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## Between Men and Boys: Reading Homosociality and Transvestism in *The Merchant of Venice*

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### **Abstract:**

The paper critically looks at the aspects of homosociality, transvestism and their application in the Elizabethan time with reference to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596). The theatre became a space for male homosociality and the overtones of gender fluidity were packed in Elizabethan plays when they sought cross-dressing. The subversive gender performance in the patriarchal Renaissance society averted female actors on stage and allowed the space for male homosociality. The characterization of Portia in the play as a transvestite is critically examined in the light of the homosocial desires prevalent at the time. This emerges from prohibition of women on English stage and engagement of young men in female roles. The court scene in *The Merchant of Venice* is analyzed in the paper discretely to gather evidence for the transgression of patriarchal gender norms and the celebration of male homosociality.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare,gender,sexuality,transvestism, homosociality, masculine hegemony

The discourse pertaining to men and masculinity in gender studies use the term "homosociality" to describe male friendships and the exercise of power in relationships. The historical explorations on male friendships reflect on the erotic intimacies between men as many of the idealizations about them in literature and political arena represent. The hierarchical arrangement of power plays a significant role in the exercise of relationships in the patriarchal society. Homosociality among males then can be seen as the space where the hegemonic masculinity has its play. In their attempt investigate and explore the subject, Hammaren et al. (2014) elaborate on homosociality in connection with power and male bonding as:

Somewhat overexploited use of the concept referring to how men, through their relations to other men, uphold patriarchy tends to simplify and reduce homosociality to an almost descriptive term that is used to show how men bond, build closed teams, and defend their privileges and positions (1).

Thus the male bonding offers space for the performance of masculine hegemony and the territory is restricted to women's entry. It may blur the boundaries in the categorization of sexuality and gender performances. However, Sedgwick (1985) in her *Between Men: English Literature and*

*Male Homosexual Desire* reads homosociality by considering the different types of desires between men: “To draw the “homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire,” of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (1:2).

Homosociality, in this sense is seen as homoeroticism. Sedgwick (1985) postulated three different manifestations of homosociality: the construction of power blocs by men in their bonding, the queer reading that involves the homoerotic desires and finally the different layer of homosociality that surrounds in female friendships. Sedgwick’s argument on the queer nature of homosociality presents a triangular version where men have relation with men as well as women and the potential fading of the boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual bonding.

Another critic Flood (2008) opines that homosociality refers to the nonsexual and same-sex bonds, with high degrees of homophobia. The sexual act with women is a means to status among men, and a direct medium of male bonding. The fear of same-sex relations as *sodomy*<sup>1</sup> is underpinned in the patriarchal imposition of homosociality and heterosexual marriages. In this sense, homosociality reinforces the hegemonic masculinity.

According to Connell (1995), the hegemonic masculinity results in the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. The women were denied the powers of decision making in the early modern England. Reflecting on the historical terrains, the act of explorations about female bonding would be slippery as they are closeted and their experiences were undermined by the patriarchal society. They were restrained from most of the liberties the men enjoyed during the time. The superior qualities of intellect, wisdom and bravery were stereotypically associated to masculinity and women were forced to be submissive and obedient. The queer perspective offers a subversive reading of the hegemonic masculinity.

### **Homosociality and Transvestism in the Renaissance English Stage and Shakespeare:**

The Renaissance period in England was of male mastery and hegemonic masculinity despite of the great aesthetic and cultural change brought in by the same. The patriarchal norm structured a hierarchical society with women as less rational, under the “protection” and rule of the men. They were denied the open space and the female sexuality was restrained. “The good woman was closed off, silent, chaste and immured within the home” (Howard 424).

The theatre constructed gender ambiguity with the flexibility of gender roles and desires. The patriarchal Renaissance England feared the exhibition of female sexuality on stage and allowed the subversive gender performance of cross-dressing or transvestism. Stryker (2006) in her introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader*, defines the transvestite as “a person who periodically changes to the clothes of other person” and performs a sexual metamorphosis (4). When boy actors took up the role of female characters, they exhibited the subversive gender performance of femininity through their transvestism. The theatre space thus openly account for

the discourse of homosociality and transvestism. The Renaissance Theater when it prohibited female actors on stage, was exercising the masculine hegemony as another level of critical inquiry delineates.

The imposition of boys in female roles restricts the ruling out of the homoerotic undertones in Shakespearian times. The understanding of sexuality pertains to the sexual acts and gender identity. The Renaissance plays employ homoeroticism which may fall under the sin of *sodomy* on the grounds of the moral code of the early modern English society.

Homoeroticism on the English stage was inescapable, because, for a variety of reasons, plays in England were performed solely by the boy companies or by youths and men in the adult companies. Women did not act on the stage, so the love scenes between Romeo and Juliet, Kate and Petruchio, Antony and Cleopatra, were played, not by a man and a woman, or a youth and a girl, but by two males, adult and/or juvenile (Hamill 4).

Considering this critical observation, it can be described that, during Renaissance, the male homosociality might have erased the boundaries of sexuality and gender performance. The heterophobia or the fear of female sexuality would have helped the unfurling of the homosocial theatre space.

William Shakespeare's major concern seems to be the depiction of human relationships as the critical inquiries pertaining to him ascertain. The comedies meant for delightful entertainments were packed with the Elizabethan values of propriety, social decorum and themes like male friendship involving homoerotic love. The English stage, in the early modern times exhibited exchanges between men when it prohibited women on stage. It can be assumed that the discharge of female sexuality on the theater obviously disturbed the patriarchal society and the heterosexual relationships on stage were influenced by the same. A number of plays incorporate cross-dressing and that perhaps made the job easier for the boy actors who were employed to perform female characters on stage. This leaves room for the homoerotic relationships culminated in male friendships as well.

In his analysis of the authorship issues of Shakespearean plays that considers the sexuality of the author, Hamill (2005) opines: "Unlike our current society, which tends to categorize sexuality as either heterosexual on the one hand or homosexual on the other, many of Shakespeare's characters would have to be placed somewhere on a continuum between the two, a condition that today we generally term bisexual" (3). Another critic observed that the term homosexual did not exist in the sense as it is understood currently until a subculture emerged late nineteenth century (Smith 11:12). The English instead used the term *sodomy* to refer homosexual relationships in the early modern times. In spite of the anti-sodomy laws, the English theater in the sixteenth century had a strong transvestite tradition and was an especially important arena for the expression of various lewd and erotic desires (Thompson 7).

### **Homosociality and Transvestism: Reading *The Merchant of Venice***

There have been previous attempts from critics to gather evidence for the homoerotic male bonding in Shakespeare's comedies. *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) was remarked as a play that explicitly depicted romantic friendships. Also, the plot depicts the space for male bonding by adding the color of homoeroticism when it frames the Characters Antonio and Bassanio. If the male homosocial space is defined by Antonio and his friends, Shakespeare brilliantly conceived the other the other aspect of the homosocial space in the play that includes the female- bonding of Portia and her maid Nerrissa as well. Shylock's intervention as a practicing money lender in the play informs the spectators about the potential patriarchal space where the exercise of power and male mastery in the Renaissance England is reinforced.

There is an identification of space for male gathering at many instances in the play. The notion of homosociality involves certain masculine practices at bazars (of lending money), merry making and the masculine pattern of socialization central to the early England. Antonio has a group of male friends, including Bassanio and the play offers interactions among them. The first scene in the play itself is suggestive of the homosocial interactions among the male friends, which is not devoid of the queer elements of homoerotic bond between Antonio and Bassanio. Later it is Antonio who, with the full knowledge of the possibilities of the foul play involved, acts as the signatory to the bond to get money from Shylock for Bassanio.

Further, the manifestations of homosociality as homoerotic conceived by Sdgewick (1985) is applied in the reading of in *The Merchant of Venice*, when Bassanio is portrayed as a man who is torn between a wife and a male friend. The homoerotic element in the play is established in the initial act of the play itself. The melancholy lurks in the mind of Antonio is understood as the result of the ensuing marriage between Bassanio and Portia. Solanio, another friend of Antonio, observes:

I saw Bassanio and Antonio part:

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. (2.8. 45-9)

Bassanio reciprocates his affection to Antonio: "To you Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love" (1.1. 131). When Antonio is put under trial, Bassanio tries at most to get him released and his attempts seem to be in vain. Antonio's final prayer before the doctor (Portia) passes her judgment was full of his "love" towards Bassanio. And this love seems to be a hint at the homoerotic desire covered up under the banner of homosociality during the time of the play and the social norms of sexual morality. Look at the words of Antonio:

Give me your hand, Bassanio: fare you well!

Grieve not that I am fallen to this for you;

.....

Commend me to your honourable wife:

Tell her the process of Antonio's end;

Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;

And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge

Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,

And he repents not that he pays your debt;

For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,

I'll pay it presently with all my heart. (4.1. 255-71)

Antonio is not sad at the thought of a pound of flesh being cut off from his body, but the most painstaking for him is to part with Bassanio his “friend” and wants the latter’s wife to be informed about the “love” the former had towards Bassanio. This love may be interpreted as the homoerotic desire largely concerned with the homosocial environment of the Renaissance England that inculcated homophobia in the practice of sexuality.

However, beneath these homoerotic undertones in the play, there are clever demarcations from the understanding of homosociality involving sexual attraction when we examine the non-sexual male bonding and transvestism used in the play. *The Merchant of Venice* employs the theme of heterosexual marriages and manifests the rift between the performances of different genders to shatter the Elizabethan values. Bassanio’s marriage with Portia would be analyzed considering the norm of the patriarchy about the homosexual bonding and the sin of sodomy. The English parliament’s 1533 statute “designated sodomy to be a felony with the punishment of forfeiture of property and death” (Mager 142). In that sense, Bassanio’s marriage can be observed as a social compulsion and an act that was underpinned by homophobia. The play depicts not only Bassanio’s marriage, but the marriages of his friends Gratiano with Nerrissa and Lorenzo with Jessica according to heteropatriarchy.

While observing the intense form of homosociality as an imposition grounded on moral codes, that itself suffices the masculine practice of hegemony. The political aesthetics of the time necessitated introducing boys in the female roles. Another line that is to be read in close to the male transvestism in the theater is the featuring of the female character’s transvestism within the

play. Interestingly that opens up the curious question of male homosociality and masculine hegemony.

Transvestism is applied in female characters in many of the Shakespearian comedies like *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594), *Twelfth Night* (1600), *As you Like It* (1600) etc. In what can be described as a phobia on the female sexuality, the woman's identity was always trusted with her male protector and most of the female characters who disguise in masculine attire exchanges their identity with masculine gender to conform to the hegemonic codes. The transvestism is seen as a device which equips the female with rationality, wisdom and heroic virtues that were conflated with masculinity. This is evident in the depiction of Portia as the transvestite Balthazar in *The Merchant of Venice*. Her female companion Nerissa also disguises as Balthazar's clerk and both of them outwits Shylock's efforts to trap Antonio at Venice. Transvestism, here can be read as a key to enter into the male homosocial world for both of them.

On the other hand, the rigidities in the masculine homosocial hegemony are complemented by the act of transvestism in the court scene in *The Merchant of Venice*. The Renaissance homosocial theatre offers the space for the application of lived experience as males in the scene. Apparently when boys act as Portia and Nerissa in the play, their employment demolishes the gender ambiguity in the process of 'acting' or 'performing' the feminine gender. Transvestism here embodies the male homosociality and the discourse of masculine hegemony by the absence of the female characters at the court room. Despite of the cross-dressed Portia and Nerissa, the play is obscure about any other female character's presence knowingly or unknowingly at the court scene which indicates the masculine hegemony of social norms and the male homosociality constructed during Shakespeare's time. The male bonding seems to be powerful than marriage when Bassanio proclaims his love towards Antonio at the court scene:

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 esteem'd above thy life:

I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all

Here to this devil, to deliver you. (4.1. 273-78)

Soon after the court scene when Balthazar requests for the wedding ring of Bassanio (Portia had made him to promise not to part with it under any circumstance), it is Antonio who requests Bassanio to gift the ring to the brilliant doctor as a token of their gratitude for saving his life:

My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring:  
Let his deservings and my love withal  
Be valued against your wife's commandment. (4.1. 445-47)

Bassanio then gives the ring though he had a dilemma initially, for the sake of his love towards Antonio. The dilemma he experience at first can be read as homophobia that arise from the moral codes of the time. His act of gifting the wedding ring confirms the liberating space that the male homosociality offered.

The court scene is indicative of the arrangement of male homosocial relations and the distribution of power and justice. Shylock is punished and Antonio is made free from debt. What remains unanswered is the shame infringed upon Shylock as a money lender and the way abusive words showered upon him by Antonio go unpunished. The male homosocial world can be not only of amity but also of hatred and violence.

The third element that is discussed mildly in the play about homosociality is the female friendship as Sedgwick (1985) considered that aspect as well when she discussed homosocial desires in English literature. Portia and Nerissa share the same kind of friendship Antonio and Bassanio had in *The Merchant of Venice* and Nerissa marries the friend of her lady's suitor and accompanies Portia as a transvestite to Venice. What silences the female bonding is perhaps the masculine hegemony prevailed at the time. Sedgwick (1985) examines this case when she says, "...in a society where men and women differ in their access to power, there will be important gender differences, as well in the structure and constitution of sexuality" (697). The female bonding is valued in connection with lesbianism to the bonding between mother and daughter, the bonding between two sisters and female friendships. Hence female homoeroticism was barely explicit in *The Merchant of Venice* and they conform to the patriarchal heterosexual marriages. At another level, the restrictions on female bonding asserts the masculine hegemony and male homosociality.

### **Conclusion:**

The theatre at the Shakespearean time was extensively patriarchal nuanced with the moral code that restricted the free expression of sexuality and gender. Heterosexual marriages and homosexual friendships were celebrated in most of the comedies produced during the time. Shakespeare himself crafted plots that conflate the ideals of heteropatriarchy through his comedies when he admitted heterosexual marriages and male bonding in the plays. However beneath the surface of this masculine order there are demarcations from the hegemonic norms in the form of homosocial and transvestite elements. Homoerotic desires cannot be strictly ruled out in *The Merchant of Venice* in the male bonding between Antonio and Bassanio. Yet, homosociality can be read as a corollary to transvestism and can be distinguished from homosexual desire as well. The play propagates the politics of male bonding and the power play in the patriarchal world. There is limited reference to the female bonding and hence the aspect of



homosociality in the play is evidently masculine concerning its imposition. Transvestism complements the male homosocial world in the play where Portia and Nerissa enter in masculine gender identity. The court scene is the epitome of masculine hegemony and homosociality which are devoid of the intrusion of female characters in theirs' own gender roles and on another level when considering the fact that boy actors performed the role, the space completely negates females and completes the male homosociality. Transvestism is conveniently used in the scene to cover up feminine gender identity and gives lived experience of masculinity to the boy actors. Thus the fact can be undoubtedly established that the Renaissance theatre celebrated male homosociality and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* explicitly manifests the same.

#### Notes:

1. The term originated from *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Chapters 18&19, *The Book of Genesis* in *The Bible*. Sodomy laws criminalize different sexual behaviors in early Western world where they were enforced.

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