During much of the twentieth century, scholarly interest in the way that issues of gender and sexuality affect the meaning of Shakespeare tended to take a few limited forms. Many critics made note of his witty and intelligent female characters and lauded his depiction of romantic love. Guides to Shakespeare’s ‘bawdy language’ were published to help readers understand his ‘dirty’ jokes and puns.1 And rumours of Shakespeare’s own homosexuality circulated among readers of the Sonnets. But not until the late 1970s and early 1980s did critics, motivated by the feminist and gay liberation movements, begin a systematic examination of gender and sexuality in the works of ‘the patriarchal bard’.2 Critical conversation since those initial debates has clarified that the aim of a feminist or ‘queer’ approach is not to find evidence that Shakespeare was sympathetic to the plight of women, or to berate him for being misogynous, or to prove that he was homosexual. Rather, the analysis of gender and sexuality allows us to understand the variety of ways that Shakespeare responded imaginatively to sex, gender, and sexuality as crucial determinants of human identity and political power.

Sex refers to the anatomical and biological distinctions between male and female bodies. Gender refers to those meanings derived from the division of male and female, and thus to the attributes considered appropriate to each: ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Sexuality refers to erotic desires and activities. Whereas anatomical sex is to a large extent ‘natural’, gender and sexuality exist primarily as constructions of particular societies. What it means to be a woman or a man, or to desire the same or the opposite sex, varies from culture to culture and changes historically. Masculinity, for instance, is typically associated with sexual aggression in our own time, whereas during Shakespeare’s life, women were considered to be more lustful than men. And neither gender nor sexuality can be thought of separately from the body, for the body provides the basis for assumptions of gender difference as well as the potential for erotic pleasure.

The beginning of an understanding of gender and sexuality during Shakespeare’s life is the patriarchal household. Patriarchy in the late sixteenth century referred to the power of the father over all members of his household – not only his wife and children, but servants or apprentices. The father was likened to the ruler of the realm, and a well-ordered household was supposed to run like a well-ordered state. Early modern culture was resolutely hierarchical,
with women, no matter what their wealth or rank, theoretically under the rule of men. Because women generally were believed to be less rational than men, they were deemed to need male protection. Legally, a woman’s identity was subsumed under that of her male protector; as a ‘feme covert’, she had few legal or economic rights. An extreme example of this belief is expressed in *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Petruccio, newly married to Katherine, calls her ‘my goods, my chattels. She is my house, / My household-stuff, my field, my barn, / My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything’ (3.3.101–3). At the end of the play Katherine appears to acquiesce, as she instructs other women – whether seriously or ironically – to welcome their subservience:

> Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
> Thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee,
> And for thy maintenance commits his body
> To painful labour both by sea and land,
> To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
> Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe,
> And craves no other tribute at thy hands
> But love, fair looks, and true obedience,
> Too little payment for so great a debt. (5.2.150–8)

Employing the analogy of household and kingdom, Katherine enjoins other women to accept their ‘natural’ inferiority. This position of inferiority required women to strive for four virtues: obedience, chastity, silence, and piety. Yet, the existence of the notion of a shrew or scold – as embodied in rebellious characters like Katherine – suggests that not all women obeyed or kept silent. ‘Shrew’ links female insubordination to unruly female speech, and speech was one of women’s most powerful weapons. The force of female speech is borne out in *Othello*, when the ‘shrewish’ Emilia points to Iago as the cause of Desdemona’s murder, and in *The Winter’s Tale*, where Paulina continually reminds Leontes of his guilt, and thereby brings about his repentance.

Condemning women as shrews or scolds was a useful tactic for men wary of losing their authority. So too was calling a woman a whore. ‘Loose in body and tongue’ was a common condemnation, linking female erotic transgression to gossip and scolding. Erotic transgression referred not only to adultery (extra-marital sexual intercourse) and fornication (premarital sexual intercourse), but any erotic behaviour that lacked the sanction of father and church. Chastity – defined as virginity for an unmarried woman, and monogamous fidelity for a married woman – was, after a woman’s economic position, the most important determinant of her social status. As Laertes warns his sister Ophelia about Hamlet’s amorous intentions:

> Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain
> If with too credent ear you list his songs,
> Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmastered importunity.
Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,
And keep within the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire. (1.3.29–35)

A woman’s ‘chaste treasure’ likewise is the focus of Much Ado About Nothing, where the ‘nothing’ of the title is the reputation Hero loses after being wrongly accused by her betrothed, Claudio, of infidelity. Hero swoons, is taken for dead, and indeed, is metaphorically dead until resurrected by the restoration of her chaste reputation.

While some elite, usually urban, women benefited from the expansion of humanist education in the sixteenth century, and one exceptional woman, Queen Elizabeth I, ruled the realm, the majority of women found their access to the public sphere decreasing, as the economic roles they played in the late medieval period contracted. Recurrent inflation, land shortages, high population growth, and widespread migration and poverty combined to create a ‘crisis of order’, during which, if ‘patriarchy could no longer be taken for granted’, it nonetheless developed new, and in some cases quite subtle, tactics for enforcing the subordination of women. Although the Protestant belief in the spiritual equality of men and women accorded some women greater spiritual dignity and power, and fostered as well a more ‘companionate’ and affectionate mode of marriage, these gains did not translate into economic, political, or social equality.

The ideology of chastity, constraints against female speech, and women’s confinement within the domestic household are summed up by the phrase ‘the body enclosed’, which refers simultaneously to a woman’s closed genitals, closed mouth, and her enclosure within the home. ‘The body enclosed’ encapsulates the prescriptive power of patriarchal doctrine; however, it fails to capture the ways that women asserted their desires and will – their agency – within such ideological constraints. Early modern England was a culture of contradictions, with official ideology often challenged by actual social practice. Competing versions of masculinity and femininity vied for dominance, in a social contestation that is recorded by Shakespeare’s plays. The rate of premarital pregnancy was relatively high – and is represented dramatically by the pregnant Juliet of Measure for Measure. Women often held considerable power within their own households, overseeing the labour and education of their children and servants – as does Hermione in The Winter’s Tale. Women did venture out in public, as Shakespeare’s own theatre audience, which included women of all social classes, attests. They also held productive roles in the early modern economy – but this is perhaps where Shakespeare is most conservative, for he limits his representation of women’s economic labour to that of household servants, tavern-keepers, bawds, and prostitutes. Nonetheless, the pressure of women pushing against patriarchal strictures can be felt throughout Shakespearian drama. When the previously obedient Desdemona frankly proclaims her desire for Othello before
the Venetian senate, her father Brabanzio is so astonished that he can only believe her to be bewitched. Nonetheless, she achieves the senate’s permission to accompany her newly wed husband to Cyprus.

Because dramatic action in Shakespeare depends on conflict, his plays are more focused on the disruption of the social order – even, in some cases, on a ‘world turned upside down’ – than on the tranquil reproduction of the household and the state. Dramatic conflict is located within familial, social, and political transitions, particularly in moments of marriage, death, and genealogical succession. Chaos – whether political, domestic, or psychological, and whether experienced as positive or negative – is the basic element through which Shakespeare’s protagonists realize their identities. The conclusions of the plays, however, tend to restore the social order. And because chaos is often expressed as an inversion of gender hierarchy, the reconstruction of order tends to reinstate masculine authority.

Traditionally, scholarship has defined Shakespearian comedy as a play that ends in marriage, tragedy as a play that ends in death, and romances as tragedies that end comically (with the restoration of the father’s rule and the marriage of his children). Comedies have tended to be viewed as ‘romantic’ or ‘problem’, depending on how easily marital closure is attained. In the words of one critic summing up conventional wisdom: ‘comedy moves from confusion to order, from ignorance to understanding, from law to liberty, from unhappiness to satisfaction, from separation to union, from barrenness to fertility, from singleness to marriage, from two to one’ But the ‘courtship plot’ of comedy is not merely a generic convention. Because marriage, reproduction, and inheritance were the basic building-blocks of society, and because gender identity functioned as a central determinant of an individual’s social position, the placement of women and men within the hierarchies of the patriarchal household and the negotiation of cultural meanings of masculinity and femininity are animating concerns of each of Shakespeare’s genres. (For a discussion of genres, see chapter 6, The Genres of Shakespeare’s Plays, by Susan Snyder.)

The importance of gender and sexuality is evident even in the history play, a genre that focuses almost exclusively on the military and political exploits of men. On the one hand, history turns to comedy in the final act of the final play of the Henriad, as the victorious King Henry V ‘woos’ the French princess Catherine, thereby uniting England and France in a dynastic marriage. But prior to this comic resolution, gender and sexuality crop up as figurative tropes on the battlefield, when a weary if determined Henry attempts to persuade the mayor of the besieged town of Harfleur to open his gates to the invading troops. If not, he vows,

The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
And the fleshèd soldier, rough and hard of heart,
In liberty of bloody hand shall range
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
Your fresh fair virgins and your flow’ring infants.
What is it then to me if impious war
Arrayed in flames like to the prince of fiends
Do with his smirched complexion all fell feats
Enlinked to waste and desolation?
What is’t to me, when you yourselves are cause,
If your pure maidens fall into the hand
Of hot and forcing violation? (*Henry V* 3.3.87–98)

Here, the women of Harfleur are rhetorically central, even though they never appear on stage. Having used the threat of rape to open Harfleur’s gates, Henry later recalls the link between cities and virgins, joking amidst marriage negotiations that he ‘cannot see many a fair French city for one fair French maid that stands in my way’ (5.2.293–4). The French king retorts that his cities have ‘turned into a maid – for they are all girdled with maiden walls that war hath never entered’ (296–7). The equation between women and cities constructs women as territory to be protected or conquered.

Such analogies demonstrate that gender and sexuality underlie not only Shakespeare’s depiction of character, but his use of image and metaphor. Such notions also reveal that gender and sexuality enact social structures. Calling Catherine ‘our capital demand, comprised / Within the fore-rank of our articles’ (5.2.69–7), Henry defines the princess as an object of exchange, as marriage is exposed as a means to further ‘homosocial’ bonds among men.8 Through the exchange of women, women’s agency is constrained, while male bonds are created and consolidated. Fully cognizant of her place within this system, Catherine answers Henry’s proposal, ‘wilt thou have me?’ with the politically astute, ‘Dat is as it shall please de roi mon père’ (5.2.228–9). That women typically are the possessions to be exchanged is attested by Shakespeare’s exploration of one exception: in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, when the aristocratic Bertram is offered as a reward to the low-born Helen for curing the ailing king, Bertram reacts with anger and astonishment, and flees without consummating the marriage.

Shakespeare tends to represent marriage as the ‘natural’ lot of male and female characters. When Benedick, a self-proclaimed confirmed bachelor, begins to succumb to his friends’ marriage plans, he does so with the justification, ‘The world must be peopled’ (*Much Ado* 2.3.213). Conflating biological reproduction with the institution of marriage, Benedick’s formulation has the force of a command. For women, the imperative was even stronger. Although Jaques in *As You Like It* versifies the ‘seven ages of man’, from cradle to soldiering to senility, for women the stages of life are confined to three: ‘maid, wife, and widow’, with each stage corresponding to woman’s marital status. Those characters left outside Shakespeare’s marital conclusions tend to be both male and ‘alien’ in some way – whether because of their temperament, ethnicity, religion, lower rank, or exclusive desire for another man.
Shakespeare's comedies and romances tend to focus on daughters whose age and rank make them desirable spouses for men seeking to improve their social standing. In the absence of a father, beautiful and wealthy heiresses such as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and Olivia in *Twelfth Night* temporarily rule over their own households. Their anomalous positions of authority indicate what is at stake in patriarchal marriage: the legitimate succession of the father's genealogy and the productive consolidation of wealth, land, and labour power. Thus, Portia's situation stands for the plight of most women in the marriage market. Albeit expressed in the fairy-tale terms of a choice among three caskets, the play enacts the theoretical dictum that 'the will of a living daughter [is] curbed by the will of a dead father' (*Merchant* 1.2.21–2).

Yet, despite the metaphoric extent of the father's reach, Shakespeare's plays often present his power as limited, with plots exploring the ramifications of the daughter's rejection of his will. The action of such different plays as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* is set in motion when daughters defy their fathers, upholders of a harsh patriarchal law that brooks no challenge to its authority. Hermia and Lysander attempt to escape the 'sharp Athenian law' (*Dream* 1.1.162) – Duke Theseus' edict that Hermia either must marry her father's choice, Demetrius, or be cloistered in a nunnery, or be executed – by fleeing in the dead of night to Lysander's widowed aunt. Although they never make it beyond the woods surrounding Athens, their desires are fulfilled after a night of midsummer madness, when desires run amuck under the influence of Puck's love potion. Juliet's love for the kinsman of her father's enemy propels her into a secret marriage, resulting in the tragic death of both lovers. Despite the differences in comic and tragic outcomes, in both cases Shakespeare comes down firmly on the side of romantic love, even as he presumes the necessity of marriage for everyone and carefully ensures that each character is betrothed to another of similar station and rank.

Nowhere is the focus on daughters more acute than in Shakespeare's romances, where the psychic issues at stake in the father's successful espousal of his daughter are most fully revealed. The daughter of romance is often lost: unknown to her father, Perdita of *The Winter's Tale* grows up in far-off Bohemia, while Marina of *Pericles* is imprisoned in a bawdy house while her disconsolate father wanders the world. Only Miranda of *The Tempest* is safely under her father's control, and Prospero masterfully orchestrates the tempest that will bring her a noble husband and restore his dukedom.

In contrast to the centrality of daughters in the romances and comedies, none of Shakespeare's tragedies or histories presents a woman as primary protagonist. Nonetheless, women – and ideas of femininity – are crucial to the unfolding of both history and tragedy. In the tragedies, women often serve as a source of the male hero's downfall. When daughters fail to comply with their fathers' wishes, when wives appear too independent, tragedy begins. The masculinity of Shakespeare's tragic heroes is paradoxically vulnerable, dependent on women's
confirmation and approval. If their masculine self-image is challenged, male characters descend into rage, tyranny, even madness. When Cordelia refuses to comply with her father's demand for a performance of devotion, King Lear's astonishment turns to fury as he impetuously divides his kingdom, banishes Cordelia, and ultimately succumbs to madness. The Fool accurately, if misogynistically, marks the beginning of Lear's descent as the moment when 'thou madest thy daughters thy mother; . . . when thou gavest them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches . . .' (Lear 1.4.149–51). In The Winter's Tale Leontes similarly banishes Hermione after convincing himself, on the basis of no evidence, that she is committing adultery with his best friend. Leontes mourns her 'death' for many years, before being released from grief and guilt by the power of forgiveness, the prospect of Perdita’s marriage to Polixenes’ son, and the 'rebirth' of Hermione as a living statue. Othello succinctly articulates his dependence on Desdemona’s love:

Perdition catch my soul.
But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again. (3.3.91–3)

Once Iago convinces him of her infidelity, Othello is undeterred from a jealous rage that proves murderous and self-annihilating.

Because men have only women’s word for the legitimacy of their children, and because patrilineal authority is necessarily transmitted through women’s reproductive bodies, men are represented as particularly susceptible to female deception. Over and over again, women are accused of being something other than what they seem. In Much Ado About Nothing Claudio curses Hero:

Out on thee, seeming! I will write against it.
You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown.
But you are more intemperate in your blood
Than Venus or those pampered animals
That rage in savage sensuality. (4.1.54–9)

Just as a fantasy of adultery impels tragic action, in the comedies a humorous acknowledgement of cuckoldry often articulates and assuages male anxiety. Cuckold jokes, expressed through images of a deer’s horn placed on top of a man’s head, imply that every man is a potential cuckold. Whereas Othello opines that ‘A hornèd man’s a monster and a beast’ (4.1.59), a song in As You Like It suggests that cuckoldry is man’s inevitable fate:

Take thou no scorn to wear the horn;
It was a crest ere thou wast born.
Thy father’s father wore it,
And thy father bore it.
The horn, the horn, the lusty horn
Is not a thing to laugh to scorn. (4.2.14–19)
Despite the economic advantages to married life, not all women or men wanted to marry. Adult women who, at any stage in their life, were unmarried composed 20 per cent of the north-west European population. Although Shakespeare tends to represent marriage as the ‘natural’ beginning of adulthood, Emilia in The Two Noble Kinsmen voices her resistance. Proclaiming ‘That the true love ’tween maid and maid may be / More than in sex dividual’, Emilia agrees when her sister observes that Emilia ‘shall never . . . Love any that’s called man’ (1.3.81–5). Isabella of Measure for Measure similarly wants only to be left free to become a nun, but, just as Emilia is married off to the victorious knight Palamon, Isabella is in the final act betrothed to Duke Vincentio – and without a line of dialogue indicating her feelings about the matter. It is hardly coincidental that Isabella is surrounded by prostitutes and bawds, as if her desire to be a ‘bride of Christ’ must be countered by the most extreme (and in Measure for Measure, degraded) form of sexual exploitation.

Yet, for all their degradation, prostitutes are, with the exception of orphaned heiresses, Shakespeare’s most independent women, all of them having attained some measure of financial independence. Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet of the Henriad and Mistress Overdone of Measure for Measure make enough money selling alcohol and their bodies to oversee their own establishments and command their own servants. As if to offset this autonomy, such women are the object of derision – particularly Mistress Quickly, whose fast and loose use of the English language associates her with other buffoons, such as the Captains Fluellen, Jamy, and Macmorris, whose Welsh, Scottish, and Irish dialects provide much of the humour of Henry V.

Quickly’s frequent malapropisms imply that women themselves are a disordered or foreign language, metaphorically or literally residing at the borders of the English (or Roman) state. Mortimer’s Welsh wife in 1 Henry IV speaks not a word of English; her father translates her incomprehensible speech for her amorous husband who, in vowing to learn Welsh, allies himself with that which is foreign and, in the terms of the play, unmanly. When, in Henry V, Princess Catherine embarks on an English lesson in preparation for her future role as England’s queen, she inadvertently slips into bawdy double entendres as she attempts to force her tongue into an English pronunciation of body parts.

Just as female characters are often characterized as foreign, foreign lands are frequently feminized. The threat of an alien femininity is embodied by Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen who seduces and ultimately causes the downfall of one of the most powerful men in the world. Throughout Antony and Cleopatra, Egypt is represented as feminine, warm, fertile, and sensuous, while Rome is masculine, cold, sterile, and hard. The erotic mingling of Egypt and Rome results in the hero’s death and the destruction of Cleopatra’s reign. Conversely, in Henry V, Henry looks forward to an erotic congress that will result in the imperialist birth of ‘a boy, half-French half-English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard’ (5.2.195–6).
Gendered language is also employed to cajole characters into accepting a national identity, as when Joan la Pucelle appeals to Burgundy’s loyalty by imaging France as a wounded breast:

Look on thy country, look on fertile France,
And see the cities and the towns defaced
By wasting ruin of the cruel foe.
As looks the mother on her lowly babe
When death doth close his tender-dying eyes,
See, see the pining malady of France;
Behold the wounds, the most unnatural wounds,
Which thou thyself hast given her woeful breast. (*Henry VI* 3.7.44–51)

Joan’s attempt to compel Burgundy to imagine himself as a mother demonstrates that men as well as women are constructed through cultural ideas of gender.

In the comedies, the most common male identity is that of the lover, a ‘feminized’ position insofar as it separates men from economic and military pursuits. The role of the male lover is frequently mocked by female characters, as when Rosalind challenges Orlando’s qualifications to be considered a true lover; such a man, she jokes, would have ‘A lean cheek, which you have not; a blue eye and sunken, which you have not; an unquestionable spirit, which you have not; a beard neglected, which you have not . . . Then your hose should be ungartered, your bonnet unbanded, your sleeve unbuttoned, your shoe untied, and everything about you demonstrating a careless desolation’ (*As You Like It* 3.2.338–45).

If Rosalind wittily anatomizes the conventional male lover’s disorderly body, mind, and dress, in the histories and tragedies masculine identity is deadly serious. The fate of nations depends on male strength, valour, and rational judgement. The development of the young man into a leader other men will follow is the theme of *1 and 2 Henry IV*, as the ‘madcap Prince of Wales’ learns to forgo adolescent pastimes, gain the stature and authority to succeed his father, and bring to rest civil strife. Prince Hal’s development requires that he hone his rhetorical expertise, prove himself in battle against a rival ‘brother’, Hotspur, and banish pleasure as embodied by the ‘jolly knight’, Falstaff. His attainment of all three depends on his ability to manipulate other men’s ideas of manhood, as becomes clear in his effort to rouse his weary troops to battle with the promise of a cross-class brotherhood:

For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day. (*Henry V* 4.3.61–7)
The transmission of patriarchal and royal power is almost always a moment of social weakness, exposing a contradiction at the heart of patriarchal society: whereas men rely on one another to support structures of male dominance, they must also be willing to kill one another. In the internecine bloodshed of the histories, rival ‘brothers’ vie for the crown. But male competition is not only a matter of history or tragedy. As *You Like It* and *The Tempest* depict younger brothers usurping the place of the elder brother legally guaranteed by the laws of primogeniture. The difference is that comedy and romance tend to idealize fatherly authority – Duke Senior benignly governs his fellow forest exiles and Prospero rules omnisciently over his island kingdom – while the histories present political rule as inherently unstable, a matter of unsavoury power plays.

Manhood, of course, is not only a concern of men. Faced with the dishonour of her kinswoman, Beatrice exclaims, ‘O God that I were a man! I would eat [Claudio’s] heart in the market place’ (*Much Ado* 4.1.303–4). Her sense of masculine honour provokes Benedick to challenge Claudio to a duel. Other women also prod men into acts of violence, such as Lady Macbeth, who goads her husband into committing regicide:

When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. . . . I have given suck, and know
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this. (1.7.49–59)

Proving herself to be the ‘better man’, Lady Macbeth makes Macbeth feel less than one; and he hardly would have heeded the prophecy of the three ‘weird sisters’ if not so shamed and spurred on. So too, Goneril berates her husband, Albany, for being a ‘Milk-livered man!’ (*Lear* 4.2.52), while Volumnia claims her breast to be the physical source of her martial son’s manhood: ‘Thy valianthood was mine, thou sucked’st it from me’ (*Coriolanus*, 3.2.129).

If Volumnia acts as though she wishes she could replace Coriolanus on the battlefield, in the history plays some women do take up arms. In *Henry VI* both Joan and Queen Margaret lead armies, but their power is undermined by the way they are demonized by other characters and by the playwright, who ultimately represents them as witches and shrews. The existence of such ‘manly women’ places particular pressure on men. As Patroclus says to Achilles, ‘A woman impudent and mannish grown / Is not more loathed than an effeminate man / In time of action’ (*Troilus* 3.3.210–12). The fear of appearing ‘unmanly’ motivates Achilles to invite his enemy Ajax to the Grecian camp, leading to a resumption of his involvement in the fighting. Several of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes are stricken with a fear of effeminacy. Lear observes of his own rising hysteria, ‘O, how this
mother swells up toward my heart! / Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow, / Thy element’s below!’ (2.4.54–6). Insofar as ‘Hysterica passio’ alludes to a gynaecological ailment – the ‘suffocation of the mother’, the results of a ‘wandering womb’ or uterus – Lear imagines himself as a woman whose body is out of control. At the same time, he fights against this self-recognition, imploring, ‘touch me with noble anger, / And let not women’s weapons, water-drops, / Stain my man’s cheeks!’ (2.4.271–3). Whereas Lear’s images of ‘the mother’ within reveal a man divided against himself, Macbeth enacts a paranoid flight from femininity. Assured that he will die only at the hands of a man ‘not born of woman’ (5.3.4 and 5.7.3), the hero indulges in a fantasy of male identity uncontaminated by uterine birth.

As Macbeth’s reliance on the image of a caesarean birth implies, the body provides an imaginative structure for many of Shakespeare’s plays. Furthermore, erotic jokes, puns, and innuendoes pepper the plays with references to breasts, the anus, and genitals, as well as lust and sexual intercourse. Such ‘bawdy language’ not only contributes to the depiction of character, but exposes the body as a resource for linguistic play. In The Merchant of Venice the cry of Shylock over the elopement of his daughter, as narrated by Solanio, forges an uncomfortable, if comic, link between his daughter and his money that depends on bodily tropes:

‘My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O, my Christian ducats!
Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stol’n from me by my daughter!
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stol’n by my daughter!’ (2.8.15–21)

In addition to the implied equation between his ducats and his daughter, the reference to ‘two sealed bags’ and ‘two rich and precious stones’ (stones being a vernacular term for testicles) forges a further association. Such ‘body language’ reveals that Jessica’s secret marriage, made worse by her theft of money and conversion to Christianity, signifies the loss of Shylock’s masculinity.

Access to sexual language and knowledge was not confined to men. Although Katherine finds herself unwillingly engaged in bawdy repartee with Petruchio (2.1.211–59), she nonetheless comprehends his lewd meanings, just as Ophelia understands Hamlet’s crude references to her lap (3.2.101–22). Desdemona’s servant, Emilia, argues that wives experience the same sexual desires as their husbands:

Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change [exchange] us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection [lust] breed it?
I think it doth. Is’t frailty that thus errs?
It is so, too. And have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use [treat] us well, else let them know
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.91–101)

Emilia’s sexual philosophy reeks of the bitterness born of mistreatment; yet,
it is nothing like the disgust that pervades the erotic consciousness of some of
the male protagonists. Hamlet’s contempt for his mother’s swift remarriage
spirals into revulsion for all female bodies (1.2.129–59), while Lear rants mis-
ogynistically against the female genitals:

But to the girdle do the gods inherit.
Beneath is all the fiends’; there’s hell, there’s darkness,
There’s the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,
Stench, consumption! (4.6.123–6)

One of the more disturbing implications of the body’s metaphoric potential is
the way in which racialized images of sexuality serve Shakespeare as a metaphor
for the ‘unnatural’. Iago exploits this connection when he awakens Brabanzio to
the news that ‘an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe’ (Othello 1.1.88–9),
furthering the implication of Othello’s bestiality and barbarism with the predic-
tion, ‘you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you’ll have your
nephews neigh to you’ (1.1.112–14). If Iago’s racism is an expression of his own
diseased imagination, Shakespeare employs no such distancing techniques in his
representation of Caliban, whose attempted rape of Miranda is used to legiti-
mize slavery. Displacing the historical actualities of colonialism, wherein
European conquerors raped native women, The Tempest Justifies Caliban’s servi-
tude as the ‘natural’ position for the creature Prospero calls ‘This thing of dark-
ness’ (5.1.278).

The body is also a site of disease, and Shakespeare frequently employs vene-
real disease to figure what is wrong with social and erotic relations. Images of
syphilis (called ‘the French pox’, in a nationalistic displacement of responsibil-
ity) crop up whenever prostitution is invoked. Doll Tearsheet dies ‘of a malady
of France’ (Henry V 5.1.73) after Falstaff has charged, ‘you help to make the dis-
eases, Doll. We catch of you, Doll, we catch of you’ (2 Henry IV, 2.4.39–41).
Syphilis heightens the sense of disgust permeating Troilus and Cressida, func-
tioning as a metaphor for the diseased ‘body politic’, as well as for the contagious
transmission of misguided desires throughout the play.

Such a claustrophobic and diseased world, however, is not the whole story of
Shakespearian eroticism. A number of plays treat eroticism as the happy conse-
quence of the movement into adulthood. Under the auspices of a pastoral ‘green
world’ – the forest of Arden, the woods outside Athens, the coast of Bohemia –
characters experience a temporary release from the strictures of family and the
city or court. In this ‘world turned upside down’, inversions of the usual gender order momentarily expand romantic and social possibilities, as women and men speak freely, commoners mingle with aristocrats, and a ‘holiday humour’ prevails (As You Like It 4.1.59–60). 11 In Arden, Rosalind cheerfully instructs Orlando in the expectations of wives and the proper way to woo. In the Athenian woods, Helena, Hermia, Lysander, and Demetrius experience a dizzying exchange of desires, while the faerie queen Titania is made to fall in love with an ass. If mid-summer madness descends into violence, and Oberon’s humiliation of Titania offsets the marital happiness of the Athenian lovers, nevertheless, a variety of desires has been explored. The confining of such exploration to a specific geographical location, however, suggests that all such fun is temporary: it is to the city or court – and the social stratification such locales represent – that most of the characters return.

Rosalind, of course, tutors Orlando in the arts of love while disguised as a young man. The vogue for the cross-dressed heroine on the Renaissance stage gave birth to some of Shakespeare’s most independent heroines. Viola, Portia, and Julia also don a masculine disguise which grants them freedom of movement and authority. It is while disguised as a law clerk that Portia successfully defeats Shylock in court. And it is while in service to Orsino that Viola discovers her own passion for impersonation and a penchant for falling in love. Despite the fact that adolescent boys and young men performed all female parts in Shakespeare’s company, only twice is a male character cross-dressed – and both Flute’s theatrical portrayal of Thisbe in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Falstaff’s unwilling female impersonation in The Merry Wives of Windsor make them the comic butt of a joke. Shakespeare depicts male characters as uncomfortable ‘descending’ into femininity, while female characters enjoy the elevation of status their temporary manhood permits.

Because gender and sexuality are so closely intertwined, inversions of gender identity affect erotic desire as well. When Rosalind cross-dresses, she takes on the name of Ganymede, the Greek boy who was swept to heaven by Jove to serve as his lover and cup-bearer. Thus associated with a central myth of male homoeroticism, Rosalind’s relationship to Orlando is imbued with homoerotic desire while she toys with him as Ganymede impersonating Rosalind. Throughout As You Like It erotic desires partake of a conditional mode structured by the question, ‘What if . . .?’ What if I were your Rosalind? What if you were my Orlando? Such erotic contingency is emphasized in the epilogue, when the boy actor playing Rosalind refers to his own impersonation of a woman: ‘If I were a woman’, he says, ‘I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not.’ In the context of a play that has thoroughly upset conventional gender divisions, this statement further challenges the binary logic of male or female, homosexual or heterosexual.

In fact, the division between homosexual and heterosexual was not evident in Renaissance England. Nor, in contrast to our own time, were erotic desires and
practices generally linked to a sense of personal identity, as the modern terms ‘homosexual’ or ‘lesbian’ imply. Nonetheless, homoerotic desire is evinced in Shakespeare’s plays, as intimate friendships slip into expressions of eroticism, and gender-segregated environments offer enticing alternatives to the conjugal bond. Polixenes’ nostalgic reminiscence of his boyhood friendship with Leontes registers his longing for the experience of similarity untouched by gender difference:

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i’th' sun,
And bleat the one at th’ other. What we changed [exchanged]
Was innocence for innocence. We knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed
That any did. (Winter’s Tale 1.2.69–73)

The affections of boyhood are given mature expression in the description of the battlefield deaths of the Duke of York and the Earl of Suffolk at Agincourt:

Suffolk first died, and York, all haggled over,
Comes to him, where in gore he lay insteeped,
And takes him by the beard, kisses the gashes
That bloodily did yawn upon his face,
And cries aloud, ‘Tarry, dear cousin Suffolk.
My soul shall thine keep company to heaven.
Tarry, sweet soul, for mine, then fly abreast,
As in this glorious and well-foughten field
We kept together in our chivalry.’ . . .
So did he turn, and over Suffolk’s neck
He threw his wounded arm, and kissed his lips,
And so espoused to death, with blood he sealed
A testament of noble-ending love. (Henry V 4.6.11–27)

Martial valour and honour are relayed in simultaneously religious and erotic terms: ‘espoused to death’, their union sealed with a kiss, they seek to fly together to heaven. Such language to describe bonds among noblemen suggests that certain forms of homoeroticism were not only tolerated, but sanctioned, especially within a military culture. When Coriolanus forsakes his patria, Rome, in order to fight alongside its arch-enemy, the general Aufidius embraces him with these words:

Know thou first,
I loved the maid I married; never man
Sighed truer breath. But that I see thee here,
Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart
Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
Bestrade my threshold. (4.5.112–17)

Male homoerotic bonds are not always supported, however. In Twelfth Night and The Merchant of Venice, the characters named Antonio are associated with
homoerotic desire, and it is they who are marginalized at the conclusion, left out of the inevitable heterosexual closure of Shakespearian comedy. Because of the importance of marriage, most intimate male friends, whether homoerotic or not, find a way to accommodate new alliances with women. Both *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* focus on the threat women represent to male intimacy, and heighten the issue by positioning men as romantic rivals. The stakes in the transfer of male allegiance are powerfully articulated in Beatrice’s response to Benedick’s passionate avowal of love. Her demand upon hearing him say, in typical romantic hyperbole, that he will do anything for her, is ‘Kill Claudio’ (*Much Ado* 4.1.287).

Female homoeroticism likewise is present in Shakespearian drama, albeit in such a way that always suggests it is a thing of the past. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as Helena perceives her childhood friend, Hermia, to have turned against her, she voices a pained admonition:

> Is all the counsel that we two have shared –
> The sisters’ vows, the hours that we have spent,
> When we have chid the hasty-footed time
> For parting us – O, is all quite forgot?
> All schooldays’ friendship, childhood innocence?
> We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,
> Have with our needles created both one flower,
> Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
> Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
> As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds
> Had been incorporate. So we grew together,
> Like to a double cherry: seeming parted,
> But yet an union in partition,
> Two lovely berries moulded on one stem.
> So, with two seeming bodies but one heart . . . (3.2.199–213)

Helena concludes this passionate appeal with the question, ‘And will you rend our ancient love asunder...?’ (216).

So too, in *As You Like It* eroticism suffuses the speeches of Celia, who urges her cousin Rosalind to ‘love no man in good earnest’ (1.2.22–3) and who later asserts, ‘We still have slept together, / Rose at an instant, learned, played, eat together, / And wheresoe’er we went, like Juno’s swans / Still we went coupled and inseparable’ (1.3.67–70). Celia reiterates Helena’s sense of betrayal when she queries, ‘Rosalind, lack’st thou then the love / Which teacheth thee that thou and I am one? / Shall we be sundered? Shall we part, sweet girl?’ (1.3.90–2). Helena and Celia’s poignant questions, which echo the rhetoric of the Anglican marriage ceremony, ‘Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder’, posit female amity as parallel in emotional intensity and physical closeness to heterosexual marriage. Nonetheless, Shakespeare did not imagine the
continuation of female–female desire into adulthood, instead rendering it in an
elegiac mode, limiting it to a mournful expression of what was instead of what is or might be.

Before the advent of feminist and queer criticism, critical and editorial prac-
tices tended to erase such intimations of homoeroticism, assuming, for instance,
that any reference to the genitals must allude to a male phallus and a female
vagina, thus yielding a heterosexual coupling. Even when modern editors have
inserted an explicitly sexual meaning into a text – as in a notorious textual crux in
Romeo and Juliet (2.1.38), in which Mercutio refers to an ‘open, or’ (second
quarto) or an ‘open Et caetera’ (first quarto), and which is emended in most
modern editions to ‘open-arse’ – the result typically has been to foster an image
of male–female intercourse. As they have become more cognizant of the enor-
mous flexibility of sexual positions and the variety of erotic desires circulating in
early modern culture, editors have begun to revise their introductions and
glosses accordingly; nonetheless, much remains to be done to establish the full
range of erotic meanings to Shakespeare’s language and characters.

Within the tradition of performance, similar elisions have occurred, although,
perhaps in response to audience taste, such practices are no longer de rigueur. For
directors looking for ways to cut the length of a production, homoerotic passages
were often considered minor or expendable. Thus, Antonio’s passionate
speeches to Sebastian in Twelfth Night and the recollections of Hermia and
Helena’s shared childhood were typically excised, the homoerotic nature of their
love silenced. If directors once felt authorized to manipulate Shakespeare’s
plays to foster conservative interpretations of social roles, today’s stage and
film productions do so at their peril – for audiences increasingly recognize that
Shakespeare’s representations of gender and sexuality are as complex, various,
and fascinating as our own bodies and selves.

Notes

1. Eric Partridge, Shakespeare’s Bawdy: A Literary and Psychological Essay, and a
King Lear and Measure for Measure’, in Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural
Materialism, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell
3. David Underdown, ‘The Taming of the Scold: the Enforcement of Patriarchal
Authority in Early Modern England’, in Order and Disorder in Early Modern England,
116–36.
(Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) and Merry E. Weisner, Women and Gender in Early Modern
Europe (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
5. Peter Stallybrass, ‘Patriarchal Territories: the Body Enclosed’, in Rewriting the


9. The Norton edition includes three different texts of King Lear; I have used the conflated text.


Reading list


DiGangi, Mario, The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama (Cambridge University Press, 1997).


