Sex in Shiz City:
Is Homosexuality Oz’s “Happy Ending?”

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There are many ways in which Oz can be defined. Oz is a socio-political landscape; where actions are presented because of a protagonist’s faith [or lack thereof]. Fueled by desires to please a “higher power;” The life of most in Oz can mirror that of an 1800’s Settlement with one exception; gay is the way. While McGuire plays with the readers view of how cultures are ran, power is placed [amongst royalty and gender alike] and the way(s) in which relationships are viewed; he plays reverse psychology with what we would normally perceive as the “social Norm.” One of the ways in which McGuire defies the ordinary is the way he allows his characters to grow as they accept, explore, or express their sexuality. Imagine a world where homosexuality became commonplace and most [if not all] heterosexual relationships were doomed to failure. Welcome to the world of Oz.

To start such an exploration, we must first subject our eyes to the geographical regions that we will partake in dissecting. The Gillikin, home to the proud, noble, and fashion-minded; is the countries center for political news. Not only does it incase [within itself] Shiz City, the home of the main university in the book Wicked, but also the Emerald City; the Countries version of America’s Washington D.C.. One unique attribute given to Gillikin is that there isn’t a mention of who the “Ruler” of Gillikin is. While it mentions various nobles, they never actually point out the monarch/patriarch of the realm. While there is a prevalent presence of Ozma sympathizers, Gillikin has mostly supported the wizard because he keeps them happy. The Wizard uses an old trick called “panem et circenses,” literally translating into “bread and circuses,” which is a
way of keeping a populace entertained when the political scandals are no longer circulating the air. Mostly a population of Lurline acknowledgers, for Gillikin’s have a right mind for magic as G(a)linda will point out.

Munchkinland is the “bread belt” of Oz; as the only listed manufacturer of corn. A population of laborers (farmers, hunters, lumberjacks, etc.), Munchkinland is a territory built on three principles: small towns, hard work, and superstition. While Unionism (the belief in the Unnamed God) is the [advertized] popular belief among the inhabitants, a vague superstitious religion between the farmers and a scarecrow type deity exists to bolster crop productions (McGuire p342). A country with a stated leader, Munchkinland is lead by the “Eminent Thropp,” a title that runs down the Thropp line and is passed on to the females of the family unless there is no potential matriarch to be found (McGuire p299). A land that is conceived as “bumpkinville” by the Gillikinese, there is a state of poverty across the region (though if everyone is poor, is anyone really poor?).

Quadling Country, located in the furthest southern region of Oz, is the poorest section of Oz. home to a native population of “mutated” humans, the Quadlings were a peevish and simple people who looked unto their savior [Frex] as a God. Mesmerized by Elphaba’s singing and Frex’s Unionist Orthodoxy; they flocked to him like sheep to a Shepard. Supposedly, Quadling Country was hiding a treasure trove of Rubies ready for the taking, but there wasn’t enough [to be found] to sate the greedy pockets of royalist/loyalists to the Emerald City. Quadlings were butchered for “hiding” rubies from the government, giving them a hirer resolve to Frex’s beliefs [so they knew where they were headed after their eminent demise]. A land with no official ruler and no democratic
methods; the Yellow Brick Road was not even completed in the Quadling Country because of its swampy and murky terrain.

The Vinkus is a desert-and-rocks sort of place that is only called home if you’re from there. With the Chief of the Winkies residing in Kiamo Ko (a converted water plant), The Vinkus is similar to Africa in several regards. While their people are nomadic and “beastly” compared to their eastern counterparts; they hold tradition and life to a higher value. Worshiping deities along with endangered species [such as elephants] are common practice while their dark skin can also tie another link from Vinkus to Africa.

With an overview of the societies that inhabit Oz, let’s examine the meat of the matter. Oz is a country on a collision course with disaster. After the words of Madam Morrible herself; “And it has been clear that the wizards bag of tricks would not do forever.” (McGuire p158). Oz is in political upheaval [even though the main populace doesn’t notice; too busy with their bread and pleasure faith] with the rights of Animals coming into question alongside how much power the wizard actually holds over Oz. is he the “president,” or just a figure head? But even with these looming threats of post-apocalyptic events in tow, there is an even more interesting setting to consider. Societal norms. Emerged in a world where science can seem more like magic more than itself, Animals talk and [can] hold positions of influence from laborer to professor, and more talk is focused on the idea of having a soul than which of the four prevalent faiths will save it. We still see a blatant disregard for who you prefer to take to bed. Elphaba makes many comments about her own sexuality and gender identity that speculated she herself chose her gender, until her ultimate admittance to her father in Cowling
Grounds that she would’ve chosen to be a boy [if she could have] to appease her mother.

Throughout the book we find that Elphaba expresses her sexuality as her choice, as the previous quotes mention, going as far as to say that she is “a girl by accident if not by choice” (McGuire p101). With this brash statement proclaimed to the world, it’s interesting to take a step back and look at the character McGuire created to play the Wicked Witch of the West. Instead of an inherently evil villain who wants nothing more than to kill Dorothy (for that’s how the movie [more or less] portrayed it) we have a character that is raised in a poverished home by a minister for a father and a druggie mother. With a father who believes she is his own personal hell and her mother afraid to touch her, she is cared for by her grandma who lies to her to find the resolve to take care of her as her mother should. Devoid of a mother’s nurturing and a father’s discipline (because he ran to the mountains to rediscover himself during her adolescence), Elphaba had a unique chance to create herself in her own image. Free from the religious oppression her father sits on everyone near and her mother’s [low] moral values. Is this why McGuire can claim Elphaba as the original creature she is? A female in all regards but sporting a scar below her waist (P192) where a hint of a penectomy might be. This in itself is another fascinating idea to conjure while lined up beside her quotations of her gender because of what she told her father that to please her mother, she would have chosen to be born a boy (and thus rid herself of the threat of becoming eminent Thropp).

With Elphaba and her Elphabist [if not feminist] viewpoints, it’s interesting to consider her future relationships while looking at the ones she held in the past. While
her and her roommate Galina was strained into an uneasy alliance, she became an independent fighter to the rights of a populace [the Animals] who were losing their freedom. After losing their right to hold positions of influence, use public transportation, and even have their presence known in the Emerald City; Elphaba was a unique creature who surrounded herself with friends who would have to fight for their own rights if they were inhabitants in our own society. Tibbet and Crope, both perceived as in a homosexual “campy” relationship while they attended college, would have to hide their feelings if they lived in the same day and age that we currently preside in.

Yes, homosexuals and homosexuality in general have made great strides in the rights department; but I think McGuire was making a great point in his novel when he mentions that Crope married a woman later on in the novel. Theorizing the way McGuire combined the our own culture with that of the land of Oz; McGuire used Crope as a subliminal way of addressing how homosexuality is viewed in our own. While I’ve stressed many times it would be easier to be gay in Oz than here, after all, the play The Boys in the Band even says: “He’s about as straight as the Yellow Brick Road,” Crope is the character who hides his true feelings by marrying someone he doesn’t love. Addressing Tibbet, Crope’s adolescent partner in watching shirtless men row along the river that runs through Shiz (McGuire p104); he actually dies from his sexuality. While the book actually tells us that it is from the sodomization of a tiger, an instance from their trip to their local pleasure faith “chapel,” it is another analogy for the idea of how [at the time this book was written] homosexual sodomy was associated with the transportation of AIDS. A complete fallacy, as we now know that the AIDS virus derived from tribes in Africa who ate a species on monkey native to their land afflicted with the
malady. But is this what McGuire is actually trying to convey to us? On one of many forums dedicated to the intricate webbing spun to create the “Sexified” Land of Oz, and on this topic, one contributor commented, “I don’t think it’s a commentary on AIDS, but maybe on society as a whole” (“Gregory mcguire,” 2007). An interesting reading, because then it’s brought into question WHAT he was trying to convey. Was McGuire talking about the dangers of sodomy? The dangers of sex? The latter seems plausible; because it could then be said that the whole storyline of Tibbet and his eminent consumption of a disease consummated by a fateful night could [very well] be a stab about the false security we have about sex in general. While we portray the gay population as the AIDS/HIV ridden populace of our nation, the fact that either virus can only be transmitted through intercourse is becoming as daunting as ever. More adolescence are handed down this plague in-vetro and through breastfeeding more than ever, and even more are attaining AIDS though needle sharing, improper medical asepsis, and even through the blood of the infected.

Now, think about the relationship between Fiyero and Elphaba. While they gossiped back and forth while they were in school together, neither really addressed how similar to each other they really were. Fiyero, a Winkie from The Vinkus and Elphaba, a creature of two different worlds; were drawn to each other half-way through the book. Whether it be fate, yackel, the time dragon or simply the all-moving hand of plot development; Fiyero began courting Elphaba. While she was vindictive and cold, Fiyero is drawn to her for the beauty she herself possesses but will not admit to holding. Through nights of entanglement and Elphaba’s ill-opinionated ideas of Fiyero's attempts at pillow talk, two people who do not belong in the land they “live” in become one. It’s an
interesting idea to watch their relationship grow as they continue to flirt and entangle because of the way each of them grow closer to each other. Fiyero starts buying his wife [who is residing in Kiamo Ko with his three children] items that she would never wear, but his current lover would. Elphaba continues to denounce their relationship and Fiyero in general for fear of becoming too close to someone. And the end result? Elphaba fails her mission to kill Madam Morrible and Fiyero is murdered by the Gale Force when he goes to Elphaba’s home to find her after the attempt was thwarted. Through these instances, it is clear that they have become to grow close to each other and perhaps to the point of love; but fate is a cruel master; as Elphaba had finally broken down and admitted her love for Fiyero by asking him to stay away while she went out on her mission so he would be out of harm’s way. Carrying Fiyero’s child and traumatized by his death and her failure, she finds herself lead to a local monastery where she becomes a caregiver for years to come.

In this main and pivotal instance of Heterosexual love, McGuire continues to tell us what he thinks of marriage among straight couples. While the homosexual population have fought for the right to marry for many years, heterosexuals have had the ability to marry, divorce, and cheat on their spouses for millennia. Not exactly a fair choice, but what in life or the Land of Oz is fair? When you compare this Romeo and Juliet to the many other straight relationships you’ll find that most of them either end in tragedy or have their ill-fated flaws. In fact; most of the powerful and influential characters (the wizard, Madam Morrible, Doctor Dillamond, etc.) are all single. Boq, who swooned over G(a)linda and eventually married Milla, reports that his wife hates her life and tries to commit suicide frequently throughout the life of the novel (p189). G(a)linda even admits
that her husband Sir Chuffrey is “Dry as two baked walnuts.” (McGuire p211). Does this promote her innocent way of still offending people, or is it yet another way for McGuire to annotate his ideals of a heterosexual marriage? The longest-lasting marriage seen throughout the book has to be that of Elphaba’s parents (Melena and Frex), and it is [yet again] one of utter failure and futility.

As was previously mentioned, Frex was married to his orthodox and found more comfort in his parish [or search for] than he did at home with his family. Melena found comfort in the arms of traveling men who would occasionally stop by and Pinlobble leaves, a sort of tranquilizing drug that leaves the consumer in a “doped” state. A couple consummated in their young age and ideas of running away from Melena’s home. While Frex met Melena while he was a traveling preacher, his home and family are never mentioned beside the fact that he is the “seventh son of the seventh son” and all of his brothers are preachers. Does this obsession with religion have anything to do with his failed marriage? Yes, and whether McGuire meant it to our not, it’s pretty evident. Frex spent more time with his philosophy and cramming it down the throats of those near than he did anything else. It even attests to the aforementioned theory by Frex’s response to Melena on the day she is due to give birth; leaving her in the hands of local farmwives and running off to save some town from the time dragon. Even the presence of Turtle Heart didn’t change much between them, but it gave them someone to love. Frex himself says that Melena and himself could love Turtle Heart as equals; just one more way for McGuire to point in another sexual faction: polyamory.

While Oz is a land of inconceivable splendor, magic, and “freedom;” it still has an interesting amount of propaganda that fights for the rights of everyone. Whether it be
Animals, homosexuality, or religion. This critique is just one of many that takes the world of Oz and looks at it as McGuire recreated it to be; a land where sexuality is everywhere.
Works Cited