
Homoeroticism Elizabethan Era Literature: William Shakespeare

The Elizabethan Era (1564-1616) during the Renaissance period in European history is known as a time when new ideas of forward thinking emerged, welcoming an era of philosophical and progressive literature from writers like the legendary William Shakespeare in England. The Renaissance brought forth the development of literature, art and innovative inventions. Queen Elizabeth I is known to have supported the arts which contributed to the success of Shakespeare's famous plays, as well as many other works of the time. King James VI of Scotland was Queen Elizabeth's heir because she never married. Scholars have speculated that King James may have been homosexual due to evidence found in his personal letters. During this time period, homosexuality was prohibited and punishable by death. It is believed that during his reign, King James was lenient towards homosexuality and very few deaths were accounted for. Scholars also believe William Shakespeare may have been homosexual. Public records show he married a woman named Anne Hathaway and they had three children together. However, some scholars have argued that he was bisexual based on some of his written works, including *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* and various of his famous sonnets. Analyzing these works, the ongoing skepticism of Shakespeare's bisexuality can be validated.

Looking at *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* written at around 1603, a devious man named Iago claims to be angry at Othello, his superior, for having denied him a promotion for the position of lieutenant. He later speculates that his wife Emilia has cheated on him with Othello, using this instigation to justify his actions as he sets out to sabotage Othello's marriage as an act of vengeance. However, his deep hatred for Othello is not entirely justified by these claims because he goes as far as to provoke Othello to kill his wife Desdemona. His anger seems to stem from something much deeper than jealousy of his wife's supposed infidelity. After all, Iago does not even seem to like his wife very much. He treats her like a piece of property and speaks to her through degrading and misogynistic verbal exchanges. It seems Iago is incapable of revealing his real motivations. Even during his soliloquies, one cannot fully trust Iago's intentions. It is possible that he cannot admit his demons even to himself, in his own mind, or when he is alone because he may be ashamed of a dark truth he has buried deep within himself. His drive to break up Othello and Desdemona may stem from his own feelings for Othello which he is trying to suppress but, naturally, cannot resist to act on. He may be jealous of Desdemona because he is secretly in love with Othello. This repressed homosexuality causes him to act on his feelings of jealousy and drives him to plot Desdemona's downfall, humiliation and ultimately, her death.

Iago often expresses his love for Othello throughout the play and enjoys sabotaging his marriage. In Act 3 Scene 3, Iago begins to manipulate Othello by presenting his speculation that Desdemona is being unfaithful to him with his lieutenant Cassio (Iago's rival for the position). Iago fabricates a lie in the process of attempting to convince Othello of Desdemona's betrayal. He tells of a night he allegedly shared a bed with Cassio while in the army, and as he lay awake due to a painful toothache, Cassio spoke in his sleep as he dreamt of Desdemona. While Iago is making his case in an attempt to frame Cassio, he describes a homoerotic moment he shared with him:

IAGO. In sleep I heard him say “Sweet Desdemona,

Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!”

And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,

Cry “O sweet creature!” and then kiss me hard,

As if he plucked up kisses by the roots

That grew upon my lips, lay his leg o’er my thigh... (Othello 3.3. 419-424)

It seems that Iago is presenting this exchange, masked by his intent to provide Othello with evidence, but ultimately seeking a reaction from Othello. Surprisingly, Othello is not shaken by the male to male contact. He is mainly focused on his wife’s role in what he describes as a “monstrous” act. He proceeds to thank Iago for his loyalty and honesty. He says, “You’re my lieutenant now” (Othello 3.3. 487), and in return Iago pledges his loyalty to him, “I am your own for ever” (Othello 3.3. 488). Iago’s choice of words leads one to believe he is expressing more than a soldierly devotion, but rather, he is indirectly confessing his love for Othello. This is his last line in Scene 3, right before they exit. It almost seems as if he spit the words out impulsively. However, it cannot be ignored that his devotion bears a resemblance to somewhat of a marriage vow.

In the final scene of the play, when Emilia enters the room and sees Othello has killed Desdemona, she is hysterical and in shock. Prior to this scene, Emilia has been portrayed as submissive, sneaky and doesn’t speak out of turn. Desdemona’s death empowers her to speak her mind. She tells Othello what her husband Iago has done and he walks in on their conversation. All truth has come out, but it seems Emilia will no longer keep her mouth shut. Iago demands her to go home and draws his sword on her. Emilia responds courageously:

EMILIA. 'Twill out, 'twill out.—I peace?

No, I will speak as liberal as the north.

Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,

All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak. (Othello 5.2. 231-234)

Iago ends up stabbing and killing Emilia as he cannot get her to shut up. However, she has already ratted him out and killing her would make no difference. It could be he killed her out of anger, or it could be she still carried more of his secrets, perhaps of his sexual preferences. Furthermore, the real question is why did Shakespeare throw in these subtle hints that could lead the audience to assume there was an underlying theme of homosexuality? Perhaps, Shakespeare himself was revealing a personal interest in men romantically through the portrayal of homoeroticism in Othello.

If one looks further through Shakespeare’s works, more evidence can be found that may lead readers and fans of his work to question his sexuality. In Sonnet 144, Shakespeare makes it clear whether he prefers women or men:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair

Which like two spirits do suggest me still:

The better angel is a man right fair,

The worser spirit a woman colored ill. (1-4)

It seems that he is describing a love triangle with a man and a woman, and he confesses he prefers the man because he is an “angel,” as in good and pure, and the woman is of “worsen spirit” and “coloured ill,” perhaps dishonest and devious.

Despite evidence in Shakespeare’s works, when addressing homoeroticism, Shakespearean scholars, such as Edmond Malone, have argued that, “such addresses to men... were customary in our author’s time, and neither imported criminality, nor were esteemed indecorous” (“The Plays and Poems,” 241). Therefore, it may just be that men during the Renaissance period had romantic exchanges due to their admiration of one another, especially in times of great bravery or achievements.