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# Equivocal queerness in classical myths, Marlowe and Shakespeare

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“You can transmute love, ignore it, muddle it, but you can never pull it out of you.”. The idea of love has been the central theme of some of the greatest works in arts and literature. However, the vast world of literature has also attempted to map the queerness in love; Love that does not fall within the preview of heterosexuality. The presence of Homosexual love has always been an equivocal argument. From classical mythologies, folk tales and art to theart and literature being produced today, one could find countless references to such love which not only challenges the notion of heterosexuality as the norm and the normal but also raises an important question of how natural is normal. The various depictions of love have been received with the most ambiguous treatment in Literature and have generated much controversial response. While these are complex issues which would require a more detailed discussion, I would now present to you a few instances in classical myths, and in the works of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Beginning with classical myths we find several classical mythologies of same sex relationship often reduced to just homoeroticism in light of the *Greek Custom of Pederasty* in ancient Greece. It was a socially acknowledged erotic relationship between an adult male and a younger male (usually in his teens). This has been one of the main reasons for critics to point out the lack of presence of love in these myths. One such greek narrative myth, presented in

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multiple ways such as homosexual love and homosocial bond as well as homoeroticism, is the Myth of Zeus and Ganymede. Zeus was the king of the Gods and in fact the most powerful among the Greek Gods. Ganymede as described in *Illiad* (Book XX, line 233) “was the loveliest born of the mortals”. Zeus in the guise of an eagle abducts Ganymede to Mount Olympus from Mount Ida. It is believed that Ganymede also became Zeus’ lover, thus he granted Ganymede eternal youth and immortality and office of cupbearer to the gods. Zeus abducted Ganymede out of sheer lust but as Xenophon, an ancient Greek historian and philosopher, in his *Symposium* claims that Zeus loved Ganymede in a non sexual manner; also, pointing out the fact that Ganymede was the only one of Zeus’ lovers who was granted immortality and a post of cupbearer, a post of quite a distinction. That in itself hints the theme of love in this classical myth. The myth of Zeus and Ganymede can be found in *Metamorphoses* and also in Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*.

This brings us to Christopher Marlowe who has blended homosexuality in his plays *The Massacre at Paris* (1593), *Dido, One of Carthage* (1594) (in which Jupiter is discovered dandling Ganymede upon his knee) and in his great tragedy, *Edward the Second* (1594). The conflict of love and duty is an issue in *Edward II*, where Edward II is a man torn between his hereditary role as king and his personal proclivities as expressed most fully in his love for another man. The play is the Renaissance’s greatest dramatization of homoerotic love. Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* provides a supple analytic tool for investigating the regimes of unknowing and unacknowledgeability that structure the place of homosexuality in Renaissance culture. When Edward II succeeds his father on the English throne, he lavishes affection and unwarranted titles on Piers Gaveston, a man hated by Edward’s court because of his low birth. Gaveston’s opening monologue in itself has reference

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of the Classical Myth of “Leander” (Act I Sc 1 L8), which Marlowe also retold in his Narrative poem *Hero and Leander* (c. 1593). Leander fell in love with Hero and swam the Hellespont to Sestos every night in order to be with Hero. One night the light in the towers which guided Leander to the shore was blown out by a storm and Leander drowned. Hero committed suicide when Leander’s body washed up on the shore. Gaveston’s analogy to the tragic lovers in the context of his arrival in London to meet King Edward, not only sets the close bond between the king and himself but also hints at the various interpretations regarding the nature of their relationship. Further more we see Edward II’s strong passion and love for Gaveston that he is even willing to give up his kingdom for the company of Gaveston. When he reluctantly has to banish Gaveston again, Edward II has an outburst and says “to banish him I love!” (Act I Scene IV L95) Edward II constantly scorns his wife Queen Isabella for Gaveston. Marlowe gives numerous classical analogies to indicate the homosexual love between the two characters, namely with analogies of Zeus and Ganymede in lines “Jove on Ganymede” (Act I Sc IV L180). One finds brilliant presentation of Homosexual nature of Edward II’s love for Gaveston in Derek Jarman’s 1991 film *Edward II*.

Another notable instance of such queering of love in Classical mythology is the Relationship of Achilles and Patroclus in *Illiad*. Their relationship has been a subject of dispute. Homer never explicitly casts the two as lovers. In *Illiad*, Achilles and Patroclus are close comrades in the fight against the Trojans. Achilles is arrogant to everyone however he is tender towards Patroclus. Achilles chooses not to participate in the battle and as the tide of war turns, Patroclus convinces Achilles to let him lead the army. Patroclus is successful in beating the Trojan forces back but is killed by Hector. In the surviving fragments of the lost tragedy *The Myrmidoms* (5th Century BC),

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Achilles publicly laments Patroclus's death, addressing the corps, criticizing him for letting himself be killed and is seen speaking of "The reverent company" of Patroclus' thigh and how Patroclus was "ungrateful for many kisses". When Patroclus is killed, Achilles laments more greatly than any other character upon another's death. Thetis, his mother, suggests that it is now time for him to take a wife. This can be seen as a rebuke for him being too long in a homosexual relationship. The rage after the death leads to the return of Achilles to the battle field with the sole aim of avenging, by killing Hector which he eventually does. The relationship between the two is deep. When Patroclus is killed, the intensity of Achilles's sorrow indicates a relationship deeper than simple friendship. It is often conjectured to be friendship formed during war fare or to the idea of male bonding and even to the early discussed *Pedestry* (which brings us back to its structure). The ideal structure of *Pedestry* consisted of an older erastes (lover or the protector), and a younger eromenos (the beloved). The age difference between partners and their respective roles (either active or passive) was considered to be a key feature. Writers that assumed a pederastic relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, such as Plato and Aeschylus, were then faced with a problem of deciding who must be older and play the role of the erastes. The speaker Phaedrus in Plato's Symposium suggests that Achilles is the eromenos whose reverence of his erastes, was so great that he would be willing to die to avenge him. Thus, in Oxford Classical dictionary, David M Halper in writes, "Homer, to be sure does not portray Achilles and Patroclus as lovers, but he also did little to rule out such an interpretation".

Elizabethan writers had in front of them classical works of love between men. To the modern imagination, the homo-erotic and same sex love potential of some of Shakespeare's writing often seems a truth that has not been dared to be spoken. The great actor Sir Ian

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McClellan who is also a well known gay activist was quoted in a press event saying that Shakespeare himself probably was gay. This is nothing new for it has been frequently expressed in Shakespeare's works especially in his sonnets, though not in the same explicit manner as his contemporary Christopher Marlowe. Shakespeare's beautiful beloved in his first part of the collection *Sonnets* was in fact a young man and the rest of the first 125 sonnets is addressed to the man in his twenties. Shakespeare's most idealized sonnets fall among those that are addressed to a male. The speaker expresses passionate concern for the young man, praises his beauty, and articulates what we would now call homosexual desire.

However, the debate of the sonnets being only a specimen of homoerotic desires and themes becomes invalid in sonnets like Sonnet 20 where the narrator tells the youth to sleep with women, but to love only him: "mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure". The narrator calls the younger man the "master-mistress of my passion". In Sonnet 13, the youth is called "dear my love", and in Sonnet 15 the speaker announces that the poet is at "war with Time for love of you". The poems refer to sleepless nights, anguish and jealousy caused by the youth, all of which indicates pure love for the same sex that does not involve intimacy of bodies. There is no analysis of these sonnets without keeping in mind Shakespeare's sexuality. The historian G. P. V. Akrigg wrote, "One is forced to suspect that some elements of homosexuality lay at the root of the trouble. The love which he felt for Southampton may well have been the most intense emotion of his life."

These instances from literature give us ample evidence that queer love is much a reality as heterosexual love and even though queer love is repressed socially, literature continues to provide a voice to it, which cannot be silenced and that will continue to tell the tale of queerness of love.

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