A HOMO-EROTIC READING OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

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According to M.H. Abrams, "queer theory is of use to designate the combined area of gay and lesbian studies and criticism. The term 'queer' was originally deroga tory, [but] since the 1990's it has been increasingly adopted by gays and lesbians themselves as a non-invidious term to identify a way of life and an area for scholarly inquiry" (254). Today, some of the leading queer theorists are Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick Alan Bray Teresa de Lauretis and Alan Sinfield. In what Abrams describes as "parallel movements to feminist and Af rican-American liberation studies, the queer scholar's major endeavor is to identify and reclaim the works of non heterosexual writers from Plato to Walt Whitman Proust, Gide, Auden, and James Baldwin, and from the Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos to Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lourde. The list includes writers who represent homo erotic subject matter but whose own sexuality the available biographical evidence leaves uncertain." Abrams cites as examples Christina Rossetti and William Shakespeare (255).

Scholars have interpreted William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* for hundreds of years. The character Hamlet is one of the most compelling in all of literature. Students and dramatists are intrigued by his divided character and the tragedy of his destruc tion. Film and stage directors speculate as to whether Hamlet and Gertrude were incestuous lovers. Freud ians insist that Hamlet was acting upon an unresolved Oedipal complex. In the context of understanding that homosexual behavior has been noted as far back in history as the Greeks, *Hamlet* is one play that can be read from a homo-erotic point of view.

This paper will investigate the validity of inter preting the character of Hamlet as a homosexual. There are scenes in the play one can choose to read from a queer perspective. This homo-erotic reading will demonstrate that some Renaissance writers have often written in code to reveal and conceal socially prohibited behavior and that a good portion of Renais sance audiences understood the meaning. The paper will discuss homosexual behavior in Shakespeare's time and will also look at the play from a queer scholar's point of view. It will also reference John Gielgud's 1929 theatre interpretation of *Hamlet*, a 1921 Danish film interpretation of the play where Hamlet is played by a female actor, and homo-erotic scenes portrayed in two recent film versions of the play, one directed by Kenneth Branagh, the other by Michael Almereyda. This essay will interpret lines from the play that dem onstrate homosexual affection.

A homo-erotic reading of *Hamlet* has not become a generally accepted idea. In fact the possibility that Hamlet is a homosexual has been denied and suppressed for years. Generally speaking any queer analysis of any beloved literary classics has experienced several reactions in scholarly circles. In the preface to his book, editor Byrne R. S. Fone writes, "the title of this book, *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*, will no doubt (even at this late date in the history of debates about nomenclature) move many readers —mostly academic ones—to anxious or irritated ob jection or to satisfied agreement" (xxix . People refuse to see the homosexual possibilities in the text of such literary works as *Hamlet*; if they do they keep quiet

about the content or drop it like a hot potato. This was not true, however in the Renaissance period. Writers such as Christopher Marlowe Rafael Holinshead and William Shakespeare wrote in code to express their intentions to the audience, who were open enough to read between the lines.

Renaissance writers Christopher Marlowe and Rafael Holinshead wrote versions of the play *Edward II*. The play is the "story of Edward II and Piers Gaveston that illustrates the variety of categories through which love between men might be perceived" (Hammond 47). In Holinshead's play, Gaveston is referred to as "the King's dearly beloved familiar a word which had a range of meanings from a member of the household to intimate friend to attendant demon" (Hammond 49). According to Paul Hammond, Holinshead's version of the play provides "homosexual behavior available as a meaning but it is not made explicit" where as in "Marlowe's version the audience is made to understand that the relationship is more than that of master to servant or friend to friend: it is overtly erotic" (48).

Coding can be found in several of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Hammond writes that "Shakespeare explores love between men and often accentuated those passionate relationships between men which he found in his sources, working into these stories an interest in the complexities of male/male passions." Shakespeare respects the "renaissance meaning of love between men" and treats the subject with awareness and sensitivity. He goes on to say that "only once in the entire [Shakespeare] canon is homosexual desire ridiculed, and that mockery comes from the scurrilous Thersites in *Troilus and Cressidil*, to whom everything is filth" (58).

Coding was necessary as homosexuality in the mid 1500's to 1600's was forbidden. It was punishable by death. It did, however, exist. "Sodomy [and buggery] was often considered a luxury only people at court could afford; buggery being the offense of sodomy but usually including bestiality and sodomy being defamed as sexual license of any kind being either heterosexual or homosexual" (Jeffries 1 . Some scholars tend to believe that "England was very open about sexuality but in fact, they were just ignoring it [homosexual ity]. Lower class men did not think anything between two consenting males was bad at all and they were rather more concerned with crimes such as theft and adultery" (Jeffries 1). If it was commonplace for both upper and lower class males to indulge in same sex relations, Shakespeare's use of coding was genius. His ideas came across to audiences both made up of royalty and groundlings, without the threat of imprisonment or worse, the closing of a play due to censorship.

In *Hamlet*, the homo-erotic relationships can be approached through Hamlet's critically well accepted Oedipal complex. According to queer theorist Eve Sedgwick homo eroticism if not homosexuality underlies the psychological struggles that occur in the natural maturation of human beings. In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homo-social Desire* Sedgwick writes that Freud "suggests homo and heterosexual outcomes in adults to be the result of a complicated play of desire for and identification with the parent of each gender: the child routes its desire/identification through the mother to arrive at a role like the father's or vice versa" (22-23).

A later manifestation of this theory according to Paul Hammond in his book *Love Between Men in English Literature* is the idea of the erotic triangle or the Oedipal triangle. The males usually rival each other for the female's affection, when in reality, the female is simply an object used to disguise the latent or forbidden sexual feelings between the men. These men cannot openly express their erotic feelings, so a fierce Oedipal competition develops. Some classic Shakespearian erotic triangular relationships appear in the plays *Romeo and Juliet*, between Romeo Mercutio and Juliet; *Othello* between Desdemona Othello and Iago; and in perhaps the most compelling triangle in all of Shakespeare, in *Julius Caesar* among the characters of Cassius Brutius and Caesar. These cleverly written examples exclude the female element and reinforce the homo-social bonds and erotic intensity between men (59-61).

It is not just queer theorists who have noted homo-erotic material in *Hamlet*. The homosexual elements in Hamlet have been exploited in several well known early 20th century productions of the play. There are a number of performances of the play *Hamlet*. One which emphasized the homosexual relationship between Hamlet and Horatio was produced on the London stage in 1929. The part of Hamlet was acted by Sir John Gielgud. "At 26, he was the first actor under 40 years of age to play the part, and over the years he made it his own" (Knitting Circle 1 . Gielgud played his Hamlet with sensitivity to the male-male relationship. Gielgud was by no means a gay activist, but he read the text as homo-erotic and saw the pos sibilities of a romance between Horatio and Hamlet. His performance and interpretation of the character included insights into the homosexual content ex plored in this paper. In a later New York production of the play with Richard Burton as Hamlet, Gielgud was noted commenting on the performance as being "a manly Hamlet" (Jeffries 1), which Gielgud's was not. This interpretation disturbed Gielgud. Critics noticed a different Hamlet as well. Howard Taubman wrote in a review for *The New York Times,* "Richard Burton's Hamlet is notable for its masculinity, [...] full of the temperament of a man in prime physical and mental health, [...] a Hamlet of such tempestuous manliness" (1). The actor who played Horatio to Burton's Ham let got little if any acclaim and as "Taubman prais[es] Burton's performance he simultaneously invalidates other readings of the part" (Jeffries 1).

Burton's testosterone inflated production may have been in reaction to the earlier arrest of John Gielgud for "homosexual importuning in Chelsea 1953" (Knitting Circle 2 . Gielgud's "humiliation became very public and painful"; however following his arrest audiences of his current play N. C. Hunter's *A Dav by the Sea* gave the actor a standing ovation "when he made his first entrance" (Knitting Circle 2 . At the time of the Burton *Hamlet,* John Gielgud had met "Martin Hensler, who [remained] his companion for forty years until he died in 1999" (Knitting Circle 3).

Another memorable and controversial production of *Hamlet* was the 1921 film, starring Danish actress Asta Neilsen as Hamlet. This production was "loosely based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and on a popular book at the time that said Hamlet was actually a girl forcibly raised as a *boy* in order to provide an heir to the Danish throne" (Morris 4). Asta Neilsen's *Hamlet* forced on the screen the homosexual friendship between Hamlet and Horatio "who caress and coddle each other in what appeared to viewers at the time as a gay tryst" (Morris 4 . The article by Gary Morris goes on to state that the actress "imparts the gender unstable nature of character in these scenes with Horatio and others with Fortinbraus, whose encounters with Hamlet are also clearly coded as gay" (4). This amazing interpretation was way ahead of its time, yet the idea was explored in a creative and sensitive way.

Once the homosexual elements are recognized, a director who wishes to emphasize them will focus on several key sequences. For example in Michael Almereyda's 2000 film version of *Hamlet* the following lines between Laertes and Ophelia clearly show the idea that Laertes's caution to his sister about her own sexual involvement with Hamlet does indeed reveal his first hand knowledge of Hamlet's sexual inclina tion:

> ...Then if he says he loves you,
> It fits your wisdom so far to believe it
> As he in his particular act and place
> May give his saying deed, which is no further
> Than the main voice of Denmark goes with al...
> Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister(1.3.24-33).

Almereyda chooses to have his Laertes (played by Liev Schreiber) whisper this closely into Ophelia's (Julia Stiles) ear; as he does this he takes a clip from her hair. The scene illustrates a sexual response to words. This is an example of an erotic triangle. This warning to Ophelia to watch out for Hamlet's sexual advances could be motivated by Laertes own former

love/sexual experience with Hamlet or information he has regarding Hamlet and other men. Laertes speaking as Ophelia's brother seems inordinately concerned for his sister's virginity.

The implied relationship between Laertes and Hamlet could be exploited by a director in two ad ditional scenes by Shakespeare. First, when Polonius enters in Act I Scene III, we are privy to a touching fa ther/son moment. Polonius advises Laertes in manners and manliness, they say good bye, and Laertes leaves for France. Polonius then goes to Reynaldo in Act II Scene I, and asks him to spy on Laertes and spread rumors about him among his friends and acquaintances in France, including that he makes use of prostitutes, "drabbing" (2.1.25 . Polonius' motivation for this action might be to smear his son's name to avoid the shame his family might endure if Laertes' homosexual nature were revealed. Polonius instructs Reynaldo to make it known that Laertes is a man's man. He swears, drinks, gambles, fights, and visits "brothel[s]" (2.1.59). All of this is done with the intent to protect Laertes' reputation as well as Polonius' position in the kingdom.

The second scene in the play that illustrates the erotic-love triangle is when Hamlet and Laertes physi cally fight in Ophelia's grave. Each one claims that he loved her more than the other. Laertes has leaped into the grave and Hamlet challenges his sincerity as he jumps into the grave and they begin to fight. Hamlet cries in despair, "I lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand broth ers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her" (5.1.269-71). A director might illustrate this scene by positioning the two characters in an intimate physical struggle that spells out a clearly dominant homo-erotic theme. A di rector might even push the point by zooming in on one or the other's face as one man licks the other's throat or cut to both of their faces as they near exhaustion or a climax in the "struggle." The rest of the funeral mourners would be watching and direction would cut to those faces that look as if they knew the unmention able truth or history about Hamlet and Laertes. The scenario of two men set at odds by a woman clearly fascinated Shakespeare, according to Bruce R Smith in his book, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England* (66). It is an example of sexual tension between men, pushing, struggling, being expressed in an apparently socially accepted way.

Within the text, there are obvious lines from dif ferent characters that imply general knowledge of the homo-erotic by key characters. Within Shakespeare's coding he has sprinkled homo-social references that these other characters are well aware of Hamlet's reputation among men. Claudius' straightforward line " 'tis unmanly grief," (1.2.94), may be interpreted to demonstrate that Claudius knows something about Hamlet's sexual preference for men. He is basically calling Hamlet a girl or a sissy because he has carried on in his sorrow over his father's death. Hamlet does not respond to the King's blatant challenge to his masculinity. This coded message to the audience points out that there may be more to Hamlet's discontent than his depression over current events.

Queen Gertrude also has a coded line that can be read as a clue to Hamlet's homo-erotic true nature. The Queen expresses her hope that perhaps Hamlet is madly in love with Ophelia. She says:

> And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
> That your good beauties be the happy cause
> Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your vir tues
> Will bring him to his wonton ways again,
> To both your honors. (3.1.36-41)

Gertrude may instinctually suspect Hamlet's sexual preference and continues to hope that it is not true. Here, she exposes a mother's desire for her son to be heterosexual, marry a lovely woman, avoid possible imprisonment and scandal, produce heirs, and make her a proud and happy grandmother. This coded mes sage can be recognized by many of the savvy men in the audience as their own mothers' concern for their welfare.

The characters Guildenstem and Rosencrantz have a more flagrant exchange with Hamlet. Upon

greeting each other the three of them speak of For tune:

> Guil. [...] on Fortune's [cap] we are not the very button
> Ham. Nor the soles of her shoe?
> Ros. Neither my lord.
> Ham. Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favors?
> Guil. Faith, in her privates we.
> Ham. The secret parts of Fortune? 0, most true, she is a strumpet. What news? (2.2.229-36)

These are low puns regarding the female body, and they abuse her reputation by calling her a strumpet. If you look at this exchange as boys being boys, it may seem perfectly innocent; however, their tone is crude and vulgar. If Shakespeare intended to fool audiences with this type of banter, then his coded exchange goes unnoticed and the play moves along. My reading is that these three "school chums" are objectifying a fictitious woman in an attempt to overcompensate for, or to cover up, their own homo sexual desires.

The term *hyper masculinity* applies to this exchange between the "school chums". In reaction to conscious or unconscious homo erotic feelings males sometimes express masculine traits that they think will mask their desire. Hyper masculinity can be expressed verbally, physically, and frequently violently. In this case, the males discuss a female with crudities. There is another term that is often associated with hyper masculinity which is, *homosexual panic*. This is best described as reacting to actions of homosexual desire or sexual activity with panic and horror. Once the sexual act has been consummated, the fear and horror of social ostracism and realization of ones' behavior cause the male/female to deny or escape from the situation end the friendship physically abuse the sexual partner or accept one's nature.

Later in the play, Rosencrantz and Hamlet have a verbal exchange, where Rosencrantz is not quite sure how to read Hamlet's mood. He appeals to Hamlet by saying, "My lord, you once did love me" (3.2.335). According to Hammond, renaissance men did verbal ize their love to one another, share beds and openly express affection. He writes:

> the renaissance male was brought up in a society where many of his most important relationships were with other men, and within this mascu line culture the bonds of affection, loyalty, and obligation were often passionate (27).

Rosencrantz acts confused by Hamlet's behavior while at Castle Elsinore because he has been accustomed to Hamlet's affections in other circumstances. In cases of unrequited love, the one who is rejected is often baft1ed by the rejection of the love interest.

In his 1997 film version of *Hamlet*, actor/director Kenneth Branagh makes use of low puns to create a provocative homo erotic scene. Hamlet is speaking to Guildenstem and Rosencrantz and he takes a recorder from one of the players and asks Guildenstem "... Will you play upon this pipe" (3.2.350 . The exchange between the men in this scene is played openly daring and suggesting familiarity with oral sex. It becomes evident that Hamlet has the power in this relationship and he is forcing Guildenstem into submission.

Many of Ophelia's lines can be interpreted as coded too. In her madness she becomes overtly sexual to Claudius. She sings a bawdy song and her manner isms exaggerate the lyrics. Over the years, this has been interpreted as alluding to the fact that Hamlet has in fact been her lover and she is now gone over the edge as he has rejected her. It can be read as she is simply exhibiting a sort of sexual frustration and is mocking the King and Queen because she knows Hamlet is not interested in her sexually. If only he were interested, but this is not the case.

In an earlier discussion Hamlet tells Ophelia to her face that her body, being female, means very little to him. As they are about to watch 'The Mouse Trap', Hamlet asks, "lady, shall I lie in your lap" (3.2. 12). This is rude. He means to embarrass her. Then he clarifies his intention by being worse, "I mean, my head in your lap" (3.2 4 . He puts his head in Ophelia's

lap and asks her, "Do you think meant country mat ters" (3.2.116)? Ophelia attempts to maintain some sort of dignity as there are people within ear shot and replies, "I think nothing, my lord" (3.2 16). Hamlet further humiliates her in saying "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (3.2.117 19 . At this point Ophelia is tired of the game and she replies, "what is, my lord" (3.2.120) and he says, "Nothing" (3.2.121). It is evident that Hamlet is referring to Ophelia's genitalia and has no desire for it. Hamlet also denies knowing Ophelia; therefore she becomes an object or worse yet, nothing.

To further abuse Ophelia, Hamlet denies giving her "remembrances" (3.1.92) and then tells her "I did love you once" (3.1. 114). Ophelia responds by saying that she believed he loved her and he cruelly says, "You shouldn't have believed me ... I lov'd you not" (3 .1.116-118). This theme is repeated in the text where the play has begun, and Hamlet is anxious for the prologue to finish. When Ophelia tells him to be patient, the prologue " 'tis brief ..." he curtly replies ''As woman's love"(3.2.153-54). This coded line may mean that love between men is everlasting. Hamlet is a bachelor after all.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes extensively about the role of the bachelor in Victorian fiction and some of her ideas can be applied to Hamlet the bachelor. Hamlet's behavior is irrational. We do not know if he is mad or if he is pretending to be. Sedgwick claims, "... male homosexual panic was acted out as a some times agonized sexual anesthesia that was damaging to both its male subjects and its female non-objects" (188). Certainly, Hamlet is agonizing over several is sues and he spares no one, male or female. She further explains "...the bachelor hero is selfish, he bitches, he has been suicidally inclined and is a hypochondriac" (189). These traits apply to the *Hamlet* hero as well.

Why doesn't Hamlet marry Ophelia? It seems as if we're lured to the theatre with the expectation of seeing a royal wedding. For centuries, people have cited Hamlet and Ophelia as some of the great theatrical lovers of all time. Shake speare teases audiences with obstacles to marriage in several of his plays. "Marriage is postponed in *The Merchant of Venice Much Ado About Nothing Twelfth Night*", Othello is separated from his bride in *Othello*, ''as he still belongs to the male world of the army", and " the arrival of women is said to have fractured the pastoral world of male innocence in *The Winter's Tale*" (Hammond 64-5). In Hamlet's case he cannot propose marriage to Ophelia until he avenges his father's death. Ascribing to queer theory Hamlet the hero loves another and that other is a male. There will be no marriage between Hamlet and Ophelia.

Ophelia herself is befuddled. After Hamlet has visited Ophelia Polonius questions her about the content of their conversation. She describes Hamlet as disheveled and of speaking horrible things to her. Polonius asks, "[is he] mad for thy love?"(2.1.82). Oph elia answers, "my lord I do not know" (2.1.83). One minute she may think one thing and the next another; she is not getting a straight answer from Hamlet and does not know how to respond to her father. Hamlet is an enigma, conflicted and selfish; this is part of his appeal to audiences, actors, directors, students, and scholars.

Horatio is another key character that Shakespeare utilizes to express homosexual love and desire. Horatio speaks loving and endearing lines to Hamlet through out the play. He refers to Hamlet as "[...] sweet lord [...] and my dear lord"(3.2.53 56 . Shakespeare pushes the point one step further by having Hamlet die in Horatio's arms. Horatio is Hamlet's closest confidant. In the same homo-social vein as the recorder scene with Guildenstem one cannot read the following section in the play without a phallic interpretation of the lines. Hamlet has seen his father's ghost and he, Horatio, and Marcellus are still in the woods. Hamlet wants the men to swear to secrecy about the happen ings of the evening and they comply. As if their word is not enough Hamlet asks the men to swear it "upon my sword"(1.5.147). When the men agree, Hamlet once again demands that they "swear by my sword", a

symbol of masculinity (1.5.154). Then he commands them to "lay your hands again upon my sword. / Swear by my sword" (1.5.158-59). As if this is not enough, Shakespeare shoves the pun into our faces by having the ghost of Hamlet's father shout out from beneath the stage, "swear by his sword" (1.5.161).

As Hamlet's "best friend" Horatio is able to accompany Hamlet to social and family functions without alerting suspicion. In one such instance Horatio is with Queen Gertrude when Ophelia comes to confront the Queen regarding Polonius' death. The Queen refuses to see Ophelia. Horatio thinks about it and advises the Queen to see her. Horatio states, " 'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew / Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (4.5.13-15). This implies Ophelia has the power to spill the beans about Hamlet being gay. In her grief, confusion and rejection will she expose the secret she has kept? We will never know, but Horatio seems overly concerned.

Ophelia Gertrude Claudius and Laertes are dead and Shakespeare has secured Horatio, Hamlet's significant other, in the right place at the right time to comfort his lover as he lies dying. Poetic justice has been asserted by the playwright for the true lovers who otherwise have to hide their love from the world. As Hamlet dies in Horatio's arms, he asks him to tell his story to the "unsatisfied" (5.2.340). Horatio call himself "an antique Roman" (5.2.341) and considers drinking the remaining poisoned wine. Hamlet speaks these beautiful words to comfort and give his lover the strength to go on without him:

> As th' art a man,
> Give me the cup. Let go! By heaven, I'll ha't!
> O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
> Things standing thus unknown shall I leave behind me!
> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity a while,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> To tell my story (5.2.342-49).

In an article titled, "Gay Content In Hamlet, " Joseph E. Jeffries discusses this scene and says "there is a deep love here, revealed further as Horatio calls out to his 'sweet prince,' that especially coming from the mind of a queer author could have a valid homosexual reading" (Jeffries 1). Horatio not only calls Hamlet a "sweet prince" he says his heart is broken "now cracks a noble heart" (5.2.359-60).

Shakespeare did it again. He entertained us and provided us with enough material to last a lifetime. We do not know what he intended; we can only imagine. This paper has explored one way to read one of his plays. It has provided the reader with a general defini tion of queer theory and looked at the text through scholars, directors, and actors eyes. It has provided evidence that the world of academia continues to read Shakespeare's work closely. It have taken an uncommon concept and walked through a reading of *Hamlet*, which just has not been widely embraced as of yet, but it may with hope. Was Shakespeare him self gay? Who cares! His brilliance has stretched our minds and guided our way to understanding the human condition on many levels. His works have given us an opportunity to look at all kinds of love as just that, love.

The paper was for ENG 462 Shakespeare. The assignment was a general term research paper, 8-10 pages. The topic was the student's choice.

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