

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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The Themes in Shakespeare

## FRIENDSHIP

The culture of Greek antiquity was comfortable with same sex friendship—think of literary examples like Orestes and Pylades, Achilles and Patroklos, or Damon and Pythias—and had no trouble accepting an educational process that permitted even sexual intimacy between mature male teachers (pedagogues) and teen age males learners. From that time and for over more than two millennia the western world maintained at least a covert respect for the special advantages of same sex intimacy, in which—it was often argued—the absence of sexuality (if it was absent) guaranteed a higher and more nobly spiritual love than can be found in heterosexual relations. The male-male perspective reaches a high articulateness in a Renaissance thinker like Montaigne, who was by Shakespeare's time familiar and widely read, in Florio's translation, in England. Shakespeare himself, consequently, inherited a polymorphous tolerance of sexual styles, as is apparent upon scrutiny of plays like the following.

**AS YOU LIKE IT** (1599). **Rosalind** and **Celia** take off to the Forest of Arden together, after Celia's father has proclaimed Rosalind's banishment. Refusing to obey her father's effort to separate her from Rosalind, Celia dresses as a mature lady, accompanies her girl-friend, and throughout the romantic gambols which take them through Arden in search of their destined loves, unites in spirit with her beloved partner. In the end each woman joins with and marries her own true (male) love.

**HENRY IV, PT. 1** (1597). The play depicts a monarch, Henry IV, who will by the end be losing his grip on life. That weakness, and the ensuing decline and death of the monarch, carry the heavy plot weight here, but many readers will longer remember the tavern scenes that bring together **Hal**, the next king to be, **Falstaff**, the clownish but life loving buddy of the King's son, and an assortment of petty thieves and scalliwags in the Gadshill and Eastchip taverns where the real fun takes place. The camaraderie among this band of marginals, one of them the King's son, is precious, witty, sophisticated, and hilarious. It is a kind of bumptious male friendship we see feted in the essays of Montaigne, or the tales of Rabelais.

**THE TWO NOBLE KINSMEN** (1634) **Palamon and Arcite**, childhood friends from Thebes, find themselves in an Athenian jail, after King Theseus has conquered the Thebans. Events separate the two, upon escape and release from prison, but in fact they remain 'friends' to the end, even though in the end one of them dies in armed combat with the other. Their commonality of mind leads them to fall for the same woman, Emilia, and to die as befits their concerns for one another—one hero killed nobly in battle, the other getting the girl who wants the man who loves her most, Palamon.

**THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA** (1593) circles around rivalries for the same girl and male-male intimacy in which the truer bond of love seems to reside. **Valentine** takes off from Verona for Milan, to seek a more adventurous life, having failed to persuade his best friend, **Proteus**, to join him. Eventually, though, Proteus—the changeable one, in Greek—makes his own trip to Milan, and after much rivalry with Valentine discovers that their buddyship trumps that of the girls they are pursuing.

**HAMLET** (1600). Surrounded by threatening challenges, in an Elsinore stinging with the recent murder of King Hamlet, **Hamlet** turns constantly to the company of his University friend, **Horatio**, who has come from the liberal University of Wittenberg, to be present at the funeral of Hamlet's father. **Horatio** is present during many of Hamlet's soliloquies, approves of all Hamlet's actions, except the plan to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and is instrumental as an outside observer of events like the ghost appearance at the opening of the play—he provides an external corroboration which jacks up the dramatic tension. He is the only character Hamlet can count on.