

REVISITING WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE IN AN AGE OF CONSPIRACY SHAKESPEARE: THE FRIEND

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare, one of the greatest poet of the Renaissance era, is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English Language, the world's pre-eminent dramatist, England's national poet and rightly nicknamed as the Bard of Avon. This renowned, appreciated, universal writer has touched almost every aspect of life, be it love, friendship, marriage, jealousy, lust or life itself. His works, especially his sonnets and plays reveal him best as a friend and an intense lover. He often portrays the complicated nature of friendship in his works and regards 'friends' both as a source of joy and profound unity and of sorrow and suffering too. His love for his friend and glorification of friendship, that transcend time, is well presented in his Sonnet 104, "To me, fair friend, you can never be old.." whereas his complaint, regret and disappointment in friendship is revealed in his well known comedy, As you like it, "...most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly, most loving mere folly.."

SHAKESPEARE: THE FRIEND

William Shakespeare, the writer of the millenium, the most influential author of the world is regarded as one of the most recognised playwrights in the history of man. I say so, as people have analysed every sentence of his works and have taken note of the various styles used in his writing. Despite this, every time, when we read his works we find some new dimensions to be explored. His literary genius compels readers to dive deeply and find new pearls. Ben Johnson, famous playwright said that "Shakespeare is not of an age but for all time."

Ironically enough, little is known about his personal life. It is assumed, however, that like other literary writers, he retales occurrences in his life into his writings. His sonnets and plays include variety of themes, predominantly being love, lust, friendship, betrayal. Out of the 154 sonnets, some discuss the theme of love and friendship. In these individually narrated poems, the address is to young man (Shakespeare friend and Patron "The Earl of Southampton") while other sonnets are addressed to a woman, probably 'the dark lady.' Shakespeare has glorified friend and friendship in his works.

For Shakespeare, the word friend expressed a wide range of meanings. He understood friendship as we do today, to mean affectionate companionship, but just as frequently he used friends when he meant family: in **As You Like It**, Rosalind defends herself from the charge of inherited treason by claiming, "**we did deserve it from our friends,/ what's that to me? My father was no traitor.**"⁽¹⁾

A friend in singular could also mean a lover, often an illicit one. Bianca, Cassios's mistress in *Othello*, is shocked to be asked to copy the embroidery on a handkerchief, Casio has presented to her. "**This is some token from a new friend**", she objects.⁽²⁾

Early modern man and women had large circles of neighbours, acquaintances, business colleagues, creditors, that is, servants and patrons, any of whom might be classed as friends. In *Julius Caesar*, when Mark Antony addresses the crowd after Caesar's shocking assassination, his opening words capture the idea that a friend was, in the broadest sense, simply ones fellow subject: "**Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears.**"⁽³⁾

Alongside these everyday definitions, friendship also meant something very much deeper and more significant. For some friendship was a precious union of emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical intensity experienced by a lucky few and impossible to resist. It's a character in **Twelfth Night** who most eloquently expresses the heart swelling potential of this kind of friendship. Antonio, the sea captain, who rescued Sebastian from shipwreck has followed him to hill to Illyria where he faces arrest for his former attacks on Illyrian ships. Challenged by the Duke, Antonio explains that after he saved Sebastian's life, he also granted the younger man, "**love without retention or restrained, / all his in dedication.**"⁽⁴⁾

His foolhardy mission into enemy territory was "**for his sake... pure for his love**"⁽⁵⁾, a love that the two men had cultivated for the previous three months, spent "day and night" in each other's company. Thinking- mistakenly- that Sebastian has foresaken him, Antonio lashes out at "the falls cunning" of "**that most in grateful boy.**"⁽⁶⁾ His hurt makes it clear that false friendship is the greatest of all betrayals.

Shakespeare believed strongly in ardent friendships and love between same sex, which is also familiar to us today. When a friendship passes a given point of intensity, we assume that the parties are no longer "just friends" but have become lovers. In a period when same-sex sexual relationships were taboo, the culture and practices of friendship provided a context for same-sex lovers to articulate and explore their intimacy. Indeed, in some contexts passionate same-sex friendship was understood to stand in conflict with marriage. In **The Merchant of Venice**, Bassanio promises his stricken friend Antonio that although he is married to **a wife/ which is as dear to me as life itself**"⁽⁷⁾, she is "**not with me esteemed above thy life.**"⁽⁸⁾ Bassanio vows to "**lose all, ay sacrifice them all**"⁽⁹⁾, to release Antonio. Such a friendship between same sex, has Shakespeare revealed through these characters.

Officially, however friendship between adults of the same gender was supposed to be sex free, a feature that in fact raised it higher in many people's mind than matrimony, implicated as that union was in the sin of sexuality.

Being a true shakespearean friend means above all loyalty, unwavering support and mutual respect—clearly shown in the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio. Horatio is Hamlet's one true ally and stands by the tragic Prince throughout his troubles, going so far as to offer to commit suicide for him. This tragic conclusion seems to be a pattern for many Shakespearean friends, revealing the darker side of human relationships. Some of the most famous villains are the ones who betray their nearest and dearest friends, indicating that unwavering trust and friendship, like the trust Julius Caesar places in his friend Brutus, until the very end, can easily be misplaced.

Shakespeare's two long poems **Venus and Adonis** (1593) and **The Rape of Lucrece** (1594) were dedicated to his friend, his patron, **Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton**. Although the dedication to the former is more restrained, the dedication to the latter is couched in extravagant terms: "**The love I dedicate to your Lordship is without end... What I have done is yours; What I have to do is yours; being part in all I have, devoted yours.**" This type of vaunting language was not particularly unusual however, became other dedications of the day always excessively praised any noble person sponsoring the author's work mainly for political and, above all, financial reasons. **Nathan Drake**, in **Shakespeare and his Times**, was the first to suggest that Southampton was not only the dedicatee of Shakespeare's two long narrative poems, but also the '**fair youth**' of the **Sonnets**.⁽¹⁰⁾

The title page refers to the "onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets **Mr. W.H.**," and it had earlier been inferred that the sonnets were possibly addressed to "**Mr. W.H.**".

The initials, **H.W. (Henry Wriothesley)**, were simply reversed by the publishers to conceal his identity.⁽¹¹⁾

Shakespeare used his sonnets to explore different types of love between the young man and the speaker, the young man and the dark lady and the dark lady and the speaker. In his sequence, the speaker, expresses passionate concern for the young man, praises his beauty and articulates what we would now call homosexual desire. The women of Shakespeare's sonnets, the so-called dark lady, is earthy, sexual and faithless—characteristics in direct opposition to lover's described in other sonnet sequences.

In fact, Shakespeare's attitude to perfect friendship in men or women was often sceptical. He had little truck with the assumption that ardent friendship was a men-only affair, creating pairs of female friends such as **Rosalind and Celia (As you like it)** and **Helena and Hermia (A Midsummer's Night**

Dream) who are every bit as devoted as their male counterparts. But he was also a dramatist, and interested in real-world relationships that were unpredictable and fallible. In his stories, the true love of friendship didn't always get the happy ending it deserved. Rosalind and Celia and Helena and Hermia, find their friendships tested by the competing demands of heterosexual romantic love, and in **Twelfth Night**, **Antonio** is left without the comfort of a resolution: amid the impending marriages at the play's conclusion, his **'desire,/More sharp than filed steel' for Sebastian, is forgotten.**⁽¹²⁾

Shakespeare glorified friendship through his poetry. In his **Sonnet '104'**, he talks about the way in which friendship can transcend time- he puts forward the idea that strong friendships will weather time, despite the season.

**"To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
Such seems your beauty still.."** (Sonnet 104)

From the most uplifting displays of platonic affection, to tragic endings and comic capers, Shakespeare explored the concept of friendship in almost all his plays.

In Act 2, Sc 1 of "Much Ado about Nothing, Claudio contemplates, friendship and its relation to matters of the heart.'

**"Friendship is constant in all other things,
save in the office and affairs of love."**

Ulysses speaks with Achilles on the transience of human relations in **Act 3, Scene 3 of Troilus and Cressida:**

**"Love, friendship, charity, are subjects all
To envious and calumniating time"**

In Act 3, Scene 7 of Henry VI, Charles the Dauphin heartily welcomes the "Bastard of Orleans" in a scene reminding us of the strength friendship can give.

Charles the Dauphin: **"Welcome, brave Duke! Thy friendship makes us fresh."**

Bastard: **"And doth beget new courage in our breasts"**

Miranda speaks to Ferdinand (to whom she is later betrothed) on the romantic side of companionship, in **Act 3, Scene 1 of "The Tempest"**

**"I would not wish
Any companion in the world but you;
Nor can imagination form a shape
Besides yourself to like of"**

The Duke of Bolingbroke recalls the power of platonic love amongst friends, after Harry Percy declares his loyalty to him in **Act 2, Scene 3 of Richard II:**

**"I count myself in nothing else so happy
As in a soul remembering my good friends;
And, as my fortune ripens with thy love,
It shall be still thy true love's recompense."**

Further Shakespeare's **Sonnet 29** is a beautiful example of a sonnet with the theme of friendship. This sonnet opens with the speaker feeling in a state of despair and even envy. He feels that he has been disgraced in the eyes of men. He paints himself as being all alone, feeling rejected, abandoned and outcast by fellow mankind. The speaker even proclaims he feels envious of other men, envious of men who have more hope than he has, more friends, more skills and a greater outlook. However, the speaker then says he thinks about a nameless person and that thinking of this nameless person and his or her "sweet love" changes the speaker's state of mind so that now he feels hopeful, uplifted and wouldn't change his situation for all the wealth of kings, as we see in his final five lines:

**Happily I think on thee, and then my state
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings. (Sonnet-29)**

The above lines are a perfect example of love in the form of friendship.

Shakespeare's **Sonnet 30** is also a perfect example of a sonnet portraying the theme of friendship- a reflection on sad memories reconciled by the realisation of the gift he has in his friend.

In this sonnet, the speaker begins by reflecting on all of the things past that he has lost, even "**precious friends hid in death's dateless night,**" which poetically refers to friends who have already passed away. However, the speaker ends the sonnet in his final couplet by saying that when he thinks of a special "**dear friend,**" then he forgets about all of his losses because the one gain of his friend cancels out all of his previous losses and thinking of this one friend puts an end to all of his sorrows as we see in his lines:

**"But while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end" (Sonnet 30)**

Hence we see that in both of these sonnets friendship is captured as a true and generous love that puts an end to all grief, which certainly is true friendship indeed.

Shakespeare often portrays the complicated nature of friendship in his works; friends can be the source of joy and profound unity but also of sorrow and suffering.

**In As You Like It, Act II, Sc VII,
" Blow blow thou winter wind..",**

Shakespeare portrays betrayal, fake friendship and bitter realities of human life.

Shakespeare's ability to see the wide plethora of human relationships in the span of the lifetime gave him a unique edge as a writer. Friendship is particularly an interesting theme with Shakespeare, the depth of which he was able to plumb. Before one ever gets into a love relationship for a marriage, it's important to be prepared in one's mind and spirit, for a relationship. One needs to have confidence in one's friendships first. Friends have to know how to love themselves.

REFERENCE:

1. As You Like It- (1.3.56-57)
2. Othello- (3.4.176)
3. Julius Caesar- (3.2.70)
4. Twelfth Night- (5.1.75-76)
5. Twelfth Night- (5.1.76-77)
6. Twelfth Night- (5.1.71,80)
7. The Merchant of Venice- (4.1.282-83)
8. The Merchant of Venice- (4.1.285)
9. The Merchant of Venice- (4.1.286)
10. Drake 1817, p-62
11. Honan 1998, p-361
12. Twelfth Night- (3.3.4-5)