

## Inside Shakespeare's Monomaniac Closet:

### Romeo and Tybalt's Homosexual Panic

Romeo Montague, a young man born and raised in an affluent household, battles with extreme depression when not hazardously lusting after an ideal heteronormative love with Juliet or Rosaline. Tybalt, a young man in the Capulet household, seeks no love but instead lusts after hate and violence, pursuing no intimate or romantic interpersonal bonds with another character in an almost asexual fashion. Both Romeo and Tybalt self destructively pursue pathways of death and despair because they desperately seek to conform to the heteronormative culture of Verona and destroy their own identities in the process. The characters of Romeo and Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* embody a great number of men who suffered through intensive homosexual panics and overbearing senses of internalized homophobia brought on by a socially constructed heterocentrism in the London culture of Shakespeare's era.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines homosexual panic as “(chiefly among men) uncontrollable fear or anxiety as a reaction to one's own or another's homosexuality” (OED). The monomaniac tendencies of Romeo and Tybalt to fixate on one intense notion, love or hate, cultivates deadly outcomes in not only their own deaths, but also the blood of others on their hands. This homosexual panic leads them to make rash choices, and the emotions of the two men always venture beyond the grounds of stability. When the reader first sees Romeo in Act 1, Scene 1, Benvolio speaks to Romeo about Romeo's depression and other matters that might weigh on Romeo's heart. Romeo confesses much to Benvolio, saying, “Why such is love's transgression. / Griefs of mine own lie heavy in my breast” (1.1.172-73). Romeo continues to express how love torments him. “What is it else? A madness most discreet, / A choking gall, and a preserving sweet” (1.1.180-81). The madness tormenting Romeo's soul may exist beyond his

pursuit of Rosaline, a woman whom Romeo easily gives up to pursue Juliet at first sight. Romeo even explicitly tells Benvolio that he loves a woman when Romeo loving a woman should be understood without additional statement in a heteronormative reading. “In sadness, cousin, I do love a woman” (1.1.191). Yet Shakespeare stresses the sex of Romeo’s current affection. Tybalt, likewise, suffers from monomaniac obsessions not with women or of love, but of hate and death. When facing Benvolio in Act 1, Scene 1, Tybalt’s first and foremost reaction is to kill him. “What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds? / Turn thee, Benvolio, Look upon thy death... What, drawn and talk of peace? I hate the word / As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee” (1.1.53-8). These blind obsessions of love and death stem from an internalized homophobia brought on by frightful homosexual panics within both men.

Similar to Tybalt’s acts and words of drastic violence, Eve Sedgwick’s book *Epistemology of the Closet* discusses violence surrounding this homosexual panic and those violent reactions from antigay sentiments also. “Homosexual panic’... refers to the supposed uncertainty about his own sexual identity of the perpetrator of the antigay violence” (Sedgwick 20). Sedgwick goes on to explain how men used the term as a defense for acts of violence on members of the gay community, but men suffering under these conflicting emotions of self-hatred would also enact violence upon themselves. “The reliance of the homosexual panic plea on the fact that this male definitional crisis is systemic and endemic is enabled only, and precisely, by its denial of the same fact” (20). In Sedgwick’s book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick argues that the social constructions within a society not affirming of gay desire would either seek out and purposefully detain all sources of homosexuality or ignore all notions of homosexuality entirely and allow heterocentrism to weed out the undesired expressions of sexuality. “And how could such an entity, described in such a

way, not have some purposes that could be served by the containment of male homosexuality?” (Sedgwick 86). Such notions of the heteronormative society acting through heterosexism and heterocentrism, making devoid any notions of gray area for homosexuality, surpass all timelines and location thanks to the strength within the self-sustaining system of the patriarchy.

Jonathan Goldberg wrote *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts Modern Sexualities* for Eve Sedgwick. In his text, Goldberg also addresses the issues of scholarship vs. the actual Renaissance cultural perspectives of homosexuality through the transvestite sensibilities of the stage. “Sexuality is collapsed through the assumptions of modern gender, the presumption that all sexuality is hetero and that same-sex relations are versions of male/female ones” Goldberg continues to call out scholars Laura Levine and Stephen Orgel on their employment of heterosexism when discussing the connection to same sex interactions on the Elizabethan stage. “Orgel’s claim that men are better women and Levine’s that men are failed women are both misogynist and a consequence of the heterosexism that shapes their definitions of homosexuality” (Goldberg 111). Shakespeare’s stage representation of the play would have focused on an all-male cast with sole homosocial associations between men, devoid of a female stage influence. Goldberg argues that the heterosexist mindset of the Renaissance makes surface level queer readings of texts like *Romeo and Juliet* nearly impossible without a more meticulous reading of the culture and of the Renaissance era. “I seek the sites of sexual possibilities, the syntax of desires not readily named” (22). Through Goldberg’s study, he defines sodomy as “a sexual act, anything that threatens alliance—any sexual act, that is, that does not promote the aim of married procreative sex” (19), meaning that any other act of sexual expression besides procreation would have marked that individual as a sodomite.

Sodomy and portrayals of the sodomite surface in Alen Bray's critical essay, "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," where Bray discusses how Elizabethan society regarded homosexuality and homoerotic relations. "Elizabethan society was one of those which lacked the idea of a distinct homosexual minority, although homosexuality was nonetheless regarded with a readily expressed horror. In principle, it was a crime which anyone was capable of, like murder or blasphemy" (Bray 40). Bray continues to address how Elizabethan society not only punished acts of sodomy, but attempted to ignore and alienate every sodomite through the culture's extreme heterosexist lens. "The ambiguity drew, though, on a tension in Elizabethan England we are not now accustomed to" (56). When left to ambiguity and ambivalence, the homosexual panic ensued, but such a term or diagnoses never reached the ears of these anxious men. Unnamed deficiencies gnawed at the hearts of men with their masculinities anxiously introspected.

Homosexual panic creates anxieties within the male and these anxieties create rash decisions and inner turmoil. Mark Breitenberg, in his book, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*, discusses the anxieties men faced in Renaissance culture because the social constructions within society formulated boundaries and harsh limits on the acceptability or even the acknowledgement of homosocial or homoerotic desire. "Thus my use of the term 'anxious masculinity' is intended to convey the internalization of specifically social tensions that are endemic to the early modern sex-gender system, the very tensions that produce the masculine subject in the first place" (Breitenberg 13). Breitenberg continues to argue that because tensions exist within the socially constructed bounds of male masculinity, sometimes these tensions have to erupt and men compensate for their internalized anxieties by seeking power, wealth, love or even murder. Men like Romeo and Tybalt sought compensation for their shortcomings and

internalized deficiencies. “If male masculine identity is fundamentally unstable, then the assertion of gender difference—especially where it is most adamantly expressed—functions as a way to compensate for the lack of anatomical guarantee of difference” (31). Paralysis and depression seem to stem also from anxieties about male masculinity as Romeo talks with Mercutio in Act 1, Scene 4, about how Cupid’s “shaft” impales Romeo. “I am too sore enpierced with his shaft. To soar with his light feathers, and so bound. I cannot bound a pitch above dull woe. Under love’s heavy burden do I sink” (1.4.19-22). This emotional paralysis fixates Romeo in a state of anxious depression. In a similar fashion, Tybalt’s paralysis originates from his monomaniac passion and capacity for hate. In Act 1, Scene 5, Capulet rebukes Tybalt and commands Tybalt to not initiate violence at the party with Romeo. Before exiting, Tybalt responds with, “Patience perforce with willful choler meeting. Makes my flesh tremble in their different greeting. I will withdraw, But this intrusion shall, Now seeming sweet, convert to bitterest gall” (1.5.86-9). Tybalt refuses to let go of his hate and that paralytic state of animosity derives from his masculine anxieties.

Socially constructed ideas of masculinity and patriarchy ordained definitions of an idealistic man consumes both Romeo and Tybalt, but Birte Sause, also argues that Romeo’s homosocial relationship with Mercutio may exist as a suppressed or secretive homoerotic relation. “The tendentially homoerotic relationship between Romeo and Mercutio as well as Mercutio’s incomprehending or jealous reaction to his friend’s infatuation with a woman support a misogynist strain in his personality” (Sause 221). Renaissance expectations and limitations on male interactions foster these strains. Carla Freccero also alludes to Romeo and Mercutio sharing more homoerotic relations instead of simply homosocial connections. “Mercutio—Romeo, the same sex romanticized friendship, is replaced by, and foreshadows, the nexus of idealizing love

and death more explicitly toward the end of the play by *Romeo and Juliet*” (Freccero 303).

Freccero points out that heteronormative readings of the text and surface level inspection only yield the lowest hanging fruit and ignore a possible queer appeal Shakespeare might direct towards men suffering under the homosexual panic. “Thus, we might say, in the domain of sexuality, that heteronormative romantic readings of *Romeo and Juliet* are themselves historically anachronistic in their extraction of the couple from a network of relations that delineate a field of differences and sameness” (303). In this way, not only may heterosexism penetrate Elizabethan England and alienate males while homosexual panics wrack chaotic chasms in the human mind, but current heterosexism in scholarship of *Romeo and Juliet* ignores all possible facets of sexual identity that existed within the Elizabethan culture. Through heterocentrism and heterosexism, the techniques and employment of shameful silence and violent punishment, Elizabethan culture drove the homosexual panic into the hearts of men, piercing deep like an ice pick.

Judith Butler, considered a founder of Queer theory, writes about the “heterosexualization of desire” in her book, *Gender Trouble*. “The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (Butler 24). Fear of the unknown and stigma about certain practices cause the individual of a heterosexist nature to compartmentalize desire as well as adhere to socially constructed forms regarding appropriate gender dress and gender actions. Butler expounds upon the framework of sexuality and desire when calling out the patriarchal system for universalizing actions of sexual need and sexual identity. “The very notion of the ‘patriarchy’ has threatened to become a universalizing concept that overrides or reduces distinct articulations of gender

asymmetry in different cultural contexts” (48). The ironic concept of Queen Elizabeth being the face of the patriarchal system when Shakespeare authored *Romeo and Juliet* highlights the disadvantages of an unspoken marginalized group. Unspoken and punished desires still exist as desires.

Alan Lewis’s article, “Reading Shakespeare’s Cupid,” explores the erotic desires within the play. Lewis addresses the question of sodomy when diving into the desires of Romeo. He mentions a displacement and confusion relating back to anxious masculinities with the males of the play. “This phantom sodomy describes the phantasied repetition or displacement of lack that haunts the predominant narrative of a transcendent romantic Eros in the drama” (Lewis 186). Lewis continues to touch on the fragility of male masculinity, a delicate balance Breitenberg says holds identity in a vice. “From Romeo’s state of emasculation by the lights of early modern gender ideology, one type of phantasy might stage desire in a reversal of Love’s wounding through a repetition reclaiming agency” (185). Romeo’s desires force him to adaptably increase his masculinities and male bravado to shade the wants and wills of his heart. In Act 2, Scene 2, Romeo speaks with Juliet about his own identity. “By a name / I know not how to tell thee who I am. / My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, / Because it is an enemy to thee; / Had I it written, I would tear the word” (2.2.53-57). Romeo wills away his own name, an affluent household, for a girl he only thinks he knows. Such reckless abandon rears its head in young blind love, but Romeo speaks of sacrificing all connections and claims to family within the Montague household, an identity crisis matched with natures of the homosexual panic.

Romeo’s rash actions from anxious self-identities do not stop short of wishing away his name. Alexander Leggatt argues for a duality between Romeo’s connections with Juliet and his connections to Tybalt. “Romeo’s affair with Juliet and his affair with Tybalt begin together, love

born from hate and hate born from love. The day Romeo marries Juliet is the day he kills Tybalt; the act of violence comes between the ceremony and the consummation (Leggatt 39). The hatred Tybalt feels for all Montagues seems brought to life by Romeo's internalized abandonment of the Montague name, but Romeo weds Juliet and defies his family on the same day he murders Tybalt, the embodiment of his own personal anger and violence brought on by his homosexual panic. Leggatt furthers his explanation of Romeo's mental anguish and acts of adopting violence as a coping mechanism. "Killing Tybalt, Romeo broke the law in a temporary burst of rage... This is the Romeo who comes to break into the tomb, and stains the entrance with Paris's blood—a blood that like Tybalt's becomes imaginatively conflated with Juliet's" (51). Romeo's claims to madness shows in Act 5, Scene 3, when he faces Paris at the tomb.

Good gentle youth, tempt not a desperate man. / Fly hence and leave me. Think  
upon these gone; ... Put not another sin upon my head / By urging me to fury. O,  
begone! / By heaven, I love thee better than myself, / For I come hither armed  
against myself. / Stay not, begone. Live, and hereafter say / A madman's mercy  
bid thee run away (5.3.58-67).

Having already killed Tybalt and Juliet indirectly, Romeo warns Paris to leave before Romeo's piercing "tool" stabs Paris as well. Rage takes on the form of Romeo's desire, followed by sadness before his death.

The heterocentric nature of Elizabethan culture reveals itself not only in abhorrence of the nonheterosexuality within the hearts and minds of men, but also in the dichotomy of binary systems of desire. Shakespeare's characters of Romeo and Tybalt create timeless appeals to men of all cultures who suffer under the pressures of the homosexual panic with their monomaniac self-destructive tendencies. As cultures progress, enlightenment carries forth and demystifies the



very taboos which create anguish in the human mind. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* shines a light on the progressive natures of art over politics in Elizabethan culture.

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