

1996

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Andrew Murphy
Denison University

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Recommended Citation

Murphy, Andrew (1996) "Antonio, Mercutio, and Shakespeare's Portrayal of Homosexuality in Elizabethan England," *Articulāte*: Vol. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol1/iss1/2>

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First Place, Robert T. Wilson Award for Scholarly Writing, 1996

Antonio, Mercutio, and Shakespeare's Portrayal
of Homosexuality in Elizabethan England
by Andrew Murphy, '98

Shakespeare is an author who deals with many political and social issues in his works. One in particular is the relationships men have with one another. He explores this issue on both the level of male friendship and also what can be referred to as homosexuality. Elizabethan society treats these relationships very differently from today's society. Shakespeare presents a picture of what can be called male love--something ideal yet unattainable. In *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night* he depicts male homosexuality but, in order to conform to social norms, confuses it with the ideal of Renaissance male friendship and presents problematic male-male relationships that are ultimately unsuccessful.

In order to understand how Shakespeare dealt with male relationships in his writing it is important to understand how Elizabethan society dealt with such issues. As Bruce Smith discusses in *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, sexuality was tightly woven into the social framework. Because society was dominated by males and women were subordinate, bonds between males were of great importance (Smith 56). This allowed for a very masculine institution known as male friendship: "a higher, nobler thing than love between the sexes" (Smith 96). These relationships between men were viewed as more important and more satisfactory than relationships with women (Smith 38).

It also is important to realize that what the 20th century refers to as homosexuality did not exist then as it does now. Although romantic and sexual relationships existed between men, homosexuality was not a category for self-definition (Smith 12). Due to the male social structure, "behavior that we would label homosexual, and hence a rejection of maleness, was for [those of Shakespeare's time] an aspect of maleness. Whether a man had sex with a man or a woman he was still masculine. By involving himself with another man he was succumbing to depravity, but to no greater degree than if he committed any other immoral act" (Smith 11). Homosexuality in Elizabethan England, according to Jonathan Goldberg, was "something that existed, something that everyone knew existed, but something that had no name of its own" (Smith 74).

Although "Renaissance moralists saw only Chaos beyond the perfectly ordered heterosexual world of Christian dogma," society--through various social institutions and through literature--acted to promote male love or at least provided it with an ideal setting (Smith 20). Smith argues that the male power structure, the education system, cross-dressing during festival occasions, the church, the social

class system, and traditions in private life all acted to promote such actions (21). Each placed males, particularly adolescents, together in the absence of women, making them similar to institutions such as sports teams and fraternities today (Smith 33). In addition, although Elizabethan law considered sodomy--whether among males, females, or both--to be illegal, these laws were not often enforced unless the crime was blatant or severe (Smith 42). Since the classification of "homosexual" did not exist, the law treated it in the same manner as it did other sexually deviant acts. It is for these reasons that Smith argues Elizabethan society "was at least tolerant of homosexual behavior if not positively disposed toward it" (73). Male erotic love was acceptable in society, provided that it occurred within certain contexts and under certain conditions (Smith 128).

All of this is not to say, however, that male relationships in any way infringed upon the institution of marriage. Even though social institutions promoted male bonding and male friendships were held in such high regard, marriage of men and women was still expected. Erotic desire between men was something associated with youth, something to be abandoned for the "higher truth of heterosexual love" (Smith 98). The ideal "marriage of true minds" as Gardiner calls it, was impossible because men cannot marry one another (Gardiner 341). In an emotional context, men could have relationships with other men, but in a social context, marriage was required in order for a male to acquire status and affirm his place in society (Smith 64).

Two plays in which Shakespeare illustrates these societal views are *Twelfth Night* and *Romeo and Juliet*. *Twelfth Night* presents Antonio, a sea captain who rescues Sebastian, a young gentleman, from drowning at sea. After saving his life, Antonio nurses Sebastian back to health and brings him ashore. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare creates Mercutio, a kinsman to the Prince and friend of Romeo, another young man of Verona. The relationships between these two sets of characters are very similar. Many instances in the two plays indicate the expression of what today is called homosexuality and the two deal with male relationships in much the same way. This involves two men, one younger than the other, whose relationships possess some common characteristics. The younger man is a main character while the older man is less so. The two men are friends. The older man has erotic desire for the younger. The older man openly professes his love, but the younger either does not know or does not openly acknowledge that this involves more than friendship. At some point the younger man becomes involved with a woman and the older man accepts this. He does, however, experience feelings of jealousy, not toward the woman but toward some other male in the younger man's life. The older man eventually loses the younger man to a woman. These characteristics, present in both plays, allow Shakespeare to discuss homosexuality in Elizabethan society. Homosexual relationships are present, but

homosexuality itself is not allowed to triumph.

Antonio and Sebastian of *Twelfth Night* demonstrate these characteristics. Although much of their dialogue can be interpreted as friendship, when examined in a sexual context, their relationship can be seen in a different light. In addition to friendship, their relationship also contains erotic elements. Shakespeare introduces the two men in Act two, scene one. At the beginning of the scene, as Antonio brings Sebastian to Illyria, he says, "Will you stay no longer? / Nor will you not that I go with you?" (1-2). He is not yet ready to part with his young friend. Sebastian sees Antonio's deeds as kind and generous-- as friendship--and responds, "I shall crave of you your leave, that I may bear my evils alone. / It were a bad recompense for your love to lay any of them on you" (6-7). Antonio, however, still cannot bear to leave him and pleads, "If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant" (31-32). His love is strong enough for him to lower himself to being Sebastian's servant. Word choice here also suggests homosexuality because "servant," according to Joseph Pequigney, also means "lover" ("Two Antonios" 203). Sebastian, however, humbly declines and takes his leave. In the last lines of the scene, Antonio makes both his intentions and the degree to which he loves Sebastian clear when he says:

I have many enemies in Orsino's court,
Else would I very shortly see thee there.
But come what may, I do adore thee so
That danger shall seem sport, and I will go.
(40-43)

He is willing to risk all, including his life, to remain with the youth. Antonio's actions show extremely strong friendship, even by Elizabethan standards. This intensity suggests a romantic attraction or desire for Sebastian going beyond the realm of just friendship. Pequigney has similar suspicions about Antonio's intentions. He comments on "the openly amorous language habitual to [Antonio] whenever he speaks to or about Sebastian," and says that "rarely does his attention turn to anything else--[it] is the foremost clue to the erotic nature of their friendship" ("Two Antonios" 202-3).

Antonio and Sebastian meet again in Act three, scene three. Antonio says:

My desire
(More sharp than filed steel) did spur me forth;
* * *
My willing love,
The rather by these arguments of fear,
Set forth in your pursuit.
(4-13)

His "desire" "spur[s]" him forth and his love is "willing." Word choice here implies sexual meaning. Sebastian, seemingly innocent, replies, "I can no other answer make but thanks" (14). Antonio then describes the nature of his offense:

I did some service; of such note indeed
That, were I ta'en here, it would scarce be answered.
Th' offense is not of such a bloody nature,
Albeit the quality of the time and quarrel
Might well have given us bloody argument.
(27-32)

Then he adds that "only [himself] stood out" (35). Although these crimes involve thievery and piracy, there is also a sexual, perhaps homosexual, nature to these actions when the text is examined literally. Sebastian replies, "Do not then walk too open," (35) which one could interpret as Sebastian advising Antonio to better conceal his sexual identity, lest he get himself into trouble. If this is the case, then Sebastian's innocence becomes questionable. According to Pequigney, Sebastian is well-aware of Antonio's intentions. He maintains that for the three months Antonio and Sebastian have been together constantly. He uses the lines, "To-day, my lord; and for three months before, / No int'rim, not a minute's vacancy, / Both day and night did we keep company" (5.1.88-90) to illustrate his point. The coming night at the Elephant is just another in a long series of nights that the two men have spent together.

Instead of changing the subject or modestly taking Sebastian's advice, Antonio counters, "It doth not fit me" (38), meaning that he is neither able nor willing to hide what he is. Antonio, it seems, is making no great effort to hide anything. Afterwards he offers Sebastian his purse, a very trusting and suggestive move considering what the purse might represent--perhaps Antonio's heart or even payment for a sexual act. This is not unlikely as Antonio is going to secure their lodgings at the Elephant and ends his speech by saying, "There shall you have me" (44). Pequigney agrees that the purse has important meaning. It is "given with the ulterior motive of pleasing if not purchasing the desired youth" ("Two Antonios 204"). He also asserts that Sebastian's use of the "Roderigo" pseudonym in the source play suggests "a means to hide his identity, his true name and family connections, during a drawn-out sexual liaison with a stranger in strange lands" ("Two Antonios" 205), and that Sebastian must know Antonio's feelings because "for months he has continuously remained with an adoring older man who is frankly desirous of him" (Pequigney, "Two Antonios" 204). Pequigney calls theirs "the classic homoerotic relationship, wherein the mature lover serves as guide and mentor to the young beloved" ("Two Antonios" 204).

In scene four of the same act Antonio comes upon Andrew picking a fight with Viola (Cesario) posing as a man. He assumes she is Sebastian and immediately comes to the defense saying, "Put up your sword. If this young gentleman / Have done offense, I take the fault on me; / If you offend him, I for him defy you" (92-94). Again, Antonio is willing to brave danger for his love. When Toby demands to know his reasoning, Antonio replies, "[I am] One, sir, that for his love dares yet do more / Than you have heard him brag to you he will," again asserting his love and devotion (96-97). After Orsino's officers apprehend him, he says to Viola (still thinking she is Sebastian), "This comes with seeking you," (312) and asks for his purse. Viola, who does not understand the request, asks, "What money, sir?" (321). At this point Antonio is amazed that his Sebastian is denying him and "those kindnesses" (230) he performed. Viola's second denial sends him into a rage:

O heavens themselves!
* * *
This youth that you see here
I snatched one half out of the jaws of death;
Relieved him with such sanctity of love,
And to his image, which methought did promise
Most venerable worth, did I devotion.
* * *
But, O, how vile an idol proves this god!
Thou hast, Sebastian, done good feature shame.
(337-47)

He sees only ingratitude from Sebastian for whom he has done so much. Antonio's feelings and expectations suggest the two have been romantically involved for some time. Like a lover he feels betrayed; his "Sebastian" has changed. In addition, Pequigney points out that in this speech Antonio stresses above all Sebastian's physical beauty, dangerous considering the way sight was thought to be deceiving ("Two Antonios 202"). Antonio's last three words before the officers take him away--"Lead me on" (352)--reveal what he must be thinking: Sebastian is playing games with his mind, allowing him to believe that the love he feels is mutual.

In the final scene (Act five, scene one), Antonio is brought before Orsino who accuses him of past crimes. Antonio denies his guilt, though he confesses to being "on base and ground enough, / Orsino's enemy" (69-70). He explains his story to the Duke saying, "That most ingrateful boy there by your side / From the rude sea's enraged and foamy mouth / Did I redeem" (71-73). Antonio considers himself Orsino's enemy and he places Sebastian (actually Viola) with Orsino even though Sebastian and the Duke do not even know one another. Hasler feels that "he 'places' Viola [Sebastian to Antonio] at

Orsino's side, [to stress] that at this juncture she is very much the Duke's loyal servant. She [he] is where she [he] most desires to be" (280). Antonio's response shows jealousy toward the Duke, his "enemy," for he assumes Orsino has stolen Sebastian away from him.

Later in the scene Sebastian expresses great excitement when he finally is reunited with Antonio. Sebastian greets him with, "Antonio! O my dear Antonio, / How have the hours rack'd and tortur'd me, / Since I have lost thee!" (210-12). As Pequigney states, Sebastian is far more excited to see Antonio than he is to see Olivia to whom he is engaged (206). Pequigney concludes that Antonio is not "rejected [by the other characters]" (206), but instead remains an important aspect of Sebastian's life. He asks, "Does this imply a ménage a trois at Olivia's house?" (206). That, however, is a question the text does not answer and one which perhaps pushes the issue of homosexuality too far.

As for the intentions of the two men, Pequigney labels Sebastian as a bisexual, saying his homosexual tendencies have been "awakened . . . under a . . . set of circumstances. . . [including] . . . continuous and clearly agreeable association, during a lengthy sojourn in the freedom of pseudonymity, with a savior, benefactor, fervid admirer, and would-be lover" ("Two Antonios" 206). He is capable of loving both men and women--Antonio and Olivia--while Antonio, solely interested in men, is a homosexual (206). Sebastian, however, although he treats Antonio with great kindness, never actually accepts the passes he makes. The fact still remains that at the end of the play Sebastian is with Olivia, not Antonio. Antonio loses and marriage wins out over the relationship, whatever its nature, between the two men. Pequigney's argument is complicated by the fact that, as Laurie Osborne points out, Antonio is still being held by the Duke. In the original Shakespearean text he never receives a pardon. At the end of the play, this places a guarded Antonio standing amongst three heterosexual couples: Orsino and Viola, Toby and Maria, and Olivia and Sebastian. Shakespeare sets up a tableau of heterosexuality, and for Antonio, exclusion. How Sebastian feels about Antonio is irrelevant. Sebastian chooses to marry Olivia and the romantic or erotic relationship between the two men fails.

The relationship of Mercutio and Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* is very similar to that of Antonio and Sebastian. The same characteristics apply: Mercutio is portrayed as older than Romeo and the two are friends. The relationship between them begins in act one, scene four. Romeo is suffering from melancholy due to problems with Rosaline and does not feel like being merry with his friends. Mercutio attempts to cheer him up saying, "Nay, gentle Romeo, we must have you dance" (13). His use of "gentle Romeo" suggests he views Romeo as young and tender and it also displays his affection. The conversation soon turns to love. Mercutio tells Romeo, "You are a lover. Borrow Cupid's wings / And soar with them above a common bound" (17-18). Romeo replies, "I am too sore enpiercé with his

shaft" (19), a phallic reference. When Romeo says that love is "too rough, / Too rude, too boist'rous, and it pricks like thorn," (25-6) Mercutio returns the sexual reference saying, "If love be rough with you, be rough with love, / Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down" (27-28). This speech about love implies homosexuality. The love it describes contains two phalluses; both the pricked and the pricker are male (Porter, *Shakespeare's Mercutio* 160).

Immediately afterward, Mercutio has three more lines that suggest his homosexuality. He says, "Give me a case to put my visage in. / A visor for a visor! What care I / What curious eye doth quote deformities?" (29-31). Since the group is wearing masks to a party at the house of Capulet, the remark is not suspicious. However, what Mercutio says is that he is putting on one mask over another. That first mask can be interpreted to mean his homosexuality, perhaps the "deformity" of which he speaks. The conversation then leads to dreams. In the Queen Mab speech that follows, Mercutio gets himself very worked up while describing the fairy who brings dreams to men's heads. These dreams start off innocently enough, but become worse and worse. At the high point of the speech Mercutio says of Queen Mab:

This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage.
This is she--

(92-95)

According to the progression of the speech, this is the worst possible subject. After all of the other evils he speaks of, it is heterosexual sex that riles him. He becomes so heated that Romeo has to cut him off saying, "Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace! / Thou talk'st of nothing" (96-97). This speech reveals much about Mercutio. Of all the evils in the world it is heterosexuality that upsets him the most. Perhaps it is because of repressed homosexuality that he feels this. Childbirth, fatherhood in particular, would be the one thing denied him. If he remains true to himself, he will never have his own children and therefore has limited use for women. Childbirth would serve as a constant reminder of his homosexuality, his male identity, and the forces keeping him from a relationship with Romeo. He says all of this openly to his friends, yet in a private manner that only he can fully comprehend. It is appropriate that Romeo is the character who interrupts his rage, for surely Romeo is its cause. However, instead of showing any inkling of understanding, Romeo says only that Mercutio is not making any sense. This brings him back to reality and, calm again, he replies, "True, I talk of dreams; / Which are the children of an idle brain, / Begot of nothing but vain fantasy" (97-100). Mercutio's mind breeds dreams just as other people breed

children. He understands, however, that his fantasy--his desire for Romeo--is neither feasible nor realistic.

The banquet scene follows, during which Romeo meets Juliet. Interestingly, Mercutio does not speak at all the entire time they are in the house of Capulet. He fades completely out of the picture until act two, scene one, when they have left the house and are going home. By this time Romeo has disappeared. Mercutio assumes he "hath stol'n him home to bed" (4), but Benvolio suspects he ran into the orchard and encourages Mercutio to call for him. Mercutio replies, "Nay, I'll conjure too" (6), implying that he seeks Romeo sexually. He continues with these sexual references saying, "Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh" (8) and "Speak but one rhyme, and I am satisfied!" (9), both references to orgasms. Then he moves into "conjuring" him in Rosaline's name:

by [her] bright eyes,
By her high forehead and her scarlet lip,
By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh,
And the demesnes that there adjacent lie,
That in thy likeness thou appear to us!
(16-21)

Benvolio is worried that Mercutio will anger Romeo, but he continues:

This cannot anger him. 'Twould anger him
To raise a spirit in his mistress' circle
Of some strange nature, letting it there stand
Till she had laid it and conjured it down.
That were some spite; my invocation
Is fair and honest: in his mistress' name,
I conjure only but to raise up him.
(23-8)

His use of "mistress' circle," "stand," "laid," "conjured," "honest," and "raise up him" are all either sexual or phallic in nature. Mercutio uses references to both Romeo and Rosaline's genitalia and to sex for and between them, but not so much to his own and himself (Goldberg, "Open Rs" 230). He "very readily grants the phallus to others, notably including his friend Romeo" (Porter, "Canonization" 135). According to Goldberg, this suggests that Mercutio wants to assume Rosaline's place and become the subject of Romeo's desire (230). In Mercutio's last speech of the scene he again wishes sex for Romeo, saying:

O, Romeo, that she were, O that she were

An open et cetera, thou a pop'rin pear!
Romeo, good night. I'll to my truckle-bed;
This field-bed is too cold for me to sleep.
(37-40)

As before, this wish is for sex between Romeo and his "mistress," (35) not between Romeo and himself. He excludes himself again and speaks of heterosexual sex. In doing this, Porter says Mercutio "reduces the friend to his genitals, while naming the phallus precisely for its use in heterosexual intercourse" ("Canonization" 136). Finally giving up, he plans to go home to his "truckle-bed" (trundle bed), implying a desire to be under Romeo sexually (Goldberg, "Open Rs" 230).

Mercutio's next appearance, in act two, scene four, is with Benvolio the next day. Mercutio is concerned with the whereabouts of Romeo and assumes it is melancholy over Rosaline that kept him away all night. At this time he states his negative views of both love and women. Rosaline, he says, is a "pale hard-hearted wench, that . . . / Torments him so that he will sure run mad" (4-5). He goes on to say that Romeo is "stabbed with a white wench's black eye; run through the ear with a love song; the very pin of his heart cleft with the blind bow-boy's butt-shaft," again denouncing love and women and making a reference to sodomy. Mercutio is also concerned for Romeo due to a challenge from Tybalt, whom he describes-again using sexual references-as "a very good blade! a very tall man! a very good whore!" (29-30). Romeo soon comes along and a jest begins between the two friends. The easiness of their dialogue, according to Porter, "establish[es] an essential equality and even fraternity between the two men" ("Shakespeare's Mercutio" 102). The conversation soon becomes sexually oriented, each talking of the "goose" or prostitute. Mercutio says, "Thou hast more of the wild goose in one of thy wits than, I am sure, I have in my whole five. Was I with you there for the goose?" (69-72) and Romeo replies, "Thou wast never with me for anything when thou wast not there for the goose" (72-73). Then Mercutio playfully threatens to "bite [Romeo] by the ear for that jest," a very flirtatious move. The playing continues until Mercutio ends it by saying, "Why, is not this better now than groaning for love? Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo; now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature. For this drivelling love is like a great natural that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole" (83-87). Mercutio is essentially telling Romeo that he has missed him. He advises Romeo to give up on love and instead spend time where he belongs, with Mercutio and his friends, ending the speech with yet another reference to sex, the "bauble in a hole."

Act three, scene one is Mercutio's final scene, for it is here that he is slain by Tybalt. Tybalt approaches Mercutio and Benvolio in Verona to inquire about Romeo. Mercutio's instigation leads to

tension between the two men. The relationship between Mercutio and Romeo is brought back into the picture when Tybalt says, "Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo" (44). "Consort," in this case, means playing together or sexual involvement. Interestingly, Mercutio does not immediately deny Tybalt's accusation. Instead he draws a metaphor, saying, "Consort? What, dost thou make us minstrels? / An thou make minstrels of us, look to hear nothing but discords" (45-47). In other words, he implies that, to his own disappointment, there is no such relationship, at least not erotically as Tybalt accuses and Mercutio desires. On ending the quarrel as Benvolio suggests, Mercutio feels that "Men's eyes were made to look," and in saying, "let them gaze," (53) he echoes feelings from earlier in the play: "What care I / What curious eye doth quote deformities?" (1.4.31-2).

When Romeo enters, Tybalt reacts by saying, "Here comes my man" (55). This "possession" of Romeo bothers Mercutio who responds, "I'll be hanged, sir, if he wear your livery" (56). Romeo, recently married to Juliet, responds to Tybalt with love. This infuriates Mercutio. Astonished, he cries, "O calm, dishonorable, vile submission!" (72). His reaction shows the jealousy that Mercutio feels of Tybalt. When Romeo says he loves Tybalt, Mercutio is unaware of the newly formed family connection and assumes that he has lost Romeo's affections to another man. He is not, however, willing to accept this. Instead he takes action, on Romeo's behalf as well as his own, and assumes Romeo's battle. As a result, he enters a fight with Tybalt and is killed.

Before he dies, however, Mercutio makes an important final speech. Romeo can see that Mercutio is wounded, but because Mercutio downplays the seriousness of his injury Romeo assumes the wound is not severe. Romeo remarks, "Courage, man. The hurt cannot be much" (93). Mercutio answers, "No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve" (94-95). These lines, among Mercutio's last, are open to broad interpretation. It might be considered a stretch to say that he is speaking of his relationship with Romeo. However, it does fit with other evidence of Mercutio's homosexuality. When Romeo says, "The hurt cannot be much," perhaps Mercutio thinks then of his love for the young man, comparing the hurt Tybalt gave him by his sword to that Romeo gave him by denial of his love. In saying, "but 'tis enough, 'twill serve," perhaps Mercutio is saying that although the hurt Romeo gave him was small, or should have been small--"not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door"--it was enough to provoke him to take on Tybalt and enough to bring about his own death. This would lead to a realization that his love was futile and brought him no benefit at all. In fact, Romeo actually aids Tybalt by stepping in between the two men while they are fighting. Interestingly, Romeo's last words to his friend: "I thought all for the best," (102) are ignored by Mercutio. He seeks help "into some house" (103) from Benvolio, not his "beloved" Romeo. This

exchange provides strong evidence for Shakespeare's undercutting of homosexuality. Not only does the homosexual relationship fail and the homosexual die, but before his death he comes to a realization that it was nothing more than this same homosexuality that brought about his death in the first place.

Shakespeare presents in these plays two sets of male characters whose relationships contain aspects of both male friendship and erotic love. Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* and Mercutio and Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* both, at times, confuse the boundary between these two Elizabethan institutions. In depicting these relationships, Shakespeare presents homosexuality according to Elizabethan standards. The society in which he writes confines him to certain boundaries. Working within these limits, Shakespeare allows the relationships to exist. At the same time, however, he does not allow them to succeed. Sebastian marries Olivia instead of remaining with Antonio and Romeo marries Juliet instead of pursuing Mercutio. Both relationships encounter obstacles that the men cannot overcome. At the end of *Twelfth Night*, Antonio is held captive by the Duke, and at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio is dead. Both homosexual men pay a price for their love. Both risk their lives, both are deserted for women, and both are ultimately unsuccessful in expressing their homosexuality.

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