Male Friendship and Sodomy in Twelfth Night

Raea DiMassino

*St. John Fisher University, rdimassino_no@sjf.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/ur

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

**Recommended Citation**


This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/ur/vol9/iss1/5 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at . For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjf.edu.
Male Friendship and Sodomy in Twelfth Night

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

"Male friendship is, indeed, the basis on which civil society is founded" (Montaigne 220). While analyzing Twelfth Night, by William Shakespeare, it is essential to understand the great value that society placed on male friendship during the Renaissance time period. In his essay "Of Friendship," Michel de Montaigne attempts to demonstrate the very slight distinction between male-male friendship and homoerotic behavior between men. Some argue that throughout Twelfth Night, the thin line between male-male friendship and homoeroticism is discreetly played upon. However, closer examination of the relationships between Orsino and Cesario, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, and Antonio and Sebastian display how Shakespeare eliminates this distinction made by Montaigne, and, as a result, undermines the notion of true friendship in Twelfth Night. Highlighting the lack of honesty and equality, as well as the possibility of erotic attachment within these male relationships emphasizes the play's deconstruction of Montaigne's distinction.

This article is available in The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research: https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/ur/vol9/iss1/5
Male Friendship and Sodomy in *Twelfth Night*
Raea Dimassimo

"Male friendship is, indeed, the basis on which civil society is founded" (Montaigne 220). While analyzing *Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare, it is essential to understand the great value that society placed on male friendship during the Renaissance time period. In his essay "Of Friendship," Michel de Montaigne attempts to demonstrate the very slight distinction between male-male friendship and homoerotic behavior between men. Some argue that throughout *Twelfth Night*, the thin line between male-male friendship and homoeroticism is discreetly played upon. However, closer examination of the relationships between Orsino and Cesario, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, and Antonio and Sebastian display how Shakespeare eliminates this distinction made by Montaigne, and, as a result, undermines the notion of true friendship in *Twelfth Night*. Highlighting the lack of honesty and equality, as well as the possibility of erotic attachment within these male relationships emphasizes the play’s deconstruction of Montaigne’s distinction.

Before jumping into the analysis of *Twelfth Night*, it is important to understand how Montaigne distinguishes between male friendship and homoeroticism. Centuries earlier, Aristotle maintained that the notion of friendship between men was the highest of human ties as well as the idea that true friendship can only occur between equals; coincidently women were viewed as inferior to men. It is for this reason that sons can not be friends with their fathers or wives with their husbands and leaves room for the possibility of true friendship to occur only between males (Smith 220). Montaigne adopts these principles in his essay as he confirms that any other attempt at friendship, besides those that exist between males, occurs only with the intent of gaining something from another which taints the honesty of the relationship. Therefore, he concludes that relationships between male and females are so inferior that they are not even comparable to friendships that exist between men, and can not be placed in the same rank (Smith 222).

It is equally important to recognize how profoundly friendship between men was valued at the time that *Twelfth Night* was written, as it is to recognize how friendship between males was commonly expressed during the Renaissance. Bruce Smith identifies the similarities between sodomy and expression of male friendship during the Renaissance when he states, “One signal difficulty with the policing of sodomy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was the fact that public ways of demonstrating friendship between men – Kissing, embracing, sharing effusive compliments – could also be interpreted as signs of sodomy” (218). It was common behavior for men of the Renaissance to express their friendship physically through touch and embrace. In society today, it is not typical for men to express their appreciation for one another physically. This discrepancy is important to realize since the thin line between the expression of male friendship and sodomy of the Renaissance time period plays a crucial role in Shakespeare’s play. In order to articulate how intimately men express true friendship, Montaigne uses his own friendship with another male as an example as he illustrates their sharing of kisses, embraces, and exchanging of compliments, but is careful to distinguish between this friendship and sodomy (Smith 220). With closer analysis of the male relationships in the play, Montaigne’s distinction can be deconstructed and genuine friendship between these males is proven absent.

The relationship between Cesario/Viola and Orsino is central to the play. How quickly the relationship between Orsino and Cesario becomes intimate is shown when Valentine tells Cesario, “If the duke continue these favors towards you, Cesario, you are like to be much advanced. He hath known you but three days, and already you are no stranger” (1.4.1-3). This emphasizes the notion of an instant connection between Orsino and Cesario which most likely would not have existed at all if Orsino was aware of Cesario’s actual gender. It was clear to Valentine, who had been in Duke Orsino’s service for much longer than Cesario, that the duke’s treatment of Valentine was much different. In just three short days, Orsino was already relying on Cesario to accomplish a task the Duke would not allow just any stranger to attempt-- winning over his beloved
Olivia. The closeness of their relationship is expressed when Orsino tells Cesario "Thou know'st no less but all. I have unclasped / To thee the book even of my secret soul" (1.4.11-12). Shakespeare uses a metaphor of comparing Orsino's soul and the secrets it holds to an open book in order to emphasize the great extent of personal information that Orsino has already shared with Cesario. Orsino "unclasps" this book of his secrets to share with Cesario not just some, but all of his private thoughts and emotions.

Based on Montaigne's principles, one would argue that it is necessary for Viola, the female, to disguise herself as Cesario, a male, in order for the two to share the intense bond that existed between them. If Orsino were not under the impression that Cesario was a male, he would not have shared his most personal emotions and thoughts with Cesario, as he did so shortly after they became acquainted.

However, one can dispute the actual strength of their friendship as a whole. Although Orsino is displayed as having confided all his deepest secrets and emotions in Cesario, Cesario/Viola is withholding from Orsino one of the greatest secrets of all-- that he is, in fact, a woman. This is not the only secret that Cesario/Viola is keeping from Orsino. Along with her entire identity, Viola is also withholding her true feelings for Orsino as she begins to secretly fall in love with him. The secrets Cesario withholds from Orsino are expressed in Cesario's monologue when she exclaims "My state is desperate for my master's love; / As I am Woman" (2.3.32-33). She is not only in love with Orsino, but is apparently infatuated with him, as exhibited in her "desperation" for her master. With closer analysis, the relationship is not actually as strong as some might argue because Viola/Cesario might know the real Orsino, but Orsino does not, in reality, know the real Viola/Cesario at all.

Another challenge to the strength of this friendship is based around Montaigne's belief that only equals can truly be friends because they are not gaining anything from each other besides friendship. Orsino and Cesario are far from equal in Twelfth Night as shown with Cesario's response to the Duke: "On your attendance, my lord, here" (1.4.9). Cesario's addressing of Orsino as "my lord" depicts his inferiority to him. This line expresses that he is meant only to be a servant to Orsino and stresses the inequality of their relationship. Orsino's power over Cesario is displayed yet again when Orsino encourages Cesario to win Olivia over for the Duke. "Prosper well in this, / And thou shalt live as freely as thy lord, / To call his fortunes thine" (1.4.36-38). Orsino is bribing Cesario with as much freedom and fortune that he has in return for wooing Olivia for him. Cesario is ordered to do all of Orsino's work in trying to win over Olivia, which further stresses their inequality.

Viola's intent of dressing up as Cesario and working under Duke Orsino is to gain a place in a society in which she would have no place as a woman. Therefore, she is using Orsino for intentions other than building a friendship with him. Orsino, on the other hand, is much higher up in society than Cesario and uses him as a messenger to Olivia to try to win her love. Orsino chooses to use Cesario for this task because he believes his favorable appearance will get him into Olivia's castle and thus is using Cesario to gain something besides his friendship. Although they do share some sort of bond, these factors do not allow for this friendship to be true in accordance with Montaigne's principles.

With the marriage of Viola to Orsino at the end of the play, the sexuality of Orsino is called into question. Joseph Pequigney calls attention to the fact that "Orsino, who proposes marriage to a girl he has known and come to love only as a male servant, has seen only in masculine attire, has addressed only with the masculine name Cesario and never once as Viola, and who when proposing to calls her 'boy'" (127). This leads to the question of whether or not Orsino has been attracted to someone he thought was a male but was just ashamed to admit it, or if he was just desperately searching for someone to be his wife. This is where the line between homoerotic attraction and male "friendship" is straddled in Twelfth Night as the play does not give any conclusive answer to this question but instead leaves the sexuality of Orsino ambiguous with the close of the play.

Some critics, such as Pequigney, would argue that Orsino was attracted to Viola before he has knowledge of her true gender. However, there is evidence that what he is actually attracted to is the character's feminine qualities. This is shown through Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony when Orsino urges Cesario to woo Olivia because he is sure he will be successful on account of Cesario's
attractive appeal, which the Duke attributes to Cesario’s feminine characteristics:

That say though art a man: Diana’s lip
   Is not more smooth and rubious;
they small pipe
Is as maiden’s organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman’s part
I know thy constellation is right apt
For this affair. (1.4.29-34)

Orsino remarks on Cesario’s striking similarities to a woman as he compliments his feminine lips as well as his petite throat and high-pitched voice. Ironically, Orsino points out the truth about Cesario without even knowing it.

To further contradict the notion of Orsino’s questionable sexuality, it is important to realize that he is much more in love with the idea of being in love than the idea of being in love with another man. As R. W. Maslen points out in his article entitled “Twelfth Night, Gender and Comedy”, not long before Orsino reveals his “love” to Viola and makes the decision to marry her, he declares “I’ll sacrifice the lamb that I do love” (5.1.120). Orsino’s willingness to kill Cesario to spite Olivia so shortly before he resorts to marrying Viola displays not homoerotic tendencies, but instead, desperation (136).

Perhaps the relationship between males that can be deemed most genuinely friendship and least homoerotic in the play is that which exists between Sir Andrew and Sir Toby. These two companions are rarely found apart from one another and are regularly partaking in drunken foolishness together, providing for the majority of the comic relief in the play. The sincerity of their friendship is expressed on several occasions, including the attempt Sir Toby makes at protecting Sir Andrew from harm when he tries to scare Cesario away from the confrontation by exaggerating Sir Andrew’s meanness and anger. Sir Toby exaggerates Andrew’s reputation to Cesario:

He is a knight, dubbed with unhatched rapier and on carpet consideration, but he is a devil in private brawl. Souls and bodies hath he divorced three, and his incensement at this moment is so implacable that satisfaction can be none but by pangs of death and sepulcher.
Hob, nob is his word; give’t or take’t.
(3.4.192-196)

In order to protect his dear companion from harm, Sir Toby portrays Sir Andrew as a ruthless villain, perhaps even the most ruthless villain of all—the Devil. Sir Toby also goes as far as to claim that Sir Andrew is so relentless that the only thing available for his satisfaction is the death of his enemy, Cesario, hoping to frighten Cesario out of partaking in the duel.

The inevitable battle between Cesario and Sir Andrew leaves many wounded including Sir Toby and Sir Andrew. Sir Andrew’s concern for his companion is expressed through his support for Sir Toby who is reluctant to dress his wounds. Sir Andrew urges, “I’ll help you, Sir Toby, because we’ll be dressed together” (5.1.189). Sir Andrew emphasizes how deeply he cares for his friend by offering moral support and suggesting that they take care of their injuries together. The duo shares a protective quality over each other as they take turns looking after one another’s safety. They also both carry the label of “Sir” which provides evidence of their equivalent social status and further supports the notion that their friendship is, in fact, true.

Despite this evidence of pure friendship existing between the two companions, the friendship is undermined because of their dependence on each other for things other than pure friendship. Some argue that Sir Andrew remains friends with Toby in hopes of courting his niece, Olivia. In contrast, Sir Toby depends on Sir Andrew’s fortune to support his drinking habit and selfishly convinces Sir Andrew that he actually has a chance with Olivia in order to keep him around. This is displayed when Sir Toby tells Sir Andrew “She’ll none o’ the Count. She’ll not match above her degree, neither in estate, years; nor wit, I have heard her swear’t. Tut, there’s life in’t, man” (1.3.89-91). Sir Toby provides reasoning to Sir Andrew as to why Olivia is not interested in the Count and urges him to continue pursuing her when he is well aware that Sir Andrew has no chance with her. He jokes with Maria: “Therefore this letter, being so excellently ignorant will breed no terror in the youth. He will find it comes from a clodpoll” (3.4.150-152). Sir Toby remarks on Sir Andrew’s apparent lack of knowledge to Maria,
knowing that he has no chance with Olivia because of this, but persists on keeping him around for his own benefit and demands money from him on several occasions. Sir Toby requests “Let’s go to bed, knight. Thou hadst need send for more money” (2.3.148). Not long after, Sir Toby again demands, “Send for money, knight” (2.4.150). Clearly, Sir Toby is dependant upon Sir Andrew for money and uses the possibility of courting his niece as bribery, persuading Andrew to remain in Illyria with him as company in his drunken foolery and support for his drinking habits.

Perhaps a better example of the difficulty in distinguishing between sodomy and male friendship in the Twelfth Night can be found by examining the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian. In accordance with Montaigne’s principles, inequality of social status between Antonio and Sebastian. Montaigne would argue that because of Sebastian’s much higher social status, Antonio’s intentions can be called into question. Rather than possessing desire for Sebastian, Montaigne would argue that what Antonio actually desires is a relationship with him in order to elevate his own social status. However, the text clearly contradicts this theory, as Antonio desires so greatly to merely be in Sebastian’s presence that he pleads with him to be his servant. Antonio begs “If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant” (2.1.26). Antonio is willing to remain in his inferior social class and is making no attempt at climbing the ladder of social hierarchy as he settles for the job of Antonio’s servant in order to simply remain in his company.

Again reflecting upon Montaigne’s argument that only true friendship can be found between equals, one would conclude that Antonio and Sebastian’s friendship is not true because of Sebastian’s dependence upon Antonio for things other than pure friendship. Sebastian, having been shipwrecked and rescued by Antonio, was forced into an unfamiliar location and relies on Antonio for money and guidance. Although Sebastian makes an attempt to refuse Antonio’s assistance when he tells him “The malignity of my fate might perhaps distemper yours; therefore I shall crave of you your leave that I may bear my evils alone” (2.1.2-4), it does not take much convincing for Sebastian to accept his offer despite his knowledge of the danger Antonio faces by following him into Illyria. The language of Sebastian’s refusal provides evidence that he is, in fact, hopeful that Antonio will ignore his refusal for help and is, perhaps, using guilt to persuade him into coming along. Sebastian is most likely well aware of Antonio’s desire for him and is sure that if Antonio feels Sebastian will be in danger, he will not be able to resist the chance at protecting his dear companion. Therefore Sebastian cleverly chooses to remind Antonio that he will “bear his evils alone”. If Sebastian truly did not wish for Antonio’s company in his travels, he would have made his journey seem less dangerous and would not have portrayed himself as helplessly as he did.

Having followed Sebastian into Illyria, Antonio does not hesitate to provide Sebastian with food and lodging but most importantly entrusts him with his purse as he wanders off to explore the sights and sounds of the unfamiliar town. Antonio explains, “haply your eye shall light upon some toy / You have desire to purchase; and your store / I think is not for idle markets, sir” (3.3.44-46). This indicates that Sebastian has little money of his own and must rely on Antonio, who willingly provides for him. It also shows how anxious Antonio is to please Sebastian as he urges him to buy not just necessities, but instead, anything he desires.

In contrast, there is little evidence that Antonio is dependent upon Sebastian for anything besides friendship. The question here that Shakespeare masterfully constructs is whether Antonio’s objective is to solely remain friends with Sebastian, or if he actually intends to cross the line into homoeroticism. Although it is clear that Sebastian deeply values his friendship with Antonio, it is obvious that Antonio is much more invested. Antonio provides reasoning for his decision to join Sebastian in his travels:

I could not stay behind you. My desire,  
More sharp then 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 befall your travel,
Being skillless in these parts,
to a stranger,
Unguided and unfriended, often prove
Rough and hospitable. My willing love,
The rather bye these arguments of fear,
Set forth in your pursuit. (3.3.4-13)

Keeping in mind that the love Antonio constantly stresses for Sebastian was common among men during the Renaissance, it is extremely difficult to interpret Antonio’s motives. However, in Valerie Traub’s article entitled “The Homoerotics of Shakespearian Comedy”, she interprets Antonio’s language as laced with homoerotic desire and argues that Antonio was both anxious and jealous about the dangers that might befall his beloved and the attractions that might entice him (147). Antonio’s desire for Sebastian is so extreme that it is described as more sharp than filed steel. As there is very little known to man that is, in fact, more sharp than filed steel, there is also very little desire that exists that is as strong as Antonio’s for Sebastian. Antonio’s inevitable passion for Sebastian causes him enough worry to sacrifice his own safety in order to remain with his companion.

Traub does not hesitate to point out, as well, how justified Antonio is in his anxious worrying over Sebastian as he falls so easily for Olivia’s charm (147). Similarly, Pequigney adds, “Any sexual desire in the friendship might be one-sided is something to consider” and this is absolutely relevant to Antonio and Sebastian’s relationship (126). Although some might argue that Antonio possesses great love for Sebastian that goes beyond love for a friend, that love goes unrequited as Sebastian falls quickly for the Countess Olivia and Antonio is so promptly forgotten. It is important to realize that Sebastian chooses not to concern himself with the troubles of his loyal companion when he is arrested by the Duke’s officers, but instead he puts his effort into convincing Olivia, who he has known very briefly, that their marriage is justified despite the fact that she had mistaken Sebastian to be a completely different person.

With the close of the play and with Antonio’s absence, it can be assumed that Sebastian left Antonio to remain in jail regardless of all the help he had given him prior to his arrest, which ironically, is partially Sebastian’s fault. Interestingly enough, Laurie E. Osborne notes in her article entitled “Antonio’s Pardon”, that some editors found such great conflict with Antonio’s final position that they actually included an invented pardon for Antonio by Orsino in his final speech and allowed for a reunion between Antonio and Sebastian in their alternate versions of the play (109). This does nothing more than further stress “the conflict between understanding Antonio’s love as an acceptably passionate, even erotic male friendship and a love that must be isolated at the end of the play because of its homoeroticism” (Osborne 114). Antonio’s absence from heterossexual couplings at the end of Twelfth Night emphasizes the ambiguousness of his relationship with Sebastian.

There is a sentiment of unresolved conflict which comes about because of the ambiguous relationships that Shakespeare masterfully constructs. By playing on the value of male friendship, and the difficulty in distinguishing between this and homoeroticism, Shakespeare continuously keeps his audience guessing while simultaneously adding to the chaos of the comedy. Most importantly, Shakespeare makes the lack of true friendship apparent in Twelfth Night by blurring the lines between homoerotic attachment and male friendship.

Works Cited