2000

Dangerous Play: Lesbianism in *As You Like It* and the Making of a Feminist Shakespeare

Marry Ann T. Davis
*Denison University*

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Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism, by Philip C. Kolin, erases any doubts that feminism has greatly shifted and widened the reading of the Shakespearean canon. In this comprehensive bibliography, Kolin surveys four hundred and thirty-nine items from 1975 through its publication in 1988. However, only thirty-eight of the books and articles listed in the subject index touch upon the specifics of "sexuality (female)," and thirteen of these items are repeated under "sexuality (male)" (Thompson 2). In addition, there are only nine sources under "homosexuality" and eleven under "homoeroticism," four of which are shared, with no male/female designations. Thompson shrewdly notes that male critics, especially in regard to female sexuality, ignore when "Shakespeare's women speak," in fact preferring them to remain silent. Certainly, since 1988 scholarship analyzing the portrayal of female homoeroticism in Shakespeare’s plays has greatly increased. Yet to this day, serious discussion of female homoeroticism, let alone homosexuality in general, within the Shakespearean canon is limited to a select few scholars.

Shakespeare's As You Like It comes under prime focus in such discussions because of its passionate "friendships" and artful, sexual language—all combined with the main heroine's, Rosalind’s, prancing around in drag. Because this play ends in the conventional gang marriages attributed to romantic comedies, where Rosalind doffs "her masculine attire along with the saucy games of youth" and agrees to marriage (Howard 49), scholars take the view that Shakespeare is showing how the conventional sexuality and gender roles always succeed. Even Valerie Traub, for all of her groundbreaking work on female sexuality and homoeroticism in Shakespeare, brushes off the hints of stronger female homoeroticism quite easily: "In Shakespeare's plays, an originary, prior homoerotic desire is crossed, abandoned, betrayed; correlatively, a heterosexual desire is produced and inserted into the narrative in order to create a formal, 'natural' mechanism of closure." ("In
d' Significance") 73. In this paper, I will argue that Shakespeare cannot and should not be boxed in so easily. Utilizing the established lens of conscious female hom­
eroticism in As You Like It, Shakespeare’s in­
ordinate boundary-pushing in portraying les­
bianship as the paramount of female sexual­
ity, reveals his atypical, yet present, feminism, in an age when women were denied eroticism of any sort.

Naming the Danger

It should be quickly noted that the term "lesbian" did not exist in Elizabethan England. Today's society tends to regard the sexual orientation of a person as an inherent part of a complete identity. For both women and men in Shakespeare's time—but more so for women because even explicit heterosexual sex for them was taboo—choice of sexuality was not an option. Paul Hammond notes that such rigidity can create problems for modern scholars because "homoerotic desire is rarely made articulate unambiguously" in works from this period. Most utilize the same language as "passionate friendships." (225). Part of the chal­

Engage for scholars, then, is to recognize vary­ing intensities of desire. In speaking directly of As You Like It, I will use the term homoerotic to analyze personal interactions as more passionate and sexual than "conventional" or in comparison with other "friendships." Thus a necessary erotic aura can be conveyed, with the avoidance of the modern trappings of les­bian.

Mary Ann T. Davis

Mary Ann T. Davis is a senior transfer student from Louisville, Kentucky. After her graduation in December of 2000, she plans to pursue graduate degrees in Creative Writing, adopt a cat before buying a kitchen table, and learn how to cook anything with cilantro.

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However, the term "lesbian" cannot nor should not be entirely avoided—the main thrust of this paper is that Shakespeare, in his play As You Like It, supports lesbian relationships. As an operational definition, the use of "lesbian" in this paper will refer to a relationship between two women which embodies both erotic and friendship aspects. It sounds strikingly similar to "homoerotic," with the additional characteristic of genuine love and respect to balance the eroticism, creating a full romantic relationship. Because the term relationship refers to two people equally and willingly involved ("required" might be another nice term to employ here), the use of "lesbian" in this paper will refer to women equally and willingly involved in an erotic and loving relationship.

A final delineation of the analysis employed here narrows the type of homoerotic desire present. As with most plays that involve disguise plots, the politically correct way of saying "cross-dressing"), homoerotic implica­tions stem from two sources in the play: the all-male cast employed during Renaissance England and the text of the play itself. Because this analysis will focus on the female homoeroticism of the play, it must necessarily limit itself to a textual focus. The obvious erotic dance between a boy-actor playing a woman disguised as man (which on the surface is simply a boy actor) flirting with and courting a woman, eliminates any possible focus on female homoeroticism. Thus the text will guide the analysis, in which enough desire circulates, whether or not disguised.

Desire in the Open

Celia. No, thy words are too precious to be cast away upon me; though some of them at me; come, lane me with reason. (I.i.4-6)

I think that Shakespeare loved Rosalind...[She] was at least the fourth woman he had dressed as a man in his work, and as Virginia Woolf said, this was a prototype of the androgynous mind. His males are inadequate, his women dominant whether generous or wicked. —John Ward

Most of the scholarship regarding female homoeroticism in As You Like It focuses on the large chunk of the play spent in the Forest of Arden, where the banished Duke senior re­sid es with his loyal followers. Rosalind's cross-dressing is the obvious reason for the focus, as well as the strong erotic language used throughout, between men and women, men and men which embodies both erotic and friendship aspects. It's strikingly similar to homoerotic, with the additional characteristic of genuine love and respect to balance the eroticism, creating a full romantic relationship. Because the term relationship refers to two people equally and willingly involved ("required" might be another nice term to employ here), the use of "lesbian" in this paper will refer to two women equally and willingly involved in an erotic and loving relationship.

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Celia. No, thy words are too precious to be cast away upon me; though some of them at me; come, lane me with reason. (I.i.4-6)
It is doubtful that a female friend would promise such gifts to another female friend—especially the gifts of inheritance. Women of higher station in Elizabethan England did not have their own estates from which to give freely. Men who married into the family took over the inheriting rights from the women. That Celia is promising her inheritance to Rosalind, links the two in a bond similar to marriage. It should also not be overlooked that Celia chose the word heir in reference to Rosalind, instead of heiress, implying a certain bending of gender into the role of son-in-law. The language in this section takes the image of "passionate friend" one step deeper, equating Rosalind in this section takes the image of in Rosalind and Celia, links the two in a bond similar to marriage. The homoeroticism of Celia's word choice cannot be ignored. She says Rosalind and herself "still" sleep together, meaning that in their early adulthood they continue to share the same bed. The Oxford English Dictionary reveals "played," in addition to the common meaning, to signify "to sport amorously, to have sexual intercourse"; and "coupled" of course carries the surface and normative sexual, as well as romantic, connotations. Mario Digangi clarifies the mention of "Juno's swans," naming Juno as the "patron goddess of female sexuality" ("Queering" 275). However, he makes note that swans are typically the birds of Venus. Regardless of who made the mix-up, Celia or Shakespeare, the coupling of the two most sexualized goddesses in mythology hints at female homoeroticism between Celia and Rosalind in a very subtle manner. In addition, Rosalind again provides the awareness of women's roles that seem to go hand-in-hand with the discussion of female homoeroticism.

That critics and scholars have, for the most part, overlooked the more blatantly homoeoretic language of the play for the stereotypical homoeroticism embodied in the cross-dressing of Rosalind as she stumps through the Forest of Arden, should not be entirely surprising. Valerie Traub, in her essay "The (In)Significance of 'Lesbian' Desire in Early Modern England," states that a female character who embodies the gender roles accorded her, "who did not cross-dress, who did not wear swords, ... and whose gendered 'femininity' belied the possibility of 'unnatural' behaviors," for such characters, "desire may have been allowed to flow rather more freely" (77). Critics and scholars do not delve into the erotic language between Celia and Rosalind because Celia is so feminine. She's not the one waging serious "sport" on the roles of women, standing up to her guardian and leader, and assuming the garb of a man quite eagerly. Thus scholars relegate Celia's words and the romantic banter between Rosalind and herself to the level of "passionate friendship." Rosalind's sexuality and freedom, because of their license and abnormality, are sent to the Forest—a magical place where everything is "righted" and every desire forgiven.
The female homoeroticism here seems out of place, especially considering the subject of which Rosalind is begging knowledge. Together, Rosalind's love for Orlando and the magical atmosphere of the Forest, female homoeroticism shifts from focus, thus helping Shakespeare to appease his audience's conventional ideals. This scene, above all, shows an increase of female eroticism across the board as a significant move toward a feminist performance in the Forest and her assumed male-ness, allowing a complete discussion of female roles and sexuality, and a complete parody of male roles and the heterosexual norm.

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The Inadequacy of Postmodern Love: An Analysis of Mary Gaitskill's Because They Wanted To

By Angelica K. Lemke '00

Jean-François Lyotard, one of the leading thinkers of postmodernism, has made the following statement concerning aesthetics:

"A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the relationship s/he creates is not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work." (407)

In this paper, I would like to argue that Mary Gaitskill's Because They Wanted To re-formulates that statement as the following:

"A postmodern lover is in the position of a philosopher: the relationship s/he creates is not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and it cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the love affair." (407)

In this collection, Gaitskill depicts relationships that adhere strictly to the postmodern aesthetic of uncertainty and contingency, but what results is not a postmodernism which rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the world.

As Stew sorts his memories of his estranged daughter, Kitty, a pattern in the way he relates to her quickly emerges; his memories highlight the importance of language. He recalls their shared "nose hair" joke (12-13), overheard insults to his wife (14), his wife always having "something bad to say about Kitty," (15) and the cruel words he spoke when Kitty tells him she's lesbian (24). Their relationship is very much characterized by the words which pass between them, words which would traditionally be supposed to signify something as a mark of themselves. In the postmodern world of surfaces, however, this need not be the case:

"It is...a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double...Never again will the real have to be produced." (Baudrillard 414)

The "real" in this case is the real Kitty, the real human being who is covered over by the signs which Stew has allowed to come between him and his daughter. The distance only grows, such that the language which masquerades as the very outset of the story; he dreams that he relates to her quickly emerges; his memories highlight the importance of language. He recalls their shared "nose hair" joke (12-13), overheard insults to his wife (14), his wife always having "something bad to say about Kitty," (15) and the cruel words he spoke when Kitty tells him she's lesbian (24). Their relationship is very much characterized by the words which pass between them, words which would traditionally be supposed to signify something as a mark of themselves. In the postmodern world of surfaces, however, this need not be the case:

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a father-daughter relationship cannot even exist as verbal exchange, but instead must be found in a letter, the words on Kitty's t-shirt (both 17), or the magazine article on which the story hinges.

What is perhaps most interesting about the article which Kitty writes is that she seems unconcerned with her father ever reading the work. The endless codification of their relationship, her father's unwillingness to see past a single aspect of his daughter has reached a point where the relationship itself no longer exists, but only the signs which have been produced by it. Nietzsche describes the danger in over-codification as follows:

But this inwardness also carries with it a celebrated danger: the content itself, of which it is assumed that it cannot be seen from without, may occasionally evaporate; from without, however, neither its former presence nor its disappearance will be apparent at all...Our interior is too feeble and disorganized to produce an outward effect...The desire which Kitty expresses for the truth which she cannot tell her father because it makes him unhappy...is illustrated most fully by Margot's response to Patrick's invitation to sex. Though she has always been interested in him at all, but to a public which examines and interprets the signs each of them now produces ad infinitum. The "real" no longer exists. As Barry paraphrases Baudrillard, "the sign dis­guises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath"...Postmodern communica­tion has failed to supply what was needed in this relationship.

"Orchid"

In "Orchid," the characters do not have the luxury of a "real" from which their relationship can grow; that is to say, they are never afforded the kind of intimate relationship that Stew and Kitty, as father and daughter, presumably lost. Margot and Patrick begin their relationship at the surface level. As such, they are truly postmodern, rather than characters who evolve into a postmodern state. Unfortunately for the hearts of these characters, "what we see is all we get" (BARRY 89, my emphasis).

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At the outset of the story, Margot gives a description of Patrick which is concerned solely with his physical appearance, then and now. His early work as an actor also informs the reader very early that Patrick may very well be concealing a self other than the one which emerges on the surface. All of Patrick's romantic endeavors seem to be based on his attractive physicality:

"People get fixated on Patrick," said Dolores. "When he was in high school he actually had a female fan club. It was embarrassing. He encourages stuff like that because it flatters him, but in another way, he knows it's not about him at all. I think he's pretty lonely, actually." (72-73)

Even as Margot and Patrick begin to develop a close friendship, Margot is unable or unwilling to see below the surface: Patrick said, "It's just that I feel so invisible. I just feel so invisible." Margot blinked and stared at him. His bright-orange shirt was open to his exquisite collarbones. His long, subtle hands looked hypersensitive against his cheap coffee cup. He was outrageously fine and fair. "What do you mean?" she said. "What on earth do you mean?" She didn't remember his answer or even if he had one. (65)

Margot keeps Patrick at a distance, both physically and emotionally. In fact, all of the physical exchanges in the story are momentary, transient, like the way in which Patrick's attention would "sometimes touch his sister, quickly, like a traveling drop of light"...This is illustrated most fully by Margot's rejection of Patrick's invitation to see her. Though he propositions her without much tact (76-77), she is still aware that he is "looking at her all the way from the bottom and, even more, inviting her to look in"...Patrick desires a relationship that goes beyond the surface, beyond physical attraction and polite conversation, but Margot stays "outside his blankets"... when she first approaches him, and quickly retreats when Patrick asks her to join him beneath the blanket; that is, she refuses to allow the relationship to take on a more significant level. At the same time, she is hurt by Patrick's own inept attempt to sound casual, the statement that he "could take [sex with Margot] or leave it"...because it trivializes the act, makes it insignificant, relegated to the surface.

Like Patrick, Margot also allows her other romantic endeavors to be overwhelmed by surface concerns. When Patrick observes her uncertainty in her relationship with Chiquita, she responds with a comment about Chiquita's nipples rather than her personality or the depth of feeling between them. The swiftly following end of this relationship comes as no surprise. Margot's emphasis on the surface, her lack of concern with the interior lives of her lovers leads her to inevitably lose them. Roberta, who has just left her when she is reunited with Patrick, leaves Margot because of her disgust with her superficiality. She mocks Margot's affinity for "bright little things on her walls and furniture"...for merely aesthetic pleasures, and condemns Margot as a stereotype...rather than a fully unique, multi-dimensional human being.

A postmodern approach to romance has failed to satisfy Margot's needs. Even when reunited with equally superficial Patrick, they are unable to break through the surface to a full commitment, but remain so distant from each other. He was trying to show himself to her, to explain something. He didn't have the means, but he was trying, silently, with his eyes. And she was trying too. It was as if they were signaling each other from different planets, too far away to read the signals but just able to register that a signal was being sent. They sat and looked at each other, their youth and beauty gone, their selves more bare and at the same time more hidden. (87)

Like the characters of "Tiny, Smiling Daddy," Patrick and Margot have found themselves overcome by signification, by surface relationships, so much so that they are "too far away to read the signals." With the exterior buffer of their beauty gone, they are "more bare," but because their inner selves have remained un­cultivated, have continually retreated in favor of a facade of surfaces, they are also "more hidden." A lifetime of postmodern romance has left them unable to enjoy romance on any level.

At the same time as it critiques a postmodern approach to love, "Orchid" explains the appeal of such a perspective through one of Margot's clients. The woman explains her desire to look like a supermodel by praising the simplicity and superficiality they literally embody: "I mean, I know the models themselves aren't like that. They probably have the same stupid, ugly problems I do. It's more the world as they represent it. Without any fucking awful complexity. Without any of this filthy shit." (66-67)

After this session...[Margot] went to the rest room, where two other social workers were talking about a woman who'd been in earlier, trying to have her daughter committed. She'd just asked her daughter, "Do you know about the kid?" said one. "but I'd say like to put Mrs. Bitch away." Margot...for some reason thought again of Patrick. (66-67)

The world of images is free of "filthy shit," of the difficulties and emotional traumas of relationships that extend beyond the surface. When Margot is faced with the cruelties of her fellow social workers, her inclination is to think of Patrick, of superficial, aesthetically pleasing Patrick. Her client also craves the solace of a pretty, problem-free world, the kind of world which she can see in photographs of supermodels. She, however, recognizes the falsity of this world. This surface-bound aspect of postmodern relationships has aesthetic appeal, as in a photograph, but is taken for the way life is actually lived. Rather than the happy play of images that appears to characterize postmodern art, these characters experience a disconnected, unfulfilling lack of emotion in their romances.

"The Blanket"

Gaitskill's collection, however, does not condemn contemporary society to the inad-
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The distinction between the real and unreal that Valerie must hold onto, as his subsequent attempt to play out a rape fantasy demonstrates. Valerie, understandably shaken and frightened by the experience which, for her, is very much about real life, though Michael thinks of it as mere play, struggles to pull him out of the postmodern game that has been their relationship thus far.

"What do you think? You spoiled, stupid, ignorant little shit! I tell you I don't want to fuck, I tell you about being raped and you set up a rape fantasy? What's wrong with you?"

"I was just doing what we do all the time."

"It's not the same... You were disrespecting me... For real."

Her small voice and her words hinted at the wonderful pathos that had so gripped him. (99)

The depth of feeling that Michael senses in her voice, that he wants to experience for himself, cannot be achieved in a play of surfaces, but must be found in the "real" which postmodernism covers over and denies. In the final scene, Michael's transformation is complete. When he truly wants to "[c]ome under the covers" (113), to go beneath the surface of Valerie's life only when she offers him that chance, he has abandoned the postmodern approach altogether by recognizing a difference between surface and what lies underneath and seeing the need to approach that underlying reality, that complex organism known as a human being differently from the world of surface images. The strength of this relationship is less than those discussed earlier. Michael and Valerie may be able to forge a solid love together.

Conclusion

Though "the postmodern condition" may foster a healthy playground for the arts, it is, like an actual playground, full of cruelty toward the heart. Though Because They Wanted To has been written in a time period which is increasingly referred to as "the postmodern era," it laments, rather than celebrates, this condition. As one of the "eternal verities" that postmodernism would have us reject, love is endangered and often lost if we are to approach it with depth. To love postmodemly, then, is to love badly, if to love at all. The terrible pain of Stew, Kitty, Margot and Patrick leaves us yearning, like Michael for "the wonderful pathos" which lies beneath the surface.

Notes
1. In fact, his view is bound by a single word, "lesbian," which he uses four times in less than four pages to describe his daughter (13-16), even saying, "Then he would remember that she was a lesbian...making it impossible for him to see her. Then she would just be Kitty again."
2. In keeping with the postmodern spirit, Patrick's appeal cannot be fully classified by gender; Margot consistently characterizes him as being boyishly feminine. See 60, 75, 76, as well as Donald's comment on 77 which shows the contrast between Margot and Patrick's unclassifiable relationship and a world view which maintains strictly defined categories, such as heterosexual/homosexual.

Works Cited


