Possible Impossibilities: Female-Female Desire in Early Modern English Drama

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In Act 2, scene 2 of John Lyly's *Galatea*, Cupid expresses his plan to complicate the lives of Diana and her nymphs: "I will make their pains my pastimes, and so / confound their loves in their own sex that they shall dote / in their desires, delight in their affection, and practice / other impossibilities" (2.2.7-10)[1]. Cupid's belief that it is an "impossibility" to love someone of the same sex is contested by the content of Lyly's play, in which two women dressed as men fall deeply in love with one another in the safety of a forest. Though the play appears to suggest that it is not possible for a pair of women to pursue a life together, it also implies that the "practice" of sex acts between women might not be "impossible" at all.

Galatea is not unique; other early modern texts also convey that sex between women was a reality, even if women making a domestic life with one another could not be. Shakespeare's similarly homoerotic pastoral comedy, *As You Like It* also insinuates that it is entirely possible for women to "practice" sexual acts with one another. In *Galatea*, the cross-dressed heroines retreat into the forest to "make much" of one another (3.3.64) and in Act 1 of *As You Like It,* Celia claims that she and Rosalind have "slept" and "play'd" together (1.3.70-1).[2] The above terms and situations all seem to be explicit examples of female-female desire, but they

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are simultaneously ambiguous, calling to mind Valerie Traub's argument that sex in the past is perpetually unknowable, and that the opacity of sex acts permits scholars to investigate "how we know as much as what we know."[3] She suggests that it is crucial that we confront what we "*don't* know as what we *can't* know about sex in the past…[because] this confrontation with the variety of ways that it is possible not to know implicates the investigator, if willing, in various considerations of pedagogy and ethics."[4]

I contend that we are incapable of "knowing" sex acts in the past and that the opacity of these acts makes them especially compelling and worthy of analysis. Unknowability, of course, is not the same thing as possibility, but the two ideas are connected; it is the unknowability of sex acts in the past that, in effect, renders them possible. Both of the texts this paper explores feature moments that initially seem to denote either sexual encounters and/or romantic attraction between two women but are ultimately opaque. As readers are not able to entirely determine with confidence what did or did not occur, these intimate but ambiguous moments multiply rather than suppress possibilities, possibilities which allow us to reimagine the past as being more diverse than we often envision it.

Galatea opens with the virgins, Galatea and Phillida, being sent to the woods dressed as men so they can avoid being sacrificed to a beast—an unfortunate fate that befalls the most beautiful virgin in the village every year. Once in the woods, the two women encounter one another and, disguised as men, fall in love. Both women, it appears, perform the role of man poorly, as each woman suspects, much to her apparent distress, that the other is female: "Phillida [aside]: What doubtful speeches these be! I fear me he is as I am, a maiden! / Galatea [aside]: What dread riseth in my mind! I fear the boy is as I am, a maiden!" (3.2.32-5) That Phillida and Galatea both experience "fear" at the thought that the other could be female suggests that they are attracted primarily to the masculine disguises rather than to the idea of becoming sexually involved with another woman. The nature of the women's desire for one another, though, is perplexing because, while each woman professes her distress over her suspicion that her beloved is also female, neither stops pursuing the object of her affection. In fact, their fixation on one another only increases after Act 3, when each has the revelation that the other could also be a woman. Therefore,

although at first it appears that what attracts each woman to the other is the masculine disguise rather than the woman veiled beneath, the text makes it clear that each maiden may be equally drawn to the feminine aspects of the other's appearance.

A few critics have argued in favor of the idea that the young women are enticed primarily by one another's feminine characteristics. Denise Walen, for example, comments that the two women are attracted "not to the stereotypically masculine attributes…that the disguise represents, but to feminine qualities in one another."[5] The basis for Walen's assertion is evident in Act 3, when Phillida comments on the femininity of Galatea's appearance. She notes that "it is a pity that Nature framed you [Galatea] not a woman / having a face so fair[…]it is a pity you are not a woman" (3.2.1-7). It is odd Phillida would make such a statement as, were Galatea truly the man she pretends to be, she and Phillida would much more easily have a future together. The meaning of Phillida's lines is unclear. Why does Phillida say that Galatea ought to have been a woman when, a mere few lines later, she indicates that she "fears" Galatea is one? And why, if both women fear loving another woman do they seem so drawn to the feminine aspects of one another's appearance? Do the women ultimately desire the masculine disguise or the feminine appearance? Or both?

The view that the women are without a doubt attracted to the feminine qualities rather than the masculine disguise is a difficult argument to make, as this cannot be proven, and Lyly appears to have intentionally left it ambiguous. Yet, it is easy to understand why any scholar might read the characters' relationship in this way when considering the words that Phillida and Galatea exchange in Act 4. The women speak as though each is ignorant of the other's biological sex, and yet Phillida asks to call Galatea "mistress":

> *Galatea:* […]I cannot love thee as a brother
> *Phillida:* Seeing we are both boys, and both lovers, that our affection may have some show, and seem as if it were love, let me call thee mistress (4.4.15-18).

At face value, this exchange is self-explanatory. Phillida claims that, because they are both boys, it would be less scandalous if one of them calls the other "mistress." That each of the girls has already speculated that the other is female and that Phillida has indicated that it is a "pity" Galatea is not a woman, however, means that

this scene is more ambiguous. Phillida does indeed seem attracted to the feminine in Galatea and, by asking if she can call her mistress, she reinforces this idea. When considering the possibility of homoerotic feelings between these two women, it is useful to examine this word *mistress* itself. Theodora Jankowski analyzes mistress-servant relationships in Shakespeare's corpus, claiming that "it would be especially possible given the fact that a woman servant often lived in the same house as her mistress for many years" for the older of the two women "to initiate the younger woman into woman-woman sex."[6] She goes on to state that, because of this, the term *mistress* likely suggested these possibilities throughout the early modern period. So those who read or viewed *Galatea* in Renaissance England would have considered the sexual implications of this term *mistress* as well, a striking detail because it explicitly signals homoeroticism between these two women in the forest.

The ambiguity in this play hardly ends with the question of what—or who—exactly draws these young women to one another, though. In the passage in which Phillida asks permission to call Galatea mistress, Phillida refers to Galatea as her "lover." This word *lover*, in itself, is difficult to define in this context. Perhaps Phillida is referring to the idea that she and Galatea are performing a kind of romantic feeling for one another. It is, though, also worth entertaining the possibility that they have actually been physically intimate prior to Phillida's declaration that she is Galatea's lover in Act 4. Their affection for one another escalates and appears to reach a kind of culmination in Act 3. In what is arguably the opaquest moment in all of *Galatea,* Phillida suggests the following course of action to her companion: "Let us into the grove, and make much of / one another, that cannot tell what to think of one / another" (3.2.64-7). These lines immediately raise a question: What does Phillida mean by "make much" of one another? Though the phrase indicates some sexual encounter between the women, there is no way to confirm what "making much" means; indeed, for the rest of the play, this strange phrase is never used again. There is no description of what occurred between the two women in the grove and, when the women appear on stage once more a full act later, they do not behave as though they have any knowledge of the other's body. In fact, they continue acting as though each believes that the other is a boy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the critics most interested in this play have commented on this section of Lyly's comedy.[7] Despite—or perhaps due to—its undeniable opacity, it appears as though only Traub and Jankowski have addressed this moment from the play in any particular detail. Jankowski considers what it means to "make much" at the greatest length:

> What kind of transgressions of modesty or "making much" occurs in the grove? Is it verbal or physical? Will it compromise their virginity or eliminate the need for disguise?... that they do not know they are the same biological sex suggests that the characters have not seen or touched each others' genitals or breasts [and]…their lack of visual or tactile evidence of biological gender suggests that they have created a new economy of pleasure, one that disrupts the masculinist scopic economy because it does not rely on a focus on genitals or vaginal penetration. Their pleasure reinforces the fact that a woman's anatomy does not require—or desire—the same type of sexual activity as a man's.[8]

Jankowski highlights what is most compelling about the grove mystery. She begins by asking these questions—what kind of transgressions of modesty are occurring, and will it compromise their virginity—before she concludes that a number of intimate verbal or physical activities—may have occurred between the two women and that, as Traub would say, there is no way of "knowing" those activities. What is evident is that Galatea and Phillida have had such an engaging time with one another that they are absent from the play from Act 3, scene 2 until Act 4, scene 4. In that way, this scene queers the traditional idea that sexual intimacy requires a man, a woman, and vaginal intercourse. Moreover, Phillida's remark that she and her "lover" "cannot tell what to think of one another" is compelling, as it confirms that Phillida is unsure whether Galatea is male or female, but desires to "make much" of her regardless of her beloved's gender. Whatever Galatea "is" serves as no obstacle to the coupling between this besotted pair.

When considering this "making much" and its opacity, it can be helpful to contemplate the methods of pleasure in which a pair of virgins might engage. Does their lack of experience limit their knowledge about sex? Might they have engaged in a kind of sex yet failed to perceive it as such? This latter possibility might explain why each girl remains uncertain of the other's biological sex in Act

4, after the incident in the glade has occurred. Though it might initially seem as though the incident is impossible to analyze due to its inscrutability, it is its unknowability that undermines what we think we know and makes us consider other alternatives. The unknowability, then, is productive rather than restraining.

In Act 5, when their true identities are finally unveiled, Galatea cries, "Unfortunate Galatea, if this be Phillida!" Phillida, in response, exclaims, "Accursed Phillida, if this be Galatea!" (5.3.120-21). These responses seem to indicate the women's distress and yet, ultimately, both women claim that, despite their revelation, they will never be able to be happy but with one another. That both Galatea and Phillida suspect the other of being female throughout the play, are attracted to one another's feminine attributes, and are incapable of imagining life without each other makes *Galatea* a story of reciprocal love between women. One might argue that this is not the case on the basis that Venus assures the two women, at the end of the play, that she will change one of them into a man so that they can eventually marry. Notably, however, the play ends before the transformation and subsequent marriage can occur. Lyly's decision to conclude the play before these events is crucial, as innumerous early modern comedies end in marriage. In this particular case, neither the marriage nor the transformation occurs because the women's desire for one another is not dependent on one or the other being made a man. In fact, as Walen, Jankowski, and others have previously suggested, it may perhaps primarily be the women's feminine appearance that leaves them feeling attracted to one another. So, the conclusion of the play leaves many questions open: Will one of the girls be transformed? Would the other girl, who fell for her beloved as a woman, still desire her newly transformed lover? Will the marriage even occur? Though there are no answers to these questions, it is apparent that Lyly is multiplying possibilities by opting out of ending this play with a marriage. By evading the wedding, the text implies that the act of transformation is not as crucial as it might seem and that it is perhaps more rewarding to imagine all of the things that may—or may not—have happened after the play's conclusion.

Though Cupid declares that the women in the forest will "practice impossibilities" with one another, the play's conclusion potentially asserts that female-female sex and desire are entirely

possible. Helping Lyly to advocate for the naturalness—and possibility—of woman-woman homoeroticism are the interludes with the comic figures, Robin, Dick, and Rafe. In Act 2, scene 3, Peter, the alchemist's apprentice, complains about the confusion of his daily job:

> It is a very secret science, for none
> almost can understand the language of it:
> sublimination, almigation, calcination, rubification,
> incorporation, cementation, albification, and fermentation,
> with as many terms unpossible to be
> uttered as the art to be compassed (2.3.11-15).

Peter insists that "no one can understand" the alchemical sciences, that they are indecipherable. Though it might initially seem difficult to imagine why Lyly constantly moves between scenes in the idyllic woods and scenes featuring these comical would-be alchemists, the clearest explanation is that Lyly is trying to show, through the exchanges between Rafe, Peter, and Dick, that there *are* impossible things in the world. Alchemy is impossible—or "unpossible" as he says—but love between women, as the play shows us, is a definite possibility. These interludes with the alchemists, like the forest setting of this play, serve to remind the reader of the naturalness—and possibility—of female-female desire and sex.

Though *As You Like It* is perhaps less explicitly homoerotic than *Galatea*, Shakespeare's work suggests, as *Galatea* appears to, that the natural world permits and encourages homoeroticism between women.[9] Rosalind, the play's cross-dressed heroine, and Celia, her cousin, are already quite close before they enter the forest, however the dialogue between Rosalind and Celia is as erotically intriguing and complex as any of the heterosexual moments in the comedies. As early as Act I, Celia states that she and Rosalind have "slept" and "played" together and that they are "like Juno's swans, coupled and inseparable" (1.3.71-4). We cannot, of course, be certain what Celia means when she says that she and Rosalind have "slept" or "play'd" together," though we can consider possibilities. The term *slept* could refer to Celia and Rosalind literally falling asleep together or, by contrast, to their being sexually intimate with one another. Likewise, *play'd* could refer to innocent games of the sort the girls played in childhood; but it could also, by the same token, allude to a sexual relationship between the two. The OED

defines *played* as "to engage in amorous play." It cites examples from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which the term is used this way, suggesting that early moderns would have considered the word *played* to have a notable sexual connotation.[10] Therefore, the ambiguity of these terms encourages readers and viewers to see sexual intimacy between this pair of women as a real possibility. When Celia describes her relationship with Rosalind, she compares their connection to that of Juno's swans, birds that mate for life. This image too helps to create the idea that their relationship is uniquely close.

Celia and Rosalind's intimacy is far more complex than the mere suggestion of physical closeness, though. In Act 1, when Charles and Oliver are discussing the relationship between the two cousins, Charles insists that Celia "would have followed her [Rosalind] into exile or have died to stay behind her" and that "never two ladies loved as they do" (1.1.104-7). Le Beau, in Act 1, scene 2, states, "their loves are dearer than the natural bond of sisters" (1.2.242-3). Furthermore, when Celia's father banishes Rosalind because he fears that she will attempt to steal Celia's inheritance, Celia insists that Rosalind has done no harm and assures her cousin that, if she is banished, she will follow her into banishment, abandoning both her inheritance and her titles in the process:

> [...]thou and I am one.
> Shall we be sundered? Shall we part, sweet girl?
> No, let my father seek another heir!
> […]Say what thou canst, I'll go along with thee (1.3.93-102).

The above quotation and the quotations that precede it are among the countless examples in the play that reveal the depth of Celia's feelings for Rosalind. Though other characters insist that Rosalind and Celia share a bond "closer than natural sisters," intriguingly, the play itself only displays Celia's affection for Rosalind. Rosalind, after learning that she is to be banished, does not seem greatly affected by Celia's description of the extent of her devotion. In fact, Rosalind's sexuality proves one of the opaquest aspects of a play that is already difficult to decipher. In response to Celia's assertion that she will "go along" with Rosalind, no matter the consequences, the latter merely asks, "Why whither shall we go?" Celia replies,

"To seek my uncle in the Forest of Arden" (1.3.103-4). Here, as in *Galatea,* the forest is a place of refuge. Exiled in the wilderness, Rosalind and Celia may be able to explore all manner of erotic possibilities, divorced as they are from the influence of society. The situation Shakespeare's comedy presents ends up rather more complicated than Celia appears to envision it, though.

When Celia proposes that she and Rosalind go into the woods, she takes the more dominant role in the planning. Carol Thomas Neely notes that, at the beginning of the comedy, "Celia's greater resources and greater affection make her Rosalind's protector" and that, after they have gone into the forest, the power dynamics are reversed such that Rosalind, whether because she is "disguised as a man" or because of "the change of venue and status," takes the lead in the relationship, abandoning her nervous disposition in favor of the confident swagger of a young man.[11] With the arrival of this confidence comes the abandonment of Rosalind's closeness with Celia. Though Rosalind and Celia's love is "more extended than any cited lovesickness discourse in Shakespeare" and "is vowed permanent," it loses steam once the two girls enter the forest.[12] Despite Rosalind and Celia's living arrangements, Rosalind is thoroughly occupied by the other opportunities that await her in Arden—particularly with Orlando, the young man with whom she ultimately falls in love. Celia, who warns Rosalind to "love no man in good earnest" (1.2.120) often responds to Rosalind's affection for Orlando with sarcasm rather than enthusiasm, an indication that she is generally skeptical of heterosexual relationships. Rosalind, by contrast, appears suddenly skeptical of homosexual relationships following her entry into Arden, a perplexing detail given that the forest, remote and inherently opaque as it is, is one place in which Rosalind could fully embrace her homoerotic relationship with Celia.

We see Rosalind's skepticism toward homosexual relationships clearly through her interactions with other characters in Arden. In Act 3, Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, chastises Phoebe, a shepherdess, for cruelly rejecting Silvius's affections for her. Phoebe is immediately attracted to Rosalind, claiming "sweet youth, I pray you chide a year together! / I had rather hear you chide than hear this man woo" (3.5.65-6). Rosalind, concluding that Phoebe will continue to fall in love with her if she speaks to her roughly, says,

in an aside to Silvius, "[…]she'll fall in love with my anger. If it be so / as fast as she answers thee with frowning looks, I'll / sauce her with bitter words" (3.5.68-70). Rosalind is suggesting to Silvius that she will seduce the woman he loves, presumably with the goal of ultimately embarrassing her. One could argue here that Phoebe's affection for Rosalind is entirely based on her disguise as Ganymede and, therefore, that the affection she develops is not a proper example of female-female desire. However, while Phoebe is indeed attracted to the "youth" she sees before her, we have to consider that Rosalind, like *Galatea's* cross-dressed heroines, might not be performing the role of "boy" as well as she could be. After all, Orlando is able to easily imagine that Ganymede is his beloved Rosalind during the faux marriage scene in Act 4, scene 1. How could he do this if there was not something in Ganymede that reminded him of his feminine beloved? Thus, we can accept the possibility that Rosalind is still more than vaguely feminine despite her disguise. What is perhaps most remarkable about Phoebe's affection for Rosalind-as-Ganymede is Rosalind's reaction to it. Rosalind's plan to trick Phoebe into falling in love with a woman because she has been unkind to Silvius seems, on some level at least, to make a mockery of female-female desire. Phoebe's growing feelings for the ambiguously gendered Ganymede are proof that the forest still sanctions female-female desire, but Rosalind herself dismisses the opportunity to embrace any manner of homoerotic feeling and, indeed, renders such desire the punchline of a joke.

The unknowability and erraticism of Rosalind's sexuality and the manner in which she presents it is not only of interest to me, but to other scholars in the field of early modern gender studies. Traub claims that, when it comes to homoeroticism between women in Shakespeare's comedies, "it is the female rather than the male characters…who, by their silent denial of another woman's emotional claims, position homoerotic desire in the past."[13] She argues that *As You Like It* stages "a violent repudiation of female allegiance," and she cites the way "Rosalind nastily mocks Phebe's expression of erotic interest" as an example of this in the play."[14] Female-female desire, Traub concludes, "is figurable in terms not only of the always already lost, but the always about to be betrayed. And the incipient heteroeroticism of the woman who

is recipient rather than enunciator of homoerotic desire comes to stand as the natural telos of the play."[15] Traub's analysis provides another understanding of this comedy. The forest fosters all kinds of possibilities. Celia sees it as a refuge where she and Rosalind can live peacefully together; Phoebe understands it as a place in which she can fall in love with the uncharacteristically pretty boy, Ganymede; and Orlando believes he can practice marriage with an individual he takes to be another man within this woodland setting. The natural world in this play offers the same opportunities as the forest does in *Galatea*; and yet Rosalind, as the recipient of homoerotic desire rather than the enunciator, chooses to limit these possibilities, at least to some degree. There does not seem to be anything that would prevent her from "practicing" love with Celia or even with Phoebe in the woods, but she ultimately rejects these options. Rosalind's sexuality itself is one of the most unclear aspects of what is already in many ways a perplexing play. Celia claims that she and Rosalind have an emotionally and possibly physically intimate relationship and, though Celia is more invested, Charles's remarks to Oliver in Act 1 suggest that their deep affection for one another is mutual. So, why does this woman, who was involved in a deep, homosocial and possibly homoerotic relationship, use the forest as a space in which to reject homoerotic possibility, to mock Phoebe's affection, and more or less to ignore Celia? There is no obvious answer to this question. The forest remains a place of opportunities, but they are opportunities that Rosalind seems to have turned away from in favor of pursuing heteroerotic banter with Orlando.

Though Rosalind's rejection of Phoebe and Celia appears harsh and even potentially judgmental, there may be yet another explanation for her sudden shift from her affections for Celia to her love for Orlando. To explore this alternative explanation, it is useful to turn to Celia's mysterious decision to marry Oliver at the conclusion of the play. Orlando's comments on the unnatural speed of Celia and Oliver's courtship—"Is't possible that on so little acquaintance you should like her? / That but seeing, you should love her? / And loving, woo? And wooing, she should grant?" (5.2.1-3)—renders it apparent that Celia's relationship with Oliver is one of those seemingly impossible, or at least unlikely, love relationships the play portrays. But Celia's quick marriage,

strangely, actually functions as proof that *As You Like It* is not a play in which couples abandon their homoerotic bonds in favor of heterosexual marriage. Celia, notably, shows little regard for Oliver at the end of the play, though she is to marry him, seeming instead to be more concerned with the fainting of Rosalind. In Act 4, Celia is clearly worried for Rosalind's health; she says, "Come, you look paler and paler / Pray you draw homewards. Good sir, go with us" (4.3.177-8). Only the conclusion of this line ("Good sir") is aimed at Oliver, illustrating that her primary concern, at this moment at least, is still with Rosalind. Celia's behavior is befuddling. Julie Crawford offers one convincing explanation as to why Celia might so quickly enter into a heterosexual marriage with a man she does not know well:

> Traub's argument that the homoerotic desires of these female characters existed comfortably within the patriarchal order only until the onset of marriage gives too much credit to the restrictiveness, and heterosexuality, of marriage…. The speed of Celia's marriage…is less an attempt to heterosexualize her, than a condition of her continued relationship with Rosalind.[16]

By quickly marrying Oliver, Celia enables herself to remain close to Rosalind, who is marrying Oliver's brother, Orlando. Homoeroticism is then compatible with and even facilitated by the women's marriages.

Thus, Rosalind might not view her marriage as the end of her relationship with Celia. As her feelings toward Celia are consistently opaque throughout the play, it is difficult to imagine how she feels about Oliver's wedding to her cousin. It seems plausible that Rosalind sees her marriage to Orlando and Celia's to Oliver as an opportunity to keep both Orlando and Celia close to her as she enters the next stage of her life, seeking the continuation of her deep homoerotic bond rather than its dissolution. Though there are obvious limits to the intimacy that can exist between Rosalind and Celia, by marrying into the same household, the two women ensure that they can remain as connected to one another as possible. I would argue that both Crawford and Traub are too definite in their readings. Crawford seems convinced that Celia and Rosalind will continue their homoerotic connection within their marriages while Traub seemingly argues that heterosexual

marriage is the death knell for all homoeroticism. By contrast, I argue that Celia's marriage to Oliver merely creates the possibility for the continuation of these homoerotic bonds, though we cannot say for certain that any such thing occurs. The fact that the possibility is even there, though, queers our view of "natural" heterosexual marriage. If we accept that *marriage* is not synonymous with *heterosexuality*, we can prevent ourselves from running to binaries and instead acknowledge that there are always numerous possibilities where sexuality is concerned. Rosalind appears to ignore the homoerotic opportunities that the green space of Arden presents, but it is feasible that she and Celia may maintain their intimacy in the future in some capacity.

I believe it is crucial that we think about *As You Like It, Galatea,* and other pastoral comedies as works in which the characters regularly inhabit more than one position of sexual desire. These characters are not "heterosexual" or "homosexual," but rather figures that exist in a middle space of sexuality and sexual expression. Valerie Rohy builds from an argument Traub makes in her book, *Desire and Anxiety*, to protest the notion that the characters inhabit only one position of desire throughout *As You Like It*:

> Rather than being homosexual, 'characters temporarily inhabit a homosexual position of desire'-a formula that uncouples Shakespeare from today's identity politics. We might ask, however, whether heterosexuality itself isn't a temporary 'position of desire.' If sexuality is subject to the whims of fortune, would that allow an endless turning?[17]

Rohy suggests that sexuality in *As You Like It* seems to be always changing and, therefore, is perpetually opaque. I would be willing to make the same argument about *Galatea* and its characters. It can be dangerous to assume that a character inhabits one position of desire or the other instead of acknowledging that the sexualities we see in these plays are fluid, changing, and, therefore, always unknowable. Determining that the female characters in this pair of comedies must necessarily inhabit either a heterosexual space or a homosexual one closes off all possibility for further analysis in two early modern works that are characterized by possibility. I believe it is imperative that we, as readers, allow the opaque moments of female-female eroticism to remain opaque rather than trying to

define them, thereby permitting ourselves to thoroughly consider all the opportunities they are able to impart.

Notes

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