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DE SALAMANCA

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Queer Elements in Shakespeare's *As You Like
It* and *Romeo and Juliet*

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Salamanca, 2017



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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

20/6/2017

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to find, analyse and explain the queer elements in Shakespeare's plays *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet*. In order to do this I have consulted several sources written by experts in queer theory, which support the existence of non-heteronormative and/or cisgender characters, plots and energies in both plays. I will also clarify the importance that queer readings of classic authors have, and the role they play in fighting the oppression of minorities.

Key words: LGBT, Shakespeare, heteronormative, cisgender, queer theory, homoerotic.

Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo es encontrar, analizar y explicar los elementos queer en las obras de Shakespeare *As You Like It* y *Romeo and Juliet*. Para poder hacer esto he consultado varias fuentes escritas por expertos en teoría queer, las cuales apoyan la existencia de personajes, argumentos y energías no heteronormativas y/o cisgénero en ambas obras de teatro. También aclararé la importancia que tienen las lecturas queer de autores clásicos, y el papel que juegan luchando contra la opresión hacia las minorías.

Palabras clave: LGBT, Shakespeare heteronormativo, cisgénero, teoría queer, homoerótico.

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20 June 2017

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We live in a society ruled by binarism, it impregnates everything around us. The prevailing heteropatriarchal system imposes its rules onto us and erases those identities that come out of the norm. Genders are divided into two classes with strict roles, sexualities are swiped under the rug if they do not match heterosexual standards, and those who do get any recognition are crushed under the weight of the oppressing male, straight class.

Queer theory challenges these stablished categories, trying to deconstruct and, ultimately, destroy the binarism in which we, as a society, are trapped. Although tags like gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender etc. are still useful and necessary nowadays, the final goal is to get rid of them once the artificial construction of gender is dismantled. That is to say, gender is a social construct but it still exists and has balances of power working in the world that cannot be ignored. Therefore, self-identities of gender and sexuality which are not straight nor cisgender, that seem to adhere the binary, are nonetheless valid and confront and threat the status quo. In words of Valerie Traub, expert in gender and sexuality studies, queer activism serves to challenge the neoliberal paradigms of inclusion based on fidelity to gender and sexual norms (16).

One of the methods to fight the heteropatriarchy is inserting new queer elements in popular culture and/or examine established media in search for items that proves them outside the cisgender heterosexual domain in which many people in the oppressor group think they are. Queer folk have always existed; consequently, the art these people produced will have queer elements in it, even if they are disguised or were overlook by the critics on their day. By

recovering them, we do not need to make place for queer art in the canon that is decided and imposed by white, heterosexual, occidental men, because they are already there. Hence, the importance of queering up works that are already present in the collective consciousness and that count with the respect and admiration of the people who are in charge of controlling the mainstream and academic media.

William Shakespeare has an indisputable place in western literary canon. He holds the number one position in Harold Bloom's classification so he counts with the seal of approval of the academy, but Shakespeare's works have also survived gender, postcolonial and queer studies that have analysed his plays from their own perspectives. Both his tragedies and comedies have an enormous weight and influence nowadays, four hundred years after his death, and that is why queering his works up remains relevant. I will analyse queer elements in two of his plays, *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and how queer theory can explain, as well as feed off, these works. I have chosen a tragedy and a comedy so that we can see how said elements function in two different genres.

Many of Shakespeare's comedies use gender as a form of role-play (Bulman 79). Gender is not a steady, fixed, solid thing, it has plenty of elements to have in consideration, and one of them is the gender performance. Gender is important for queer theory despite the ultimate aim to destroy it. When encountering attraction between characters of the same gender, making the love between them, as an abstract concept, the focus of attention and not their homosexuality, is invisibilizing and disregarding the queer nature of said love. That is to say, ignoring that the affection is not heterosexual reinforces the cisgender, straight oppressors. Because, as Valerie Traub points out with great accuracy, heterosexuality itself is a social and political institution (16).

As You Like It is not an exception of these kind of games with gender roles, performance and fluidity. Cross-dressing is an important element of the play, but homoerotic pairings are

also relevant. These characteristics are what prevent the play to have a heterosexual stability even when it culminates with not only one, but two marriages. Several factors, which will be eventually explained, prevent the recovery of heterosexuality and help queerness prevail.

I would like to start by explaining how the homoerotic love between Celia and Rosamund works all through the play. There are numerous evidences of the affection between these two women, an affection that goes beyond what could be considered a typical, heterosexual bond between friends. Women forming alliances with other women often happens in Shakespeare's works. They are characterized by friendship and "the rejection of homosexuality and, in some cases, homoerotic love" (Frye and Robertson 114). They usually give up this alliances in favour of heterosexual romance, as it, in appearance, happens in *As You Like It*.

Celia and Rosamund loved each other; in words of Shakespeare himself, never two ladies loved as they do (*As You Like It* 9). Their attachment is undoubtedly profound. Their relationship does change when Rosamund goes to the woods and disguises herself as a man, pursuing the affections of Orlando, thus creating a new homoerotic pairing. The name Celia chooses for herself, when disguised as a peasant, is a further symbol of the alteration in her relationship with Rosamund. She calls herself Alieana, she becomes alienated in regards of her love for Rosamund (DiGangi 274), who is in love with Orlando, a man that now gets to receive her attentions.

Celia is jealous of Orlando, dismissing any qualities Rosamund claims he has. She is forced to hear the woman she is in love with talk wonderful things about a third person, woo him, and even help them culminate their romance. There is no heterosexual explanation for Celia's behaviour, there is "no wonder [why] Celia . . . delays telling Rosalind of Orlando's arrival in Arden, impugns the sincerity of his love for her and hesitates when saying the words of the mock marriage between them." (DiGangi 274). Celia suffers due to the unrequited love

of Rosalind once she becomes the handsome man called Ganymede, who is interested in another young man, Orlando.

The second homoerotic pairing in the play is formed by these two characters. Ganymede seems to trick Orlando into playing a game of flirting with him, just so that he could feel his affections and check if he is indeed a good man. Orlando does not seem shocked not bothered with Ganymede's proposition, he accepts and caresses him lovingly with sweet words and gestures. These men do even arrange a fake marriage, a symbol that could be appropriated by homosexual couples who cannot get an official, legal union due to the nature of their same gender love. They get married with only one witness, while hiding in the woods, which adds to the symbology of a forbidden love.

At the end of the play, in what we may call the climax, Ganymede returns to be Rosalind again in order to undo all the conflicts and tangles that were built through the course of the story. However, as it was mentioned before, the final union of a man and a woman does not mean there is a heterosexual culmination of the play. There are three main elements that make queerness prevail in *As You Like It*: The previous-to-marriage homoerotic attraction, what it seems like a typo in the First Folio but it is not, and the final epilogue by Rosalind.

Even if the first impression is that *As You Like It* has a cis, heteronormative ending, which is not true, that would not eliminate or erase the previous homosexual attraction between the characters, nor the gender fluidity of Rosalind. That is to say, if someone were to consider the ending heterosexual, they would not have any means to hide the attraction that existed between Celia and Rosalind, and Ganymede and Orlando.

There's a second element present in the ending that prevents the characters to have a heterosexual destination, and that is the seeming typo in the First Folio that was mentioned before. Jeffrey Masten points out that Shakespeare wrote, in the wedding scene, that Hymen tells the duke that he can finally marry the two lovers, phrasing it with the words "join his

hand with his” (158). With this statement, that might seem small and it can be easily overlooked, there is a breaking with both heterosexuality and gender, since Ganymede is back on stage, marrying the man he is in love with. Rosalind’s gender is once again proven to be fluid, which secures the queerness of her relationships, whether they be with men, women, or people who do not identify as either.

The last element corresponds to the last part of the play: Rosalind’s epilogue. Since in the Elizabethan era all actors were men, her speech serves the purpose of mocking gender roles, expectations and heteronormative spectatorship, and to remind theatregoers of the fragility of the gender binary. “In the Epilogue, the character playing Rosalind reminds us that she is played by a boy, the neat convergence of biological sex and culturally constructed gender is once more severed” (Howard 434). Rosalind makes sure we do not forget she is played by man, who plays a woman, who disguises herself as a man. This speech can be further extrapolated and be assigned to Rosalind herself instead of his actor, meaning in this way that she is stating she is not a cisgender woman.

Thanks to all of these elements, *As You Like It* is a clear example of how queer energies work on a play where gender fluidity and homosexuality are a central part of the plot. They are embedded in the story and cannot be removed or changed for other heteronormative plot devices or cisgender characters without losing the essence of *As You Like It*.

In regards to *Romeo and Juliet*, the story may seem heteronormative at first sight, and that plays a double role when analysing it from a queer perspective. First, because if it we consider it as, indeed, a typical heteronormative and tragic love story, we could say it is written as a mockery towards young straight lovers and everything heterosexuality stands for. Secondly, as Anthony Guy explains, “it is the queer that enables the heteronormative love

between Romeo and Juliet to manifest fully” (NP). There are plenty of queer elements in this story that should not be dismissed, and that will be explained eventually.

Shakespeare, as it has been clarified before, plays an important role in regards of queering up the canon, he functions as a “‘socio-political conductor’, an ideologically-driven mechanism” (Reynolds and Segal 39). Thus, considering *Romeo and Juliet* a heteronormative story would reinforce the oppressor’s system, since it is, arguably, the most known play of the author, which has been adapted, parodied, referenced in different media uncountable times, and is present in the collective consciousness of the occidental culture. By finding and highlighting the queer energies and elements in this story, we are breaking with heteronormativity at a very high and influential level.

There is an obvious queer reading of the plot as a whole, and that is the trope of forbidden love, an affection that has to be hidden from the lovers’ families in fear of rejection. A love that, as in *Romeo and Juliet*’s case, can drive you to a tragic death, whether from your own hand, and/or pushed by those who do not accept the nature of your devotion.

This is a story that, unfortunately, many queer people know too well. There is an inversion of an issue that was mentioned before in *As You Like It*; Whereas in the comedy we stated that the important point of the love story was not the sentiment of love itself but the gender of its protagonists, in *Romeo and Juliet* the element that has queer connotations is the nature of the love story per se, and not the respective genders of Romeo and Juliet, who incidentally happen to be a heterosexual couple. The narrative of the forbidden love has been used by queer artists to make a call of attention towards the injustices, the prejudices that come out of the oppressing system and that harm people who live outside the cisgender, heterosexual norm. Thus, many queer folk may see a reflection of their own story and fears in *Romeo and Juliet*.

There are further elements, plot-wise, that reinforce the queer reading of it all as a whole. However, in order to get to them and understand them, we first have to analyse the homoerotic affections that exist between two of the main male characters.

Mercutio is one of the most easy to read as gay of Shakespeare's characters. Many productions have exploited this side of the character, making his sexuality more obvious and explicit. The most clear example in the mainstream adaptations of the play is probably Baz Luhrmann's film of 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*. Even when his Mercutio falls into problematic tropes such as the predatory gay drag queen, he reinforces the homoeroticism behaviours that are present in the original character.

The behaviour of Mercutio with Romeo reminds us of the way Celia acted around and towards Rosamund. They both show signs of jealousy, advising their friends not to engage with the third person, they do not want them to pursue their love interest. Mercutio is angry at Romeo for deciding to abandon the homosocial male group and seek a heterosexual relationship, in a manner that happens to be very similar to the disdain of Celia when she complains about Rosamund's future lover.

Mercutio and Romeo are not afraid of being intimate with each other, reinforcing with words and gestures their deep bond. Their physical intimacy is magnified in Zeffirelli's film of 1968, where Mercutio and Romeo touch foreheads two times, the second occasion being in Mercutio's death scene. They are clearly comfortable with physical contact, it is a way to soothe one another. It is also in said tragic death scene where we are shown how, while losing consciousness, Mercutio will only focus on Romeo's face, as if he were the person who makes him hang onto his life a little longer.

In regards to Mercutio's death, it cannot be denied or ignored the fact that he dies, no matter the adaptation he is in, to protect Romeo's honour. He sacrifices himself for the sake of his best friend, mimicking the latter deaths of the star-crossed lovers. This parallelism

reinforces the idea that Mercutio's feelings for Romeo are romantic, such as Romeo's are for Juliet and vice versa. Mercutio dies with an unfulfilled relationship with his friend because, as Anthony Guy explains, "men's homoerotic bonds with other men, like those of Romeo and Mercutio, cannot survive the demands of heterosexist, patriarchal culture" (NP). When using the word "survive" he is not only referring to a literal meaning of it, implying that Mercutio died because of these demands, but also to a symbolic death of homoerotic relationships. That is to say, homosexuality cannot prevail because of heteronormativity, men have to be with woman and abandon the homosocial pack, they are "torn between other men they loved and the women society demanded them marry with" (NP). The heteronormative society is forcing Mercutio and Romeo to be apart, just like the Montages and the Capulets oblige Romeo and Juliet to give up their love. There is a parallelism between the two pairings that cannot be ignored, both are couples who are willing to defy the establishment in order to be with the one they love, even if that, in the terms of this tragedy, means death. John Drakakis reflects on this issue stating that "no other text affirms as passionately that, in aspiring sexual union as well as to the legalization of their passion, lovers enjoy only ephemeral happiness." (289). Mercutio, thus, becomes the second element that make the plot as a whole unable to be driven by heteronormative rules.

Romeo and Juliet may seem, at first sight, a story about a heterosexual couple, excluding the possibility of a queer reading of the play. However, if we take a closer look, the plot itself serves as an allegory of queer struggles, and Mercutio, who is one of the main characters, is legible as gay. These premises of queerness in the play cannot be dismissed or overlooked, they are clear examples of how this work can and should be deconstructed, stripped away from the heteronormative veil in which the story is surrounded. It is true that *Romeo and Juliet* does not culminate, as seen in *As You Like It*, with the destruction of heterosexual and cisgender relationships, but that is due to the tragic nature of the play. Although, in a little

farfetched interpretation, the death of the lovers could be read as the failure of heterosexuality.

Both of the analysed plays share common features, which seen in perspective are a reinforcement for all the previously explained interpretations. They support each other, the parallelisms between both works, even when their genres are vastly different, help the understanding of how queer energies that “are not dictated by a compulsory heterosexuality and gender binarism” (Goldberg 280), work in Shakespeare’s theatre. Finding a queer interpretation of *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet* is relatively easy, since they are perfectly legible as non-heterosexual nor cisgender plays. The elements are present in the text, they are not pulled out of thin air, and by enhancing them we defy the expectations of the Western canon. Shakespeare is one of the most influential writers in our culture, so, queering his works up implies being a step closer to destroy the heteronormative ideas of the academy by showing how queerness is intrinsically a part of the canon they choose to admire and respect.

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