

Margit Harsányi**Pushing the Boundaries
Gender and Sexual Orientation in Shakespeare's Work**

Four centuries after William Shakespeare's death his cult flourishes and thrives, more than ever. The most important reasons for this are the high quality of his works, the countless possible interpretations his works are open to, and the lack of evidential support regarding most of the events in his life. One might wonder why this last ingredient is so important, but it is easy to see how the lack of knowledge, in fact, feeds a cult. The lacunae of Shakespeare's biography invite scholars as well as the general readership to hypothesize about his life story. Shakespeare's love interests, his sexual orientation, and his relationships have always been in the focus of such contemplations, for his works seem to suggest that these questions were indeed of interest to him. It is unique how in his writings he constantly pushes the conventional boundaries concerning gender and sexual orientation, and what is more, he does so in a non-judgmental way.

This is true both for his poetry and for his plays. Shakespeare, well aware of conventional gender roles, manages to reflect on these with objectivity and distance. His sonnets, his plays, and his narrative poems deal with same-sex relationships, gender differences and the transgressive aspects of sexuality. The best known examples have always been the sonnets, of course, in the case of which homosexuality and homoerotic desire have much-discussed topics (Thompson 4). The speaker's description of his love for the Fair Youth has always made the sequence the most scandalous of Shakespeare's works. Many scholars saw the *Sonnets* as proof for Shakespeare's own homosexuality.

This has been a common mistake among readers of Shakespeare, one against which scholars and critics tried to warn audiences. Namely, that interpretations tend to treat the author and the speaker of the texts as identical. Such an approach is tempting, because it promises the possibility of filling the gaps in Shakespeare's biography with fictional relationships and ideas, and the other way round – using biographical evidence in interpreting the works. It is crucial that we differentiate between “the author and the fictive self” (Vendler 14), for it is not Shakespeare's own sexual orientation we should primarily be interested in when analyzing his *Sonnets*, but the emotions and desires of the speaker.

Thus from the three possible interpretations of the *Sonnets* (autobiographical, fictitious or esoteric) we should concentrate on the second, which claims that our focus should be on the literary conventions (Nejgebauer 15) (including stock characters) that Shakespeare made use and fun of, keeping and twisting the traditions of his time. Such an approach releases the reader from having to form any kind of judgment about the author of the poems, and makes room for what has been regarded as the best quality of the *Sonnets*, their accuracy (Vendler 17). Indeed, the power of the sequence does not lie in providing an explicit moral judgement regarding promiscuous and adulterous relationships, or providing labels for the kind of love the speaker indulges in (Mahood 61). Quite the opposite, their power is a result of Shakespeare's authentic and convincing description of the speaker's feelings and thoughts (Vendler 17).

Sonnet 144 is a perfect example for the accurate representation of inner struggles without moralizing. It also exemplifies the twisting of conventions, and the pushing and questioning of well-established sexual and gender boundaries. The sonnet starts out as a common medieval drama, presenting a good and a bad spirit fighting over the soul of Everyman (Vendler 605). However, Shakespeare provides a new, unconventional ending with the bad angel wanting to win over the good angel (Vendler 605). Therefore, by the end we see that the speaker is neither good nor bad; his state is marked by doubt and pain. This version lacks the verdict at the end, the speaker's soul is neither saved, nor damned; these clear categories are excluded from Shakespeare's model. And so are the well-known gender characteristics. The black woman is "masculine" in taking the initiative and behaving rather aggressively, while the man is "femininely" fair and powerless: a victimized saint.

Interestingly enough, it is the speaker's relationship with the saint-like, "comfort" figure that evoked more scandalized reactions; it has been described as unnatural or abnormal (De Grazia 49). Meanwhile, the love for "despaire", an ill coloured, ill natured woman was regarded as natural or normal (De Grazia 49). There are scholars who do not label the love for the Youth as inappropriate, rather they understate it by calling it conventional friendship (Vendler 16). However, Shakespeare's truth seems to be different from these. He presents a sexual triangle, unprecedented in English or European sonnet sequences, in which two extremely different types of passions are "idiosyncratically present together" (Vendler 16).

And Shakespeare does not tell us which the good one is. He tells us that these are too narrow terms. He mixes and twists the conventions and pushes division lines.

Similarly to his *Sonnets*, Shakespeare's dramatic work often reflects on questions of gender and sexual identity. And though this topic appears in both comedies and tragedies, his plays best known for dealing with sexuality in depth are his so called Golden Comedies. In these he introduces women disguised as men, either literally or intellectually, and through these characters he deconstructs stereotypes, aiming towards multiplicity and plurality (Belsey 188). Through the eyes of these heroines (Beatrice, Viola, Rosalind) the reader gains new perspectives; we can define and, more importantly, redefine our convictions about masculine and feminine conventions (Belsey 190). For all of these female protagonists the plot is an intellectual quest, one in which they gain knowledge of themselves and the world, and since they are given the privilege to go through their journey having (at least) a double perspective, the audience, witnessing their struggles, acquires the same knowledge.

All of these characters are forced to play the part of the outsider, reflecting on themselves and their environments. In the case of Rosalind, for instance, the heroine of *As You Like It*, Shakespeare, by almost giving her both genders and making her the love interest of both a man and a young woman, gives her deeper and greater awareness than any of the other characters have (Dillon 53). Furthermore, on the Elizabethan stage female roles were given an extra twist by being played by boy actors. In the case of Rosalind, at one point we see a boy actor on the stage who plays a woman who plays a man who plays a woman. This is the ultimate questioning of sexual identity. "The very notion of gender, and more broadly, of 'self' and 'other' become confused" (Berry 129). Shakespeare was undeniably interested in the potential of women when given the intellectual and social power of men. In the atmosphere of the dominantly patriarchal Elizabethan England Shakespeare explores the possibilities of going beyond conventions and beyond well-established, convenient ideals (Berry 129).

But does he really do that? Many critics argue that such heroines ending up in marriages is really the re-affirmation of Elizabethan stereotypes, and not the ground-breaking, new perspectives others claim Shakespeare's ideas to be. All the Golden Comedy protagonists abandon their disguises by the end, and marry "husbands whose social power outreaches their depth of character" (Berry 129). Nevertheless, the five-act-long journey is not in vain, a play

is so much more than its ending (Belsey 188). We should accept that Shakespeare is, indeed, trying to reach beyond conventions and the happy ending is saved for form's sake rather than to nullify the discoveries and plural perspectives the protagonists and the audience gained.

His narrative poems seem to strengthen this argument as well. We need to see that in order to play with conventions Shakespeare needs to rely on them, which is exactly what he does in *The Rape of Lucrece* and in *Venus and Adonis*. He takes two well-known stories and makes them idiosyncratically his by using the original material in a way that serves *his* purposes. He shifts the readers' focus from where it previously lay, and emphasizes new aspects. One of these is his reflection on the role and power of women in Elizabethan society. From this viewpoint the two poems can be regarded as connected to each other through the presentation of two women stripped of agency. And even though Lucrece represents the ideal Renaissance woman, her fate, her sacrifices, and her impossible situation suggest a critical attitude (on the author's part) towards conventional contemporary expectations. Together with Venus, though the two of them can be considered as two ends of the same scale, they draw attention to the unbearable stereotypical role of women.

Venus, unlike Lucrece, goes against the literary tradition not only in her fate, but also in her character. The essence of her role can be grasped through looking at the changes from the Ovidian text. Venus is no longer the invincible, gracious goddess of love with limitless power and unearthly beauty, femininity itself. She is turned into a very earthly, aggressive, in many ways masculine woman, whose deeds lack any elevation (up until the very end). This is how the transgressive nature of sexuality is introduced, which is so characteristic of the poem (Bate 88). On the one hand, Venus bears traditionally male features like high intellectual capacities, eloquent speech, impatience, and ambitions as a warrior. On the other hand, however, Adonis receives feminine traits both physically and psychologically. His girlish complexion and the imagery he is depicted with (flowers, colours) all point toward his lack of masculinity. Once again Shakespeare toys with the idea of the "dissolution of the conventional barriers of gender" (Bate 88).

It is not this peculiar reverse of the roles, or the dissolution of division lines that hinder *Venus and Adonis* from uniting in love. Apart from a likely incestuous relationship, critics most often accept an interpretation in which Adonis refuses not only the love of Venus but the love of women in general. Shakespeare's rewriting of the story is open to such a reading.

Adonis's resistance to the love of Venus is contrasted by his eagerness to hunt the boar, and the ambiguous wording of his fatal hunting accident. Moreover, when analyzing the text, we should bear intertextuality in mind. In Ovid's original the tale is told by Orpheus, "the patron saint of homosexuality" (Bate 82). His songs can be regarded as "an apology for homoeroticism" (Bate 83), claiming that since the gods practiced it, such desires are allowed (Bate 83). Of course, Shakespeare is never so explicit, his subtle tools, nevertheless, suggest validity in interpreting Adonis as gay.

Thus *Venus and Adonis* is a proof once again for the trait many scholars regard as the best in Shakespeare's works, the plurality. Plurality of perspectives, of interpretations, of views is omnipresent. He blends and re-blends ingredients in his works in the most unique ways (Howarth 97). This blending holds for both the blurring of genders and the blurring of different traditions and conventions. Shakespeare explores the possibilities, and he is not interested in giving an explicit moral. Instead of moralizing he tries to discover psychological truths, and emotional depths (Bate 84). Pushing well-established boundaries is both his final aim and his tool for acquiring authentic knowledge of the world. And without having to rely on insufficient data concerning Shakespeare's own sexuality, we can expand our horizons on such topics reading his works instead.

In conclusion, gender, sexual identity and sexual orientation are problems that Shakespeare constantly reflects upon in both his poetry and his dramatic writings. He relies on social and literary conventions, but mostly in order to question them, or move away from them. He often defies gender divisions, and refuses to give judgments on the basis of conventional morality. His experiments are not arbitrary though, in fact, the refusal of stock characters and patters, the pushing of boundaries is his way of learning about the world. Fortunately, we can learn from him.

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