

Caesar's Same-Sex-Food-Sex Dilemma

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Abstract: Often disjointed, temporally inconsistent, and metaphorically mixed, Shakespeare's sprawling *Antony and Cleopatra* frequently challenges as much as it entertains. However, consistency is seen in the near constant deployment of food and, more precisely, food metaphors, throughout the play. Just as Cleopatra is thematically imbricated with banqueting and revelry, Caesar's designs on Antony are also couched in terms of food, though in a much more sober and reserved manner. Specifically, the austerity of Caesar's "strange flesh" speech stands in sharp contrast to Cleopatra's wanton excesses. Because food is also inextricable from Cleopatra's sexuality, this analysis will posit that Shakespeare likewise posits a sexual dimension into Caesar's speech. In support of this argument, other instances of same-sex desire will be evaluated within Shakespeare's canon. More importantly, the social values associated with this instance of same-sex desire would have been recognized by a Jacobean audience. Thus, the dual allegorical construction of food and sexuality bridges the time period between the Renaissance and Rome to establish a harmonious and universal message about the "strange flesh" associated with desire.



The consumption of food is a central theme in *Antony and Cleopatra*; in fact, as so many references to the trappings of Egypt are couched in terms of banqueting and gluttony, the association between Cleopatra and food cannot be materially separated within the texts. For example, after only a brief allusion to Cleopatra as "our great competitor" (4.1.3), Caesar grounds his complaint about her influence on Antony in terms of gluttonous frivolity:

...From Alexandria

This is the news: he fishes, drinks, and wastes

The lamps of night in revel... (1.4.3-5)¹

Rather than helping Caesar solidify his power in Rome (much less eagerly assisting in the stabilization of the empire), Antony is distracted from his duties by the pleasures of Egypt. The symbol of the queen and Egypt's gluttony, as Christopher Wortham argues, would have been recognized by Shakespeare's audience: "Temperance, or the lack of it, is related to the play's apocalypticism in ways that would have been readily divined by a courtly audience and probably by one in a public playhouse too."² Consequently, Caesar occupies a space that is simultaneously Roman and English. Yet, Shakespeare encodes within the same binary of gluttony and temperance a much more complex, more subversive message: Caesar's sexual desire for Antony is a motivational plot device. As such, he is a pseudo-anachronism, seemingly positioned between the ancient tolerance of same-sex desire and Jacobean prohibitions against such affections—though still reflective of a constant and ubiquitous, if latent, cultural paradigm recognized by Shakespeare's audience.

Because those same prohibitions that call for the suppression of openly expressed same-sex desire also disallowed any overt discussion of the topic, Shakespeare deploys food as a vehicle for encoding his characters. Caesar's "strange flesh" speech contains multiple, as well as overlapping, meanings. Among the revelations that emerge are Caesar's association with the virtue of temperance and Cleopatra's alignment with indecent excess. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a sprawling play that appears often disjointed, temporally inconsistent, and metaphorically mixed; however, the dual allegorical construction of food and sexuality manage to bridge the time period between the Renaissance and Rome to establish a harmonious and universal message about the "strange flesh" associated with desire.

Strange Flesh

Not only critical to sustaining life, food also possesses an inherently discursive nature that explains its ability to define and regulate culture. Ken Albala argues:

It has been suggested thus far that the major changes within Renaissance nutritional theory reflect larger transformations of European society, culture, and thought. The most conspicuous features of this new outlook have been described as reactions to various greater trends: a demographic surge, inflation, a greater disparity of wealth, the differentiation of social strata, and divergence of high and low cultures. One other significant development may be discerned in the recommendations of dietary regimens, and this is a growing consciousness of regulation, order and rational government at a personal level in terms of that parallel the rationalization of political states.³

Albala continues with the assertion that “in tandem with the use of political metaphors is a fear of the physical insurrection brought on by disorderly diets as well as its opposite, fear of tyranny and excessive regulation.”⁴ The deployment of food through its preparation and consumption represented a form of social control and was (and continues to be) emblematic of cultural identities: “When we examine what a culture eats, along with that, what it says about what it eats, we find that nearly everything it does or thinks about food has been absorbed into a body of symbolic articulations.”⁵ Cultures, nations, and individuals are defined by what they eat and how that food is prepared. Robert Applebaum recounts how oral traditions gave way to a new discourse about food preparation:

As early as 1300, without any extant precedent, a text appears in multiple editions in several different nations, attesting to a form of cookery that is at once local and international. It is neither a guide for novices nor a book for the masses. Like most early books of cookery, it usually omits to specify quantities of ingredients and cooking times, or to explain cooking techniques.⁶

Applebaum explains that this emerging literary creation was reserved for the wealthy and privileged class; however, the evolution of the European discursive landscape, as well as the society at large, resulted in the transformation of many precepts related to food.⁷ More than simply acknowledging his awareness of the influence of cookbooks during his era, Shakespeare deploys food as a method of encoding public and private motivations for the characters in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Early in the play, Caesar's discussion of Antony's survival skills reveals as much about Caesar's nature as it does about Antony's:

...On the Alps

It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,
Which some did die to look on... (1.4.66-68)

While the shocking and direct nature of this pronouncement is foundational in understanding Antony's character, what does it really say about Antony? Does he have a natural inclination and tolerance of strange flesh? Does he have experience with strange flesh? According to the OED, the word "strange" implicitly means "belonging to another country; foreign, alien" or "belonging to some other place."⁸ The word "strange" can also have a more positive connotation: "of a kind that is unfamiliar or rare; unusual, uncommon, exceptional, singular" or "exceptionally great (in degree, intensity, amount)."⁹ Applying this meaning, Caesar's speech becomes one of envy, or at least of curiosity, as Antony is depicted as partaking in something extraordinary, or extraordinarily exotic. Caesar recognizes that this strange flesh consumed by Antony cannot sustain, or sate, everyone. In fact, some people perished at the sight of this food. The issue that comes to the forefront is how well Antony fared on such potentially lethal cuisine.

Yet, even beyond this one instance, references to food characterize Antony's strength and weakness. Peter A. Parolin argues that "for Caesar, food degrades Antony by mastering him. Rather than exercising self-control, Antony subjects himself to his appetites, a move that marks his feminization and Egyptianization, the undoing of his Roman masculinity."¹⁰ Parolin's argument, however, does not take into account the final lines of the speech, which reveal,

It wounds thine honour that I speak it now—
Was bourne so like a soldier that thy cheek
So much as lanked not. (1.4.69-71)

Antony displayed no outward signs of hunger or emaciation from his experience with strange flesh. In fact, Antony more than survived on strange flesh, he thrived on it. Therefore, it can be surmised that Antony developed an appetite, or at least a taste, for strange flesh. When Caesar laments for "Antony [to], / Leave thy lascivious wassails" (1.4.55-56), he wants Antony to make a choice, not a sacrifice. Reinforcing this notion is the deployment of the word "lascivious" with food. In this instance, food is directly sexualized. Antony will not materially suffer by virtue of the consumption of either gluttonous excess or strange flesh. Therefore, the imbrication of food and sex emerges as a critical issue. Caesar employs food metaphors because he cannot express this desire outright. In

addition, since food and sexuality are frequently intertwined with Cleopatra, Caesar's association with food can likewise be posited as sexual.

The nature of the strange flesh consumed by Antony further supports the claim that food and sex are intertwined. While "flesh," a word with multivalent meanings, naturally refers to "that which covers the framework of bones and is enclosed by the skin," the OED also indicates that this reference by Shakespeare could also be associated with "The Epistle of Jude" in the Bible.¹¹ The corresponding passage reads, "As Sodom and Gomorrhe, and the cities about them, which in like maner as they did, committed fornication, and followed strange flesh, are set foorth for an ensample, and suffer the vengeance of eternall fire."¹² Even taken out of the context of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the words "strange flesh" are sufficiently evocative to call Caesar's motivation into question.

For a member of the privileged class like Antony, the consumption of strange flesh may or may not be surprising, especially considering the delicacies typically reserved for those members of the upper class. Still, Caesar expresses surprise at how adaptable Antony's appetites proved to be:

Though daintily brought up—with patience more
Than savages could suffer. Thou didst drink
The stale of horses, and the gilded puddle. (1.4.60-63)

The reference to being "daintily brought up" and "more than savages could suffer" means that Antony at one point ignored the tenets of his upbringing and turned to another type of consumption with a startling vigor. This wholesale adoption of a new culinary paradigm on the part of Antony can be construed as Shakespeare's veiled criticism of the religious proscriptions of Jacobean theocratic tenets. Consequently, just as the sustenance (or the virtue of sexual practice) typically consumed by Antony is reduced in value by comparisons to these new foods, the virtue of heteronormative sexuality is also diminished. While the "stale of horses" and "gilded puddles" give the reader some shocking internal visuals, the implied reference to genitalia (specifically the horses') and the consumption of sticky liquids is not coincidental.

Loaded into this language is more than simply a reference to the consumption of urine. The OED indicates a complicated component of sexual duplicity to the word "stale," which can refer to "a person or thing held out as a lure or bait to entrap a person."¹³ Further, as part of the phrase "common stale," the definition is one of "a prostitute of the lowest class, employed as a decoy by thieves."¹⁴ Though neither definition can be made to exactly apply to the strange flesh partaken by Antony, a further

distinction can be drawn against Cleopatra, who, though deploying a noted amount of sexual prowess as a distraction for Antony is certainly not of the "lowest class." Another meaning of "stale" actually confronts the knee-jerk reaction experienced by many people who contemplate the consumption of bitter and briny urine. The OED also explains that stale, as a adjective, deals with "malt liquor, mean, [and] wine" that is refined and "has stood long enough to clear" and is "freed from dregs or lees."¹⁵ Of course, there is a reasonable possibility that the urine from horses is not just from male horses. However, this consumption takes place while on retreat from battle, certainly a masculine affair.

Parolin's argument that "in Caesar's account, Antony's past military greatness derived from his having denied himself the kind of sumptuous fare he now enjoys with Cleopatra" collapses under the larger context of the speech it seeks to illuminate.¹⁶ Since Caesar admits that Antony did not suffer by virtue of consuming strange flesh, it is Caesar who becomes an unreliable narrator of his own speech because his desire is brought so starkly into relief. Caesar is really questioning why Antony, who is perfectly capable of consuming that strange flesh, chooses to remain with Cleopatra.

The consumption of "strange flesh" occurs at a difficult time and in a forbidding location for Antony. As a result, the notion of temperance comes into play, which is especially relevant to Shakespeare's audience. Parolin notes that "incessantly eating and drinking, Antony and Cleopatra can be read in relation to Elizabethan and Jacobean ideas about food, drink, and consumption."¹⁷ In this regard, Caesar's affection for Antony is revealed as proper and self-sacrificing—a desire vitiated by temperance. Unlike Antony, Caesar is not recklessly pursuing his desire. The ideal response for Antony would be a certain amount of self-sacrifice, or at least an acknowledgement of the validity of Caesar's austerity. This self-sacrificing paradigm takes form in Caesar's sister and surrogate, Octavia:

You take from me a great part of myself.
 Use me well in't. Sister, prove such a wife
 As my thoughts make thee, and as my farthest bond
 Shall pass on thy aproof. Most noble Antony,
 Let not the piece of virtue which is set
 Betwixt us as the cement of our love
 To keep it builded, be the ram to batter
 The fortress of it; for better we
 Hath loved without this mean if on both parts
 This be not cherished. (3.2.24-33)

The figure of Octavia is actually quite problematic because she and Caesar are presented as two sides of the same person. Caesar's confession that Octavia represents a "great part" of himself increases her importance beyond that of mere bargaining chip. To this end, Shakespeare exploits her historic name "Octavia" as a near homonym of Octavius (Caesar). Further, Octavia is not only the polar opposite of Cleopatra; she is the opposite of the glutton. Unlike the exotic Cleopatra, Octavia is the figurative housewife, an appeal to domesticity. True, Octavia probably does not spend a significant amount of time in the kitchen; however, by comparison to Cleopatra, Octavia is the domestic "cement" that, in addition to serving as the binding force between Caesar and Antony, binds her to Shakespeare's audience. She is the virtually silent ingress point through which the audience has access to the characters. As such, the access point for the audience is directly tied to food.

Sex without Food

Having established that Shakespeare encoded sexual meanings into references to food, homosexual desire is validated by direct references found in many of Shakespeare's other works. Neither Shakespeare nor the characters he depicts would have understood homosexuality the same way it is constructed today; however, even strict temporal structuralists like David Halperin admit to "the existence of homosexuality as an ancient (if not a universal) category of human experience."¹⁸ Certainly, the rules regarding same-sex desire have proven to be changeable throughout history. By means of North's translation of *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*, Shakespeare would have recognized differences between Renaissance sexual prohibitions and those experienced by the ancients. Though this unfulfilled desire may be a result of the Jacobean proscriptions against such overt behavior (or even a veiled criticism of such precepts), its unconsummated nature actually allows for a more pure love to be presented. As such, *Antony and Cleopatra* does not stand as the lone example of same-sex desire as character motivation.

W.H. Auden's legendary introduction to Shakespeare's sonnets cautions against either discounting or embracing notions of homosexuality; however, only a few pages later, Auden concedes the presence of some form of desire: "The Vision of Eros...is concerned with a single person, who is revealed to the subject as being of infinite sacred importance... though the subject is aware of its erotic nature, his own desire is always completely subordinate to the sacredness of the beloved person."¹⁹ Sexual

consummation and sexual desire are related insofar as consummation is the hopeful outcome of desire; yet, the actual act of consummation is irrelevant as desire is the true motivation. Consequently, Shakespeare actually subverts religious tenets by providing homosexual motivation without allowing for the fulfillment of that desire.

One specific implication arises from Auden's analysis: the erotic pursuit (or at least the desire) of a member of the same sex is not only agential but also warrants status as character motivation and plot device. Pursuit of the object of desire appears in a more pure and more direct form in *Twelfth Night*. Explaining why he has placed himself in danger by accompanying Sebastian, Antonio confesses:

I could not stay behind you. My desire
More than filèd steel, did spur me forth,
And not all love to see you—though so much
As might have drawn one to a longer voyage...(3.3.4-7)²⁰

Not only is the reference to "filèd steel" deliberately phallic, Shakespeare offers no other explanation for Antonio's behavior in this parody of classical friendship. Even more remarkable, this direct but understated interaction takes place in a play renowned for its cross-cross-dressing exploits. Stephen Greenblatt observes that in *Twelve Night* "the transforming power of costumes unsettles fixed categories of gender and social class and allows characters to explore emotional territory that a culture officially hostile to same-sex desire and cross-class marriage would ordinarily have ruled out of bounds."²¹ Not accidentally, the friendship between Antonio and Sebastian is the model of stability that contrasts the machinations and intrigues that permeate most of the action of the play. Auden's concepts certainly explain Antonio's motivation. In addition, relationships like Antonio and Sebastian's are depicted as authentic. The problem with the characterizations of such relationships in *Antony and Cleopatra* is due to the play's countless schemes and subterfuges. In other words, rather than being depicted as separate—separated by location and isolated within a dedicated scene—any authenticity is inherently imbricated within the *Antony and Cleopatra's* complicated intrigues.

Though political intrigue is an undisputed element on *Antony and Cleopatra*, this same type of undefined desire motivates Caesar's attitude and behavior toward Antony. Rather than attempt to justify or elaborate upon these inexplicable and undefined male friendships, Shakespeare simply allows them to remain enigmatic. Critical interpretations of Shakespeare over the last four hundred years have proven to obfuscate as much as they illuminate. For example, critics like Timothy C. Davis argue

that Caesar's many pronouncements of love combined with frequent weepy emotion belie a subtle and sinister intent. In regard to Caesar's sister Octavia, Davis questions, "If Caesar loves Octavia, why does he sacrifice her to his political machinations...?"²² Davis argues that Caesar and Cleopatra are posited as binaries that demonstrate "the brilliant...contrast Shakespeare builds between Caesar as cold and calculating and Antony as passionate and impulsive."²³ However, this analysis complicates (or is complicated by) Christopher Wortham's argument that Jacobean contemporaries would have recognized the value of Caesar's temperance.²⁴ Clearly, an academic debate appears entrenched where, on the one hand, gluttony would have been rejected by Shakespeare's audience, and, on the other hand, the audience is expected to vilify Caesar for his refusal to partake in the drunken revelry of banqueting. Of course, the simultaneity of these characteristics could represent one of the tragic faults often experienced by Shakespearean tragic figures: indecision. However, the tragedy is reserved for Antony, and maybe even for Cleopatra, but certainly not for Caesar, who not only survives but ends up inheriting Rome.

Some critics attempt to mitigate the Jacobean prohibition against homosexuality by explaining that it is both undefined and somewhat standard in the Renaissance. As Orgel argues, "English Renaissance culture does not appear to have a morbid fear of male homoerotic behavior."²⁵ Supporting this notion, A.L. Rowse reports that such dualities are exemplified by James I:

James Hay's marriage in 1607 naturally left a gap in the king's affections, which was filled the same year by Robert Carr, knighted and promoted gentleman of the Bedchamber. He, like Hay, was of good Scotch family and, as a boy, had served as running page to the king's coach. From this, he went into France to learn manners and accomplishments, and so returned.²⁶

Not only does the provocative title "gentleman of the Bedchamber" give one pause, but Orgel argues that "as proliferating studies in the history of sexuality have shown, the binary division of sexual appetites into the normative heterosexual and the deviant homosexual is a very recent invention; neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality existed as categories for the Renaissance mind."²⁷ Of course, only the act of sodomy itself was defined and condemned. Two specific (and familiar) issues arise in relation to sodomy, the term most employed in relation to Renaissance homosexuality: first, though seldom prosecuted, homosexuality (or sodomy) was not necessarily considered acceptable to the Renaissance

masses, even though “close” male friendships were recognizable with their suspect associations; and second, the privileges and practices of the noble class did not correlate in any way with the lives of the common people.²⁸ Such notions are supported by Robert M. Adams who explains of King James that “his fondness for handsome young men was so marked that not even a wife and three authentic children could muffle the gossip.”²⁹ The lack of overt same-sex relationships combined with the unrequited nature of same-sex desire illustrates this second point by drawing on contemporary Renaissance references.

Writing about the end of the age of heroes, Shakespeare exploits the encoded homosexual meanings within classical texts to aid in the audience's comprehension of Caesar's motivation toward Antony. Caesar does not want his “hero” restored to him, he wants Antony transformed into a kindred form, one who demonstrates temperance and who will once again partake in the rarefied cuisine of strange flesh. Like James I, Caesar is a complicated figure who presents a complex sexuality; however, this sexuality is not only agential, but it but also informs larger goals and desires. Shakespeare's plays consistently questions the value of war and violence. Writing a historic play for a contemporary audience, Shakespeare, aware of the gossip concerning James I, would also have been aware of the monarch's political views. Rowse explains: “The ruling ideas of his [James I] life as a monarch – to uphold peace in Europe, in that age of religious conflicts and fanaticisms, to win fame as *Rex pacificus* – was a worthy one; in fact, we may regard it as far more sensible than that of aggressive masculine types.”³⁰ The notion of peace, a worthy aim, combined with same-sex desire is subsequently refracted back on the character of Caesar, whose motivations toward Antony now belie a worthy ambition for the state.

Cooking with Shakespeare

Throughout the play Cleopatra's hold over Antony is tied to her extraordinary luxury. In fact, her association (albeit indirect) with the culinary arts is considered by some to be akin to witchcraft:

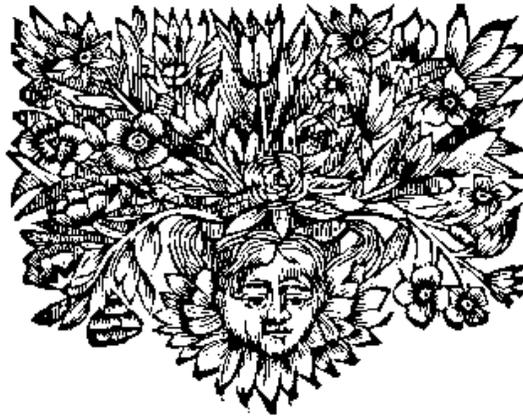
Salt Cleopatra, soften thy waned lip.
 Let witchcraft join the beauty, lust with both
 Tie up the libertine, in a field of feasts
 Keep his brain fuming; Epicurean cooks
 Sharpen with cloyless sauce his appetite,
 That sleep and feeding may prolong his honour

Even till a Lethe'd dullness—(2.1.21-27)

Through these references to “witchcraft” and “keeping his brain fuming,” Cleopatra’s sexuality is tied to food in a powerful and supernatural way. Since the rhetoric associated with her attributes is tied to feasting, Cleopatra’s charms are depicted as specifically unnatural. Cleopatra is again references in terms of fire and water: “The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne / Burned on the water” (2.2.197-198). Further, water and liquids become overtly associated with the gluttony of Cleopatra. On another barge, Caesar explains, “...I had rather fast from all, four days, / Than drink so much in one” (2.7.96-97). Water leads to Antony’s doom as he is ultimately defeated at sea. In a potent Shakespearean combination of fire and water, Antony gets his goose cooked. Arguably, had Antony remained on land, as opposed to simmering in Cleopatra’s tempestuous sauces, the outcome would have been different. The otherwise unnatural aspects of Caesar’s appetites become natural and normal, especially as Cleopatra is posited with unnatural food.

Same-sex desire, whether it be sodomy, homosexuality, or patriarchal privilege is an elusive topic in any era. While critics debate depictions (and receptions) of homosexuality in the Renaissance, the argument is settled by the very fact that Shakespeare encoded these same-sex desires within his texts. Cleverly, Shakespeare subverts the classical paradigm of close male friendships to grant agency to the person presenting a passively desirous sexuality. Shakespeare’s “strange flesh” metaphor encoded the theme of sexuality within food on multiple levels. In this regard, the “strange flesh” speech by Caesar, the representative of Jacobean sensitivities, reveals a great deal about same-sex desire within the discursive as well as the cultural context. Further, the overall theme of temperance and restraint, as opposed to gluttony and indulgence, would have resonated with Shakespeare’s audience.

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¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean H. Howard and Katherine Eisaman Maus, 379-434 (New York: Norton, 1997), 1.4.3-5. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically in text by act, scene, and line number.

² Christopher Wortham, "Temperance and the End of Time: Emblematic *Antony and Cleopatra*," *Comparative Drama* 29, no. 1 (1995):27.

³ Ken Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 217.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Robert Applebaum, *Aguchek's Beef, Belch's Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2006), 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-84.

⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition 1989 s.v. "Strange."

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Peter A. Parolin, "'Cloyless Sauce': The Pleasurable Politics of Food in *Antony and Cleopatra*," in *Antony and Cleopatra: New Critical Essays*, ed. Sara Munson Deats, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 215.

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition 1989 s.v. "Flesh."

¹² *The Geneva Bible (1587)*. *StudyLight.org*. (15 November 2009). <http://www.studylight.org/desk/?=1en&query=Genesis+1&=gen>.

¹³ Oxford English Dictionary. Second Edition 1989 s.v. "Stale."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Parolin, 215.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁸ David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 18.

¹⁹ W.H. Auden, Introduction to *Shakespeare: The Sonnets* (New York: Signet, 1964), li.

²⁰ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*. 1768-1821.

²¹ Stephen Greenblatt, Introduction to *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1762.

²² Timothy C. Davis, "Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*," *Explicator* 90, no. 48.1 (1990): 177.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Wortham, 27.

²⁵ Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 58.

²⁶ A.L. Rowse, *Homosexuals in History: A Study of Ambivalence in Society, Literature and the Arts* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1977), 57.

²⁷ Orgel, 59.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Robert A. Adams, *The Land and Literature of England: A Historical Account* (New York: Norton, 1983), 203.

³⁰ Rowse, 50.