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Aristotle, Performativity, and Perfect Friendship in Shakespeare

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Ryan is a senior majoring in English. The initial research for this project was undertaken during

the summer of 2010, as part of the Adrian Tinsley Program. Ryan worked under the wonderful, yet sometimes infuriating mentorship of Dr. James Crowley. Dr. Crowley, for his part, worked tirelessly for the oftentimes infuriating Ryan Engle. Ryan presented this piece proudly with his mentor in attendance at NC State's "Manifest Identity" Graduate Symposium in February of 2011. This research is being expanded and will culminate in an honors thesis.

From childhood, most of us have been taught that our "identity," both how we see ourselves and how others see us, is shaped at least in part by our friends: "you are the company you keep," as the cliché goes. Experience will teach us that not all friendships are the same, much less equal, even if we never hear of Aristotle and his tripartite scale of friend-types. His categories were of course born of the classical world but, true to fashion, remain valuable barometers for measuring individual identity and desire in friendships. They're useful, too, in understanding Shakespeare's characters and their motivation. Traditional, formalist readings of his plays have long offered us neat and clean ways to understand a character's dramatic function—a foil, an adversary, a confidant, and so forth—and further, to see the role one character plays in the development of another. The drawback, though, is the rigidity of the approach: once a character is assigned a function or a label, it sticks. Shakespeare's best characters, though, are not static. More recent critical opinion, specifically that advanced by practitioners of Queer theory, suggests that we look less at structural function and more at process, or "performativity," in character relations. The drawback here is that characters can appear to have no defined formal function, and Shakespeare's best characters do. In *Much Ado*, Claudio says that "Friendship is constant in all other things / Save in the office and affairs of love" (II.i.175-6). He seems to know more than we do as readers: friendship is both fixed and fluid, and so too is individual identity within the relationship.

Both formalist and Queer theory approaches pose problems when we investigate the notion of friendship. A fusion of the two, however, comes closer, I think, to Shakespeare's sense of identity in friendships. Specifically, I'm interested in what Aristotle termed "perfect" friendship, that is the friendship that exists between two people of equal virtue and like station, and how Shakespeare explores the notion in three plays: *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*. Formal Aristotelian enquiry serves us well in determining structural function; Queer theory opens up questions of process. Together, these divergent but complementary approaches show us a Shakespeare familiar with precedent, but willing to risk great thematic advances.

Although *Two Gentleman of Verona* is an often overlooked play in Shakespeare's canon, we can trace what would later become major Shakespearean themes back to this relatively early work. Scholars, directors and production

companies have preferred comedies that handle the love “knot” better (*Twelfth Night*), or concern locales wherein characters can undergo personal transformation (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), or handle the influence and necessity of a cross-dressing female (*As You Like It, Twelfth Night*); and so it is *Verona’s* handling (or mishandling in some cases) of these tropes that make it fascinating. Compared to the later, sophisticated *Twelfth Night*, *Verona* can seem clumsy. Nevertheless, there is much we can learn here about Shakespeare’s attitude toward friendship.

Scholarship has tended to emphasize Valentine’s curious “offer” of Sylvia to Proteus. While this is clearly the play’s talking point, readers run the risk of overlooking some of *Verona’s* inspired moments. After banishing his best friend to the nameless woods between Milan and Mantua, Proteus tries desperately to secure Sylvia’s hand in marriage, despite being betrothed to Julia back home in Verona. Sylvia, anxious to find her beloved Valentine, leaves her father’s castle and sets forth in search of her cruelly banished suitor. Then, in what could be charitably described as a moment of temporary insanity, Proteus forces himself on Sylvia after failing to woo her with the “gentle spirit of moving words” (V.iv.55). Valentine emerges from the woods to stop his former friend from committing a regrettable act, delivering a speech that seems to cure Proteus of his indelicate desires and the compulsive mood that took possession of him upon his arrival in Milan:

Proteus,
I am sorry I must never trust thee more,
But count the world a stranger for thy sake.
The private wound is deepest: O time most accurst!
‘Mongst all foes that a friend should be the worst!
(V. iv.68-72)

As the place setting reminds us, we are between two states: physically, in woods somewhere between Milan and Mantua, emotionally, in a place between enemies and friends. The unique and special bond Proteus and Valentine have shared since they were children is at a dangerous intersection, with their friendship on the verge of permanent dissolution.

Tom McFaul’s recent study of male friendship in Shakespeare explores the humanist notion of true or perfect friendship. Renaissance humanists generally understood perfect friendship as Aristotle characterized it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: it furnishes a second self. McFaul sees this as a fractured or unattainable ideal, enormous in its importance to social bonds, but as mystical and fictional as ancient legend. He argues that pursuing perfect friendship ultimately leaves a Shakespearean character “disappointed” and “alienated from himself” (2).

McFaul writes, “Having identified with another, even when this identification is exploded as a fiction, the self will never quite feel one’s own” (2). Readers need to do little more than recall Egeus or Malvolio to know that in Shakespeare, refusing to engage in society or friendship leads to loss of self and alienation. While McFaul claims Shakespeare and other dramatists saw through the fantasy of expressly equal friendship, I contend that Shakespeare does not see the humanist ideal of perfect friendship as that which stunts the growth of identity; he shows, rather, that people do not arrive at their best possible selves until they are met with their perfect pair. McFaul correctly states that Shakespeare’s notion is somewhat removed from the Aristotelian ideal of perfect friendship. Shakespeare does not, however, eschew Aristotle’s virtues wholesale: in Shakespeare, friendship is the gateway to identity and self-understanding. McFaul’s observations are valuable in that they open up an understanding of Shakespeare’s approach to friendship as a something of a nuanced evolution of Aristotle’s older, perhaps rigid definition. We could, however, take this in a more focused direction by incorporating principles of Queer theory. Born out of Gay and Lesbian criticism, Queer theory separates itself from its critical predecessors by placing emphasis on identity, specifically on the transient and unfixed nature of the self. Instability of the self is a central issue in Queer theory. Charles Bressler observes:

Gender is not stable, but fluid, so it changes from person to person and from context to context. Like gender, self identity is performative—that is, what one does at a particular time, place, and context determines one’s gender and identity, not a universal concept of who we are. Our identities are not connected to our supposed essence (essentialism) but to what we do and are. Our identities are the *effect*, not the cause, of our performances. (Bressler 260)

Echoing Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, Gil Harris notes, “we are all, effectively, in drag” (125). The ‘queer’ of Queer theory “has designated less an essential identity than a perversion or lack of any such identity” (124). In *Verona*, Valentine and Proteus move from being best friends, to rivals in competition for the hand of one woman, to enemies, and then back to best friends—a concrete instance of the fluidity and mutability Queer theory suggests. In this instance it is the mutual identity of the characters that is in the state of flux. If we merge the principles of mutability and instability with Aristotle’s notion of perfect friendship we can see that in Shakespeare relationships are (until the end of the play) in a highly unfixed state, always marked by growth and change.

A fusion of Aristotle and Queer theory opens the complexity

of Shakespeare's notion of friendship. In *Verona*, we see not an inexperienced Shakespeare offering a series of dramatic set pieces, but a play with every sign of the more complex things to come. Valentine and Proteus are characters whose identities are in constant flux right up until the promise of "one feast, one house, one mutual happiness" that ends the play (V. iv. 174). Proteus is a clear example of what Butler has termed performativity. The reader knows that the Proteus who asks "In love / Who respects friend?" is a perversion of the character we meet in Act I and the character who walks off with Julia at the close of the play (V.iv.53-54). Valentine is similarly changed by his experience as Sheriff of the unnamed woods. He enters the woods heartbroken and fragile; he leaves having rescued Sylvia, having shamed Proteus into regaining his sense of self, and having become a man worthy of marrying a Duke's daughter. As Valentine and Proteus grow individually, so too does their friendship. Having been best friends since birth in the comfort of Verona, Valentine and Proteus have always enjoyed a life of concord. The move from the known of Verona to the new, unknown world of Milan shakes the certainty of their bond. Despite briefly becoming fierce rivals and enemies, they emerge from the unnamed woods having negotiated the discord that threatened to end their friendship.

Shakespeare's notion of friendship in *Verona* is more intricate than recent scholarship has indicated. There is a definite Aristotelian bend here, but Aristotle's template is insufficient in defining Shakespeare's grasp of relationships. The performativity and fluidity emphasized by Queer theory build on that Aristotelian foundation, and a fusion of the two gives us a fairer and fuller understanding.

Like the characters in his plays, Shakespeare's actual treatment of friendship changes and evolves throughout his career. We see substantial development in *The Merchant of Venice*. *Two Gentlemen of Verona* treated us to an ending where the male friends can remain in perfect union *and* be married to their respective (heterosexual) loves under "one house" and "one mutual happiness" (V.iv.173). Written a short two years later, *The Merchant of Venice* does not present this even as a possibility. *Merchant* shows significant advancement not just in Shakespeare's overall dramatic acumen, but specifically in his ability to produce characters and relationships with many different and varying layers. Importantly, we see Shakespeare's notion of perfect friendship drifting farther from the accepted Aristotelian conventions. *Merchant* represents a more mature approach to perfect male friendship and it seems to confirm Shakespeare's support of perfect *female* friendship. Through *Merchant*, Shakespeare presents perfect friendship as a *human* ideal, not strictly a male one. Gone also is any semblance of the thoroughly unrealistic ending of *Verona*, replaced here by

the emotionally trying conclusions met by Antonio, Bassanio and Portia.

Interest in *The Merchant of Venice* has often focused on Antonio's sexuality, but Shakespeare leaves no smoking gun. The impetus stems from the cause of Antonio's depression at the beginning of the play: "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (I.i.1). He continues some seventy lines later by evoking *contemptus mundi*: "I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano / A stage, where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one" (77-79). His sadness, of course, is tied to Bassanio's imminent departure for Belmont: physically, Bassanio will be distant from Antonio, but emotionally, and legally, he will soon be married, a state essentially separating the two perfect friends forever. Identifying an apparent tension between the new commitments of marriage and the difficulty such vows create in maintaining perfect male friendships, Queer theorist Bruce R. Smith writes:

The Two Gentlemen of Verona inaugurates a series of conflicts between male bonds and marriage that continues right to the end of Shakespeare's career in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Among the stratagems Shakespeare tries to resolve that standoff are a communal living arrangement among the two friends and their wives (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*) . . . the wife's buying-out of the friend (*The Merchant of Venice*) [and] . . . the husband's murder of the wife (*Othello*). . . . Suffice it to say, the conflict between male bonds and love for women admits of no easy solution. (*Shakespeare and Masculinity* 62)

Smith is both correct and slightly off the mark in his observations. He has identified a consistent thematic underpinning to Shakespeare's work, but has interpreted its function improperly. In Shakespeare, women and wives are not obstacles in the way of perfect friendship, as Smith seems to assert. They are instead capable of friendships with their husbands that are just as serious and meaningful as those with their former best friends.

Elsewhere, on Aristotle's distinction between *philia* (true friendship) and *eros* (sexual desire), Smith writes, "*Philia* is rational; it respects the integrity of the other person. *Eros* is 'a sort of excess of feeling'; it seeks to overwhelm the other person and possess him" (*Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England* 36). Antonio's love for Bassanio leans more toward *philia* than *eros*. Antonio respects Bassanio's "integrity" so much that at no point in the play does he attempt any sort of erotic or romantic overture toward his dear friend. Joseph Pequigney rightly observes, "Neither of the Venetian friends ever makes reference

to physical beauty in the other, or ever speaks in amorous terms to or about the other” (213). The closest Antonio ever comes to an outright declaration of homosexual love is in his somewhat reserved letter to Bassanio, written while Antonio awaits trial. He begs Bassanio to tell his “honorable wife,” “how I lov’d you” and to “bid her judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love” (IV.i.269-73). If we accept Antonio as a gay character, we can almost picture the restraint it took for him not to write “Whether Bassanio had not once a *lover*.” The letter asks not for financial compensation to free Antonio from his fate; in it Antonio asks simply to see his friend one more time. He ‘holds the world as the world,’ but holds Bassanio in such rarified regard that merely a glimpse of him is all Antonio requires before he is due to meet an unjust end. This is homoerotically suggestive, but no more.

Throughout the play Antonio demonstrates the selflessness of his love for Bassanio. He never approaches Bassanio with any amorous overtures, either for fear of rejection or (more likely) for fear of destroying the friendship he values. Simple desire takes a back seat to the higher estate of perfect friendship. Though their relationship has no guarantee of a future at the end of the play, Antonio and Bassanio’s bond is no less perfect. Shakespeare shows us that even though two people may love each other very much, the very real requirements of adult life can irrevocably change their relationship.

Laurie Shannon writes that “*Merchant’s* Portia starts with a “marriage” in the matrimonial sense and then uses her considerable verbal and economic assets to leverage a second marriage in a Neoplatonic affective sense that entails friendship” (9). Portia’s journey to personal completion takes her from the concord of Belmont to the discord of Venice, from a female to a disguised male, from the “lord” of a large estate to a physician/lawyer and most importantly, from being Bassanio’s wife (something they both want) to becoming his best friend (something they both need). Similar to Bassanio with Antonio, Portia has a dear friend in Nerissa, yet these relationships are not wholly fulfilling for either of them. They both long for “something else,” and find a perfect union with each other. Portia, for her part, must take on different roles and assume varied identities to secure the life she desires.

Both Portia’s gender and her identity are “performative” in *Merchant*. Portia understands the special bond Bassanio has with Antonio (calling Antonio “the bosom lover of my lord” III.iv.17) and seeks to incorporate the strength of perfect friendship in her marriage. By personally rescuing Antonio from the jaws of death, Portia displays her love for the “bosom lover” of Bassanio and undergoes a conversion from wife to friend. Shakespeare looks past the literal interpretation of

Aristotle’s notion of “perfect friendship,” exhibiting his own understanding of it as being other than gender-specific.

By the time Shakespeare writes *Othello*, seven or eight years after *The Merchant of Venice*, but a world away from its ‘comic milieu,’ he explodes the bounds of his own investigation of friendship. Where questions of Antonio’s sexuality might have been left pleasantly ambiguous, there is no question of the sexual tension that drives the Othello/Iago relationship. *Othello* functions as a corruption of everything we have seen thus far. In fact, Iago and Othello’s relationship serves as a foil to Shakespeare’s notion of friendship by highlighting virtues that oppose those in the comedies. As Michael Neill has shown, the culture and quality of the setting in *Othello* is vital. Neill writes, “Venice is the city of the play, its metropolitan center and repository of civil values, but the civilization it represents proves, on closer inspection, to be no more ideal than that of its counterpart in *The Merchant of Venice*” (Neill 208). The Venice of *Merchant* is a world of *philia*; that same locale in *Othello* is thoroughly a world of *eros*. Shakespeare uses the same city to show us two very different edges in male friendship: even the locale evolves. Where *Merchant* showed us selfless—even if homoerotic—love in the friendship of Antonio and Bassanio, and then understanding and concord in the perfect friendship of Bassanio and Portia, *Othello* works in another, darker realm. Othello and Desdemona’s relationship is marked by disharmony and jealousy; Othello and Iago’s by selfishness and cruel devising. As Jonathan Dollimore argues, “Conservative world views work in terms of binaries and by analogy: as ordered government is the antithesis of anarchy, so natural love (heterosexual, patriarchal, etc.) is the opposite of sexual deviation” (Dollimore 160). Dollimore contends that a world ordered by these ‘binary lies’ is inherently unbalanced. With *Othello*, Shakespeare shows us the mutability of friendship and the incredibly fragile, easily unbalanced construction it ultimately is.

An Aristotelian reading of *Othello* allows us to see Iago’s contradictory and unstable nature. He is of course a foil in his perversity to Othello and his idealistic love. Iago claims many times that he hates the Moor, but desires him sexually and seems maniacally driven to make Othello his best or perfect friend. Yet, even after the dramatic exchange of vows between Iago and Othello that cements their friendship at the close of III.iii, Iago continues to treat Othello as a friend of utility which, in Aristotle, is one retained because he serves a useful purpose. He is a means to an end. Othello, used by Iago, becomes the unwitting means to his own demise.

A fusion with Queer theory here is invaluable, as it further illuminates Iago’s corruption, or perversion, to use Dollimore’s

idiom, of the sacrosanct notion of perfect friendship. Jonathan Gil Harris writes, “A queer reading of a text does not necessarily aim to identify homosexuals. Instead, as in Dollimore’s interpretation, it seeks to reveal the larger processes of displacement that produce and trouble categories of sexual normality and perversion” (Harris 134). Just as Neill emphasizes the “place” of *Othello*, “displacement” is similarly important. *Othello* contains a series of events that serve to displace the established relationships within. The play begins with Iago’s feeling of displacement, being snubbed for the position of Othello’s lieutenant. He bristles at the favoritism shown toward Cassio, shaking Iago’s conception of his relationship with the Moor. Whereas Othello views Iago as simply a comrade in arms at the play’s start (a friend of lesser station), Iago evidently sees their friendship as something more substantial. The imbalanced affections between the play’s principal characters are shown to the reader at the opening, evoking the notion of *eros* that will dominate the tragedy’s central relationship.

While Iago fashions himself a man in total control, the text suggests a man who only *thinks* he is in control. He is, rather, totally controlled by his emotions. Iago is fueled almost exclusively by destructive urges and highly erotic feelings. Sexual intercourse, at its foundation a creative and unifying act, is in Iago’s terms reduced to a violent animal overmastering. To Brabantio, Iago says, “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe,” in the act of “making the beast with two backs” (I.i.88-89, 116-117). By debasing the physical act of love, Iago is emblematic of Dollimore’s notion of the perverse dynamic. We see Iago displacing the loving reality of Othello and Desdemona’s relationship with absurdly brutal language. He never misses an opportunity to do this throughout the play.

Being Iago’s best friend displaces Othello’s mental state. After vowing “I am your own for ever,” Iago becomes synthesized with Othello (III.iii.480). In *Verona* and *Merchant* best friends help to bring clarity to individual identity. In *Othello*, the friendship of Iago and the Moor destroys the latter. After “letting Iago in,” Othello suffers two fits of epilepsy, or madness, and starts to talk like him, mounting reference upon reference to weapon, little arm, and sword in V.ii—hardly coincidental allusions to his own penis that echo Iago’s earlier debasing depictions of sex. Iago is an affront to the institution of perfect friendship, substituting the mutually affirming power of human relationships with his own destructive bent. Iago causes Othello to *devolve*, and while he stands in Aristotelian terms as very much the destructive static foil to the Moor’s initial innocence or optimism, we do well to see him as participant in, or director of, the displacement of Othello’s natural desires and attitudes. Throughout the play, Iago’s identity is highly

performative; he assumes many roles in order to “make the net / that shall enmesh” all within his sway (II.iii.361-62).

From the early *Verona* through *Merchant* and on to *Othello*, we see nearly ten years of Shakespearean art—a representative sampling of his work, and a profitable one for us considering the growth and development of his notion of friendship. The two critical approaches we have considered, formalist Aristotelianism and Queer theory, likewise illustrate the growing complexity of critical debate. Were we to use but one of these approaches we would find ourselves overlooking important insights offered by the other. Aristotle provides a structural framework, Queer theory a performative one. Shakespeare himself seems dissatisfied with a one-dimensional look at the multi-layered notion of human friendship, indeed perfect friendship, as Aristotle would say. As his characters exceeded the bounds of traditional categories so too are we as readers to expand our own vision and explore the ways in which these two divergent, but not wholly incompatible approaches might inform his texts and our reading. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola says that only time can untangle the knot of human relationships. Right she might be, but we can marshal and fuse two critical approaches to help us along.

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