

MALE BONDING IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

By Beatriz E. Aguirre

En sus tragedias y comedias, Shakespeare nos presenta un abanico amplio y variado de lazos de amistad entre hombres. Si bien demuestra una predilección para este tipo de lazos, nunca parece haberlos idealizado. Pues, la debilidad humana no tenía secreto para él. Cada grupo de amigos, aunque presente lazos parecidos, varía en su modo de vivir la amistad. Es evidente que la amistad a menudo es más fuerte que el amor.

Palabras claves: Shakespeare, teatro, relaciones humanas, amistad masculina.

Dans les comédies et les tragédies de Shakespeare, se déploie une large représentation de liens entre les personnages masculins. Shakespeare ne semble jamais avoir idéalisé ce type de relations, bien qu'une prédilection envers l'amitié entre hommes y soit indéniable. Il est évident qu'il connaissait bien les retards de la faiblesse humaine. Chaque groupe d'amis, bien que manifestant des liens similaires, fonctionne différemment: le contenu et la forme de chacune des expériences mises en scène varient. Que l'amitié seule perdure au détriment de l'amour, cela est manifeste.

Mots-clés: Shakespeare, théâtre, relations humaines, amitié entre hommes.

Shakespeare throughout his plays, tragedies and comedies, makes an ample representation of male bonding at different levels, and although he shows predilection for this kind of relationship he never idealizes it. Shakespeare is aware of human weakness. Each group of male friends functions differently because, although they express similar bonding, the exchanging of experiences varies in its content as well as in its form. What is evident is that friendship survives more often than love.

Key words: Shakespeare, plays, human relationship, friendship, male bonding.



The function of a friendship is to do good rather than to be treated well.

Aristotle.

Throughout Shakespeare's plays the most common group of people is the one formed by male friends. This group has variable number of members going from two in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, up to an indefinite number in *Timon of Athens*. Each group functions differently because, although they express similar bonding, the exchanging of experiences varies in its content as well as in its form.

The origin of the friendship is one that gives a peculiar shape to a group. Romeo, Benvolio and Mercutio; Proteus and Valentin; and Polixenes and Leontes have grown together. This sharing the years of childhood creates a kind of kinship, brotherhood, and the level of familiarity is higher than in those friends whose relations start in adulthood. However, this acquired parentage does not assure a more successful adult friendship or more similar personal characteristics.

Friendship occurs in a milieu of freedom in which everyone keeps independence and develops his/her self. Ronald A. Sharp in his book *Friend-*

ship and Literature says that

we place such a high premium on change and freedom of choice that we are reluctant to commit ourselves to relationships that bring with them requirements and obligations over time. (Sharp, 1986:23)

If something is learnt from the other it must be the consequence of free choice to emulate the friend or to please him/her, or a simply unaware exchanging of behavior:

"What one presents in a friendship is not only one's self but also one's sense of the world." (Sharp, 1986:16).

There is a permanent exchanging of experiences, but one's self always prevails. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo, Benvolio and Mercutio have well differentiated characters and roles in their group. Romeo is the dreamer, Mercutio is the boisterous and Benvolio is the cautious one. But Benvolio can be as assertive as Mercutio:

"Come, come, thou art as hot a Jack in thy Mood as any in Italy, and as soon mov'd to be moody, And as soon moody to be mov'd." (III,i,11-13)

Mercutio gives himself a margin to dreams and common sense:

Mer.
True I talk of dreams
Which are the children of any idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
Which is as thin of substance as the air. (I,i,96-99).

Romeo can manage language wittily and let himself be led by fierceness:

Rom.
He (done) in triumph, and Mercutio slain.
Away to heaven, respective lenity,
And fire (-ey'e) fury be my conduct now!
Now, Tybalt, take the "villain" back again
The late thou gavest me, for
Mercutio's soul...(III,i,122-126).

In *The Winter's Tale*, Polixenes and Leontes, who were almost one person in their childhood, still have great affinity in their adulthood. Despite the separation occasioned by their respective political duties Polixenes remains "Nine changes of the wat'ry star" (I,ii,1) in Sicily.

In *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, Proteus and Valentin, who were also

raised together, diverge in their attitude towards life. Valentin has

been an idle truant,
omitting the sweet benefit of time
to clothe his age with angel-like perfection.
Yet had Sir Proteus (for that his name)
made use and fair advantage of his days. (II,iv, 64-68)

However, Valentin, who depicts himself as a 'truant', never loses his nobility of character, while Proteus is transformed into a liar both to his mistress and to his friend. Freedom of action characterizes this couple of friends; each chooses a way and respects the other's decision. Proteus who knows perfectly well the code of friendship analyzes their separation:

"He after honor hunts, I after love:
He leaves his friends, to dignify them more;
I (leave) myself, my friends, and all for love." (I,i,63-65)

Both friends go to the court and experience an unexpected change. Valentin becomes confused, and Proteus' experience there only prompts the bad side of his character. They suffer another separation, at first a



physical one, now a spiritual division. Paradoxically, this second separation originates in the fact that their feelings address to the same woman.

It is not only Valentin and Proteo who are separated by the love to a woman. Romeo, when in love with Rosaline, detaches himself not only from Mercutio and Benvolio but also from his family and society in general. Although Romeo hears Benvolio's advice and tries to learn from it, he does not look for his friends, it is they who look for Romeo.

Isolation is not so radical with Proteus and Valentin who, in their turn, become confidant of each other. Bassanio has also in Antonio a confidant for his love affairs. But in the case of Romeo, when he falls in love with Juliet his isolation becomes, necessarily, extreme, since he is betraying a bond that links him with his friends: the feud. The feud is the way of bonding among men in this play-world.

In many societies, marriage is considered a crucial threat to pre-existing friendships. "A man's friendships are, like his will, invalidated by marriage...but they are also no less invalidated by the marriage of his friends." (Sharp, 1986: 120)

In *The Merchant of Venice* Antonio's unexplained sadness at the beginning of the play may indeed stem from anxiety that Portia's love might separate Bassanio from him. Ironically, Bassanio asks Antonio for the economical support to win Portia's hand, and Antonio gives it to him. However, what Antonio is offering to Bassanio is his life; Shylock's bond requires no money back but a pound of Antonio's flesh. Antonio takes a risk nonetheless in the higher interest of his friendship; or friendship makes

him careless or he simply does not believe in risk.

Antonio, according to Ronald Sharp, is "[a] man committed to the high ideals of friendship and ready to sacrifice himself for his friend." (Sharp, 1986: 119) It has been said that Antonio conceals a homosexual interest in Bassanio. Antonio's letter to Bassanio is an evidence of this homosexual feeling. Antonio places himself as a martyr for the sake of friendship:

"...and since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are clear'd between you and I, if I might but see you at my death." (III,ii,317-320).

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Antonio's asking Bassanio to witness his death cannot be taken as "an invaluable lesson in the meaning of sacrifice" (Sharp, 1986: 148); it is a manipulation of Antonio upon Bassanio's affection. Bassanio will feel guilty because he is, ultimately, the cause of Antonio's death.

In the scene of the simulated wedding ceremony, Portia, by means of the ring trick, establishes the priority of marriage over friendship without exacerbating the latent antagonism with Antonio. However, Antonio does not consider Portia's action as a positive present for him. He is dead until he receives back his fortune:

"Sweet lady, you have given me life and living,
for here I read for certain that my ships
are safely come to road." (V,i,2286-2288)

Antonio has understood the lesson Portia gave him: her bond is more powerful over Bassanio than Antonio's. Antonio finally accepts his reality and bases his life on his possessions, those which he had offered to Bassanio and are being returned by Bassanio's wife.

The mutual exclusion of friendship and love is also present in *The*

Winter's Tale, but the antagonism becomes more complex since power gets involved with feelings. Leontes and Polixenes were raised together and in their affinity were "as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' th' sun" (I,ii,67). Since those childhood days Leontes was the dominant character. That Leontes possessed Polixenes' love is noted by Hermione in her defense:

"To you and toward your friend, whose love had spoke,
Even since it could speak, from an infant, freely,
That it was yours." (III,ii,69-71)

It is never said that Leontes had given all his love to Polixenes. Leontes' superiority in this childhood relationship is reaffirmed by Polixenes in their adulthood. He admits to Leontes that in comparison to him and his "rich place," he, Polixenes, is but a "cipher" (I,ii,6-7). He assures him that Leontes' very words are capable of moving him like "none, none, i' the world" (I,ii,19), and that he will remain in his debt "for perpetuity" (I,i,5).

Throughout this exchange Leontes never once bestows a similar compliment upon Polixenes. As their conversation unfolds, Leontes continues to assert and reassert his will while



boasting to Polixenes:

"We are tougher, brother,
Than you can put us to't." (I,ii,15-16).

Leontes believes he is 'tougher' and greater, that his predominance over Polixenes remains intact.

Polixenes' refusing Leontes' demands reveals that his submissive role to Leontes is over. Polixenes's complimentary words are not a lie, he still loves and admires Leontes, but his life has gone an independent way now. Polixenes' words follow the ritual of courtesy, which is a constituent part of friendship. Leontes, in his demands to Polixenes, is transgressing against one of the principles of friendship: "Friendship is the relationship in which two want to play and enjoy their play." (Sharp,1986:37). Leontes, by encouraging Hermione to ask Polixenes to stay, is both violating the freedom of friendship and taking a risk of confirming his lack of authority over Polixenes. Although for Polixenes the amusement is ended and his duties prevail over his enjoyment, he cannot refuse, since he is

courteous, the demands of a woman. Hermione's words imply a meaning which annoys Leontes and makes him suspicious. She claims that "a lady's 'verily' is as potent as a lord's" (I,ii,50-51). So, Hermione's 'verily' is indeed more powerful than his own.

The mutual exclusion of friendship and love is also present in The Winter's Tale, but the antagonism becomes more complex since power gets involved with feelings.

Upon learning that Hermione has persuaded Polixenes to stay, Leontes notes: "At my request he would not" (I,ii,87). Leontes parallels this scene with his petition of Hermione's hand, he had to wait those "[t]hree crabbed months" before getting her acceptance. The consequence of this analogy is jealousy of love and of power. Although Leontes takes the risk of being completely refused by Polixenes, it is not in his mind the possibility of being defeated by a woman. Leontes had accepted his failure if Hermione would not have been successful. But Leontes, in his stubborn proud attitude, does not want to recognize the failure of his power, he rather fails as a husband as well as a friend. By the means of his jealousy he recovers power and punishes both Hermione and Polixenes. Of course, he has a double loss: mar-

riage and friendship.

"Males are readier risk takers than females" affirms Walter Ong in his remarkable book *Fighting for Life* (1981:69). Neither Mercutio nor Antonio hesitates to act in behalf of his friend. Antonio does not give him any margin of doubt in his fortune and accepts Shylock's demands. Mercutio relies on the power of his words and starts the fight with Tybalt who is another ready fighter. Fortune and words are their shells, and very weak ones, and so they are defeated. But nevertheless they take the risk.

Leontes, like Mercutio, is a victim of his own invention. Mercutio finds death because his exacerbated verbal wit leads him to inflame, hasten, the fight with Tybalt, and indeed, Mercutio dies by his words. Leontes, in his turn, is victim of his swollen proud of power which leads him to overstep on the sacred bonds of friendship. The risk exerts its influence in a particular way in each play. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio's death arouses in Romeo his male aggressiveness, placing, thus, friendship over love. Romeo goes even beyond and accuses Juliet whose 'beauty hath made me effeminate' (III,i,114).

When Antonio knows fortune has



Stage, 17 th century

been adverse, and that he will have to pay Shylock with his life, he gives Portia the chance of becoming even more powerful than before. Love triumphs over friendship. In *The Winter's Tale* the friendship between Leontes and Polixenes is restored when Leontes recognizes his daughter, and therefore, Leontes revalidates his marriage bond. But there is an inversion of roles because Leontes



surrenders his power to Polixenes; Polixenes' son will inherit Leontes' power through Perdita.

In *Love's Labor's Lost* women are also a cause of dissension among men. But what is dissolved here is not exactly the male friendship but the bond that links

the King, Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine. The Academy of Navarra, in contrast to the former group of friends, has an amorphous shape, there is a lack of strength in both characters and goals. The King is just a nominal authority since he himself undermines his authority by being the first in transgressing the law. Berowne, though, is the most boisterous and the one who has common sense, does not have enough weight to lead the group.

The four friends, the King, Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine perform always as a group; even in their courtship to the Princess of France and her friends, they utilize the same devices: a poem and a gift. The Muscovites' masquerade reinforces that lack of individual identity. Their collective identity is ratified by the women's

disguises when the four men are not even able to recognize their respective lovers.

The central bond in this Academe is the men's vow to consecrate their lives to study for the next three years. This consecration requires the restraining of vital needs such as food and sleeping and the total denial of women. The design of this Academe resembles the traditional male fraternities which have their ultimate origin in the male's struggle to distance themselves from woman in order to get their masculine identity.

Walter Ong says that masculinity means differentiation; since the beginning of his existence the male fetus develops hormones against its environment, the female womb. Therefore, male's vocation becomes a growing away from the feminine gender. And, so, male will look for another male to establish masculine identity (Ong, 1981:64-65).

What the Navarra Academe seeks is to empower the masculine identity of each of its members. They are going to live in a milieu of perpetual con-

test, measuring their own worth by what the others do. The best will be the one who can best fulfill the rules. But the Academe's goal fails. The failure is inevitable because the law is false, since its creator was already perjured at the time the law was established. The King argues that it is necessary to see the Princess of France for political reasons. Berowne wittily replies:

Necessity will make us all forsworn
Three thousand times within this three
years' space;
For every man with his affects is born,
Not by might mast' red, but by special
grace. (I,i,149-152)

Berowne's words become a prediction; each of them transgresses the law by necessity. The King perfectly baptized their new bond: "Sweet fellowship in shame" (IV,iii,47). Again they act as a group betraying, simultaneously, their own will and their friends. It is a chain of betrayals, of revelations. Although there is a chronological order in the scene of the revelations, the symmetry in their speeches gives the impression of they performing as a chorus. Berowne seems to be more independent, he has the advantage of being the first and

had no witness of his confession. But it is he who conceives the common discharge for the common guilt and for the common oath.

The final irony is that these men in the end get the isolation from women which the vision of Academe had originally required. The King, Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine have not got male identity, and women recognize it so. This Academe will need more time for education, they agree too much with each other and male identity is a matter of divergence which is explained by Ong as follows: "Bonding pattern in a male group is well known: it consists of closeness and distancing simultaneously." (1981:81).

Duke Senior's society in *As You Like It*, shares with the Navarra Academe the isolation from the courtly life, the real life. The central bond of this society is political fidelity and all of them remain faithful to their vow. A political group is also a particular fraternity in which male power is assured. The Duke, Jaques, Amiens and the Lords are not exactly denying life, becoming misanthropists or misogynists. However, this society is exclusively masculine; neither a wife nor a girlfriend, nor a sister, nor a daughter

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is missed or remembered. Although women are mentioned, their first appearance in the group is through Jaques' words, which are not precisely positive ones:

"What woman in the city do I name,
When that I say the city-woman bears
The cost of princess on unworthy
shoulders?" (II,vii,74-76).

The Duke Senior is the authoritative figure in the bucolic society of Aden, having in Jaques' adversarial force the confirmation of his power. The Duke and Jaques compete with words and it is the Duke who wins the contest. Jaques defines his relationship with the Duke so "[h]e is too disputable for my company. I think of as many matters as he, but I give heaven thanks, and make no boast of them." (II,v,35-37).

The one who boasts is Jaques, but he will not admit his failures; he thinks he has the grace of wit and that this confers on him greater authority. Perhaps both, the Duke Senior and Jaques, have the same capacity for wittiness, but it is only the Duke who holds the authority of the group because he embodies not only the paternal figure but also the maternal one; the Duke "takes over the traditional

female prerogative of maternal nurturance, negatively defined by Jaques." (Erickson, 1981:80).

One of the most common bonds between these males is verbal wit which is a constant source of amusement. Most of the plays already mentioned have a representative of wittiness, such as Mercutio, Jaques, Berowne, Gratiano. Walter Ong explains that "[h]umor relieves psychological strain, especially hostilities. Humor lies closer to the male world, especially grosser and boisterous humor, for it relieves conflict." (1981:67). Those four 'clowns' are the cathartic element in each group. They with their role of fools have acquired the freedom of speech, they can utter the 'black' against the 'white' and through their words the group releases tensions. Sexual jokes are frequently used and in them, the members of the group reinforce their masculine identity.

These jokes are constructed in a secret language which conceals masculine weakness; male sexual organs are external and exposed to mockery or to harm. By making fun of their weakness, men believe they become immune to any harm, so the cryptic language creates a defense. Mercutio re-

values Romeo's masculinity when Romeo can reply to his sexual jokes with the same acute level of wittiness:

Mer.
"Why is not 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..." (II,iv,88-91).

Mercutio and Romeo's dialogue is a contest of speech which has the same agonistic structure of other male ceremonial combats in order to establish masculine identity.

The relationship with the witty character unfolds an endless exchanging of insults in and out of the group. This insulting game is not only another outlet of the natural male aggressiveness, but paradoxically, it raises the level of intimacy. Ronald Sharp describes the situation in which teasing a close friend unmercifully in the company of another person is an action that affirms the friendship; insults are put to the service of the bond of intimacy (1986:42-3). Therefore, when Romeo defines Mercutio as "[a] gentleman, nurse, that loves to hear

himself talk, and will speak more in a minute than he will stand to in a month." (II,iv,147-149), he is exerting the freedom he has acquired for having bore Mercutio's mockery. If Duke Senior had depicted so crudely the life of another

member of his group as he does Jaques' (II,vii,64-69), the other relationship would have been broken. But Jaques' continual gloomy commentaries about the external world, which attempt to the harmony established in the woods, allow the Duke his offensive words.

In *Love's Labor's Lost* Berowne is the only one who dares to doubt the worth of the foundation of the Academe. He finds an impediment to the fulfillment of each clause in the contract. It is he who, indirectly, accuses the King of being forsworn and makes fun of the King's "necessity". Berowne keeps advantage over his comrades but it is he who is more in fault. The King repays Berowne's satirical words by making fun, cruelly, of Berowne's lover, Rosaline.

Sexual jokes are frequently used and in them, the members of the group reinforce their masculine identity. These jokes are constructed in a secret language which conceals masculine weakness



K.
By heaven, thy love is black as ebony.
(...)
O paradox! Black is the badge of hell,
The hue of dungeons, and the school
of night;
And beauty's crest becomes the
heaviness well.
(IV,iii,244-252).



Street Scene (17th century)
In *The Riverside Shakespeare*

Gratiano, in *The Merchant of Venice*, is the least effective witty character among those in these plays. Bassanio describes him so:

Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice. His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff; you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when you have them, they are not worth of search. (I,i,114-118).

Bassanio is evidently angry because Gratiano, with his nonsensical chatter, is delaying his crucial conversation with Antonio. But Bassanio is being unfair to Gratiano who, as Solanio and Salerio, notices the change in Antonio's aspect. Bassanio does not express any concern for what is so evident for the others, he is blinded by his preoccupations. Perhaps the origin of Antonio's sadness is "not worth of search" for Bassanio. Bassanio is afraid of Gratiano's behavior. Gratiano is "too wild, too rude, and bold of voice" (II,ii,181) and that could provoke a problem at Belmont. Gratiano's wittiness has no more meaning in the play than a source of amusement, and sometimes of disturbance, for his friends. The central issues in *The Merchant of Venice*, the bond of Antonio with Shylock and Bassanio's marriage, just allow in their development a third person, Portia, who becomes as important as, or even more important, than the two

friends.

At the end of these five plays, the groups of friends have experienced significative changes. The relationship among those friends will not be the same any more. Separation, between higher or lower level, is a common issue in the groups.

Although death and marriage have dissolved the group of Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio, it can be said that their former friendship remains unharmed; at least no dubious feelings have arisen between them. Proteus and Valentin get reconciliation, but there will always be between them the betrayal of Proteus. Polixenes and Leontes have renewed their bonds, and even increase them through the marriage of their children, but the homicidal desires of Leontes and the suffering of Hermione will be always between them. Antonio and Bassanio, though no negative feeling was evidenced in the play, cannot be as close as they were; Bassanio has now another central person in his life, Portia. Antonio will have to satisfy himself with his material possessions and, why not, with his memories.

The Academe of Navarra has been dissolved by its creators. The future of its members has been decided by

William Shakespeare.



the Princess of France and her friends. The four friends will stay out of any society for one year; they are going to be isolated even from each other. The society of Arden is also dismembered. While the Duke Senior and Jaques will consecrate to a religious life, Amiens and the Lords will go back to the court.

Shakespeare throughout his plays, tragedies and comedies, makes an ample representation of male bonding at different levels, and although he shows predilection for this kind of relationship he never idealizes it; Shakespeare is aware of human weakness. What is evident is that friendship survives more often than love. I would like to end this essay by proposing a second part, exploring how women relate to each other in Shakespeare's plays.

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NOTAS SOBRE LA AUTORA

Profesora de la Escuela de Idiomas de la Universidad de Antioquia.
Master of Arts in English.
Ph.D in Comparative Literature, Binghamton University, New-York.

