexual identities of Viola, Orsino, and Olivia. As Kaye McLelland explains, "One problematic aspect of using the concept of bisexuality to examine characterization and interactions in the early modern period is that it has always been very much entwined in the criticism with concepts surrounding the performance of gender....It is true that bisexuality and androgyny have historically been seen as linked or even partially synonymous" (350). This has caused some speculation amongst scholars that any instance of homoeroticism is merely transitional. Or, that by crossdressing, Viola's "disguise represents a crucial stage in her sexual development" (Slights 327) on her way to heterosexual marriage. That is, she may flirt with homoeroticism while crossdressed, but when she loses her disguise, she also loses her homoerotic tendencies. This interpretation not only discredits the complexity of the characters and relationships in *Twelfth Night*, but it also works to erase the possibility of a bisexual reading by perpetuating the myth of the "confused bisexual". While gender ambiguity does play a part in the romantic relationships of *Twelfth Night*, I believe any homoerotic and bisexual tendencies are borne out of the romantic language and actions the characters use to court one another. This is evidenced by the two subsets of bisexual relationships in the play: relationships that contain crossdressing (the Orsino-Viola-Olivia triangle) and

relationships that are not influenced by a crossdressed character (the Antonio-Sebastian-Olivia triangle, and to a lesser degree, Orsino/Olivia). The latter is especially useful as it shows that a character is capable of the same level of emotional and sexual intimacy in an opposite-sex relationship as in a same-sex one.

Though it is Viola's use of language that ultimately binds her to Orsino and Olivia, it is her crossdressed appearance that initially allows her entry to both households and sparks the interest of each character. As Cesario, her appearance is referred to in both feminine and masculine terms, and this gender ambiguity appears to "evoke the possibility that the figure who unites both masculine and feminine within one body may both incarnate androgyny, and be the object of bisexual desire from both men and women" (Chedgzoy 112). Thus, by crossdressing as a man, Viola's femininity does not disappear, so she represents both genders which, in turn, means characters who are sexually or romantically attracted to either gender now have a higher chance of being attracted to her. This is a sentiment which Viola herself realizes on several occasions, such as in 2.4 when she says, "I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too" (2.4.120-1), and perhaps more importantly in 2.2 when she says "disguise, I see thou art a wickedness" (2.2.27) and then when she calls herself a "poor monster" (2.2.34), which is a Renaissance term for hermaphrodite (Charles 126). In acknowledgment of her androgynous state, Viola recognizes that her decision to crossdress has caused her endless trouble in regards to both platonic and romantic relationships. Yet, she still chooses to keep her masculine guise.

Viola-Cesario's first scenes with Orsino and Olivia have characters who immediately comment on her androgynous appearance. Orsino, in particular, "nicely

captures the gender confusion in an unintentionally ironic description of his young page” (Greenblatt 91). Orsino observes, “That say thou art a man: Diana's lip / Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe / Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman's part” (1.4.31-34). Likewise, Malvolio gives the following description of Viola-Cesario to Olivia: “Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy... 'tis with him in standing water, between boy and man. He is very well-favoured and he speaks very shrewishly; one would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him” (1.5.150-5). Each description begins with the assurance that Viola-Cesario is “a man” (1.4.31 and 1.5.150), but then dovetails into explicitly female terms. The use of “maiden’s organ” (1.4.33), “a woman’s part” (1.4.34), and “shrewishly” (1.5.154) indicate that Viola’s femininity is visible despite the masculine disguise of Cesario.

While these two speeches offer an insight into how Viola-Cesario’s androgyny is perceived, they also provide the first sign of Orsino and Olivia’s romantic interest in Viola-Cesario. “Smooth and rubious” (1.4.32) is a particularly intimate and sexual term, indicating that Orsino may already have homoerotic leanings despite the proposed obsessive love he claims to have for Olivia, while “thy small pipe / Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman's part” (1.4.32-34) foreshadows the conversation about gender and love Orsino and Viola-Cesario share in 2.4. Similarly, the phrase “he speaks very shrewishly” (1.5.154) also foreshadows Olivia’s interest in the way Viola-Cesario wields words to court her.

Casey Charles expands on this point, stating:

This staging of gender imitation by Viola, the performance of her gender performance, uses her disguise and her identity with her brother Sebastian as vehicles to demonstrate that erotic attraction is not an inherently

gendered or heterosexual phenomenon. The homoerotic and cross-gendered disruptions that ensue, finally, operate within a world that is properly named Ill-lyria in order to demonstrate how the phenomenon of love itself operates as a mechanism that destabilizes gender binarism and its concomitant hierarchies. Lovers like Olivia, Orsino, Malvolio, and Antonio construct fantasies that turn the objects of their affection into something more than they are, thereby disrupting the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality. (Charles 124)

Charles' analysis relies on the theory of performative and socially constructed gender identities and "argues that the cultural meanings that attach to a sexed body – what we call gender – are theoretically applicable to either sex" (122), positing that by removing traditional definitions of biological gender and sexual identity from the equation, we are left with the idea that love is fluid and based on character rather than gender. This, as Charles suggests, ignores the traditional heterosexual-homosexual binary and causes Orsino and Olivia to turn Viola-Cesario into "something more than they are" (124). While Orsino and Olivia are at first captivated by Viola-Cesario's androgynous appearance, they ultimately see Viola-Cesario as more than a man or woman and see her as someone to bind themselves to, regardless of gender or sexuality.

Taking this into consideration, it allows us to view Viola's seduction of Orsino and Olivia as based on her use of language rather than her appearance. There are two key scenes to consider. The first is the "willow cabin" speech:

**Viola:** If I did love you in my master's flame,  
With such a suff'ring, such a deadly life,  
In your denial I would find no sense;  
I would not understand it.

**Olivia:** Why, what would you?

**Viola:** Make me a willow cabin at your gate  
And call upon my soul within the house,



Write loyal cantons of contemned love,  
 And sing them loud even in the dead of night;  
 Halloo your name to the reverberate hills  
 And make the babbling gossip of the air  
 Cry out 'Olivia!' O, You should not rest  
 Between the elements of air and earth  
 But you should pity me.

**Olivia:** You might do much.  
 What is your parentage? (1.5.253-67).

The language Viola uses is sensual and evocative, invoking tropes of both romantic love and tragic, all-consuming and unrequited love. The use of “suffering” and “deadly” (1.5.254) detail the passion of Viola-Cesario’s imagined unrequited love, an emotion that is then softened and made sympathetic by the phrase “you should pity me” (1.5.265). These words and phrases portray the depths of Viola-Cesario’s possible desire, and the willingness to which Viola-Cesario would let herself be consumed by love in order to court Olivia. Viola-Cesario then goes a step further and uses the intensely romantic imagery of a willow cabin. Willow trees, nicknamed “weeping willows”, are often associated with lovers and romance. Moreover, “the willow cabin emblem pictures the lover as shut up and unable to move” (Ronk 385), suggesting an intimate and private setting where lovers become two halves of one whole. Expanding upon this image, Viola-Cesario says she will “call upon my soul within the house” (1.5.259), indicating that her soul belongs to Olivia while also referencing the intimate imagery of the willow cabin. This speech also suggests that Viola-Cesario’s love is based on Olivia’s character and not on her physical beauty, as compared to the content of Orsino’s love letters.

This is further compounded by Viola’s use of nature imagery in the phrases “the reverberate hills” (1.5.261), “the babbling gossip of the air” (1.5.262), and “between the

elements of air and earth” (1.5.264) which continue to evoke the idea of wholeness and spirituality. Nature imagery is often used in romantic poetry, and by using such language in her speech to Olivia, Viola-Cesario is admitting that her love has been elevated to the highest possible point of romanticism. As Jami Ake notes, “Viola's poetry, unlike Orsino's, does not rely at all upon Olivia's physicality, and instead appeals to her "soul," an interiority that remains unfragmented in her verse; she would not reduce Olivia to a written text designed to represent, replace, and circulate her. Rather, Olivia remains whole, identified, present, and unambiguously the object of the poet's desire-but no less a desiring subject in her own right” (381). This use of romantic language and imagery is what ultimately causes Olivia to fall in love with Viola-Cesario and what identifies Viola’s bisexual leanings.

That Viola “reaches not for another, similar version of Orsino-like pronouncements but for a language that she believes would seem appealing to a woman much like herself” (Ake 380-1) is tantamount to understanding both Viola and Olivia’s bisexual nature. Viola is using language she wishes Orsino would use to describe *her*, but she also, as Ake suggests, understands the type of language Olivia would be enamored by. Viola may be seducing Olivia on Orsino’s behalf, but there is no reason for her to throw away Orsino’s scripted missives and engage in her own version of love poetry. The fact that she does so is entirely her own decision and one we can assume is borne of her own possibly internalized desire for Olivia.

For Olivia, her interest in Viola-Cesario begins to grow after the “willow cabin” speech. Her dialogue switches from prose to verse, as seen in her immediate reply of “You might do much. / What is your parentage?” (1.5.266-7), which represents the

emergence of romantic feelings. We see her trying to analyze these sudden romantic leanings in the following speech:

Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions and spirit  
 Do give thee five-fold blazon. Not too fast. Soft, soft—  
 Unless the master were the man. How now?  
 Even so quickly may one catch the plague?  
 Methinks I feel this youth's perfections  
 With an invisible and subtle stealth  
 To creep in at mine eyes. (1.5.282-8)

There are two key items of note in this speech. Olivia remarks that she finds herself attracted to Viola-Cesario's "tongue", "face", "limbs", "actions and spirit" (1.5.282), indicating that while she has some interest in Viola-Cesario's appearance, she is more intrigued by her intelligence and wit. Second, Olivia states that she wishes that "the master were the man" (1.5.284), signifying that she would perhaps be attracted to Orsino if the content of his character was similar to Viola-Cesario's personality. These two statements demonstrate that "above all, Olivia falls in love with Viola's theater-a performance that includes more than her body or words alone" (Ake 385). Thus, it can be assumed that Viola-Cesario's gender does not ultimately matter to Olivia, and this, along with her use of and reaction to romantic language, is what informs her bisexual identity.

Switching now to Viola's relationship with Orsino, we have the second of two key scenes, which is the "patience on a monument" speech:

**Viola:** Ay, but I know—

**Orsino:** What dost thou know?

**Viola:** Too well what love women to men may owe.  
 In faith, they are as true of heart as we.  
 My father had a daughter loved a man,  
 As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,

I should your lordship.

**Orsino:** And what's her history?

**Viola:** A blank, my lord. She never told her love,  
 But let concealment, like a worm i'th' bud,  
 Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,  
 And with a green and yellow melancholy  
 She sat like patience on a monument,  
 Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?  
 We men may say more, swear more, but indeed  
 Our shows are more than will; for still we prove  
 Much in our vows, but little in our love. (2.4.103-18)

While the language Viola uses here is less sensual than the language she uses in the “willow cabin” speech, there is still a heightened element of romance. The use of “true of heart” (2.4.106) indicates Viola’s desire to be bound to Orsino, while also showing her frustration with having to disguise her love. Viola can only have this discussion with Orsino because she is disguised as Cesario. Additionally, as Viola-Cesario, she is only able to use language to pursue Orsino as she cannot be certain that Orsino would react to same-sex flirtation positively. Hence her reiteration of the word “love” throughout the speech. Considering Orsino’s preoccupation with love, as seen both earlier in the scene and in 1.1, mentioning “love” five times within the space of fourteen lines is a clever way for Viola-Cesario to subtly hint at her feelings. Viola-Cesario challenges Orsino’s view on heterosexual love when she says, “My father had a daughter loved a man, / As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman, / I should your lordship” (2.4.107-9), but she also uses these lines to once again subliminally suggest her burgeoning love for Orsino. In doing this “she says that if she were a woman she would love Orsino, [and] she is able to assert and to deny her love in ways necessary to her situation at this moment in the play” (Ronk

390). That is, she basically introduces and then removes herself from the equation as she, like the woman in her story, is “a blank” (2.4.111).

Relaying a story about the strength of love is enough to capture Orsino’s attention, but Viola-Cesario attempts to ensure that Orsino truly understands the meaning behind her story with imagery traditionally associated with tragic love. The phrases “pined in thought” (2.4.113), “green and yellow melancholy” (2.4.114), and “smiling at grief” (2.4.116) all evoke a sense of distress and unrequited love. The lyrical nature of the phrases – and the speech in general – is a parallel of Orsino’s “if music be the food of love” (1.1.1) speech. Both speeches contain the idea “that the spirit of love is so all-consuming that it can rob beautiful things... of their value” (Warren and Wells 85n2). This sentiment appeals to Orsino’s narcissistic nature and is what piques his interest in Viola-Cesario. She is able to seduce him via the only language he appears to understand: the language of romance, passion, and love.

Viola’s romantic interest in Orsino is clear in most of their interactions, but the “patience as a monument” scene is the beginning of Orsino’s interest in Viola-Cesario. As Casey Charles states, “as the boy Cesario tells the story of his sister who is himself, Orsino continues to fall in love with his/her “masterly” speech (2.4.22). This scene thus challenges patriarchy not by reidealizing the heterosexual norms of passion-vowing males and patiently passive females, but by calling those constructions into question through portraying the cross-dressing female as a figure who deconstructs the categories of gender by ironically reiterating them in a context that depicts their reversal” (136). That is, Orsino is attracted to the story of impassioned love, but he also recognizes the unique quality of Viola-Cesario’s wit and her ability to challenge his worldviews. In fact,

this speech seems to be so compelling in endearing Viola-Cesario to Orsino that he disappears from the play until his presence is required in 5.1. The last scene of the play serves to show the audience that the romantic interest Orsino showed in Viola-Cesario in 2.4 has turned into full-fledged love. Upon finding out that Olivia believes Viola-Cesario to be married to her, Orsino states:

O thou dissembling cub, what wilt thou be  
 When time hath sowed a grizzle on thy case?  
 Or will not else thy craft so quickly grow  
 That thine own trip shall be thine overthrow?  
 Farewell, and take her, but direct thy feet  
 Where thou and I henceforth may never meet. (5.1.160-5)

Orsino's rage over the loss of Viola-Cesario to Olivia is immediate. His use of "dissembling" (5.1.160), "thy craft" (5.1.162), and "thine overthrow" (5.1.163) are all harsh terms that indicate the extent of Orsino's ire. He feels betrayed, and with this betrayal, he wishes that he and Viola-Cesario "may never meet" (5.1.165) again. These are terms that may not be seen as traditionally romantic, but they are terms induced by rejected romance. Additionally, the idea of Viola-Cesario and Orsino never meeting again is reminiscent of behavior seen in couples who have separated. However, when he learns of Viola-Cesario's true identity Orsino's sense of betrayal and outrage disappears and he immediately states, "Give me thy hand, / And let me see thee in thy woman's weeds" (5.1.267-8). His relief is so evident that he immediately proposes marriage, and when Viola's feminine clothing is not available, he says "Cesario, come— / For so you shall be while you are a man" (5.1.375-6). The fact that Orsino marries Viola while she is still dressed as Cesario shows that "the love for Cesario could not have changed instantaneously with the revelation of his femaleness... what does change is that marriage

suddenly becomes possible, and hence the immediate proposal. This love that commences as homoerotic and conducts Orsino into nuptial heterosexuality is an unbroken curve, a bisexual continuity” (Pequigney 207). Orsino’s actions in 2.4 and 5.1 serve to counterbalance each other and show that Orsino’s attraction to Viola-Cesario is built on his love of *who* she is rather than her gender.

It is worth pointing out that while the homoerotic content in these scenes is fully realized by the end of the play, Olivia and Orsino’s heterosexual interest in, respectively, Sebastian and Olivia, is what makes their bisexual identities fully complete. Orsino’s desire for Olivia precedes his interest in Viola-Cesario as seen in 1.1 when he exclaims, “O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first / Methought she purged the air of pestilence” (1.1.18-19). Similarly, Olivia’s wedding to Sebastian and her lack of noticeable dismay over the fact that Sebastian is not Viola-Cesario and that Viola-Cesario is in fact a woman indicates her own realized bisexual identity. Shakespeare plays on the latter point with Sebastian’s speech to Olivia:

So comes it, lady, you have been mistook.  
 But nature to her bias drew in that.  
 You would have been contracted to a maid,  
 Nor are you therein, by my life, deceived.  
 You are betrothed both to a maid and man. (5.1.253-7)

Sebastian’s use of “mistook” is used as a metonym for “love”, and the first two lines of the speech describe how Olivia’s love for Viola-Cesario has now transferred to Sebastian. Yet, Shakespeare pokes fun at this theme by indicating that Sebastian is a virgin through use of the word “deceived” (5.1.256), and stating that while a marriage between Olivia and Viola-Cesario would have resulted in a same-sex pairing, by marrying Sebastian she

is technically marrying both a man and a woman as Sebastian's virginity makes him a "maid". This speech is a clever way to indicate Olivia's bisexuality while also subverting traditional gender tropes.

Ultimately, while the "willow cabin" and "patience on a monument" scenes use romantic language and imagery with different intentions, the end result is still the same. Viola-Cesario shows her desire for both Orsino and Olivia through the way she uses language to not only court them, but to discover her own bisexual identity. The romantic language in the "willow cabin" and "patience on a monument" scenes is as much about Viola's realized sexuality as it is about Orsino and Olivia's reaction to Viola's gender and sexuality. In turn, Orsino and Olivia's reaction to Viola-Cesario's use of romantic imagery and their passionate responses indicate that though Viola-Cesario's androgynous appearance initially attracts them, it is not what continues to hold their interest. Their romantic interest is due to Viola's wit and intelligence, proving that her presented or natural gender identity has very little to do with their love.

The Orsino-Viola-Olivia situation is complicated due to the nature of crossdressing, which makes the comparable Antonio-Sebastian-Olivia plot seem infinitely less intricate. Yet, the nature of this triad is important in that it shows a bisexual identity that is not completely influenced by crossdressing. Olivia's interest in Sebastian may be due to a case of mistaken identity, but Sebastian's bisexuality is not influenced by crossdressing. His interest in Antonio and Olivia is based on their physicality and personality. This is critical to understanding bisexual identities in *Twelfth Night*, as it provides more concrete evidence that gender confusion and ambiguity have very little to do with bisexual romantic interest.



Several critics, such as Chad Allen Thomas and Joseph Pequigney, cite the Antonio/Sebastian pairing as one of Shakespeare's most fully realized same-sex pairings.

As Thomas states:

Together Antonio and Sebastian represent a same-sex (and for some scholars mutually loving) couple that nonetheless must find suitable mates of the opposite sex to fulfill the aforementioned central premise of romantic comedy: the transformation of characters from homosocial twosomes into heterosexual marriages. Sebastian comes to this easily, and his development from weeping boy to married man occurs in the fourth act, well before the play's climax, when Olivia successfully woos and weds him after mistaking Sebastian for Cesario. (Thomas 226)

Antonio and Sebastian's first scene in 2.1 provides a backstory as to their initial off-screen meeting, and it isn't until Sebastian reveals the truth of his identity – he has been living under the pseudonym Roderigo (2.1.15) – that the strength of their relationship is revealed:

**Antonio:** If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant.

**Sebastian:** If you will not undo what you have done— that is, kill him whom you have recovered, desire it not. Fare ye well at once, my bosom is full of kindness, and I am yet so near the manners of my mother, that upon the least occasion more mine eyes will tell tales of me. I am bound to the Count Orsino's court: farewell.

**Antonio:** 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. (2.1.31-8)

Antonio's first line indicates his loyalty to Sebastian but more importantly the term "servant" (2.1.31) is "a word that can also mean 'lover'" (Pequigney 202). Using this interpretation provides a more intimate look at Antonio and Sebastian's interactions.

With this in mind, it is understandable that Antonio is upset at the thought of Sebastian

leaving him to journey to Illyria. The use of “murder” (2.1.31) implies that by leaving, Sebastian is causing Antonio emotional turmoil. Sebastian’s response is equally moving, as the phrase “kill him whom you have recovered, desire it not” (2.1.32) indicates that Sebastian cannot abide the idea of leaving Antonio, and his use of “mine eyes will tell tales of me” (2.1.33) shows that their separation causes Sebastian enough pain that he is brought to tears. Their time spent together has made such an impact that he is devastated at having to leave Antonio behind. Antonio’s response to Sebastian shows that their separation causes him as much pain as it does Sebastian. Antonio’s speech “expresses his adoration for Sebastian in verse, a syntax quite often used to express romantic love” (Thomas 236). But the language he uses, especially the word “adore” (2.1.37), indicates the sincerity of his feelings. Antonio has “many enemies in Orsino’s court” (2.1.35), but decides that “the danger shall seem sport, and I will go” (2.1.38), as his adoration for Sebastian outweighs the potential danger he may face. This is important because “such ‘adoration,’ especially as prompting the adorer to risk his all happily and carelessly only to be with the other, must stem from passion” (Pequigney 203).

Antonio’s pursuit of Sebastian in 3.3 and their second separation and reunion in 5.1 adds more credence to the suggestion that they are romantically involved. Their conversation in 3.3, and specifically Antonio’s lines, are filled with a sense of devotion and affection:

**Sebastian:** I would not by my will have troubled you,  
But, since you make your pleasure of your pains,  
I will no further chide you.

**Antonio:** 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 to a longer voyage—  
 But jealousy what might befall your travel,  
 Being skillless in these parts, which to a stranger,  
 Unguided and unfriended, often prove  
 Rough and unhospitable. My willing love,  
 The rather by these arguments of fear  
 Set forth in your pursuit.

**Sebastian:** My kind Antonio,  
 I can no other answer make but thanks (3.3.1-14)

The use of “pleasure” (3.3.2), “desire” (3.3.4), and “willing love” (3.3.10) are all sensual, suggestive terms. Sebastian is pleased and grateful to find Antonio has followed him to Illyria, though he is unable to profess the extent of his gratitude aside from a simple “thanks” (3.3.14). Antonio is equally grateful to be reunited with Sebastian and states that it was not just his desire and love that compelled him to follow Sebastian, but his worry over what might befall Sebastian during his journey (3.3.7-10). It is not “words only but also his correlated actions [that] reflect Antonio’s avid devotion” (Pequigney 203) to Sebastian. That is, Antonio’s love is so sincere and all-consuming that he is willing to prove it not only with words, but with his actions as well. These actions include finding a place for them to “lodge” (3.3.40) and giving Sebastian his “purse” (3.3.38), both of which indicate the trust and devotion Antonio has for Sebastian. By seeking them a place to stay and providing Sebastian with money, Antonio is giving Sebastian physical reminders of his love.

Antonio’s dedication is perhaps borne of the three months he and Sebastian spent together after Antonio rescued Sebastian from the shipwreck. He says, “for three months before, / No int’rim, not a minute’s vacancy, / Both day and night did we keep company” (5.1.89-91). The phrase “not a minute’s vacancy” (5.1.90) indicates that they were

inseparable, while the mention of the “day and night” (5.1.91) reveals that their relationship was most likely romantic and not platonic. Were it platonic, Antonio would not need to mention spending his nights with Sebastian and would not use the phrase “keep company” (5.1.91) which implies sexual relations. Sebastian’s reaction to their reunion in 5.1 confirms that their relationship veers over the line of friendship when he states, “Antonio! O my dear Antonio! / How have the hours rack’d and tortured me / Since I have lost thee! (5.1.211-3). The use of “rack’d and tortured” (5.1.212) is especially notable, as it displays Sebastian’s genuine worry over Antonio, while the use of “lost thee” (5.1.213) reminds us that Sebastian has been searching for Antonio since their separation in 3.3. The mention of “lost” also alludes to Sebastian wondering if he has lost his relationship with Antonio now that he is married to Olivia. Moreover, this speech is “the most impassioned speech Sebastian delivers” (Pequigney 206) throughout the play, which is striking when compared to his emotional reunion with Viola and his interactions with Olivia.

If Sebastian’s interactions with Antonio show his confirmed same-sex desires, then his interactions and marriage with Olivia confirms his opposite-sex desires. After meeting Olivia, who mistakes him for Viola-Cesario, he says, “Yet doth this accident and flood of fortune / So far exceed all instance” (4.3.11-2), indicating that his chance meeting with Olivia and her ardent reaction to him may be confusing, but he considers it auspicious and beneficial to his current situation. His willingness to marry her (4.3.32-3) is also significant since it insinuates he probably has romantic and sexual interest in Olivia, and there is no reason for Sebastian to agree to marry Olivia otherwise. His language in 5.1 does support this theory, as he calls Olivia “sweet one” (5.1.207) and

refers to “the vows / [they] made each other but so late ago” (5.1.207-8), demonstrating his commitment to their new union. His language here is fond and affectionate, demonstrating that despite their short acquaintance, Sebastian does appear enamored of Olivia.

The interactions Sebastian has with both Olivia and Antonio is indicative of his realized desires for both of them, and the romantic terminology in his conversations with them reveals that these are consummated relationships. Considering the mention of Sebastian’s virginity in 5.1, consummation in this case means romantically and spiritually. As in, Sebastian’s feelings of love for Antonio and Olivia, as well as his bonds of friendship and marriage, and the reciprocal nature of those feelings from his intended recipients is what completes each relationship. Sebastian’s relationship with Antonio and Olivia provides an example of the ability of a character to have romantic connections with characters of the same and opposite gender.

By comparing the different types of relationships in the Antonio-Sebastian-Olivia and Orsino-Viola-Olivia triads, we receive a picture of love that is fluid and not completely influenced by gender. While some of these relationships are complicated by the gender confusion that plagues the greater part of *Twelfth Night*, the use of romantic language and imagery in every relationship provides a compelling portrayal of bisexuality that is based on personality and identity rather than only on gender. By stripping out the gender ambiguity and focusing on the characters’ personalities, language, and actions, we see that “bisexual experiences are not the exception but the rule in *Twelfth Night*” (Pequigney 207). *Twelfth Night* ultimately provides evidence that

through the lens of romantic language and imagery, same-sex, opposite-sex, and crossdressed relationships can be viewed on an equal footing.

## Chapter VI

### Conclusion

Queer readings of Shakespeare's plays have always been a complicated issue, and one that is mostly borne out of the critical debate over whether modern scholars should analyze historical works through contemporary lenses. Examining sexuality in the crossdressing plays is even more difficult due to the gender ambiguity associated with crossdressing. The relationship between "bisexuality and gender ambiguity [is] complex and volatile" (Chedgzoy 112), as any potential interpretation of same-sex desire within the crossdressing plays is often conflated with issues of gender and androgyny. Furthermore, the backlog of critical texts on the homoerotic desires caused by crossdressing tends to favor the idea of intransience and erasure. There is a pervasive belief in the literary community that Shakespeare's crossdressed heroines may flirt with homoeroticism, but that they do not contain any realized same-sex desires.

Yet, as discussed throughout this thesis, the use of romantic language and imagery in *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night* provides contextual evidence as to the bisexual natures of Bassanio, Rosalind, Orlando, Viola, Orsino, Olivia, and Sebastian. The use of romantic language and imagery is highly regarded in traditionally heterosexual poems, drama, and literature as the height of romanticism. To dismiss its use in homosexual or bisexual interpretations reeks of erasure and homophobia, however internalized the latter example may be. As Joseph Pequigney points out, "the Shakespeare professoriat has a long history of avoiding the topic of bisexuality" (201), a sentiment which Kaye McLelland shares, stating that

“Shakespeare’s status as a cultural icon, which has long been problematic with regards to any nonheterosexual interpretation, simultaneously necessitates and obstructs bisexual readings” (McLelland 347). The problem, it turns out, is that critics are eager to claim Shakespeare as either homosexual or heterosexual (354), and this interest in claiming his works and identity for their own purposes means that analyses that deviate from the binary are all but ignored.

While analyzing Shakespeare with modern points of view can present some problems, it also allows for new critical perspectives. Historical, political, and social context is crucial when examining the crossdressing plays, as it helps us understand gender and sexual norms, but historical context is also not the only aspect an analysis should focus on. As explored in Chapters Three, Four, and Five, all three crossdressing plays subvert heteronormative expectations. *The Merchant of Venice* shows Bassanio as “infinitely bound” (5.1.135) to Portia and Antonio after they both vow to give their life in exchange for his happiness. *As You Like It*, on the other hand, challenges heteronormativity by allowing Rosalind to participate in multiple marriages regardless of whether she is being presented as herself or as her crossdressed identity. Rosalind’s disguise as Ganymede allows her to marry both Celia and Orlando while she is in her biological state and then again when she is in her masculine disguise. And *Twelfth Night* challenges traditional gender roles by showing Orlando and Olivia falling in love with Viola-Cesario because of her character and not because of her appearance. Her brother, Sebastian, finds himself happily ensconced in a relationship with Antonio as well as married to Olivia.



All of these characters invoke romantic imagery throughout the play, and each of their actions in pursuing same-sex and opposite-sex relationships allows them to realize their bisexual desires. Though each play ends in heterosexual marriage and the probable consummation of the wedding bed, I maintain that the desire for both genders does not disappear once the characters enter into marriage. The bonds of love that were explored throughout the play are still valid and still acknowledged.

This acknowledgement of bisexual desire is critical in underscoring the need for a bisexual analysis of Shakespeare's plays. A good deal of existing criticism relies on the heterosexual-homosexual binary and the idea that there are only two sexual identities worth exploring. A bisexual reading ultimately offers criticism that has, until recently, been largely ignored. This is especially important because there are *seven* potential bisexual identities throughout the three crossdressing plays that are not only recognized, but understood to be consummated. By focusing on male and female bisexual identities in the crossdressing plays, I hope that I am adding a new perspective to existing Shakespearean scholarship and that I am working against the traditional tendency of scholars to ignore the potential of queer readings that go beyond the heterosexual-homosexual binary.

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