

As You Like It Program Note

Written by Caroline Holmes for the 2022 production at Carnegie Mellon School of Drama

For our production of *As You Like It*, we have sought to disrupt patriarchal gender constructs as our characters explore all kinds of love that reach beyond the constructs of heteronormative romance. At first glance, this approach may seem detached from the intentions of the text as it has been traditionally produced. However, as we view this story through a queer lens, it can be helpful to think of William Shakespeare and the time in which he wrote *As You Like It*. Today, the conventional view of sexuality is that it entails a fixed attraction to a particular gender which serves as part of a foundation for a person's identity, but Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It* before the 20th century idea of fixed sexual orientation was invented. Not only did the terms “gay” or “straight” not exist, but the concept of labeling oneself according to sexual orientation was foreign to Elizabethan audiences. This is not to say that queer love and the expression of non-heteronormativity did not occur, but rather that such forms of expression were considered actions detached from one's identity.

Renaissance ideas of sexuality focused on its embodied expression. The Elizabethan monarchy and Protestant Church of England outlawed any sexual act that did not serve the purpose of procreation, including sodomy, buggery, bestiality, sex with clergy members, and sex in any position other than the church-ordained missionary between a married man and woman. These laws sought to treat a general “subversiveness” and “depravity” which was aimed at the general population rather than targeting a particular category or identity of people. In this way we can broaden our understanding of how queerness is portrayed by the characters in *As You Like It*, as their identity and actions are not entirely co-dependent and are also open to change.

character may gain clarity on their identity due to exploration of gender or sexual expression, but none of Shakespeare's characters were limited to a label or permanent definition of their identity. This freedom allows these characters to express all forms of love and desire with fluidity.

Further illuminating this perspective, Shakespeare himself was likely bisexual. Though he was married to and had three children with Anne Hathway, she remained in Stratford-upon-Avon while Shakespeare worked in London. There is evidence that during his time in London he had affairs with both men and women. One hundred and twenty-six of the one hundred and fifty-four sonnets Shakespeare wrote are addressed to a young man and were dedicated to a "Mr. W.H.," most commonly theorized to be either Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, or William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke. If Shakespeare had been discovered to be having affairs with men, he could have suffered legal persecution and, in the worst case, death. This knowledge allows theater makers and viewers today to see the ways Shakespeare expresses his personal insight through his creative work.

Just as the characters of *As You Like It* explore themselves as they traverse the Forest of Arden, we seek to expand our understanding of ourselves and each other and celebrate the vast and varied forms that love can take.