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THE EROTICS OF GENDER AMBIGUITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

I hereby formally declare that I myself have written this work and no portion of the work contained in this report has been submitted in support of any application for any other degree or qualification.

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Abstract

Many scholars agree that the Renaissance theatre, especially the theatrical transvestism and gender role reversal threatened the conventional categorization of the genders. If indeed most scholars agree on this statement, a question that one might ask is, how did Shakespeare use and portray desire to challenge aspects of social principles, such as the patriarchal social proscriptions? The first chapter, hence, will have a look at the culture-specific attitudes towards women, sexuality, and how Shakespeare used eroticism to challenge the patriarchal norms of sexual behaviour.

Cross-dressing is central to the erotic dynamic of Renaissance drama. One "erotic delight" certainly evoked by the cross-dressing prevalent in Shakespeare's plays is the strong undertone of homoeroticism. Therefore, the second chapter will analyse how the deft and subtle explorations of homoeroticism in Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries' plays questioned and disrupted the heterosexual mores of the time.

Going beyond the homoerotic implications, the third chapter will look more closely into that particular theatrical convention of the time: cross-dressing. It will strive to gauge the fuller implications of transvestism in Shakespeare as a theatrical sign within a subtler project of disrupting the logic of the patriarchal discourse of sexuality.

The fourth chapter will take that analysis further and aims to re-examine how these theatrical manipulations carried out within Shakespeare's plays were spurred and defined by an irrational and elementary component which underlay much of Renaissance culture: the fear of female sexuality.

Through the deft use of theatrical devices, the Shakespearean stage represented eroticism, gender and their interplay in ways quite subversive to the official representations in the hegemonic discourses. It is this disruptive power of art embodied in Shakespeare's plays that renders them relevant even today. The fifth and final chapter will examine how, through the subtle plays of erotic ambiguity, the Shakespearean theatre has provided provocative sites for ideological change around sexuality even in postmodern times.

This paper, then, is a study of diversity and multiplicity; there is an astonishing amount of information found in Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries' plays that challenge popular conceptions of gender. There is no single, fixed way to read their texts, so any academic looking to explore gender must open his or her mind to see the often contradictory aspects that emerge from the many works available for analysis. In this study, I aim to explore different texts in order to discover the ways in which Shakespeare made use of erotic dynamics to challenge the very basics of gender.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF SEXUAL DESIRE IN RENAISSANCE THEATRE

The study of English Renaissance drama and theatrical practices will never run out of new insights and newer interpretations for an earnest literary scholar. Though one can raise legitimate concerns regarding the desirability of using literature as an authentic source for gathering factual and historical truths, the idea is not entirely devoid of merit, especially when it comes to certain periods of the not-so-immediate past, of which documentary evidence is lacking. The period of the English Renaissance is one such. Taking a cursory look at all the material available to us right now, whether religious, scientific or secular, one begins to feel that the popular theatre of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provides better insights into the cultural attitudes of the time than do all these varied sources. The Elizabethan theatre still remains the most genuine source to gain an understanding of the socio-cultural reality of the early modern times.

Having moved away considerably from the humanist and the New Critical preoccupation with the aesthetic and moral values of the theatre, current scholarship, in various guises of post-structuralist thinking, finds it more rewarding and insightful to focus on the theatre's complex engagement with early modern cultures and ideologies. Comensoli and Russell observe how cultural historians have pointed to the heterogeneity of the significant practices of the theatre in early modern England.[1] The commercial theatre of the time was an institution characterized by diversity and contradictions, just as it was the site of convergence for different discursive and dramatic traditions. The early

[1] Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell, eds., *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1.

modern theatre thus was a site where cultural meanings were both promoted and contested.

Central to the diversity and multiplicity of voices that characterized the English Renaissance drama, was its pervasive fascination with gender. Gender roles were officially well defined and fixed, and as a public institution the theatre was obligated to support the conventional paradigms of gender. Be that as it may, at times, the theatre inverted those patriarchal structures with serious cultural ramifications.

A proper study of the cultural history of English Renaissance theatre will allow us to perceive how theatre functioned as a corrective to the course of dominant ideologies of the period. Nowhere can perfect examples of this inversion be seen better than in Shakespearean theatre. Though normally a voice of authority, sometimes, Shakespeare quite significantly chose to voice divergent views regarding the norms of gender behaviour.

In the past few decades, feminist criticism has unmasked early modern culture's patriarchal structures, and exhorted us to reconsider its social hierarchies, and the complex role of gender in their development. Following on the heels of the feminist rereading of the Shakespearean theatre, later studies in Elizabethan theatrical practices brought interdisciplinary perspectives to early modern conceptualizations of gender, looking into the ambiguities built into the categories of "man" and "woman" in relation to their function in dramatic representation. Hence, by taking up the task of revisiting the sites of eroticism and gender in Shakespearean dramas, which have always been marked by ambiguity, this study strives to look into the cultural significance of gender in play on the Shakespearean stage, whereby the social structures of his time were inverted by

"positing alternatives in ways that renegotiated difference and sometimes contradicted traditional norms."[2]

In our own times, the revisitation of Shakespearean dramas takes almost always a poststructuralist approach, revolving mainly around two principal areas of inquiry:

1) The theatre's staging of the profound instability of gender, race and sexuality categories, and
2) The complex role of the boy actor and the dynamics of the transvestite theatre.[3]

By choosing to explore these issues more deeply, the current study aims at understanding how the social and cultural structures are defined and influenced by models of the gendered body, performance practices and ideology.

Gender Roles in Renaissance Society

The public theatre became one of the chief "ideological state apparatuses" in Elizabethan society. It provided a popular site for the propagation of images and narratives through which imaginary relations to the real were represented and playgoers positioned within ideology.[4] However, as Howard suggests, so as to gain a proper understanding of Renaissance theatre practices and their role in enriching and interrogating the social life of the period, it is imperative that we properly assess the political function of the Elizabethan

[2] Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell, *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, 1.
[3] *Ibid.,* 2.
[4] Howard draws here on Louis Pierre Althusser's (a Marxist philosopher), argument that an individual's intentions, preferences, judgments, desires, choices, and so on have been instilled in us by ideological practice, the sphere which constitutes individual people as a subjects. This ideological practice comprises a variety of institutions called "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs), which include the media, the family, religious organizations, and most importantly, the education system, as well as the ideas and believes they proliferate. Althusser very often seems to only focus on the success of these predominantly non-repressive institutions in serving the interests of the state. Nonetheless, he makes it clear that the Ideological State Apparatuses "may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle." In other words, they can provide sites for resistance to ruling ideologies. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (Delhi: Aakar, 2006), 85-126, esp., 99; Jean E. Howard, "Renaissance Anti-Theatricality and the Politics of Gender and Rank in *Much Ado About Nothing*" in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology* (New York: Methuen Inc., 1987), 164.

drama. Such an attempt calls for an assessment of how the Elizabethan theatre served the hegemonic interests of the state and dominant ideologies.

That the theatre sincerely served the interests of the powerful and the elite is apparent from the fact that the leading theatre companies of the period all played at court, enjoyed the patronage of noble men and monarchs, and operated under conditions of censorship and public regulation. These were, in fact, the necessary conditions under which the theatre could exist and operate in Renaissance society. But taking a more critical and inquisitive view of the matter, it begins to dawn upon us that the theatre was not entirely a tool for hegemony and that it was not always conforming to the prevalent ideology. There are ample indications that many a time the theatre had acted against the grains of dominant ideologies. This going against the grain is most discernible in none other than Shakespeare.

The very fact that censorship and regulation were necessary, that dramatists were occasionally imprisoned for sedition, that actors and dramatists often came from non-aristocratic classes – all these factors suggest the volatility of the stage's production and dissemination of dominant ideologies, and the susceptibility of plays to subversive appropriation, remarks Howard.[5] The fact is that the natural circumstances of theatrical writings created conditions for ideological contest and contradictions, as we note in many of Shakespeare's plays. This does not suggest that Elizabethan drama was inherently subversive in nature; it only suggests that though the prominent voices in Elizabethan theatre were voices of the dominant ideologies and acted in their interests, at times, quite significantly, these voices were strongly marked by contradictions and fissures. In the case

[5] Jean E. Howard, "Renaissance Anti-Theatricality and the Politics of Gender and Rank in *Much Ado About Nothing*," 164.

of Shakespeare's dramas, this dissent is brought out by the play of ambiguity, most remarkably in the play of gender and sexual desire.

The Social Milieu: A Patriarchal Society

Throughout history, men and women have had to conform to different sets of social, cultural and behavioural mores. Men have traditionally carried out certain tasks, while others have been delegated to women, most of which were part of the domestic domain. The rights of citizenship, legal and social status, social expectations and values differed significantly between the sexes. A lot of these gender roles can be singled out through a fastidious examination of the literary canon written during the Jacobean and Elizabethan era. Those roles are sometimes defined explicitly while, on other occasions, the characters move smoothly between them. Of course, the characters of Renaissance drama were not supposed to offer a realistic picture of society. The plays were not documentaries but entertainments. The plays could not entirely go against the values ruling the society as it would have threatened the general order of things, resulting in an upset audience and authority. The playwrights were, first and foremost, businessmen who wanted to please their audience and not upset it. However, Shakespeare's time was a period of transition: the authority of the old system was crumbling, a new system was not yet fully established and the society was trying to cope with a series of contradictory ideas. The attitudes towards women were also changing: the traditional patriarchal model in which women lived in submission to male authority was being questioned by the idea of partnership.[6] This allowed playwrights to choose heroines who were, according to some books of conduct, not acceptable. The audience, however, seemed to have accepted them

[6] Theresa D. Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Press, 2010), 29-64.

with pleasure, even if the majority of men in the audience would most probably not have liked having anything similar at home. In the context of Shakespeare's works, what should be taken into account is the cross-dressing of his heroines as young boys or men. Those disguises make it possible to comment on the patriarchal society that governed the early modern period. Indeed, according to Phyllis Rackin, "the theatre provided an arena where changing gender definitions could be displayed, deplored, or enforced."[7] Stephen Greenblatt's thesis maintains that the transformative power of costumes unsettles fixed categories of gender, and allows characters to explore emotional territory that a highly patriarchal culture would ordinarily have ruled as being out of bounds.[8] As will be shown in the study, both *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* make a statement of opinion on the weaknesses and even the frivolity of such a patriarchy and, hence, cross-dressing allows for dynamic possibilities. However, the women who dress as men do not have the same motivations. Both plays take the central female character out of her comfort zone, stranding her in a strange territory, and there both women decide to transform themselves into men in order to seek protection from the hazards that women face away from home. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind uses her disguise in order to escape detection on the way to the Forest of Arden because, as she puts it, "Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold." (I.3.104) In *Twelfth Night*, Viola has been shipwrecked in the unknown land of Illyria, inciting her to wear men's clothing. Hence, Rosalind and Viola use their costume to hide their own identity, invent a new one for a specific purpose, or adopt a persona flexible enough to adapt to a number of different circumstances.[9]

[7] Phyllis Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," *PMLA,* 102:1 (1987), 29.
[8] Stephen Greenblatt, "Introduction to *Twelfth Night*" in *The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt, ed., (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 1762.
[9] Susan Baker, "Personating Persons: Rethinking Shakespearean Disguise," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 43:3 (1992), 305.

However, in order to fully understand the comments of the plays on the traditional hierarchical order, one must first clearly understand the concept of the time's gender roles. This section, therefore, provides an insight into the ways early modern patriarchy constricted and/or restricted women. In other words, by using evidence from some of Shakespeare's plays, it focuses on the history of women in Shakespeare's world, surveying their status in theory and practice, and gesturing toward the extreme range of standards of living experienced by women during this period. I cannot hope to reproduce the lives of women Shakespeare knew. What I can do, however, is first of all to collect and examine different material that highlights the ways, the practices and beliefs that formed Shakespeare's experience of women, and secondly, challenge the story of total female disempowerment and oppression that is often told in accounts of the women's place in Shakespeare's era.

Even though a powerful woman ruled England for over 40 years, the way in which society regarded men and women varied tremendously. Men were most commonly acknowledged as the ruling voice in society. In fact, "all forms of public and domestic authority in Elizabethan England were vested in men: in fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, preachers, magistrates, [and] lords."[10] Women essentially had no control over the part they played in society. The most respected way of life "was that which included not only scholarly activity, but also public and political service. Such a life was impossible for women … because for a woman, a public reputation was dishonourable, a sure sign of immorality and scandal."[11]

[10] Louis A. Montrose, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture" in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 68.
[11] Merry E. Wiesner, "Women's Defense of Their Public Role" in *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Mary Beth Rose, ed., (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 12.

Women were barred from any sphere of considerable authority in society. Of course, for a tiny number of influential aristocratic women power and authority extended beyond the limits of their families. The examples of the Tudor queens Mary and Elizabeth are well-known, but they were not the only ones who exercised political power. For example, as owners of boroughs, two of the queen's female subjects were permitted to choose Members of Parliament.[12] These examples, however, are rare exceptions. Most women were disallowed any rightful claim to personal autonomy or institutional authority. In *De Republica Anglorum* Sir Thomas Smith declares "we do reject women, as those whom nature hath made to keepe home and to nourish their familie and children, and not to medle with matters abroade, nor to beare office in a citie or common wealth." He, however, makes an exception for the minority whose "blood is respected, not the age nor the sexe."[13]

The legal status of men and women during the Jacobean and Elizabethan age also differed. Married women lacked almost all rights as citizens, whereas men held almost total authority. In fact, "women differed from the men in their ability to be witnesses, make wills, act as guardians for their own children, make contracts and own, buy, and sell property."[14] In other words, they were legally powerless in the society in which they lived. The men, whether they were their fathers, husbands or brothers, had total control over all constitutional matters of women's lives. In other words, women were not free – "free" meaning to enjoy the privileges and rights of a citizen and to be acknowledged to possess a capacity for intellect, both of which were beyond the bounds of possibility for women.[15]

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[12] Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel: Woman's Lot in the Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 231.
[13] Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum 1553*, I:xvi, Online Version <http://www.constitution.org/eng/repang.htm>, August 2011.
[14] Mary E. Wiesner, "Women's Defense of Their Public Role," 4.
[15] *Ibid.*, 1.

However, single women – whether widowed or unmarried – had a few rights within society; they could, if they were old enough, sue and be sued, write a testament, inherit land, sign a contract, own property. On the other hand, married women had no such rights under common law.[16] An example of this theory is expressed in *The Taming of the Shrew* when Petruccio, who has recently wed Katherine, describes her as "my goods, my chattels. She is my house / My household-stuff, my field, my barn / My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything." (3.3.101-103)

For Stephen Greenblatt, however, it is crucial to realise that "this conception of a woman's role conveniently ignores the fact that a majority of the adult women at any time in Shakespeare's England were not married,"[17] which means that most women managed their own affairs. Even women in the lower social strata earned their living, not only as servants, but also in a variety of trades that took them outside of the household. One example, which Greenblatt provides, is that of "village wives who oversaw the production of eggs, cheese, and beer, and sold these goods in the market."[18]

Nevertheless, "many men seem to have regarded the capacity for rational thought as exclusively male; women, they assumed, were led only by their passions."[19] Women were not capable of ignoring their emotions long enough to commit to memory anything substantial. This belief is also associated with Renaissance conceptions of biology. Writers on medicine were of the opinion that "it is heat which makes a man bold and hardy, but the coldness of woman makes her naturally fearful and timorous. And since women are weak physically, they must be weak morally and mentally."[20] This primitive

[16] Stephen Greenblatt, "Introduction" in *The Norton Shakespeare,* S. Greenblatt, et al., eds., (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 9-10.
[17] *Ibid.*, 10.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*, 18.
[20] Carroll Camden, *The Elizabethan Woman* (New York: Paul A. Appel, 1975), 19.

conception of heat as a biological difference made people take for granted that women were inferior to men in nearly every ability, apart from those associated with domestic chores and duties. Aristocratic women at court, however, demonstrated persistently that women were the intellectual equals of men. Henry VIII's queens, especially Catherine of Aragon and later Catherine Parr, were noteworthy for their own scholarship, for financing scholars and for educating the young women around them, including Princess Elizabeth. Then there were the extraordinary women who formed part of Elizabeth's court – Lady Anne Bacon, The Countess of Pembroke and Lady Anne Clifford, to name but a few. In fact, aristocratic women in England in the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth century enjoyed a level of emancipation of which middle- and lower-class women could still only dream.[21]

Furthermore, Renaissance women were often seen as property whose marriages could be arranged for the benefit or convenience of men, whether they were their fathers, brothers or any other male authority in their lives. It is, therefore, only logical that anxiety about the fidelity of women was particularly predominant, a fact which non-literary sources also stress. Katherine Maus in "Horns of Dilemma: Jealousy, Gender and Spectatorship in English Renaissance Drama", makes reference to studies of sixteenth century clerical courts which show that words like whoremaster, whore and cuckold provided the reason for most defamation suits.[22] A logical consequence of a patriarchal society is, of course, the fear of losing control of women's chastity, a cherished asset as regards the legitimacy of men's heirs and for fathers as a piece of disposable property.[23] For example, in *The Tempest*, when Miranda learns of her noble origins for the very first

[21] Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 2.
[22] Katherine Maus, "Horns of Dilemma: Jealousy, Gender and Spectatorship in English Renaissance Drama," *ELH,* 54:3 (1987), 562.
[23] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 36.

time, she asks Prospero: "Sir, are you not my father?" Prospero answers: "Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter." (1.2.55-57) He seems to dwell on the fact that no man can be utterly certain of paternity. Scholars have adduced Prospero's statement as evidence of his suspicion of female sexuality.[24] Maus states that there is a far more significant number of plots involving cuckoldry in drama than in other genres of the period. This shows the extent to which theatre served as a means of managing specific sexual anxieties.[25] Prospero's extreme fear about maintaining his daughter's virginity provides a clear window into this sphere of sexual anxiety.

However, the English system was full of ambiguities as regards parental rights and, hence, the anxiety of a father – who was assumed to be in complete control of his child – could actually be justified. Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, insists on his daughter marrying a man whom she does not love, but the law supports him. Nevertheless, by the end of the play, the Duke has overruled Egeus' authority, and Hermia can marry the man she desires after all. In England, fathers were authorised to arrange their daughters' marriages as they pleased and, what is more, they had control of all property that came with the daughter. However, "horror stories of enforced marriages," as Orgel puts it, "relate primarily to upper-class matches, where political alliances and large sums of money were at stake."[26]

As far as middle- and lower-class arrangements were concerned, there was much less pressure, as more often than not, there was much less at stake. In fact, many scholars have argued that middle-class London offered women unusual liberties, which

[24] See David Sundelson, "So Rare A Wondered Father: Prospero's Tempest" in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, Murray M. Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn, eds., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 35-36; and Stephen Orgel, "Prospero's Wife," *Representations,* 8 (1984), 1-2; 4-5.
[25] Maus, "Horns of Dilemma: Jealousy, Gender and Spectatorship in English Renaissance Drama," 561.
[26] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37.

certainly contributed to the theatre's popularity. Orgel agrees and claims, "The professional theatre drew much of its support from London's mercantile and artisan classes."[27] This might also explain the increase in the number of plays that feature cuckoldry and love matches; "the two sides of the notion of liberty for women." On the other hand, that "liberating theatrical freedom" could also be deemed dangerous, and as we have seen, the fundamental part of this danger was pointedly sexual.[28]

In fact, patriarchal society in those days tried to impose on women specific virtues – obedience, silence, chastity, modesty and piety.[29] All of these attributes characterize someone who agrees to be passive and obedient and who has no right to make decisions. As already discussed, a woman's "behaviour was carefully prescribed. She was to tend to her household duties industriously … she must be silent most of the time and not speak out or argue … and she must never be witty or clever."[30] Indeed, the control of women's bodies was central in patriarchal preoccupations.[31] "Women who gadded about outside the home or who talked too much (by male standards) were suspected of being whores. A good woman was reserved: silent, chaste and immured within the home."[32] Yet, the existence of the term "shrew" – as embodied by female characters like Katherine – shows that not all women obeyed or kept silent.

The full force of female speech is demonstrated in *The Winter's Tale* in which Paulina regularly reminds Leontes of his guilt and, as a result, causes him to repent; and also in *Othello*, when Emilia accuses Iago of Desdemona's murder. Indeed, dubbing a

[27] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 37.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] Catherine M. Dunn, "The Changing Image of Women in Renaissance Society and Literature" in *What Manner of Woman*, Marlene Springer, ed., (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 17.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 123-142.
[32] Jean E. Howard, "Cross-dressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39:4, (1988), 424.

woman a shrew or a whore was convenient for men who were afraid of losing their authority.[33] The phrase to be "loose in body and tongue," would link female erotic transgression to gossip. Erotic transgression referred not only to fornication (premarital sexual intercourse) and adultery, but "any erotic behaviour that lacked the sanction of father and church."[34] Traub posits, "The ideology of chastity, constraints against female speech, and women's confinement within the domestic household are summed up by the phrase 'the body enclosed', which refers simultaneously to a woman's closed genitals, closed mouth, and her enclosure within the home."[35]

Having had a closer look at gender in Shakespeare's time, we have come to realize that in terms of their difference we find asymmetry, inequality and conflicts. As this study will examine later in greater detail, many of Shakespeare's plays like *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, pick up on this difference when women dress as men and, as a result, tease out anxieties about women on top or women who are not in their rightful place, and point out the brittleness of male authority. Obviously, the disguises in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* do not make the two female protagonists – Viola and Rosalind – real men, but once they don men's clothing, they are allowed to explore their freedom, which in turn lends them power and a certain amount of autonomy. In *As You Like It*, for example, en route to the forest of Arden, Celia says to Rosalind, "Now we go in content / To Liberty and not to banishment." (1.3.131-132) By overcoming the restrictions of the "typical" female role, these women find freedom and liberty.[36] Furthermore, as I am about to argue, Rosalind and even Viola use that newly found power to, first of all, comment effectively on

[33] Valerie Traub, "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare" in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 130.
[34] Valerie Traub, "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare," 130.
[35] *Ibid.*, 131.
[36] Peter Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 22.

the socially accepted male and female behaviours of the time, and secondly, to ultimately reveal the superficiality of the patriarchal society.

Re-Historicizing Shakespeare

The rationale of the present study is restrained in its basic argument: to understand the fuller implications of Shakespeare's dramas for our own times we need to re-historicize his theatre. A revisitation of the social and cultural sites of Shakespearean theatrical production will help us to understand, I believe, why he at length focuses on gender, sex, desire and their complex interplay in his dramas. The ambiguity that we find in erotic relationships in his dramas is by no means accidental; we have reasons to believe that he consciously built them into his plays. In Shakespeare, this ambiguity still remains the singular clue to the understanding of the complex politics behind the cultural production of sexual desire in the early modern society. This is why it appears better to me that, rather than following the current of a textual, deconstructive approach to understand the Shakespearean dramas, we should keenly look at the particular social formation within which human will and desire are produced, directed, controlled, satisfied and frustrated. Hence, the attempt is to put the Shakespearean text back into the context from which it was generated, as Edward Pechter would describe it.[37]

The emphasis on the cultural production of the theatre makes perfect sense, because, the audiences themselves have will and desire, which also develop in connection with social and cultural authority. Therefore, the new historicization of literary studies is equally a new politicization, remarks Pechter.[38] So, putting the Shakespearean text back into history will help us, I believe, to better understand the politics of cultural production

[37] Edward Pechter, "The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama," *PMLA,* 102:3, (1987), 292.
[38] *Ibid.*

in our own times. The works of acclaimed Renaissance critics, new historicist thinkers, and other sorts of writers such as Althusser, Foucault and Jameson will help us bring clarity into the process of re-historicizing Shakespeare.

Such an attempt naturally takes this analysis into the fold of Marxist criticism; to the extent that it will view Renaissance history and contemporary political life as determined by conflicts, power relations, contestations and dominant desires. As Stephen Greenblatt remarks in his introduction to "The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance", unlike the old historicism which was "monological and concerned with discovering a single political vision," the new historicism will recognize a medley of competing forces of cultural power.[39] A careful reading of Shakespeare's plays, as well as other Elizabethan dramas, will direct us towards the fact that the Elizabethan theatre had its own way of protesting against the conventional and dominant ideologies that ruled the social behaviour of the times.

In trying to fully comprehend this problematic relation between Shakespearean theatre and the ideology of the time, Fredric Jameson's work is quite explanatory. Jameson has at length dwelt upon the relation between ideology and textuality that the distinction between them seems to disappear. In fact, in his proposal he states: "the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext,* it being always understood that the 'subtext' is not immediately present as such, not some commonsense

[39] Stephen Greenblatt, "The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance" in *Genre* 15, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 5.

external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re) constructed after the fact."[40]

A proper understanding of Shakespeare's plays also asks for a clear comprehension of the subtexts involved in them. His dramas and their performances were, we may assume with a fair amount of certainty, in many ways more than just literary constructions; they were also articulations of the multiplicity of voices present, though often suppressed by the dominant ideology. Elizabethan theatre found room for such divergent voices, too, though under many guises. The significance of gender ambiguity and sexual roles in Shakespeare's plays is exactly this – they served a social and political purpose, by standing for the official conventional ideologies of the Elizabethan society, but at the same time, quite ambivalently, they deliberately but subtly questioned and subverted those dominant ideologies.

Althusser develops the idea that art "presupposes a retreat, an internal distantiation," from the very ideology from which it emerges.[41] But even by this formulation of detachment, ideology retains a privileged or substructural position, preceding and determining discourse. So it is neither possible nor desirable to look at the theatre as just literary production; the dramas are much more than that. Texts do not exist without contexts, or subtexts or interpretations, and it is the contexts that allow us to determine the facts of the text.

The contexts to the Shakespearean texts are many in this respect – the prevalent ideology of the patriarchy is the most notable among them, as we have already seen. Along with that, we also have to take into account the subtexts of the deviant

[40] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 81.
[41] Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Delhi: Aakar, 2006), 152.

notions of gender roles and sexual desire that surfaced intermittently in the society. The extraordinary aesthetic, emotional and political resonances of the gender play in Shakespearean dramas challenge the cultural givens of the time. Even if the discourse of patriarchy forms the immediate context for his plays, they are not always patriarchal assertions of the sexual mores and standards. They often voice claims to entitlement and belonging of a diverse and multi-vocal culture.

Hence, a culture that is hostile to the hopes and desires of men and women is the larger subtext of Shakespeare's work. The ambiguities in the play of eroticism and gender that Shakespeare often makes use of, are tools to drive home the point that the history and culture of a country are not monolithic and exclusive, but also belong to the diverse and muffled voices, and are composed of prohibited sexual desires.

A careful re-examination of the fluidity of gender boundaries in Shakespeare, as the present study will take up in the coming chapters, will expose the cultural and political constructedness of gender and desire in the social order beyond the theatre. Such a new historicist revision of the Shakespearean dramatic texts that employ erotic ambiguities will tell us, it is hoped, how they act as fields of play in which spectators could try out imaginary sexual roles, without having to bear real responsibility. In the process, this study will emphasize the fact that all the social roles that we play out are, in fact, inherently theatrical.

Chapter 2
THEATRE FOR SUBVERTING SEXUAL NORMS: HOMOEROTICISM IN SHAKESPEARE

The cultural production of desire in Elizabethan theatre, as we have seen in the first chapter, had serious implications for the complex co-existence of gender roles in early modern society. Probably the best way to gauge the cultural significance of this complex play of gender and desire is to look into the dramas of the time, like Shakespeare's, and see how they employ ambiguity in dealing with the logic of eroticism.

Juxtaposing eroticism and gender ambiguity can be justified in that eroticism connects to the audience and to society: it is in seeing what sort of stories and performances audiences found titillating that we can gain some of our most immediate insights into contemporary mind-sets about sexuality and the perceived roles of the sexes. In fact, the English Renaissance stage provided a myriad of possibilities to explore this conjunction. Renaissance drama was brimming with sexual desire and the production of eroticism involved every aspect of theatricality, especially the cross-dressing acting convention – which provided an inescapable and most distinctive erotic element. While the use of the term "eroticism" may be an anachronism, it allows us to analyse – from our own perception – intense emotional investment and erotic attraction; that which the early moderns referred to as love, passion, lust, and appetite.

It is probably because of our own fascination with gender roles and sexual identity that present-day scholarship has devoted considerable attention to such aspects, and the period of the Shakespearean stage, roughly from 1576 to 1642, has received the majority of this attention.

Cross-dressing is central to the erotic dynamic of Renaissance drama. One "erotic delight" certainly evoked by the cross-dressing prevalent in Shakespeare's plays is the strong undertone of homoeroticism. However, before having a look at expressions of homoerotic feeling, one needs to first of all know how people in the sixteenth and seventeenth century viewed sexuality. We need to be aware of the fact that sexuality was not, as it is for us, the starting point for anyone's self-definition. In other words, no one in Shakespeare's England would have called himself a "homosexual," or for that matter, a "heterosexual". According to Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, social theorist and historian of ideas, homosexuality did not come into existence as a conceptual category until the nineteenth century; but that does not mean that homoerotic feelings did not exist.[42] Another key aspect is that "homosexuals" were actually acknowledged in the official "Elizabethan world picture," but only as innately wicked. For the Puritan writer John Rainolds, for instance, same-sex sexual activity was a sin to which "mens naturall corruption and vitiousnes is prone."[43] Shakespeare, however, devotes considerable time to the intensive study of male friendship and bonding; plays such as *The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* reveal an undertone of homosexual desire. If homosexuality had no place in the early modern view of societal structure, why then did Shakespeare present erotic homosexual friendships in a context that is often positive? Were there counterexamples in which homoerotic desire leads to disaster? To fully comprehend the subversive power of the deployment of homoeroticism as a natural given by Shakespeare, we first need to have a proper historical understanding of homoeroticism as a cultural and sexual category.

[42] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality - Vol. 1* (New York: Knopf, 1980), xii.
[43] John Rainolds, *The Overthrow of Stage-Plays* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1972), 10.

The Historicity and Politics of Homoeroticism

David Halperin, in a significant study on the history of homosexuality, observes that any proper effort to delineate the historicity of sexuality will have to come up with a strategy that takes into account two particularities. Firstly, the features of sexual life that appear to have persevered through time and, secondly, the dramatic differences between recorded forms of sexual experience.[44] Present analytic models that try to do this by referencing changes in the classifications or categories of an otherwise unchanging "sexuality," or by insisting on a historical differentiation between modern sexual identities and early modern sexual acts, cannot completely expose the complicatedness of the matters in question in the new histories of sexuality.[45]

The tensions between identity and difference, continuity and discontinuity, surface with agonizing intensity in the historical writings of homosexuality. Those tensions reflect not only the political concerns in any project aiming to reveal representations of homosexuality, but the definitional confusion about what homosexuality itself is, as well. The work which articulates the consequences of this confusion for historians clearly and concisely, is *Hidden from History*, a groundbreaking literary collection of gay and lesbian history:

> Same-sex genital sexuality, love and friendship, gender non-conformity, and a certain aesthetic or political perspective are all considered to have some (often ambiguous and always contested) relationship to that complex of attributes we today designate as homosexuality ... much historical research has been an effort to locate the antecedents of those characteristics a given historian believes are constitutive of contemporary gay identity, be they sodomitical acts, cross-dressing, or intimate friendships.[46]

[44] In what follows I will, in part, summarize David M. Halperin's argument. David M. Halperin, "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality," *GLQ*, 6:1 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 88
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989), 8.

According to Halperin, "the essence of the constructionist approach to the history of homosexuality, after all, was to argue that homosexuality is a modern construction, not because no same-sex sexual acts or erotic labels existed before 1869, when the term 'homosexuality' first appeared in print, but because no single category of discourse or experience existed in the pre-modern and non-Western worlds that comprehended exactly the same range of same-sex sexual behaviours, desires, psychologies, and socialities, as well as the various forms of gender deviance, that now fall within the capacious definitional boundaries of homosexuality."[47] The discursive territory nowadays claimed by homosexuality was occupied by earlier categories of identity in relation to same-sex sexual relations; others cross the line that separates homo- from heterosexuality. Some of these identity types had persevered in diverse forms for centuries before the modern term "homosexuality" was thought up. "It is quite possible," Halperin says, "that the current definitional uncertainty about what homosexuality is, or the uncertainty about what features are constitutive of lesbian or gay male identity, is the result of this long historical process of accumulation, accretion, and overlay."[48]

The word "homosexuality" first appeared in print in Germany in 1869, in two anonymous pamphlets published in Leipzig by Karl Maria Kertbeny, an Austrian translator of Hungarian literature. The term "homosexuality" can be considered a pro-gay neologism, insofar as Kertbeny used it during an unsuccessful political campaign to prevent homosexual sex from being criminalized.[49]

For Kertbeny "homosexuality" simply specified the sexual drive directed towards people of the same sex. In fact, it was the term's simplistic theoretical outlook

[47] Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 89.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*, 109.

that made it so easily adaptable by theorists, writers, and commentators with a medley of ideological purposes. Consequently, the word nowadays comprises a multitude of different ideas about same-sex sexual attraction on top of a collection of theoretic models to define what homosexuality is.[50]

According to Alfred Kinsey, "homosexuality" unifies at least three distinct ideas: 1. A psychiatric notion of perverted or pathological *orientation*, which is an essentially psychological concept that applies to the inner life of the individual and does not necessarily presume same-sex sexual behaviour; 2. A psychoanalytic notion of same-sex *sexual object choice* or desire, derived from Freud, which is a category of erotic intentionality and does not necessarily imply a permanent sexual orientation (according to Freud, most normal individuals make an unconscious homosexual object choice at some point in their fantasy lives); and 3. A sociological notion of sexually *deviant behaviour*, derived from nineteenth- and twentieth century forensic inquiries into "social problems," which focuses on non-standard sexual practice and does not necessarily refer to erotic psychology or sexual orientation.[51] This means that neither a concept of orientation, a concept of object choice, nor a concept of behaviour on its own suffices to generate the modern definition of "homosexuality"; rather, "the notion seems to depend on the unstable conjunction of all three. 'Homosexuality' is at once a psychological condition, an erotic desire, and a sexual practice (and those are three quite different things)."[52]

A genealogical analysis of homosexuality, as I propose to undertake before proceeding to examine the case of Shakespeare, begins with our current conception of

[50] Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 109.
[51] Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948), 615. As quoted in Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 110.
[52] Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 110.

homosexuality. Such a notion might be incohesive, not only because it shapes our analysis of past same-sex sexual expression, but also because it comprises elements of its own historical evolution. As a matter of fact, the very disjointedness at the heart of the contemporary definition of homosexuality offers straightforward evidence of the accumulation of incoherent ideas through time. "The genealogist," Halperin posits, "attempts to disaggregate those notions by tracing their separate histories as well as the process of their interrelations, their crossings, and, eventually, their unstable convergence in the present day."[53]

Effeminacy often stood for sex reversal in men, for transgenderism or gender role reversal, and hence for homosexual desire. Effeminacy, however, is utterly different from male inversion, passivity, and homosexuality. Effeminacy is a quality or characteristic belonging to either man or woman, and is in no way to be equated with same-sex sexual preference in men or homosexual object choice, not only because men can be homosexual without being effeminate, but also because they can be effeminate without being homosexual. In fact, "effeminacy deserves to be treated independently because it was for a long time defined as a symptom of an excess of what we would call *heterosexual* as well as homosexual desire. It is, therefore, a category unto itself. The appearance of effeminacy in some characters need not always lead us to conjure notions of homoeroticism in such plays."[54]

Apparently, men desired their male companions to be crude and strong. They may have preferred their women and boys to be gentle, soft and passive, yet they did neither appreciate nor respect these features in a sophisticated male. On the other hand, women appear to have favoured the soft style of masculinity. All of these different tastes

[53] Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 90.
[54] *Ibid.*, 92.

resulted in a clash between the established foundations of gender and the sexual relations available to men. An unparalleled example in the literary canon is Hercules, who highlights this tension between hard and soft masculinity best (usefully, a mythological character in whom Shakespeare was interested throughout his career). Hercules is a hero who changes back and forth between the extremes of hyper masculinity and effeminacy: he is extraordinarily strong, yet he manages to be made a servant by Queen Omphale; he wins every single contest, yet he is crazed by love, whether that be for a boy (Hylas) or for a woman (Iole).[55] Hercules lays the foundations for Shakespeare's modern figures like, for example, Mark Antony, who in *Antony and Cleopatra* declares Hercules as his literal ancestor and who brings upon himself matching allegations of effeminacy when he decides to take a break from governing the Roman Empire to delight in a life with Cleopatra. According to Halperin, "the roles of ruler and lover are made to contrast from the very opening of the play, when Antony is described as 'the triple pillar of the world transform'd / Into a strumpet's fool' (1.1.12–13)."[56] Shakespeare created other characters with similar problems. Othello, for example, voices worries about the paralyzing effects of love on a military leader. However, no other but Shakespeare's Romeo represents this tension best, when he criticizes himself for a lack of soldierly devotion:

> O sweet Juliet,
> Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,
> And in my temper softened valour's steel!
> (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.1.108–10)

The interaction of the above-mentioned differing conceptions of effeminacy might be of help to explain the tenacious sexual ambiguity that is, even today, associated

[55] Nicole Loraux, "Herakles: The Super-Male and the Feminine," trans. Robert Lamberton, in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 21.
[56] Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 94.

mainly with male organizations like, for example, the army, the clergy, and political parties. Halperin wonders whether "the sort of manhood fostered and expressed there to be considered the truest and most essential form of masculinity, or an exceptional and bizarre perversion of it."[57]

In the indicated predominantly male institutions, sex equals hierarchy not reciprocality; sex is not a mutual quest for shared pleasure. In this case, sex means difference not identity, and it depends on a methodical (often simplistic) separation of gender roles in society.

This hierarchical system of male sexual relations depicts sexual preference without sexual orientation. Halperin observes that a number of texts going back to classical antiquity affirm a conscious erotic inclination of men, even to the point of exclusivity, for sexual relations with members of one sex rather than the other. Indeed, many erotic writings comprise formal deliberations between two men about whether women or boys are best to achieve sexual satisfaction. Such jocose discussions are widely spread in the writings of traditional male societies: examples can be found in Arabic and medieval European poetry and prose, in Greek prose literature from late antiquity, and in late imperial Chinese writings.[58]

Halperin, nonetheless, is of the opinion that for at least three reasons, it is essential that those unambiguous and conscious erotic inclinations expressed in such literature should not be put on equal footing with declarations of sexual orientation. First of all, they are depicted as the consequence of conscious choice, a choice that represents the man's preferred way of life. The males who express such inclinations often consider themselves as at least theoretically able to acknowledge the erotic attraction of beautiful

[57] Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 94.
[58] *Ibid.*, 98.

women and handsome boys. "This is," Halperin declares, "sexual object choice as an expression of aesthetics, as an exercise in erotic connoisseurship, not as a reflex of sexuality."[59] Secondly, in this context, same-sex sexual object choice does not necessarily mark a difference. Men are not differentiated one from the other in terms of their "sexuality." Thirdly, in this situation, same-sex sexual object choice is neither visible on a man's physical appearance, in his personal mannerisms or behaviour, nor does it belie his masculinity.[60]

All in all, homosexuality, both as a concept and as a social practice, significantly rearranges and reinterprets earlier patterns of erotic organization. With homosexuality, the significance of gender roles and gender identity to classify sexual acts and sexual actors fades. Therefore, one effect of homosexuality is to cut off sexual object choice from any connection with gender identity, in order to make it possible to ascribe homosexuality to men and women whose gender and physical appearance or behaviour are utterly normal.[61]

Homosexuality in Early Modern England

In examining expressions of homoerotic feeling, one needs to know first of all how people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries viewed sexuality. We need to be aware of the fact that sexuality was not, as it is for us, the starting point for any individual's self-definition. Simply because present-day society has become obsessed with sexuality does not mean that it has always been thus. In fact, in early modern England, sexual activity was considered less important in relation to other aspects of a person's life, such as, for example, ways of thinking or social connections. Early modern society would

[59] Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 98.
[60] *Ibid.*
[61] *Ibid.*, 111.

have called what we call homosexuals "sodomites," which is a vague term that does not mean the same things that we associate with homosexuality today.[62] In 1533, the English Parliament passed a statute that "designated sodomy to be a felony with the punishment of forfeiture of property and death."[63] This law was in effect for the following 300 years, except during the brief reign of Mary I. From a linguistic point of view, it is vital to mention that today's definition of "sodomy" as any "unnatural form of sexual intercourse, especially that of one male with another" is similar to the early modern meaning, yet not quite the same.[64] In Renaissance England, in addition to the present-day definition, "sodomy" referred to crimes of which virtually anyone was capable, like murder or blasphemy. Even heterosexual acts could count as sodomy if the sex involved was not for the purposes of procreation. Furthermore, Alan Bray points out that the early modern definition of sodomy differed even more fundamentally in that it was not only a sexual crime, but also a religious and political crime.[65]

As E. M. W. Tillyard argues, the average Elizabethan probably held on to the idea of the Great Chain of Being, a concept that was started by Plato and developed by Aristotle, spread by the neo-Platonists, and appropriated by Renaissance thought.[66] Designed by God, it specifies a strict, religious hierarchical structure that includes every speck of creation. God sits at the top of the chain, which then progresses downwards to angels, demons, stars, moon, kings, princes, nobles, men, animals, trees, other plants and even down to minerals. The descent is from the spiritual to the physical. The human being

[62] Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10-11.
[63] Donald N. Mager, "John Bale and Early Tudor Sodomy Discourse" in *Queering the Renaissance*, Jonathan Goldberg, ed., (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 142.
[64] "Sodomy" *The Oxford English Dictionary,* Vol. X. Sole-SZ (Oxford University Press, 1970).
[65] Alan Bray, "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," *History Workshop Journal,* 29:1 (1990), 3.
[66] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 25-36.

held an especially difficult position, balancing both; when the nobler, spiritual element in him gives way to the physical or the lustful, he is deemed lowered to the position of the animal. Tillyard asserts that though the notion was often only hinted at rather than taken for granted, it was one of the genuine ruling ideas of the age, and the common man subscribed to it and valued his position in it.[67] Of course, sodomites had no place of human beings, but only of animals in the Chain. Having no place in the Chain was almost apocalyptical to an Elizabethan and, hence, the sodomite became the enemy of the population. (S)he was responsible for the disintegration of the divinely ordained universal order. As a consequence, the general attitude towards sodomites was hatred, and it is "difficult to exaggerate the fear and loathing of homosexuality to be read in the literature of the time."[68] Due to the fact that popular literature associated homoeroticism with "revulsion, violent hostility [for] the loathsome and evil thing" and that to the Elizabethans it was "abhorred, polluted and unclean … all that is beastly and obscene," one is likely to think that Elizabethan society would not tolerate anything remotely bearing resemblance to homoeroticism, and yet, at least according to Bray and other scholars, homoerotic practice was fairly widespread in Renaissance England among both women and men.[69]

In order to understand homosexuality in early modern England, we need to examine what was actually forbidden and what passed lightly under the label. What we discover is an astonishing discrepancy. The illogical relationship between the ominous official law and the hateful popular attitude and the enforcement of the same law, as well as actual sexual practices, is indeed puzzling. Alan Bray explores this ambiguity and describes how homoerotic activity was omnipresent and unpunished. According to Bray's

[67] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), vii.
[68] Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 62.
[69] *Ibid.*, 58-62.

research into early modern court records, judges were more concerned with punishing the parents of illegitimate children than homosexual transgressors. The reason was practical: illegitimate children would be the responsibility of the community and would, therefore, endanger the well-being of society. In this sense, homoeroticism functioned as a stabilising mechanism in society: it produced no illegitimate children to burden society, and young people had an outlet for their sexual desire.[70] Bray's research has shown that homosexual practice was only punished when it involved a scandal, violence or when an "illegitimate child was produced."[71] Bray, for example, discusses one case in which a servant called Davy of Minehead was prosecuted for sodomy.

> According to the evidence of his master's apprentice, a boy 'aged twelve years or thereabouts' called John Vicary, with whom he shared a bed, Davy had been in the habit of having sexual relations with the boy … after he had been drinking; eventually the boy cried out and Davy ended up before the Justices.[72]

Davy seemed disconcerted by the charge, and it was obvious that he did not know that his action related to the crime of sodomy. The prosecution apparently viewed the transgression as only slightly beyond the boundaries of acceptability, as they merely admonished Davy and sent him home, "since which time [Davy] hath layn quietly with him."[73] Put differently, life in the household continued unchanged, and John and Davy continued to share a bed. Davy himself "denieth that he ever used any unclean action with the said boy as they lay in bed together; and more he sayeth not."[74] In other words, despite the fact that officially homosexuality was a felony punishable by death, in practice, it was punished only if it threatened the social order.

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[70] Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England,* 78.
[71] *Ibid.*, 50.
[72] *Ibid.*, 48.
[73] *Ibid.*, 77.
[74] *Ibid.*, 69.

There is another possible explanation for why homosexual acts were overlooked. Lawrence Stone's examination of the changes that took place in early modern society contains an analysis of the Elizabethan perception of the self as an individual, as opposed to the collective self of the Middle Ages.[75] However, even if there were transitions taking place in the early modern period, they may not have been fully assimilated into the Elizabethan consciousness yet. Therefore, the early modern inability to react to sexual misbehaviour can be attributed to a lack of awareness. In her book *Sex, Gender, and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, Sara M. Deats also explores the concept of the self in the early modern period, declaring that the boundaries of sex and gender were blurred, hence rendering sexual misbehaviour difficult to define.[76] Forrest T. Stevens, for example, in his essay "Erasmus's 'Tigress': The Language of Friendship, Pleasure, and the Renaissance Letter," analyses Elizabethan epistolary conventions between same-sex correspondents that present-day society would view as "compromisingly passionate" yet, at the time, were considered "precisely proper," despite the official condemnation of homoeroticism.[77] Therefore, whether the reason was the blurred or dispersed idea of the self or the preservation of the social order, male and female homoeroticism was clearly present in the early modern England.

The main issue in the case of homoeroticism, I would argue, was the preservation of the social order. In other words, the transgression was not necessarily related to the homosexual practice itself, but to the violation of the established order. Therefore, it seems that if a person engaged in homoerotic practice in the early modern

[75] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1979), 151-180.
[76] Sara M. Deats, *Sex, Gender, and Desire in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), 88.
[77] Forrest Tyler Stevens, "Erasmus's 'Tigress': The Language of Friendship, Pleasure, and the Renaissance Letter" in *Queering the Renaissance*, Jonathan Goldberg, ed., (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 128.

period, as long as they observed the patriarchal mores, and did not cause too great a scandal, "homosexual behaviour was rarely recognized as … sin …, and thus rarely persecuted."[78] Something similar happens in most of Shakespeare's comedies and tragicomedies. In fact, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* each present different representations of homoeroticism, and yet they are very much alike. However, although these plays enact various forms of erotic play, they all ultimately marginalize homoerotic attachments without punishing the "offenders," and they all privilege heterosexual closure. In fact, as Orgel puts it, "there is no indication whatsoever that Shakespeare is doing something sexually daring there, skating on thin ice."[79] But at the same time, it is interesting to note how some of his contemporaries or predecessors looked at the social role of this sexual category.

Homoeroticism In Elizabethan Theatre - Shakespeare's Peers

In Shakespeare's plays, homoerotic desire is abandoned, betrayed and crossed. At the same time, a heterosexual desire is created to fit into the narrative as a natural closure. However, these homoerotic desires never lead to disaster, because they observe the patriarchal mores, and do not cause too great a scandal. Counterexamples in which homoerotic desire leads to disaster are extremely rare. The only clear-cut theatrical one, in which a homoerotic relationship is presented in the terms in which society viewed it – as antisocial and ultimately disastrous – is in Marlowe's *Edward II*. Earlier on, I argued that Renaissance homosexuality was, in general, not viewed as threatening because it was not seen as an obstacle to heterosexuality and marriage. Edward's love for Gaveston,

[78] Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7.
[79] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 43.

however, is presented as destructive because it *is* presented as anti-heterosexual; his passion renders him an unfit king.

While the play never explicitly presents a homoerotic relationship between Gaveston and Edward, it does everything else to suggest, especially through other characters' views upon the matter, that such a relationship really exists. The play opens with Gaveston's soliloquy, in which he says:

> Not that I love the city or the men,
> But that it harbors him I hold so dear –
> The King, upon whose bosom let me die,
> And with the world be still at enmity.
> (*Edward II* 1.1.12-15)

As reported by Arthur Kinney, "die" can signify either "to swoon" or "to enjoy a sexual orgasm."[80] Thus, the basis for a sexual relationship between Gaveston and Edward is laid, and this seemingly innocent pun proves to be extremely powerful. Edward's strong affections are demonstrated constantly during the play. His affection seems so powerful that he banishes Isabella, his queen, "till [Gaveston's] repeal." (1.5.203) In fact, even after the queen manages to convince the nobility to allow Gaveston to return, Edward offers his love to his wife only if she promises to love Gaveston:

> For thee, fair Queen, if thou lov'st Gaveston;
> I'll hang a golden tongue about thy neck,
> Seeing thou hast pleaded with so good success.
> (*Edward II* 1.5.326-328)

Without doubt, this strength of affection suggests a sexual relationship, but it is Gaveston's opening soliloquy that pushes that suggestion to an implication.

However, Edward's desire for another man represents no threat. In fact, it is forgiven explicitly in the following conversation between Mortimer Senior and his nephew:

[80] Christopher Marlowe, *The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second* in *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*, Arthur F. Kinney, ed., (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 279.

MORTIMER SENIOR

The mightiest Kings have had their minions:
Great Alexander loved Hephaestion;
The conquering Hercules for Hylas wept;
And for Patroclus stern Achilles drooped.
And not kings only, but the wisest men:
The Roman Tully loved Octavius,
Grave Socrates wild Alcibiades.
Then let His Grace, whose youth is flexible
And promiseth as much as we can wish,
Freely enjoy that vain light-headed Earl,
For riper years will wean him from such toys.

MORTIMER JUNIOR

Uncle, his wanton humor grieves not me,
But this I scorn – that one so basely born
Should by his Sovereign's favor grow so pert
(*Edward II* 1.4.390-403)

Mortimer Senior lists a number of historical figures who have engaged in and defended homosexual love, thus suggesting that the desire for the same sex is, in fact, not unnatural. Mortimer Junior, who is undoubtedly the king's most determined opponent in everything else, states that he has no complaint against Edward's love for Gaveston, taking issue instead with the king's preference for Gaveston over other powerful and ambitious courtiers. Gaveston is not criticized because of his sex, but because he is an irresponsible influence on the king.

In the time of Edward II, as Frederic Maitland (amongst other political historians) has noted, the Crown came to symbolize not only the divine properties and capabilities of the king, but also the inalienable rights of the kingdom; the king – during his coronation oaths – swore to always consult with his peers and the commons.[81] As early as the first scene, Edward pays no heed to the royal prerogatives and without consulting his peers, he invites Gaveston to "come … , / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend."

[81] Frederic W. Maitland, *The Constitutional History of England: A Course of Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 99.

(1.1.1-2) Even Edward's ensuing vindications of his will show little or no evidence at all of consultation. In fact, he confers on Gaveston three different titles:

> I here create thee Lord High Chamberlain,
> Chief Secretary to the state and me,
> Earl of Cornwall, King and Lord of Man.
> (*Edward II* 1.1.154-156)

Edward does not stop there; he is quick to grant Gaveston discretionary and executive powers:

> Thou shalt have a guard.
> Wants thou gold? Go to my treasury.
> Wouldst thou be loved and feared? Receive my seal.
> Save or condemn, and in our name command
> Whatso thy mind affects or fancy likes.
> (*Edward II* 1.1.166-170)

Edward's "Whatso thy mind affects or fancy likes" seems to have turned Gaveston's head, as he becomes more and more audacious. Indeed, in the first scene, Gaveston slights a common soldier by suggesting "hospitals" rather than a battlefield are a fit place "for such as [him]." (1.1.35) Moreover, Edward and Gaveston reject with disdain the council of the peers, who want Gaveston to be banished, and lose no time in ousting and actually seizing the property of the Bishop of Coventry. It is not only Gaveston's actual expropriation of the bishop's belongings, but also his earlier passion for "Italian masks by night" (1.1.55) and other expensive entertainments, which foretells his additional profiteering of the Crown's treasury for his private purpose.

As these examples show, what provokes the nobles to war are the overwhelming political implications of Edward's arrogant and irresponsible love; implications that disrupt the ties that hold king, peers and the kingdom together. At the close of the first scene, Mortimer Junior – as if to highlight the primarily political nature of their argument – makes it more than clear that the "wanton humour" between Edward

and Gaveston is not disgraceful because it is homoerotic; Mortimer Senior even justifies the legitimacy of homoerotic love by listing kings from the past who had male lovers. In other words, the king's love for Gaveston is not subversive at all. What is subversive, however, as Mortimer Junior points out, is the "wanton humor" that interferes with the execution of the king's regal duties:

> this I scorn, that one so basely born
> Should by his sovereign favor grow so pert
> And riot it with treasure of the realm
> While soldiers mutiny for want of pay.
> (*Edward II* 1.4.402-405)

With the treasury being redirected from the soldiers to Gaveston, Edward neglects his duties. Hence, Mortimer Junior's severe criticism is not directed at the homoerotic understanding of this "wanton love," but at its political ramifications; the fact that any wantonness in a king is subversive if it leads him to disregard his regal duties.

It is fair to say, therefore, that Edward and Gaveston are not murdered because of their love for one another, but because of their arrogant and selfish violation of established norms.

Indeed, according to critics like DiGangi, sodomy is generally hinted at in the socio-political transgressions that take place within a play.[82] We have to remember that charges of sodomy were hardly ever punished as long as the social order was preserved, which is not the case in *Edward II*. Hence, Gaveston's murder results from his immoral self-indulgence and Edward's downfall is primarily a result of his haphazard administration of the realm, but also because he raises Gaveston – an upstart with no legitimate right to kingship – to nobility. Sodomy in *Edward II*, therefore, takes on meaning primarily when

[82] Mario DiGangi, "Marlowe, Queer Studies, and Renaissance Homoeroticism" in *Marlowe, History, and Sexuality*, Paul W. White, ed., (New York: AMS Press, 1988), 195-209.

the sexual negatively affects the political; when the homoerotic love between Edward and his favourite results in the disturbance of court procedures.

In Shakespeare's plays, as we will see later on, homoerotic desire or love is only abandoned and betrayed, but never stigmatised nor criminalised – it never even leads to disaster, precisely because the characters do not violate any established norms or rules; they conform to the patriarchal mores. Homoerotic desire is replaced by heterosexual desire, paving the way for a natural closure and, hence, it can be argued that Shakespeare's plays only practised impossibilities.

However, John Lyly, one of Shakespeare's most prominent immediate predecessors, in his play *Gallathea*, makes those impossibilities possible:

> 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 affections, and practice only impossibilities.
> (*Gallathea* 2.2.6-9)[83]

Valerie Traub in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* examines the way in which Lyly practised these impossibilities and concludes that, at the plot level, his answer to the problem of same-sex eroticism is "linear."[84] First, the two female characters, cross-dressed by their fathers to escape an annual ritual sacrifice of pretty virgins, fall in love with the other "boy." Dressed in a man's apparel, Phyllida perceives Gallathea, also dressed in men's clothes, and says: "It is a pretty boy and a fair. He might well have been a / woman; but because he is not, I am glad I am …." (2.1.19-20) Gallathea is similarly in awe: "I would salute him, but I fear I should make a curtsy instead / of a leg." (2.1.24-25) Each girl then acknowledges her passion for the other "boy," but

[83] John Lyly, *Gallathea* in *Gallathea and Midas*, Anne Begor Lancashire, ed., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1969). All subsequent play references are to this edition.
[84] Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism of Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 327.

soon they begin to suspect their heart's desire to be a girl, which results in disheartenment:

> PHYLLIDA
> It is pity that Nature framed you not a woman, having a face so fair, so lovely a countenance, so modest a behavior.
> GALLATHEA
> There is a Tree in Tylos, whose nuts have shells like fire, and, being cracked, the kernel is but water.
> PHYLLIDA
> What a toy is it to tell me of that tree, being nothing to the purpose! I say it is pity you are not a woman.
> GALLATHEA
> I would not wish to be a woman, unless it were because thou art a man.
> PHYLLIDA
> Nay, I do not wish thee to be a woman, for then I should not love thee, for I have sworn never to love a woman.
> GALLATHEA
> A strange humor in so pretty a youth, and according to mine, for myself will never love a woman.
> (*Gallathea* 3.2.1-12)

In saying this, the girls illuminate the cultural restrictions surrounding the explicit expression of their attraction to one another. The banter between Gallathea and Phyllida, according to Jean Howard, "is absolutely riveting in the way it acknowledges, insists upon, female erotic desire, while making clear the cultural imperatives that operate to shape, channel, and control that eroticism."[85] However, the two girls are able to "escape" and perhaps even elude heteroeroticism in the end, for so intent is this play on celebrating the love between both girls that the necessity of marriage is deferred beyond the dramatic frame.[86]

[85] Jean Howard, "Sex and Social Conflict: The Erotics of The Roaring Girl" in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, Susan Zimmerman, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1989), 184.
[86] Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, 328.

In addition, the revelation of the girls' real gender occurs before the actual sex change. Even more interestingly, after only a short moment of dismay, Gallathea and Phyllida affirm their unshaken love for one another:

GALLATHEA
Unfortunate Gallathea if this be Phyllida.
PHYLLIDA
Accursed Phyllida, if that be Gallathea!

GALLATHEA
And wast thou all this while enamored of Phyllida, that sweet Phyllida?
PHYLLIDA
And couldst thou dote upon the face of a maiden, thyself being one, on the face of fair Gallathea?
NEPTUNE
Do you both being maidens love one another?
GALLATHEA
I had thought the habit agreeable with the sex, and so burned in the fire of mine own fancies.
PHYLLIDA
I had thought that in the attire of a boy, there could not have lodged the body of a virgin, and so was inflamed with a sweet desire, which now I find a sour deceit.
DIANA
Now things falling out as they do, you must leave these fond, fond affections, nature will have it so, necessity must.
GALLATHEA
I will never love any but Phyllida. Her love is engraven in my heart, with her eyes.
PHYLLIDA
Nor I any but Gallathea, whose faith is imprinted in my thoughts by her words.
NEPTUNE
An idle choice, strange, and foolish, for one virgin to dote on another, and to imagine a constant faith where there can be no cause of affection. How like you this, Venus?
VENUS
I like well and allow it. They shall both be possessed of their wishes, for never shall it be said that Nature or Fortune shall overthrow love and faith. Is your loves unspotted, begun with truth, continued with constancy, and not to be altered till death?
GALLATHEA
Die, Gallathea, if thy love be not so.

PHYLLIDA

Accursed be thou, Phyllida, if thy love be not so.

(*Gallathea* 5.3.113-140)

Despite the objections of Diana and Neptune – comments such as "you must leave these fond, fond affections," "idle choice," "strange" and "foolish" – both girls remain steadfast in their love.

These exceptions make Lyly's play entirely different from Shakespeare's. Whereas Shakespeare ensures that by the end of his plays the wandering course of Eros is "corrected" – in the sense that Jack gets Jill – by channelling erotic desire into heterosexual marriage, *Gallathea* is far more extremely and sincerely homoerotic in plot, structure and character than *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Rather than seek to confirm the inappropriate nature of homoerotic desire by imposing heterosexuality, Lyly not only makes practising impossibilities possible, but at the same time makes visible the "tension … between a view of identity as that which is always there (but has been buried under layers of cultural repression) and that which has never been socially permitted (but remains to be formed, created, or achieved)."[87]

Homoerotic Desire in Shakespeare

Having looked into the way how some of his immediate predecessors dealt with the issue of homoeroticism, it will now be intriguing to take a closer look at a couple of Shakespeare's plays, and see the pervasive ambiguity that he employs in presenting the issue. In what is to follow, this study will look at some select plays and focus on some of the homoerotic attachments which, according to Orgel, "figure in those plays in a context that is more often than not positive, and display little anxiety – even if the underlying

[87] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 100.

attitude to homosexuality is disapproving – about the issue."[88] I would like to extend this argument by proving that although Shakespeare's comedies, as if by magic, work out well and end with heterosexual closure, these characteristics represent only a superficial reading of the plays. For example, in the plays that contain cross-dressing, the female character dressed up as a boy or man must switch back to her "true" gender before the end of the plays. In *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, the heroines, however, do not fully drop their pretended masculinity. The epilogue to *As You Like It* keeps the layering of Rosalind's character going by speaking to the spectators both as Rosalind and as the male actor who plays her. Similarly, Viola does not appear in women's garments after Act 1, Scene 2, and Orsino at no time lays eyes on her in "woman's weeds." (5.1.266) This continuation of a homoerotic undertone challenges a society that gave official sanction only to matrimony.[89] Other dramas do indeed eschew homoerotic relationships and explicitly channel the erotic energy into the culturally constructed container of marriage. I would argue, nevertheless, that the simple fact that homoerotic relationships are presented within a play provides a commentary on the structure of society during Shakespeare's era. Whichever argument is correct, Shakespeare's representation of homoerotic attachments, therefore, illustrates the social dynamic of the time.

It cannot be denied that Rosalind's altered gender identity in *As You Like It* affects the erotic undertones of the play. Every character, male or female, falls in love with Ganymede, the beautiful boy whose feminine appearance can be attributed to the fact that he is a woman in reality. Rosalind's choice of the alias "Ganymede" is an intriguing one; it is a reference to a classical myth with strong homosexual connotations – a well-

[88] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 42.
[89] Bruce Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, 73.

known image to early modern audiences.[90] In the play, even though Orlando is supposed to be in love with Rosalind, he seems drawn to the beautiful young boy. Indeed, the boy who bears a resemblance to the woman he is supposed to love is almost as appealing as the woman herself:

ROSALIND
Why, horns, which such as you are fain to be beholden to your wives for. But he comes armed in his fortune, and prevents the slander of his wife.
ORLANDO
Virtue is no hornmaker, and my Rosalind is virtuous.
ROSALIND
And I am your Rosalind.
CELIA
It pleases him to call you so; but he hath a Rosalind of a better leer than you.
ROSALIND
Come, woo me, woo me, for now I am in a holiday humour, and like enough to consent. What would you say to me now an I were your very, very Rosalind?
ORLANDO
I would kiss before I spoke.
ROSALIND
Nay, you were better speak first, and when you were gravelled for lack of matter you might occasion to kiss. Very good orators, when they are out, they will split; and for lovers, lacking – God warr'nt us – matter, the cleanliest shift is to kiss.
ORLANDO
How if the kiss be denied?
ROSALIND
Then she puts you to entreaty, and there begins new matter.
ORLANDO
Who could be out, being before his beloved mistress?
ROSALIND
Marry, that should you if I were your mistress, or I should think my honesty ranker than my wit.

[90] Ganymede (Ganymēdēs in Greek, Ganymedes or Catamitus in Latin), in Greek legend, the son of Tros (or Laomedon), King of Troy. Because of his unusual beauty, he was carried off either by the gods or by Zeus, disguised as an eagle, or, according to a Cretan account, by Minos, to serve as a cupbearer. In compensation, Zeus gave Ganymede's father a stud of immortal horses (or a golden vine). The earliest forms of the myth have no erotic content, but by the 5th century BC it was believed that Ganymede's kidnapper had a homosexual passion for him. "Ganymede" Encyclopedia Britannica Online, October 2011.; *Ibid.,* 191.

ORLANDO
What, of my suit?
ROSALIND
Not out of your apparel, and yet out of your suit. Am not I your Rosalind?
ORLANDO
I take some joy to say you are because I would be talking of her.
(*As You Like It* 4.1.52-78)

Clearly, the audience would be inclined to assume the presence of homoerotic undercurrents at least, if not more. Moreover, Philip Traci in "As You Like It: Homosexuality in Shakespeare's Play" quotes Jan Kott by saying "the name [Ganymede][91] remained above all, as it had been in antiquity, the symbol of pederasty." Kott's investigation shows a consciousness of both the homosexual aspects of Ganymede and Orlando relationship and the fact that this is but one side of the relationship. Kott explains, for instance, "Orlando does not recognize Rosalind in the shape of Ganymede. Rosalind woos him with intensity, but she does it as a boy, or rather as a boy who in this relationship wants to be a girl for his lover."[92] In addition, the scene in which Ganymede announces that he is in a "holiday humour" and is "like enough to consent," and in which he invites Orlando vigorously to "Come, woo me, woo me," clearly has extreme erotic undertones. But who is lusting after whom? Maybe Rosalind forgets her "true" sexual self and enjoys playing with Orlando. But what about Orlando? Who does he desire, Rosalind or Ganymede? Is it genuinely possible for him to forget the fact that a boy stands in front of him, and not his Rosalind? In addition, the scene comes to a climax with the couple's wish to be married:

ROSALIND
By this hand, it will not kill a fly. But come, now I will be your Rosalind in a more coming-on disposition; and

[92] Philip Traci, "As You Like It: Homosexuality in Shakespeare's Play," *CLA Journal*, 25:1 (1981), 92-93.

ask me what you will, I will grant it.
ORLANDO
Then love me, Rosalind.
ROSALIND
Yes, faith, will I, Fridays and Saturdays and all.
ORLANDO
And wilt thou have me?
ROSALIND
Ay, and twenty such.

ORLANDO
What sayst thou?
ROSALIND
Are you not good?
ORLANDO
I hope so.
ROSALIND
Why then, can one desire too much of a good thing?
(*To* CELIA) Come, sister, you shall be the priest and marry us.
(*As You Like It* 4.1.95-106)

Exactly because of the binding power of marriage in early modern England, this should have unnerved Orlando but he, nonetheless, proceeds willingly with the "mock" marriage. Perhaps he feels safe precisely *because* his partner is a boy and the union will, therefore, not be valid. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the banter between the two *is* erotic, that the play is called *As You Like It* and that Orlando's partner's name is *Ganymede*, the symbol of pederasty, which without doubt, invites different approaches to and interpretations of sexuality.

Twelfth Night, more than any of the other plays being discussed, insists upon heterosexual relationships. The play begins with Orsino desiring Olivia, which establishes a strictly heterosexual frame. Like *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* includes homoerotic bonds, but rather than a seemingly indomitable circulation of desire sooner or later ending in heterosexual matches due to divine intervention, characters in *Twelfth Night* replace their homoerotic desires by normal ones in order to guarantee heterosexual closure. Desires, in

this play seem more limited by Patriarchy, which demands erotic and emotional substitution so as to hold on to heteronormativity. Any characters that do not replace their feelings are marginalised or expelled – like, for example, Antonio. Despite the strictness of the patriarchal structure, through Antonio's character and Viola's cross-dressing, its rigidity seems more like being of little substance. Indeed, Viola's gender transformation is the source of much of the comedy found in the play. In many ways, *Twelfth Night* presents a world turned upside-down, a world in which men and women are freed from the expectations placed upon them by society.[93]

Even though the disguise of "real" gender often provokes homoerotic desires, situations and relationships, Antonio's homoeroticism emanates from his undisguised identity and social roles rather than cross-dressing. His bond with Sebastian is as (if not even more) homoerotic as Cesario's bond with Orsino and Ganymede's bond with Orlando, without being watered down by cross-dressing. The first time we happen upon Antonio and Sebastian, they are about to be separated. Sebastian wants to go to Duke Orsino's court and Antonio wishes to accompany him, but it would be dangerous for him because he has enemies in Illyria. The entire first scene between the two men focuses on Sebastian's discouragement of Antonio's attempts to accompany him, and Antonio's unstoppable wish to protect the man with whom he has spent "three months … / No int'rim, not a minute's vacancy. / Both day and night." (5.1.89-91) Homoerotic affections are unmistakably perceptible in their conversation. In that very scene, Antonio begs Sebastian: "If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant." (2.1.30-31) In addition to the apparent signification of the word "servant," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a servant is also "a professed lover; one who is devoted to the service

[93] Valerie Traub, "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare," 141.

of a lady."[94] Without any doubt, Antonio's assertion depicts his relationship with Sebastian as quite erotic. Antonio adds "But come what may, I adore thee so / That danger shall seem sport, and I will go." (2.1.41-42) Greater than Antonio's fear of danger is his passion for Sebastian, and so he decides to follow his beloved.

Moreover, unlike Viola – whose duty drives her to woo Olivia for Orsino – it is Antonio's desire "more sharp than filèd steel" (3.3.5) that urges him to follow Sebastian. Antonio continues:

> More sharp than filèd steel, did spur me forth,
> And not all love to see you – though so much
> As might have drawn on to a longer voyage –
> But jealousy what might befall your travel,
> Being skilless in these parts… My willing love
> The rather by these arguments of fear
> Set forth in your pursuit.
>
> (*Twelfth Night* 3.3.6-13)

In the glossary, the editors of *The Norton Shakespeare* describe "jealousy" as "apprehension." However, like Traub, I maintain "jealousy" and "apprehension" both work equally well. First, Antonio is clearly jealous of the sexual attractions that might seduce Sebastian, a fear that is not groundless as he – as previously discussed – succumbs rather quickly to Olivia's charisma. Secondly, and without doubt, he also worries about the hazards that may "befall" his lover.[95] Concluding by emphasising his "willing love" accentuates the fact that Antonio loves Sebastian passionately. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "will" as "carnal desire or appetite" and even mentions an example of Shakespeare's use of the word in its erotic sense: "Thus graceless holds he disputation /

[94] "servant" *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://photo.pds.org:5004/view/th/class/137195>, November 2011.
[95] Valerie Traub, "The Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy" in *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 134.

'Tween frozen conscience and hot-burning will." (*The Rape of Lucrece*, ll. 246-247)[96] Therefore, when Antonio concludes the scene with a reference to their sleeping arrangements and adds, "There you shall have me," (3.3.42) it is devilishly hard not to give these words a homoerotic meaning.

The resolution of *Twelfth Night* presents the final exchange of desires; it renounces homoeroticism – represented in the figure of Antonio – and at the same time perpetuates it in the figure of Cesario. Marriage, as previously argued, is the persevering structure of society in Illyria, but concurrently not all homoeroticism is constrained by the exchanges that take place at the end of the play. Once Orsino discovers that Cesario is actually Viola, he is ready to marry her. However, he first wants to see her in her "woman's weeds," (5.1.266) but she informs him that the "captain that did bring me first on shore / Hath my maid's garments. He upon some action / Is now in durance, at Malvolio's suit." (5.1.267-269) Malvolio, of course, is furious and leaves with "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you," (5.1.365) implying that Viola may never get her clothes back. While the audience, the reader and Orsino know that Cesario is a woman, his gender is constructed entirely by his disguise. At one point, he literally comes to be "all the daughters of [her] father's house / And all the brothers too." (2.4.119-120) Denuded of her own clothes, which should reconstitute her identity as a woman, Cesario will remain Orsino's "boy."

Similarly, Antonio's affection for Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* carries a distinct homoerotic component. Antonio loves Bassanio dearly and he is happy to prove it, both financially and physically. Indeed, Antonio shows admirable generosity in his readiness to finance Bassanio's enterprise, and particularly in his wish to please Bassanio

[96] "will" *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://photo.pds.org:5004/view/Entry/229046?rskey=OwkrqN&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>, November 2011.

by enabling his romance with Portia. He is the paradigm who "more rejoiceth at his friend's good fortune than at his own."[97] Antonio, hence, vows that in addition to his purse, his "person" and "extremest means / Lie all unlocked" (1.1.138-139) to Bassanio's needs. Antonio's sacrifices are signs of a lover who wants to make public his deep affection. His devotion becomes evident to bystanders like Salerio, who observes that Antonio "only loves the world" (2.8.50) for Bassanio. The sadness that burdens Antonio at the beginning of the play is understood when Bassanio leaves to marry Portia; "In sooth," Antonio sighs "I know not why I am so sad. / It wearies me, you say it wearies you." (1.1.1-2) Antonio's feelings towards Bassanio are clear to Salerio, who remarks, "Why then you are in love …."

> I saw Bassanio and Antonio part …
> And even there, his eye being big with tears,
> Turning his face, he put his hand behind him
> And, with affection wondrous sensible,
> He wrung Bassanio's hand; and so they parted.
> (*The Merchant of Venice* 2.8.36-49)

Antonio's grand gestures, according to Steve Patterson, can also be seen as signs of physical desire.[98] Salerio remarks on Antonio's "affection wondrous sensible" for Bassanio (2.8.48), and as previously mentioned, Antonio himself professes, "My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie unlocked to [Bassanio's] occasions." (1.1.138-139) In Seymour Kleinberg's opinion, the echoing pun on *purse* and *person* suggests a "sexual

[97] Sir Thomas Elyot, "The wonderfful historye of Titus and Gisyppus, wherin is the ymage of perfect amitie" in *The Boke Named The Governour*, Book II (London: J.M. Dent & Co, 1998), Online Version <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/resour/mirrors/rbear/gov/gov2.htm#XII.>, October 2011.
[98] Steve Patterson, "The Bankruptcy of Homoerotic Amity in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 50:1 (1999), 20.

longing" – a love vented in carnal terms.[99] To give all, including one's body, was a sign of supreme love.[100]

Also Bassanio is certain about his attachment to Antonio: "to you Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love." (1.1.130-131) Even as he stands before the court, before Shylock and, unknowingly, before his own wife Portia, present dressed up as a magistrate, Bassanio claims:

> Antonio, I am married to a wife
> Which is as dear to me as life itself,
> But life itself, my wife, and all the world
> Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
> I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
> Here to this devil, to deliver you.
> (*The Merchant of Venice* 4.1.277-282)

Furthermore, the term "love," used frequently by Antonio in reference to Bassanio, hints towards a homoerotic relationship. Ready to die, Antonio says goodbye to his friend and begs him to:

> Commend me to your honourable wife.
> Tell her the process of Antonio's end.
> Say how I loved you. Speak me fair in death,
> And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
> Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
> (*The Merchant of Venice* 4.1.268-272)

According to Joseph Pequigney, "the usage of one man as the 'love' of another is rare, and with the exception of *the Sonnets* does not occur elsewhere in Shakespeare or in the period."[101] So the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio can, indeed, be viewed as homoerotic. At the end of the play, however, Portia demands that Bassanio

[99] Seymour Kleinberg, "The Merchant of Venice: The Homosexual as Anti-Semite in Nascent Capitalism" in *Literary Visions of Homosexuality*, Stuart Kellogg, ed., (New York: Haworth Press, 1983), 117.
[100] Sir Thomas Elyot, "The wonderfful historye of Titus and Gisyppus, wherin is the ymage of perfect amitie," Online Version, October 2011.
[101] Joseph Pequigney, *Such is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), 211.

subordinates his attachment to Antonio to his attachment to her. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the woman insists on her husband prioritising marriage bonds over other affective bonds. Naturally, Portia does it kindly. So that Antonio feels included, she gives him the ring to give back to Bassanio. Antonio knows that the homoerotic relationship with Bassanio is over, but thanks to Portia's kindness, at least their friendship can continue. Although their homoerotic attachment is neither stigmatised nor criminalised, it is, nonetheless, subdued by Portia's insistence on the primacy of marriage.[102]

In other words, in most of Shakespeare's plays, homoerotic desire is abandoned, betrayed and crossed, and at the same time, a heterosexual desire is created to fit into the narrative as a natural closure. However, these homoerotic desires never lead to disaster, because they observe the patriarchal mores of the time.

Thus, we can argue, on the basis of this play of homoeroticism in Shakespeare and his predecessors' dramas, that even if the Elizabethan theatre generally conformed to the dominant patriarchal ideology of the time, at times, in quite subtle ways, they challenged the heterosexual mores of the patriarchal discourse. Shakespeare brilliantly used the undercurrents of homoeroticism in the sexual behaviour of his society to explore the many-sidedness and diversity in human self and desire. In Shakespeare, as in his society, homoeroticism or sodomy made it possible for men to explore and compare their sexual preferences, and to express and discuss their sexual tastes. It is because of this erotic reflection that men, throughout the time, have been able to voice conscious erotic preferences.[103] As Halperin comments in his study, the "highly elaborate, ritualistic, conspicuously public practice of courtship and lovemaking provided socially empowered

[102] Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 117.
[103] Halperin, "How To Do The History of Male Homosexuality," 98.

males with a traditional, socially sanctioned discursive space for articulating such preferences and for presenting themselves as conscious *subjects* of desire."[104]

Quite significantly, as we see it in Shakespeare, the homo-/heterosexual model has other consequences. Homosexuality often translates same-sex sexual relations into the register of sameness and mutuality. Homosexual relations do not always necessarily suggest an imbalance in social identities or sexual positions, nor are they necessarily expressed in terms of hierarchies of gender, power, age, or sexual role. Homosexual relations are not necessarily asymmetric in their distribution of erotic pleasure or desire, as we have observed in many instances in Shakespeare. Rather, the notion of homosexuality means that it is possible for sexual partners to bond with one another, not on the basis of their difference but on the basis of them being similar, their identity of desire and orientation and "sexuality," just like that of heterosexual romantic love.[105]

Halperin claims, "homosexual relations cease to be compulsorily structured by a polarization of identities and roles (active/passive, insertive/receptive, masculine/feminine, or man/boy)."[106] Large-scale social institutions do not organize homosexual relations according to their prescriptions or requirements. In fact, homosexual relations, in their own right, serve as principles of social organization and engender freestanding social institutions.[107] Ever since Shakespeare, we have witnessed the political and cultural evolution of this category of human sexuality.

Historically, owing much to the explanations provided by thinkers like Foucault, we have now come to recognize, that homosexuality is not merely same-sex sexual object choice, nor can it merely be defined as a notion of conscious erotic same-sex preference.

[104] Halperin, "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality," 98.
[105] *Ibid.*, 112.
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] *Ibid.*

Homosexuality, then, is the definition of same-sex sexual object choice as a fundamental part of sexual and social difference. Homosexuality is an element in a new system of sexuality that makes personal individuation possible: it fixes a sexual orientation and a sexual identity for each and every one. Homosexuality per se, is a new component of the social organization, of the social articulation of human difference, of the social production of desire, and finally, of the social construction of oneself.[108] It should be for projecting, in his own time, the potentiality of homoeroticism for personal individuation and construction of the self against the grains of the overarching ideologies of the institutions, that we should value the dramas of Shakespeare more than anything else.

[108] Halperin, "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality," 113.

Chapter 3
THEATRICAL TRANSVESTISM AGAINST PATRIARCHAL DISCOURSE: CROSS-DRESSING IN SHAKESPEARE

The culturally constructed forms taken by desire and its gender dictated manifestations are of extreme importance in Shakespearean theatre; they function as keys to our understanding of the nature of the Renaissance social practices as far as gender roles are concerned. A tension between identity and difference has been constant in the history of sexuality, and in the last chapter, I have demonstrated how in the Renaissance society it resulted in the cultural production of representations of homoeroticism as seen in the plays of Shakespeare. But this hetero/homo categorization of sexuality was never decisive, and there always persisted a fundamental uncertainty regarding the constant nature of sexuality. Hence, going beyond the homoerotic implications, I believe it is imperative that we explore in greater depths the cultural implications of this erotic ambiguity in Shakespeare, which is best done by looking more closely into that particular theatrical convention of the time: cross-dressing, or transvestism. Hence, this chapter will strive to gauge the fuller implications of cross-dressing in Shakespeare as a theatrical sign within a subtler project of unsettling the logic of the patriarchal discourse of sexuality of the period.

The Cultural Politics of Transvestism

Transvestism as a cultural phenomenon has not just been confined to the Renaissance stage. It existed before and has existed since, with important implications to the cultural formations of gender in every society. It has become of particular importance in our own time, for more reasons than one.

One of the objectives of cross-dressing or transvestite is precisely to mark a kind of displacement, substitution, or slippage: from gender to class, class to gender, or, equally possibly, from gender to race or religion. As Marjorie Garber remarks in an interesting study on the issue, "the transvestite is both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification. It points toward itself, or rather toward the place where it is not."[109]

The ambiguous position of a transvestite in any cultural situation is of immense symbolic significance. The transvestite as object of desire, as we often see it in Shakespeare's dramas, is perhaps the manifestation of Freud's concept of the overestimation of the object.[110] For, the transvestite is there and gone at once – nobody gets "Cesario" (or "Ganymede"), but "Cesario" (or "Ganymede") is necessary to falling in love.[111]

A revisiting of the sites of cross-dressing in Shakespeare can clearly inform us what exactly the function of this phenomenon within the cultural framework of the Elizabethan society was. There is an enormous amount of ambiguity regarding the meaning and purpose of this practice on the Elizabethan stage, and the present chapter will look into the cultural, political and also symbolic overtones of transvestism.

The use of transvestism in Renaissance drama generated heated debates amongst anti-theatrical writers about the dangers it posed to public morality. Puritans such as Philip Stubbes and John Rainolds believed that cross-dressing blurred sexual and

[109] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 36.
[110] For a more detailed discussion on the overestimation of the object, see Joseph Sandler, et al., ed.. *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction"* (London: Karnac Books Ltd, 2012), 35-53, esp., 41.
[111] Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, 37.

social boundaries by "adultering" the essences that God had given us.[112] Stubbes maintains, "our apparel was given us as a sign of distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex, and therefore one to wear the apparel of another sex is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the verity of his own kind."[113] Another aim of this chapter, then, is to find out what the dangers of cross-dressing according to the anti-theatrical tract exactly were, and whether the objections to this practice were founded. What did the audiences see when they went to the theatre, the female character or the boy underneath the dress? There is testimony of sixteenth and seventeenth century playgoers that suggests that audiences were always aware that they were not watching women.[114] Any erotic element in the boy's impersonations and the audience's perception of those impersonations must surely have varied.[115] The question remains, whether or not Shakespeare seizes the chance to confront commonly held beliefs about "gender-appropriate" behaviours and desires whenever a character's fictional gender is changed by disguise, whenever a boy actor dresses up as a girl.

Cross-dressing, then, is central to the erotic dynamic of Renaissance drama. There are strong advocates for the view that the practice of cross-dressing only served to reinforce the patriarchal ideology of male supremacy in the gender relations. But at the same time, we cannot fail to notice the disruptive power the practice wielded within the male framework of the theatre. It was used by the playwrights of the time, most notably by Shakespeare, for putting into question the accepted assumptions regarding the gender positions, and very often, for subverting the logic of patriarchal ideology. Weighing the relative merits of both the views, the present chapter will look deeper into the political

[112] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations*, 26.
[113] As quoted in Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkley, 1981), 92.
[114] Bruce Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, 148.
[115] *Ibid.,* 149.

significance of the practice of cross-dressing for the time, along with its power to inscribe a new ideology of gender into the cultural definitions of human identity.

Jean Howard argues, "cross-dressing, as fact and as idea, threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was a chief instance, trumpeted from pulpit, instantiated in law, and acted upon by monarch and commoner alike."[116] Just like any other social practice, its significance changed with the situations of its occurrence, with the societal position of the offender and with the particular sites of its enactment. On the stage, for example, the import of cross-dressing "was mediated by all the conventions of dramatic narrative and Renaissance dramatic production."[117]

Rereading Shakespeare to reassess the significance of the cross-dressing convention, as this part of the study proposes to do, is motivated by the larger concern with which this study is involved – re-historicizing the past with the help from the present historical and critical knowledge. Such a reassessment will give care to the differences amongst miscellaneous representations of cross-dressing, but will simultaneously analyze the manners in which those representations form an interconnected network, through which we can look at and understand the visible struggles of gender and class in the period; conflicts in which the theatre played a highly contradictory role. According to Louis Montrose, when talking about a new framework for historical analysis: "Integral to this new project of historical criticism is … a recognition of the agency of criticism in constructing and delimiting the subject of study, and of the historical positioning of the

[116] Jean Howard, "Cross-dressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," 418.
[117] *Ibid.*

critic vis-à-vis that subject."[118] This historical positioning has probably never been as significant as at present, with all the fears and anxieties regarding gender balance and its cultural import looming large in our modern society. A look back into the times of early modernism and its way of dealing with the issue will help us gain some perspective in this regard.

Different views have emerged over time regarding the exact cultural significance of the phenomenon of transvestism. There is an existential concern voiced by many, regarding the danger it posed to the identity formation of the subject. On the subject of boys playing women's roles, Laura Levine argues that that practice exposed a deep-seated anxiety about the self not being stable and fixed but "unstable and monstrous and infinitely malleable unless strictly controlled."[119] "Behind the repeated protestations that the boy actors will be made effeminate by wearing women's clothing," she argues, "lies the fear they will be found to have no essential being."[120]

But many cultural historians are of the opinion that such a fear is unfounded, because the male ideology of the time used the practice primarily as a tool to reinforce its own vision of the human self. For example, Stephen Greenblatt states that an all-male acting company, as was the practice, was the natural and unremarkable product of a culture whose conception of gender was "teleologically male."[121] Clara Claiborne Park in "As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular," suggests that women who

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[118] Louis Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," *English Literary Renaissance,* 16 (1986), 7.
[119] Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization 1579 -1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12. As quoted in Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 159.
[120] *Ibid.*
[121] For Greenblatt the phrase "teleologically male" refers to the "one-sex" account of bodies. Thomas Laqueur delineated the "one-sex" model. In this model, female and male sexual organs are structured homologously; the woman wears hers on the inside, rather than on the outside. The "one-sex" model is, hence, inevitably male and the female was viewed as a providentially inferior version of the male. Stephen Greenblatt, "Fiction and Friction" in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), 66-93, esp., 88.

cross-dress in these plays discard their disguises willingly, providing to men an extravaganza of spirited women who tame themselves voluntarily to conform to male expectations.[122]

But there are obviously fissures within such an over-arching patriarchal dominance implied by the custom. Catherine Belsey and Phyllis Rackin, for example, both maintain that, maybe in not all, but certainly in some situations cross-dressing on the stage allowed the possibility of revealing the variety, fluidity and cultural construction of gender, thus working against the binarism used to suppress women.[123] Juliet Dusinberre argues that plays of cross-dressing explored the freedom of women by toying with gender identity.[124]

Before looking further into the contesting claims regarding the cultural meaning of transvestism as a theatrical practice, we will take a close picture of the actual practice of cross-dressing on the Shakespearean stage.

The Dangers of Cross-Dressing

In order to properly gather the significance of the cross-dressing convention, we need to, first of all, gain a perspective regarding the historical rationale of its origin. It goes almost hand in hand with the origin and development of the various theatre companies in England. We might in this regard follow Andrew Gurr, who, in an authoritative study, tells us the detailed story of what happened through the seventy years between the granting of the first royal patent in 1574 and the closure of theatres in

[122] Clara Claiborne Park, "As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular" in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), 100-116.
[123] Phyllis Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," 29-41, and Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies" in *Alternative Shakespeares,* John Drakakis, ed., (London: Methuen, 1985), 166-90.
[124] Juliette Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 231-71.

1642.[125] With the statute of 1572, the "Acte for the Punishment of Vacabondes," begins the establishment of the official institution of public theatre. The statute, by curbing the wayward nature of the public performance, groomed the strolling entertainers to professional players. It required each playing company to be authorized by a noble. In 1583, Queen Elizabeth herself formed a company under her name, The Queen's Men. And later, when James came to the throne, he took over the patronage of the company and then made his son and his wife patrons of the other leading companies. Thus, the theatre as an official institution flourished under the royal patronage it received, despite the antagonism from the clergy and the puritan elements of the society. But their serious reservations regarding the public performance of the female roles resulted in the acting convention of keeping women away from the stage and their roles being taken up by boys who cross-dressed as women. The early boy companies were established as far back as the 1570s, and ran for commercial purposes, just as the early adult companies, and they were rising and falling regularly throughout the 1580s. By the 1590s, two companies merged to take a predominant position on the London scene – The Admiral's Men and Lord Strange's Men. The amalgamation lasted until the last of the major reshuffles in 1594, out of which emerged the most successful company of all: The Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's company.[126] What is important regarding these playing companies is that all of them used boys in the place of women, excluding women altogether from the stage physically. They instead adopted the convention of cross-dressing, which nevertheless did not placate the anti-theatrical positions.

A good number of critics still argued that the stage, and especially the use of the cross-dressing convention, was dangerous. The attacks on the English theatre and

[125] Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 27.
[126] *Ibid.*, 34.

cross-dressing came from English Puritans who published numerous pamphlets against the theatre in order to close it down. This "literature of denunciation," as Edmund Morgan puts it, "reached its culmination in William Prynne's *Histrio-Mastix* in 1633."[127] According to Morgan, Prynne writes that it is risky for actors to take part in plays and for the audience to attend plays in the theatre. The Puritans were scared of the theatre because they feared that wearing women's clothes could actually change the gender of the male body underneath the disguise. Hence, they saw the theatre as producing a monstrous transformation of the self. Moreover, they perceived the theatre as being so powerful that they thought that people would imitate what they had seen in the play. Alongside many other twentieth century critics, Stephen Orgel has argued that this fear was part of a wider anxiety about the nature of identity.[128]

The hostility to the stage was articulated most fully by polemicists, who saw a person's identity – the self – as fixed and stable. William Prynne's *Histrio-Mastix* insists decisively that God "hath given a uniforme, distinct and proper being to every creature," and is at the same time the work, as we will see, which reveals the most anxiety about the

[127] Gabriel Egan in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* explains*: "*The first important attack on the theatre was Stephen Gosson's rather mild *The School of Abuse* (1579), followed by the stronger *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582). The former was dedicated, without authority, to Philip Sidney, whose *Defence of Poetry* partly answers it. In January 1583 the bear-baiting stadium at Paris Garden collapsed killing many in the lowest gallery and Puritan preachers hailed this as God's judgement. Later the same year Philip Stubbes, in his *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), complained that 'the running to Theatres and Curtains, daily and hourly, time and tide, to see plays and interludes' was bound to 'insinuate foolery, and renew the remembrance of heathen idolatory' and to 'induce whoredom and uncleanness'. Two aspects of playing were subject to criticism in these attacks. The subject matter was likely to incite irreligious sensual pleasure via spectacles of 'wrath, cruelty, incest, injury [and] murder' in the tragedies and 'love, cozenage, flattery, bawdry [and] sly conveyance of whoredom' in the comedies, as Gosson put it. Furthermore, acting itself was suspect because commoners feigned the actions of monarchs and men the actions of women, which might suggest that God-given social and sexual distinctions were matters merely of conduct rather than being …. The longest anti-theatrical polemic was William Prynne's *Histrio-mastix: The Players' Scourge* of 1633 which specifically laments the folio format, once reserved for Bibles and other high-quality work, being used for play anthologies such as 'Ben Johnsons, Shackspeers and others'. Prynne was imprisoned, and his ears were removed because his condemnation of women acting was taken to be a direct reference to Queen Henrietta Maria's participation in a masque, but his book was influential in the suppression of playing in 1642. Gabriel Egan, "Anti-Theatrical Polemic" in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare,* Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13-14; Edmund S. Morgan, "Puritan Hostility to the Theatre," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* 110:5 (1966), 340.

[128] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 26.

gender of that "proper being."[129] As discussed earlier, gender roles were clearly defined in the Renaissance, but plays like Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* seem to highlight the idea that "gender is, above all, a social construct … varying from one society to another, related to sex but not identical with it."[130] Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night* are able to cross gender boundaries and to be accepted in society as a member of either sex. With this representation, according to Rackin, "Shakespeare emphasises the attractiveness of his transvestite heroines, to other women as well as to the men they love."[131] However, it was this fluidity of gender and desires it prompts which appalled the Puritans. Indeed, Prynne repeatedly emphasises that men should never wear women's clothing and that women should never wear men's garments: "It is again a most abominable thing for women to become men … and to wear that apparel of a man."[132] Prynne's repetition here seems to stress the difference in gender roles and hierarchy to which he is desperately trying to cling.

In order to maintain this hierarchy, Prynne and his fellow Puritans constantly called those who cross-dress "monsters, of both kindes, half women, half men" and made it explicit that boy actors (or men) who wear women's clothing can literally "degenerate" into a woman.[133] In this way, the anti-theatrical tracts grew increasingly obsessed with the idea of the effeminised male actor. Prynne sees women as being so inferior to men that in order to play a woman's part in a play, a man must diminish in quality so as to take on the natural mannerisms and behaviour of a woman. Hence, the anti-theatrical writers were of the opinion that the theatre could make men effeminate, as the actor's own identity is

[129] William Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix: The Player's Scourge or Actor's Tragedy* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), 182-183.
[130] Phyllis Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," 30.
[131] *Ibid.*, 36.
[132] Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, 188.
[133] In *Histrio-Mastix* Prynne described a man whom women's clothing had literally caused a sex change, 197.

unstable, and he himself can be shaped or unfashioned by the part he plays. In *School of Abuse,* another anti-theatricalist, Stephen Gosson, claims that the actual danger for the actor is that he has to become the part in the interest of playing it well. The actor who plays a tyrant must "whet his mind unto tyranny that he may give life to the picture he presenteth."[134] "It is not that the actor himself has the power to shape identity," Laura Levine explains, "but that the part is actually constitutive and shapes the man who plays it."[135] As Levine puts it, the anti-theatricalists seem to have believed that the self "can … be altered, but [only] by malevolent forces outside its control."[136] Levine concludes, "the self was both inherently monstrous and inherently nothing at all."[137] Therefore, a "male actor, dressed in women's clothing, seemed to lack an inherent gender, and this seemed to make him monstrous."[138] As previously mentioned, Stubbes' *Anatomie of Abuses* calls men who wear women's clothes "monsters, of both kindes, half women, half men."[139] He defines the monstrousness itself in terms of "that which has no essential nature – because it has no essential gender."[140] Thus, the ambiguous sexuality of the actor – the hermaphroditic actor – becomes "the embodiment of all that is frightening about the self," Levine explains.[141]

As the anti-theatricalists' polemical rhetoric makes clear, they preferred definite, perceptible gender boundaries. Gender boundaries allowed them to believe that their own identity – the self – was "uniforme" and "distinct." To them, the use of transvestite actors implied that gender boundaries were fluid and that gender could take

[134] Stephen Gosson, as quoted in Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14.
[135] Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing*, 14.
[136] *Ibid.*, 12.
[137] *Ibid.*
[138] *Ibid.*, 19.
[139] Phillip Stubbes, as quoted in Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing,* 19.
[140] Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing,* 19.
[141] *Ibid.*

the shape of whatever clothes an actor was put into. Therefore, the anti-theatricalists' repeated, anxious attacks insist that fluidity is evil and unnatural, like magic.[142]

In order to prevent the lines from blurring, Prynne argues that one of the reasons that God has given the two sexes different clothing is to establish and demonstrate a clear distinction between them. He argues that a man dressing in women's garments "perverts one principall use of garments, to *difference men from women*."[143] Similarly, Stephen Gosson defends this view by stating "garments are set down for signes distinctive betwene sexe and sexe."[144] Jonas Barish, in his study of the anti-theatrical material, quotes William Perkins who says, "wanton and excessive apparel … maketh a confusion of such degrees and callings as God hath ordained." "Distinctions of dress," Barish comments, "however external or theatrical they seem to us … virtually belong to our essence, and may no more be tampered with than that essence itself."[145] The very fact that clothing marks the difference between the sexes insinuates that there is no difference when the clothes are removed and, therefore, that gender is only a construct of what is to be worn by whom. As culture and society normally decide what is to be worn, gender must, hence, be a construct of culture and society. In order to uphold this difference, the anti-theatricalist writers repeated ceaselessly that costume was the "sign" of gender, and highlighted the importance of not donning the garments assigned to the opposite gender as according to Shapiro, "cross-gender casting disrupted the sense of difference undergirding the strict binary gender system."[146]

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[142] Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing,* 12-13.
[143] Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix,* 207.
[144] Stephen Gosson, "Playes Confuted in Five Actions" in *Markets of Bawdrie: The Dramatic Criticism of Stephen Gosson*, Arthur F. Kinney, ed., Salzburg Studies in Literature 4 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974), 181.
[145] Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*, 92.
[146] Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines & Female Pages* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 41.

If, however, anti-theatricalists believed that clothes are constitutive, they contradicted themselves by claiming that wearing clothes of the opposite gender "could actually alter the gender beneath."[147] In "Transvestism and Stage Controversy in Spain and England 1580-1680," Ursula Heise posits, "in a culture for which the 'essence' of gender identity … consists precisely of certain sets of cultural encodings and practices, the infringement of such codes may indeed have an 'emasculating' or 'un-sexing' effect."[148] In this sense, Gosson notes: "there is something dangerous not only about dressing, but also about talking and gesturing like a woman."[149] Similarly, according to Prynne, not only wearing women's clothes but also acting like women is an abomination before God, because biblical injunctions from Deuteronomy[150] assert that clothing and even hairstyles accentuate the difference between a man and a woman. Prynne believed that God wants a clear distinction between the sexes and, therefore, mannerisms, characteristics, pose and gestures must differ as well.[151] In the view of the anti-theatricalists, a boy acting a woman's part will eventually turn into a woman. The very act of playing a woman as a man was, therefore, considered to tarnish the lines drawn by God, and would result in a terrifying effeminacy.

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[147] Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing*, 4.
[148] Ursula Heise, "Transvestism and the Stage Controversy in Spain and England 1580-1680," *Theatre Journal*, 44 (1992), 371.
[149] Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing*, 21.
[150] Deuteronomy, Hebrew Devarim, ("Words"), fifth book of the Old Testament, written in the form of a farewell address by Moses to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land of Canaan. The title Deuteronomy, derived from Greek, thus means a "copy," or a "repetition," of the law rather than "second law," as the word's etymology seems to suggest. Although Deuteronomy is presented as an address by Moses, scholars generally agree that it dates from a much later period of Israelite history. An early edition of Deuteronomy as it exists today has been identified with the book of the Law discovered in the Temple of Jerusalem about 622 BC (2 Kings 22:8; 2 Chronicles 34:15). This early edition, corresponding roughly to chapters 5–26 and 28 of Deuteronomy as it now stands, expresses a cultic liturgy. Chapters 5–11 contain an introductory speech by Moses, largely hortatory. In chapters 12–26 laws are reiterated that the people are exhorted to obey. The section closes with a report of the formulation of a Covenant between God and his chosen people. Chapter 28 recounts in elaborate detail the blessings or curses that will come upon the people, depending on their response to laws that explicate their covenantal obligations. This arrangement of materials corresponds to the liturgy of Covenant renewal festivals that were celebrated in Israel's premonarchic period. Within this cultic context very ancient laws were preserved and transmitted. "Deuteronomy" *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, <http://britannica.gates.myschool.lu/EBchecked/topic/159740/Deuteronomy>, April 2012.
[151] Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix,* 199.

The virulent fulminations against boy-players, however, not only warn against the transformation of the boy into a monster of "both kindes," but also signal an even more appalling transmogrification. The anti-theatrical tract argued that the audience would get wrapped up in the play and would, as a result, be unable to differentiate between fantasy and reality and would imitate the actions and behaviours they had seen on the stage. It was feared, therefore, that not only would the male audience members lust after the play's female character but that they would also lust after the boy underneath the costume, or even desire to put on women's clothing, thus becoming effeminate. This concern is so omnipresent in the anti-theatrical tracts that it is worthy of examination.[152]

John Rainolds, another Puritan and an Oxford Greek scholar, was of the same opinion as Prynne. He, too, warns "of beautifull boyes transformed into women by putting on their raiment, their feature, lookes, and facions."[153] He, however, takes the argument a step further and claims that sodomy, homosexuality, sadistic flagellation and male marriage are all likely consequences of such behaviour.[154] The reservations expressed by Rainolds carry some weight if we are to remember the fact that as a student, Rainolds himself once played "Hyppolita," Queen of the Amazones in Richard Edwards's *Palamon and Arcite,* for an audience including Elizabeth I during her visit to Oxford in 1566. In general, the anti-theatrical tracts accused men wearing women's clothing of engaging in unnatural sexual practices, for which sodomy was used as a catchall designation. However, as Alan Bray points out, while sodomy was considered to be an extremely revolting

[152] For a more detailed discussion of the fear of effeminization, see Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization, 1579-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 22-23; Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 27-30.
[153] John Rainolds, *Overthrow of Stage Playes* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1972), 34-35; 10-11.
[154] *Ibid.*

offence, there were few cases of persecution during the period in question.[155] Additionally, it is essential to note that sodomy rarely seems to have been associated with what we now call homosexual activity, for which there is a fair amount of evidence at the time, especially between men of unequal status.

This argument reaches its peak in Prynne's *Histrio-Mastix*, in which he claims by citing long lists of antecedents that the cross-dressing convention is extremely dangerous because female dress is an indispensible stimulant for homoeroticism. His list includes, for example, the "Male Priests of Venus" who, with their companions, the "passive beastly sodomites" of Florida, "went clad in womans apparell, the better to elliciate, countenance, act and colour their unnaturall execrable uncleannesse."[156] It also includes the magical Incubi,[157] "who clothed their Galli,[158] Succubi,[159] Ganymedes … in woman's attire, whose virilities they did oft-time dissect, to make them more effeminate, transforming them as neere might be to women, both in apparell, gesture, speech, behaviour …. And more especially in long unshorne, womanish, frizled lust-provoking haire and love-lockes …."[160] Prynne, like most other Puritans, here represents homosexuality and homoeroticism as "vices" that grow out of a violation of gender boundaries:

> [Prynne] associates male homosexuality with the loss of the masculine gender in a number of ways: first, through associations attached to the Incubi and Succubi who have no inherent gender, second, through the associations of castration – or as Prynne puts it, 'dissection' – and third,

[155] Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 71.
[156] Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, 209.
[157] An evil spirit that lies on persons in their sleep; *especially* one that has sexual intercourse with women while they are sleeping. "Incubus" Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://britannica.gates.myschool.lu/EBchecked/topic/284957/incubus>, October 2011. All subsequent references will be to Encyclopedia Britannica Online.
[158] The Galli were eunuchs attired in female garb, with long hair fragrant with ointment. "Gallus" Encyclopedia Britannica Online, October 2011.
[159] A demon assuming female form in order to have sexual intercourse with men in their sleep. "Succubus" Encyclopedia Britannica Online, October 2011.
[160] Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, 209-210.

> through the notion … that 'doing' what a woman does leads to 'being' what a woman is.[161]

According to Prynne, therefore, the sodomite is the same as the effeminate or androgynous male.

The deepest fear in the anti-theatrical writings, therefore, is the fear of universal effeminization, and homosexuality – sodomy – as the centre of attention, is only an attempt to prove their reasoning. "Sodomy in the tracts of Prynne and Stubbes … functions as a metaphor or scapegoat, or an attempt to give an account for the much more disturbing idea at the centre of these tracts," as Levine puts it.[162] At the heart of the issue was the "concept of the mimetic art … the art itself that effeminates."[163] "The growth of desire through the experience of theatre," Stephen Orgel summarises:

> … is a sinister progression: the play excites the spectator, and sends him home to 'perform' himself; the result is sexual abandon with one's wife, or more often with any available woman (all the women at the playhouse being considered available), or worst of all, the spectator begins by lusting after a female character, but ends by having sex with the man she 'really' is.[164]

Indeed, Prynne believed it was too much to expect "[that] mortal men … could view without imitating those immodest gestures, speeches, attires, which inseparably accompany the acting of our Stage-Playes; especially where the Bawdes … [and] the Womans … parts are lively represented."[165] Phillip Stubbes explains that the theatre encourages men to play the woman's part and argues that after the play ends, "every one

[161] Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing*, 22-23.
[162] *Ibid.,* 23.
[163] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 29.
[164] *Ibid.*, 29.
[165] Edmund S. Morgan, "Puritan Hostility to the Theatre," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 110:5 (1966), 342.

bringes another homeward of their way verye friendly," and secretly "they play the Sodomits, or worse. And these be the fruits of Playes and Interludes, for the most part."[166] In order to prove the homoerotic character of the stage, Prynne cites the following passage:

> Yea, witness … M. Stubbes, his Anatomy of Abuses … where he affirms that players and play-haunters in their secret conclaves play the sodomites; together with some modern examples of such, who have been desperately enamored with players' boy thus clad in woman's apparel, so far as to solicit them by words, by letters, even actually to abuse them … This I have heard credibly reported of a scholar of Bailliol College, and I doubt not that it may be verified of divers others.[167]

Hence, according to Orgel, fear was generated from the belief, first, that "the response to theatre was erotic, second that erotically, theatre is uncontrollably exciting, and third, that the basic, essential form of erotic excitement in men is homosexual."[168] In short, Orgel suggests that homosexual stimulation had always played a significant role at a time when, for the most part, men wrote and acted plays for other men. According to this view, boy actors dressed as women become a licensed way of arousing and satisfying homosexual desire.[169]

Spectators' Reactions to Boys Playing Women

The question that springs to mind next is as follows: were these fears grounded? What did audiences see when they went to the theatre: the female character or the boy underneath? Thomas Heywood, for one, claimed that audiences never forgot

[166] As quoted in Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing*, 22. She emphasizes "unless we want to dismiss as mere convention that boys play women's parts, what the spectator has seen on stage is boys in an embrace."
[167] Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, 211-212.
[168] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 30.
[169] See, for example, Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 9-36; and Jean E. Howard, "Cross-dressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39 (1988), 418-429.

that they were watching boy actors temporarily impersonating women and that they were even aware of particular performers:

> To see our youths attired in the habit of women, who knows not what their intents be? who cannot distinguish them by their names, assuredly, knowing they are but to represent such a Lady, at such a time appointed.[170]

Indeed, the testimonies of sixteenth and seventeenth century playgoers like Thomas Platter, George Sandys and Lady Mary Wroth suggest that the audiences accepted boys in women's clothes as simply a stage convention. In 1599, Thomas Platter, a student from Basle on a visit to London, went to see *Julius Caesar*: "When the play was over, they danced very marvellously and gracefully together as is their wont, two dressed as men and two as women."[171] What Platter suggests indirectly is that this is simply the way things were done.

George Sandys, who went to a play in Sicily whilst travelling, saw firsthand that there were other ways of portraying women on the stage, and just like Platter, Sandys speaks about the use of boy-players on the English stage in conventional terms only. Apparently, the play itself was not sufficiently noteworthy to merit discussion; however, the way in which it was acted triggered Sandys' criticism. Between the city wall and the harbour, Sandys says:

> … is to be seene the pride and beauties of the Citie. There have they their play-houses, where the parts of women are acted by women, and too naturally passionated; which they forebeare not to frequent upon Sundayes.[172]

What Sandys implies is that the women performed their parts too "naturally," and did not leave any space for improvisation or impulsivity. In this sense, Sandys does not

[170] Thomas Heywood, as quoted in Orgel, *Impersonations*, 31.
[171] Thomas Platter, *Thomas Platter's Travels in England 1599*, trans. Clare Williams (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), 166.
[172] George Sandys, *A Relation of a Journey begun Anno Domini 1610*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Barrett, 1615), 245-246.

consider the boy-players on the English stage as a moral issue, but as a dramatic convention. He even seems to prefer them because their presence permits greater artistry. Smith agrees and says, "Sandys' interest is not in the boy beneath the costume but in the female illusion the boy creates."[173]

The artistry of the boy-players is also implied in a passage from Lady Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*. This passage can be found in Book I of the long prose romance. A queen, after having confirmed her love to a servant, has convinced him to kill her husband. However, when a delegation from a neighbouring kingdom comes to offer her their condolences, she falls in love with one of their captains. He resists her wooing but this does not stop the "chastlesse Queene" from pursuing him even more intently. The servant, to whom she had pledged her enduring love, finds out that she has tried to seduce the captain and hence decides to spy on them:

> … there hee [her first lover] saw her with all passionate ardency, seeke, and sue for the strangers love; yet he [the captain] unmoveable, was no further wrought, then if he had seen a delicate play-boy acte a loving womans part, and knowing him a Boy, lik'd onely his action.[174]

In simple terms, this passage makes the servant seem like a member of the audience who watches a scene. He then parallels the captain explicitly with a spectator who watches a boy actor impersonate a woman. The captain has two different reactions; he resists her wooing, but like an "experienced theatregoer admires 'onely her action,' that is, her technical expertise in pretending to be what she is not."[175] Unlike the anti-theatricalists, therefore, who frequently criticise actors because of their transformation of sexual identity, and due to their extreme anxiety about the kindling of desire by the boy-actor or

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[173] Bruce Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, 149.
[174] Lady Mary Worth, *The First Part of the Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, Josephine A. Roberts, ed., (Binghamton, New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1995), 73, Questia, Web, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=114615398>, November 2011.
[175] Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage*, 44.

the female protagonist of the play, Wroth does not use the image of the boy-actor with moral bias. The passage clearly illustrates that the queen does not at all sexually excite the captain. In this sense, therefore, "the consciousness of the boy actor beneath the costume is both controlling and unerotic."[176] Many scholars simply assume that anti-theatricalists were cranks and that witnesses like Platter, Sandys and Wroth represent the way in which Elizabethan audiences viewed the actors who played women's parts. As Smith claims, we are left, therefore, with two different and unusually extreme views: the boy-players either exuded an erotic appeal as the female characters they portrayed (the heterosexual appeal implied by Platter, Sandys and Wroth) or as the boys they were in reality (the homosexual appeal attacked by the anti-theatricalists).[177]

Of course, we cannot take for granted a homogenous collective response by the audience towards boy actors. We can never know what went on inside the spectators' heads, and we certainly cannot assume that each and every one felt or thought the same way. However, the few witnesses whose responses we can read show that audiences at the time remained conscious of *both* elements; the actor and the illusion he created.[178] Any erotic element in the boys' impersonations of women and the audiences' perceptions of these impersonations must surely have varied from actor to actor, playwright to playwright, play to play and spectator to spectator.

The main argument of this study is that the English Renaissance theatre was "an important site of cultural transformation – a place where cultural change was not simply reflected but also rehearsed and enacted."[179] It is instructive to analyze the

[176] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 31.
[177] Bruce Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, 149.
[178] *Ibid.*
[179] In what follows I will, in part, summarize Rackin's argument. Phyllis Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the Renaissance Stage," 29.

theatrical representations of gender during that period, as I take up to do in the course of this study, because the theatre was a site where anxieties about the changing gender definitions could be expressed by playwrights, and accepted or repressed among their audience.[180]

As the term gender roles indicates, it is necessary to note that gender, not only for women in general, for actresses or for boys pretending to be women, is a kind of act. Sandra Gilbert, for example, calls attention to the fact that among modern writers, in contrast to men, women consider sexual identity as a kind of disguise rather than as the reality.[181] Indeed, when male actors played female characters, feminine gender was unavoidably a matter of disguise. Furthermore, in the plays in which the heroines cross-dressed, gender became doubly problematic, the unstable consequence of role-playing and costume.[182]

Rackin remarks that for early modern playgoers, the sexual innuendo of the male actor dressed as a woman dressed as a boy was "likely to invoke a widespread and ambivalent mythological tradition centering on the figure of the androgyne."[183] During the Renaissance, the androgyne could be defined as an image of transcendence – surpassing the limits of the human condition in a fallen world and breaking through the constraints that material existence imposes on spiritual aspiration or the restrictions of society. On the other hand, the androgyne could also be seen as an object of ridicule or an image of monstrous deformity, of social and physical abnormality. Rackin observes that both these

[180] Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the Renaissance Stage," 29.
[181] Sandra Gilbert, "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, 7:2, (1980), 394-399.
[182] Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," 29.
[183] *Ibid.*

images of the androgyne appear in Shakespeare and his contemporaries' plays, expressing radically different conceptions of human life and society.[184]

In many famous English Renaissance comedies these changing conceptions of gender and androgyny can be seen in the representations of cross-dressed heroines. Like, for example, in John Lyly's *Gallathea* (c. 1587); William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596), *As You Like It* (1599), and *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601); but also in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* (1609). Even if these plays cover only about two decades, they are still well qualified to illustrate a changing theatrical tradition. Lyly, was the most influential playwright of his age; and of all his plays, *Gallathea* seems to have had the greatest impact on Shakespeare. Earlier in this study, we saw how the element of homoeroticism was present in this play before Shakespeare employed it. Jonson, on the other hand, and we know for a fact, influenced the drama of his successors more than any other Elizabethan playwright.[185]

These plays are possibly the most qualified to present changing conceptions of gender. Each of their plots centres on marriage, the ideal that ruled the lives and defined the identities of Elizabethan women.[186] As *The Lawes Resolutions of Women's Rights* (1632) proclaimed, "all women are understood either married, or to be married."[187]

The institution of marriage, however, was changing extremely and the Renaissance "redefinition of marriage" necessarily resulted in "a redefinition of the feminine."[188] The paradigmatic relationship between men and women, including marriage,

[184] Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," 29.
[185] In "An Essay on Dramatic Poesy" John Dryden considered him "the most learned and judicious writer which any theatre ever had." John Dryden, "An Essay on Dramatic Poesy" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, M. H. Abrams, ed., (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 2114.
[186] Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 18-20, 57, 75, 85.
[187] *Ibid.,* 75.
[188] Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies," 179.

is also an emblem for the relations between differing sets of gender characteristics. Therefore, marriages in the plays express not solely their playwrights' and spectators' shifting visions of what is acceptable and unacceptable in relationships between women and men, but also the shifting gender definitions and shifting visions of the relations between masculine and feminine gender attributes within the human psyche and within the culture that shapes it.[189] "Some conceptions of these relations," Rackin states, "can be seen in the changing figure of the boy heroine, who occupies a central position in all five plays. In each one, the bride-to-be wears a transvestite disguise and, in each, the disguise plays a crucial role in the plot, impeding, enabling, or even motivating the marriage."[190]

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, in Lyly's *Gallathea,* the two heroines, dressed up as boys, fall for each other. When their true sex is disclosed, a wedding seems impossible. However, at the end of the play the gods get involved, and we discover that some kind of supernal sex reassignment surgery resolves the issue. In *Epicoene,* by contrast, there is no heroine, there are no gods, and marriage represents not the longed for resolution but the stumbling block to its accomplishment. Epicoene is, in fact, a boy in female costume and married to Morose. The ending turns out for the best with the *annulment* of the marriage when Epicoene is stripped of his female costume.

Gallathea and *Epicoene* both represent opposite extremes of the conceptions of androgyny, as Rackin observes.[191] Both Lyly and Jonson make different statements about gender by their dissimilar treatments of androgyny. What they make us realize is that gender is, primarily, a social construct that varies from one society to another; and that gender roles vary from one culture to another just like words have varying

[189] Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," 30.
[190] *Ibid.*
[191] *Ibid.*, 32.

significations from one language community to another. Rackin adds that the connections between gender and sex are just as differing and questionable as those between certain words and their significations or between literary fictions and the elusory "realities" those fictions try to replicate.[192] "Just as different cultures and even different individuals within a single culture can construe all those relations differently," Rackin says, "so, too, can the relation between gender and sex be construed in various ways."[193]

Shakespeare's plays, written after Lyly's and before Jonson's, are more ambiguous in the manner they treat material positions, the importance of romantic love, and the concept of gender identity. Hence, a careful examination of the plays, in which he makes use of the cross-dressing device, will tell us a great deal about the serious cultural implications of Shakespeare's questioning of the gender relations and the patriarchal ideology.

The Cultural Politics of Cross-Dressing in Shakespeare

I will start my investigation with *Twelfth Night*. It is fair to say that the cross-dressed Viola – who is a character loved by both a woman and a man – turns the fixed notions of sexual differences upside down. For Stephen Orgel, this blurring of sexual differences amplifies the "fears of a patriarchal society about the power of women."[194] Juliet Dusinberre agrees and claims that cross-dressing creates a vision of liberty and opens up the liberating possibility of undoing all structures of domination.[195] In other words, the female cross-dressed characters are enabled to explore a freedom they would have been denied without their male disguises. For Jean Howard, by contrast, it is not

[192] Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," 30.
[193] *Ibid.,* 32.
[194] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations*, 107.
[195] Juliet Dusinberre, ed., "Introduction" in *The Arden Shakespeare: As You Like It* (London: Thomson, 2006), 13.

Viola who threatens patriarchal society, but Olivia – a female character who is sexually and economically independent.[196] I wish to question these readings by examining whether either the cross-dressed Viola or Olivia poses the real threat to the gender system, or whether perhaps they are both threatening in their own way.

According to Howard, *Twelfth Night* endorses the control of women's position within the patriarchal system and promotes "the 'good woman' as the one who has interiorized – whatever her clothing – her essential differences from and subordinate relations to, the male."[197] In other words, in Howard's mind, the play expresses approval of the cross-dressed woman because she does not lust after power attainable only by men and punishes a non-crossdressed woman who does.

As regards the blurring of sexual differences, the play clearly focuses on Viola. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that Viola's choice to don men's clothing is not a political act. On the contrary, she adopts male clothing merely for security purposes. Viola is aware that she cannot traverse an unknown country as a woman and that she must cross-dress to "serve this duke." (I.2.51) Moreover, after donning her disguise, Viola discusses how the clothes reflect a fraudulent self, while inside she remains the woman who will, in the course of time, use her disguise to woo the man she loves. The audience is constantly reminded with condemnations of the disguise as "wickedness" that Viola is irrefutably a woman who is only superficially playing a male and that she has neither the desire nor the skill to play the man's part in a phallic sword fight: "I am no fighter. I have heard of some kind / of men that put quarrels purposely on others, to taste their / valor." (3.4.216-218) Later, she adds: "This is as uncivil as strange." (3.4.225) These comments highlight her false identity and reveal her true self. Robert Kimborough argues that even

[196] Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 114.
[197] *Ibid.*, 112-115.

while Viola "experiences human freedom and growth in male disguise," she feels "constricted" and "self-conscious" throughout *Twelfth Night*.[198] Indeed, Viola never fully comprehends the potency to be found in her disguise, but rather mirrors the societal perceptions of such a disguise. She says: "Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness / Wherein the pregnant enemy does much." (2.2.25-26)

However, in Howard's view, the real threat to a system that is explicitly designated as male in its defining relationships is not Viola, but Olivia. Howard describes Olivia as a woman of property, headstrong, initially intractable (at least to the desires of Orsino, the play's highest-ranking male figure) and with no perceptible male relatives, apart from the dishonourable Toby, to control her fortune.[199] In other words, Olivia is a lady of significant independent means, disinclined to submit herself and her lands to any man, all of which are typical marks of unruliness. Howard claims that the play punishes Olivia's unruliness by making her fall in love with Cesario – the cross-dressed Viola – a fact that is highly sexually transgressive, as Viola's costume opens the door to a number of homoerotic narratives. First, in desiring Cesario, Olivia lusts after a man who is actually a woman, and second, Orsino, who at the beginning desires Olivia, ends up marrying his manservant Cesario, who turns out to be a woman. The play makes sure that in the end the boy gets the girl, but Howard believes that *Twelfth Night* is not concerned with homosexuality, but rather with re-establishing women's subordination. In fact, the homoerotic relationship between Sebastian and Antonio is not frowned upon in the slightest, as discussed in the previous chapter. Since Olivia presents the real threat to

[198] Robert Kimbrough, "Androgyny Seen Through Shakespeare's Disguise," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 33:1 (1982), 28.
[199] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 114.

patriarchal society, her independence needs to be harnessed; her ménage and even herself must be placed under male control. Howard continues:

> In the process her passion for the disguised Viola is presented comically, as an example of the madness that has overtaken Illyria when women grow too independent and men too passive. It is a marker of the 'unnatural' that time and destiny must correct. Unintentionally, Viola becomes the vehicle for rendering the unruly Olivia comic …. But in the end, despite her 'mistakings', Olivia marries a man.[200]

In fact, Olivia marries Sebastian, the real identity of whom she does not know. The audience, however, knows that she has married a fellow who is only accomplished at sword fights. I believe that Howard is right in seeing this as Olivia's "comeuppance" – patriarchy's retribution for having overstepped her boundaries.

I would argue, however, that even if Olivia is the real threat to patriarchal power and that, personally, Viola does not don men's attire in order to prove that "custom is an idiot," her disguise nonetheless inadvertently comments on binary sexual opposition, as does the behaviour of most of the men in the play; it presents a danger to the early modern English gender system by personifying different levels of foolishness, from Sir Toby's drunkenness and Orsino's arrogance and boastful vanity to Sir Andrew's naïveté. As soon as Viola starts wearing male garments she 'becomes' Cesario. From now on, it is as if she impersonated her own opposite-sex twin: "I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too." (2.4.119-120) She herself makes it clear that, after donning men's clothes, she imitates Sebastian's behaviour: "For him I imitate." (3.4.348) Her idea of what it means to be manful leaks into her costumes and hence mirrors what she views as man's true nature. Cesario interprets the "ideal" man not only because of her disguise but also because of the foolish nature of Sebastian in the play. It can be argued that

[200] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 114.

Cesario is a better "man" than some of the other men, because Viola's gender-based disguise constructs the ideal man, whereas the other men in the play serve as faint-hearted and effeminate opposites to this ideal. Indeed, Cesario seems a better model of the ideal man than even Viola's own model, her brother Sebastian. In this sense, her cross-dressed state mocks patriarchy itself. Sebastian feeblemindedly accepts Olivia as his wife without knowing who she is or why she claims to know him:

OLIVIA
I prithee, gentle friend,
Let thy fair wisdom, not thy passion sway
In this uncivil and unjust extent
Against thy peace. Go with me to my house,
And hear thou there how many fruitless pranks
This ruffian hath blotched up, that thou shalt thereby
Mayst smile at this. Thou shalt not choose but go.
Do not deny. Beshrew his soul for me,
He started one poor heart of mine in thee.

SEBASTIAN
What relish is in this? How runs the stream?
Or am I mad, or else this is a dream.
Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep.
If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep.

OLIVIA
Nay, come, I prithee, would thou'dst be ruled by me.

SEBASTIAN
Madam, I will.
(*Twelfth Night* 4.1.48-61)

When meeting Olivia for the first time, Sebastian gives in to his baser instincts, although he notices something "deceivable" about Olivia's love for him. In doing so he reveals his powerlessness over love, and at the same time by allowing himself to be ruled by Olivia, he manifests a flagrant difference between himself and Viola. Viola, in contrast to her brother, exhibits extreme personal determination by not casting off her disguise. Despite her feelings, Viola does not make any obvious efforts to earn Orsino's love. She chooses to remain silent:

VIOLA

A blank, my lord. She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i'th' bud,
Feed on her damask cheek. She pined in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief.

(*Twelfth Night* 2.4.109-114)

This determination is also evident in an emotional response to Olivia, as Viola expresses genuine sympathy for her:

VIOLA

How easy it is for the proper false
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we,
For such as we are made of, such we be.
How will this fadge? My master loves her dearly,
And I, poor monster, fond as much on him,
And she, mistaken, seems to dote on me,
What will become of this? As I am man,
My state is desperate for my master's love.
As I am a woman, now, alas the day,
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!

(*Twelfth Night* 2.2.27-38)

Even though Viola is "desperate" for Orsino's love, she keeps her emotions in check – unlike her brother, who succumbs to his "will" immediately – and carries on wooing Olivia in Orsino's name. For this reason, the twins serve as an effective contrast between the genders, with Sebastian as the weaker of the two. By maintaining her masquerade as Cesario, despite her feelings for her master and her troubles with Olivia, Viola reveals her strength. Sebastian plays the woman to Olivia while Viola's exercise of control emphasises her dedication to her male role as Cesario.

Furthermore, despite Viola's disapproval of her disguise, she seems to have no problem at all "acting" the male part, thus exposing the simple and, to a certain extent,

predictable nature of male action. Viola's admittance to Olivia's court, which previously "will admit no kind of suit / No, not the Duke's" (1.2.41-42), is the first demonstration of how easy it is to imitate a man. Apparently, Viola enacts the male part more skilfully than a man – Valentine – who "might not be admitted." Once in court, Viola manages what no man has been able to so far: to make Olivia fall in love with Cesario, an achievement that highlights the bounds of Orsino's patriarchal power. This accomplishment, nevertheless, seems rather unintentional. Viola quite simply wants to the duke to be happy. It is reasonable to consider the possibility that, if Olivia had not fallen in love with Viola/Cesario, Sebastian would never have married her. Olivia simply mistakes Sebastian for Cesario, and hence their marriage largely results from Viola's impersonation of Cesario. Viola's actual intentions for her actions aside, her fictional character destabilizes male society's preconceived idea of women being "frail" because she achieves what men cannot. The men who are in love – epitomised by Orsino, Sebastian and Malvolio – act foolishly while Viola is able to keep her wits about her and to maintain her disguise, regardless of the problems it causes.

Viola's cross-dressing also draws attention to the instability of gender. In "As We Like It: How Can a Girl Be Smart and Still Popular," Clara Claiborne Park claims, and I agree with her on this, that Viola's masquerade allows her to be "assertive," and this assertiveness is accepted by other characters and the audience only because she is dressed as a man. In the absence of male dress, a woman who is aggressively self-assured was viewed with hostility. In the play, dressing up as a man turns what normally "could be experienced as aggression into simple high spirits."[201] Cesario is described as a boy who was "saucy at the gates" and who "began rudely," and yet when he visits Olivia for the

[201] Clara Claiborne Park, "As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular," 108.

second time, Olivia exclaims: "If one should be a prey, how much the better / to fall before the lion than the wolf!" (*Twelfth Night* 3.1.120-121) Later on, she adds that when "wit and youth is come to harvest / Your wife is like to reap a proper man." (*Twelfth Night* 3.1.124-125) In other words, Viola acts out the gender stereotype to perfection, even if her conversational traits and feelings are feminine. On the other hand, Orsino's longing for love and his "womanly" tears do not suit the male image at all, and yet the "male" characteristics of Cesario suit Viola. In his discussion of "mannish" women on the stage, Orgel argues that this "anxiety" about women and their role in a patriarchal society was a much-discussed topic throughout the English Renaissance.[202] His most effective example stems from Sir Thomas Elyot's taxonomy of gender from 1531, which defines gender in the following way:

> A man in his naturall perfection is fiers, hardy, stronge in opinion, couaitous of glorie, desirous of knowlege, appetiting by generation to brynge forthe his semblable. The good nature of a woman is to be milde, timerouse, tractable, benigne, of sure remembrance, and shamfast.[203]

These characteristics are inverted in *Twelfth Night*, as Viola displays fierceness, boldness and strength of opinion both before and after the adoption of her disguise. This reversal of gender roles "question[s] what it means to be a man or a woman."[204] Although the heroine retains some feminine characteristics, even though she dresses, walks and talks like a man, the power she achieves through her gender-based disguise rejects a strict categorisation. Orgel argues that Elizabethan and Jacobean society recognized a real danger when "women reveal that they have an independent essence … not under male control." He continues "more dangerously," this independent essence "is not simply a

[202] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 107.
[203] Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named the Governour,* I:xxi (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1998), Online Version <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/resour/mirrors/rbear/gov/gov1.htm#XXI>, August 2011.
[204] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 63.

version or a parody of maleness, but is specifically female."[205] This means that Viola achieves power not only through her masquerade – in her "parody of maleness" – but also reveals her true power through her independence, which clearly is not "under male control" in the play.

Nonetheless, although the play points out the restrictions which exist within a patriarchal society, in order for the proper end (marriage) to be achieved, there needs to be a restitution of the female. In order to prove her true gender, Viola must first symbolically "switch" back into her female identity. Orsino refuses to marry her until he has seen proof that Cesario is, in fact, a woman: "Give me thy hand, / And let me see thee in women's weeds." (*Twelfth Night* 5.1.265-266) Furthermore, Viola must shed her "male" attitude. By doing so, Peter Erickson argues in *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama*, Viola surrenders the strength that the male clothing symbolises.[206] In *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*, Penny Gay argues that this return to the female is a "return to the real world and its social constraints."[207] Olivia, despite having fallen in love with Cesario, who is actually a woman, is married off to Sebastian. The woman who transgressed is punished, whereas Orsino escapes punishment for his follies.

> [Orsino's] narcissism and potential effeminacy are displaced, respectively, onto Malvolio and Andrew Aguecheek, who suffer fairly severe humiliations for their follies. In contrast, Orsino, the highest-ranking male figure in the play, simply emerges from his claustrophobic house in Act V and assumes his 'rightful' position as governor of Illyria and future husband of Viola.[208]

Even though Orsino has been viewed as obstinate, slightly effeminate and pathetic, by the end of the play, he is once again the powerful Duke of Illyria. He tells Fabian to "persue" Malvolio, continues to call Viola "Cesario" while she is a "man" and

[205] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 63.
[206] Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama*, 23.
[207] Penny Gay, *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women* (Oxon: Routledge, 1994), 49.
[208] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 115.

speaks the last lines of the play, apart from Feste's song. This restoration of patriarchy goes hand in hand with Olivia being put into her rightful place.

Although the play ends with one reported and one promised marriage, it is questionable whether the union between Viola and Orsino has a "solely heterosexual valence."[209] Indeed, Orsino first fosters a companionship with Cesario that transcends a conventional master-servant relationship, which even the other characters in the play appear to notice. In Act 1, Scene 4, Lines 1-6, Valentine points out to Viola: "If the Duke continue these favours towards you, / Cesario, you are like to be much advanced. He hath known / you but three days, and already you are no stranger." Orsino also frequently comments Cesario's beauty, which suggests that he is enamoured of Viola as a "man":

> DUKE
>
> Dear lad, believe it;
> For they shall yet belie thy happy years
> That say thou art a man. Diana's lip
> Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe
> Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
> And all is semblative a woman's part.
> I know thy constellation is right apt
> For this affair.
> (*To* CURIO *and attendants*) Some four or five attend him.
> All if you will, for myself am best
> When least in company (*To* VIOLA) Prosper well in this
> And thou shalt live as freely as thy lord,
> To call his fortunes thine.
> (*Twelfth Night* 1.4.28-38)

Lisa Jardine argues in her essay "Twins and Travesties: *Twelfth Night*" that "Orsino eroticises the 'small pipe' and the 'maiden's organ' of Cesario. And because 'pipe' and 'organ' are 'semblative a woman's part' they position Cesario as desired dependant of

[209] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 115.

Orsino – as available for his own sexual pleasure."[210] At the end of the play, however, Shakespeare's audience has been left in considerable doubt about the nature of Orsino and Viola's relationship. Orsino's declaration of love suggests that he seems to like the idea of prolonging Viola's masculine disguise. Orsino says to Viola: "Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times / Thou never shouldst love woman like to me." (5.1.260-261) Later, Orsino declares: "Cesario, come – / For so you shall be while you are a man; / But when in other habits you are seen, / Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen." (5.1.372-375) Even after Viola has admitted her real sex, Orsino continues calling her Cesario, leading the audience to wonder whether he loves Viola, or whether he loves Cesario.

In addition, Viola never wears her women's clothing at the play's end. Howard maintains:

> While the drama conservatively underwrites the maintenance of gender … it plays fast and loose with the question of a hierarchy of sexual practices, at least for men. For women heterosexual marriage is the primary cultural *form* in which their gender subordination is enacted. For a woman to be outside that institution, especially when she controls economic assets, is a form of transgression that must be stopped. But for Orsino what is important is not the homoerotic or heterosexual nature of his desire so much as his maintenance of a position of superiority vis-à-vis either a wife or male subordinate. Viola-Cesario, conveniently, stands for both.[211]

It is fair to say that the play prioritizes women's subordination compared to any issues of sexuality. It disciplines an independent and headstrong Olivia through marriage, and as a result, re-establishes her "natural" role within the patriarchal gender system, but it does not punish nor criticize Orsino, who lusts after his servant, Cesario. It is also true that the play rewards Viola's self-sacrifice by allowing her to marry her heart's true love, and there is no question that Viola's cross-dressing in *Twelfth Night* creates all

[210] Lisa Jardine, "Twins and Travesties: Twelfth Night" in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, Susan Zimmerman et al., eds., (London: Routledge, 1992), 33.
[211] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 115.

sorts of sexual confusions and mix-ups. Nevertheless, compared to Howard, who claims that the greatest threat to patriarchal society is not Viola's cross-dressing, but the failure of both Orsino and Olivia, I would argue that the threat to patriarchal society lies in all three. To my mind, even if Viola does not intentionally dress up in order to protest against gender inequalities, her cross-dressing nonetheless reveals the superficiality of the patriarchal society.

Just like Viola, Rosalind in *As You Like It* reveals herself to the audience not as a man, but as a lovelorn girl whose love "hath an unknown bottom, like the bay of Portugal." (4.1.177-178) After donning men's clothes, just like Viola, Rosalind ensures that the audience does not forget that she is a woman impersonating a man. In Act 3, Scene 2, she says: "Dost thou think, though I am / caparisoned like a man, I have a doublet and hose at my disposition?" (3.2.198-180) Furthermore, dressed up as Ganymede, Rosalind collapses when she sees the handkerchief smeared with Orlando's blood, which prompts Oliver's response: "You a man? You lack a man's / heart." Rosalind answers: "I do so, I confess it." (4.3.163-166) Rosalind acknowledges that she looks like a man, but acts in a very emotional way, which reminds the audience of Rosalind's true "womanliness."

However, whereas Viola laments the pitfalls of her masculine disguise, Rosalind seemingly embraces her masquerade as an opportunity for personal empowerment and self-extension. Far from being passive, she decides to flee from Frederick's court and takes charge of her encounters with Orlando in the forest. Conventionally – as previously mentioned – women remained under the control of their parents until the day they were married. Rosalind's father, however, has been banished and her uncle wants her to leave his court – an unusual situation for women at the time. Her decision to cross-dress singles her out even more. Domineering, mobile and loquacious Rosalind contradicts the idea that

women are inherently passive, silent and in need of masculine supervision.[212] Robert Kimbrough determinately argues that in "consciously using her disguise to act in a way that society will not allow a woman to act, [Rosalind] experiences human freedom and growth."[213] In other words, Rosalind uses her disguise to reap the benefits of the privileges of the supposedly superior sex. However, upon closer inspection, I would argue that Rosalind makes use of her disguise not only to experience freedom, but also to rewrite and enlarge the women's place in the early modern period.

In fact, Howard claims that Rosalind makes use of her disguise to redefine (albeit in a limited way) the station of women in a patriarchal society. She adds, "While dressed as a man, Rosalind impersonates a woman, and that woman is herself – or, rather, a self that is the logical conclusion of Orlando's romantic Petrarchan construction of her."[214] Indeed, Orlando is obsessed by imitating the Petrarchan conventions. Conventionally, the Petrarchan lover addresses an unattainable lady in hyperbolic terms and presents her as a model of perfection and inspiration. Orlando, rushing through the forest reading out bad love poems to trees, is a caricature of such a Petrarchan lover. Rosalind, dressed as Ganymede but pretending to be "Rosalind" so as to alleviate Orlando's lovesickness, delights in showing how overdone and nonsensical the Petrarchan lover's assertions about the perfection of his beloved are. Rosalind's use of her disguise as Ganymede parodies the simplistic way in which men and society viewed women:

> ROSALIND [*as Ganymede*]
>
> At which time would I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantasti-cal, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something, and for no passion truly anything, as

[212] Jean Howard, "Introduction to *As You Like It*" in *The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt et al., ed., (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 1595.
[213] Robert Kimbrough, "Androgyny Seen Through Shakespeare's Disguise," 28.
[214] Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 119.

boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour –
would now like him, now loathe him; then entertain him,
then foreswear him; now weep for him, then spit at him, that I

drave my suitor from his mad humour of love to a living
humour of madness, which was to foreswear the full stream of
the world and to live in a nook merely monastic.
(*As You Like It* 3.3.366-376)

In other words, Rosalind acts out – for Orlando – the personality traits formulated for women by early modern culture. By dressing up as Ganymede and at the same time pretending to be "Rosalind," Rosalind incorporates both male and female stereotypical behaviour while being disguised as Ganymede:

> Shakespeare's Rosalind is both boy and girl, and must realize Ganymede's brashness not simply as a female pretence of maleness. This is not what Rosalind does. She becomes a boy playing a woman's role: Ganymede playing Rosalind for Orlando to woo. But Ganymede's Rosalind is not our Rosalind … the wayward Rosalind is Ganymede's fictionalized capricious woman, just as Ganymede is our Rosalind's fictionalized brash boy with 'a swashing and a martial outside' (1.3.117), whom the heroine promised to impersonate at the beginning of the play.[215]

Indeed, Rosalind seems to enjoy any chance to condemn the weaknesses of women. As such, she showcases stereotypical femininity through her performance as "Rosalind" for Orlando and through her interactions with Phoebe. For example, she uses her preconceptions of femininity to harshly criticize Phoebe's "angry-tenored" letter to Ganymede:

ROSALIND
I say she never did invent this letter.
This is a man's invention, and his hand.
SILVIUS
Sure, it is hers.
ROSALIND
Why, 'tis a boisterous and a cruel style,

[215] Juliet Dusinberre, "As *Who* Liked It?," *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespeare Studies and Production*, 46 (1994), 24.

A style for challengers. Why, she defies me,
Like Turk to Christian. Women's gentle brain
Could not drop forth such giant-rude invention,
Such Ethiop words, blacker in their effect
Than in their countenance. Will you hear the letter?

SILVIUS
So please you, for I never heard it yet,
Yet heard too much of Phoebe's cruelty.
ROSALIND
She Phoebes me. Mark how the tyrant writes:
Read[s] 'Art thou god to shepherd turned,
That a maiden's heart hath burned?'
Can a woman rail thus?
(*As You Like It* 4.3.28-42)

Rosalind highlights the negative character traits of a stereotypical woman, such as Phoebe's temperamental and disdainful manner. In doing so, Rosalind reveals patriarchy's nonsensical conception of women at the time, and manipulates those conceptions as she pleases, mocking for her own purposes what is assumed to be innate, teaching the men in the play – especially Orlando – a more realistic approach to the relationship of men to women than that which is offered by the Petrarchan tradition.[216]

Furthermore, Rosalind's intricate courting game with Orlando questions the regulation of desire. In early modern times, men were supposed to woo women, and not the other way around. Dressed as Ganymede, however, Rosalind has the power to initiate the courtship herself. Therefore, one might ask, what *is* the proper behaviour for a woman in love? Celia accuses Rosalind of having "misused our sex in your love-prate"; nevertheless, Celia herself takes matters into her own hands with Oliver – just like Phoebe, who sees Ganymede's outer signs of masculinity as an opportunity to charm him. Through Rosalind's behaviour, *As You Like It* deconstructs patriarchy and its gender roles, but in the end Hymen makes everything return to the real world; everyone must be repositioned into

[216] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 119.

his or her appropriate social position. In the final scene, Rosalind is now Rosalind and not Ganymede, four marriages take place under Hymen's ministrations and when they are barely over, we discover that Frederick has decided to restore Duke Senior back to his position.

However, in terms of eroticism, the epilogue of *As You Like It* more than that of any other Shakespearean comedy, calls into question culturally constructed gender divisions. As I very briefly dwelt upon in the previous chapter, at the heart of this play lies Rosalind's complex sexual ambiguity; a young man (the actor) plays a woman (Rosalind), who then dresses up as Ganymede (a young man), who later pretends to be a woman ("Rosalind"). The obvious problem here is the relation between clothing and gender roles. Rosalind impersonates a man quite easily, and consequently obtains a certain freedom to travel about, give counsel and mingle with men. Celia, who remains feminine in her part as Aliena, on the other hand, remains passive and has to wait for a man to woo her rather than looking for one herself, as Rosalind does. This raises some compelling questions. If becoming accepted as a man meant simply donning men's apparel and successfully impersonating the manner of a man, then what happens to the treasured differences early modern society claimed to be the basis for its differential treatment of men and women? Similarly, Jean Howard wonders, if the boy actor "can so successfully personate the voice, gait, and manner of a woman, how stable are those boundaries separating one sexual kind from another, and so, how secure are those powers and privileges assigned to the hierarchically superior sex which depends upon notions of difference to justify its dominance?"[217] Hence, the epilogue links Rosalind's sexual ambiguity with the

[217] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 120.

complicated relations between the male actor and the female character he plays. By the same token, it serves the male audience members' homoerotic attraction to the actor.

The epilogue raises such questions, just as it invites the question of where the erotic energy between the audience, characters and actors is flowing. The play, of course, ultimately – or at least officially – celebrates conventional heterosexual marriage, but throughout the text, it has also offered us a multitude of erotic possibilities without condemning them. Just as with Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* corrects Phoebe's mistake in loving a man who is really a woman; it discards the homoerotic bond between the two friends, Rosalind and Celia, and eliminates all of the homoerotic implications brought about by Ganymede by highlighting Orlando and Rosalind's love for each other.[218] But despite the play's ending, which re-establishes the heterosexual order, we must remember that the strong homoerotic undertones of the play have continued to capture the imagination of later audiences. Michael Dobson, for instance, provides us with a piece of telling evidence of eighteenth century women regarding Rosalind and Celia as perfect models of intense female friendship, when he quotes from a letter written in 1769 by a lady, Mrs. Apphia Peach, about her feelings for Shakespeare: "… I shall forever love and honour his memory because he is the only poet (that I know of) who has delineated to perfection the character of a female friend … let us at least erect one standard of friendship on own and inscribe it with the names of Celia and Rosalind."[219]

The epilogue, however, turns the play's closure on its head. Rosalind (or the actor) "charges" the audience to find the play pleasurable:

> I charge you, O women, for the
> Love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you.

[218] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 120.
[219] Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 224.

> And I charge you, O men, for the love you bear for women – as
> I perceive by your simpering none of you hates them – that
> between you and the women the play may please.
> (Epilogue 10-14)

At the same time, the male actor playing Rosalind reveals himself by saying: "If I were a / woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased / me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not." (Epilogue 14-16) The actor dressed in women's clothing addresses the men in the audience in erotic terms both as a woman (Rosalind) and as a man (the actor) at the very same time. In other words, Rosalind takes us back to the vertiginous intermingling of heterosexual and homosexual desires that dictate life in the Forest of Arden. In such both/and, rather than either/or, situations, the theatre reveals itself as an escape from reality, where sometimes overwhelming complexities like, for example, the differences between the sexes and the range of erotic possibilities, can be observed, then pondered and maybe even examined.

It is worth mentioning that both Viola and Rosalind fail to seize the ultimate pragmatic opportunities that their disguises offer them. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, on the other hand, does not. More so than either of the other two women, Portia does not use her disguise as "a psychological refuge, but as a vehicle for assuming power."[220] Although Rosalind plays the part of a man with confidence, concomitant circumstances – such as a potential physical assault – convince her to don male clothing. Portia, on the contrary, has no direct relation to Antonio, and thus could have chosen to let the situation resolve itself. However, she chooses not to, and ergo ridicules the confidence of a patriarchal society by playing a man.

[220] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 116.

Like both Rosalind and Viola, Portia learns "a thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks." (*Merchant of Venice* 3.4.77) She knows that imitating men and wielding their authority is fairly easy to do. Much of Portia's mocking of fundamental aspects of patriarchy happens through her logical processes in freeing Antonio. It is worth mentioning here that patriarchal society considered women as illogical beings in order to ensure their subservience.[221] However, as Karen Newman argues, Portia clearly exposes the falsehood of that assumption:

> She engages, that is, in productive labor reserved for men, and not insignificantly, in linguistic labor, in a profession the successful practice of which depends on knowledge of history and precedent, on logic and reasoning, and on rhetoric, all areas of education traditionally denied to women.[222]

Dressed up as Balthasar, Portia can access a male dominated sphere. She then uses her levelheadedness to flaunt its weakness by rescuing Antonio from death, and by managing to subordinate Bassanio's attachment to Antonio. This weakness of the patriarchy is comically demonstrated by Shylock's ironical admission that "There is no power in the tongue of man / to alter me," (*Merchant of Venice* 4.1.236-237) since it is a woman who in the end liberates Antonio. However, all the while, the male characters on

[221] In Shakespeare's England, women were excluded from educational opportunities because intellectually, they were seen as limited; society in general, including women themselves were of the opinion that a woman was by nature not capable of higher learning but that God had skilled them in domestic chores only. Women were not only excluded from the educational opportunities that were offered to men, they were thought of as physically incapable of learning the materials men studied. Furthermore, many men considered the capacity for rational thought as exclusively male; women, they thought, were only led by their passions. Women were unable to escape from their emotions long enough to learn something factual. This assumption is also related to Renaissance conceptions of biology. Carroll Camden in *The Elizabethan Woman* quotes writers of medicine who thought that 'it is heat which makes a man bold and hardy, but the coldness of woman makes her naturally fearful and timorous. And since women are weak physically, they must be weak morally and mentally.' (1975:18) This primitive notion of heat as a biological difference led people to believe that women were inferior to men in almost every ability, except those associated with domestic duties. All of these arguments were used to justify the male domination over women. For a more detailed discussion see my part on "Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality," 110; Catherine M. Dunn, "The Changing Image of Woman in Renaissance Society and Literature" in *What Manner of Woman*, Marlene Springer, ed., (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 15-38.; Stephen Greenblatt, "Introduction" in *The Norton Shakespeare,* Stephen Greenblatt et al., eds., (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997) 9-10.; Carroll Camden, *The Elizabethan Woman* (New York: Paul A. Appel, 1975), 18.; Stephen Greenblatt, *Impersonations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18-25.

[222] Karen Newman, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in The Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly,* 38:1 (1987), 30.

the stage remain unaware, whereas the spectators are conscious of Balthasar being a woman in reality. Hence, the weight of the commentary is aimed primarily at the audience, rather than the characters on stage, surpassing the imaginative outer limits imposed by the theatre and affecting the reality of everyday life.

Although her behaviour highlights the weaknesses of the patriarchal system, the actual homosocial transcendence results in Portia's insistence on pushing to the margins Antonio and Bassanio's relationship. Because of her disguise, Portia finds out where Bassanio's real devotion lies. Moreover, once she has found out, she uses her disguise as Balthasar in a successful manner to persuade Bassanio to hand over her ring. The power that Portia acquires with this trick is crucial. Karen Newman explains that by accepting the ring, Portia first ratifies an Elizabethan marriage that was characterized by women's subjugation, but then she, in the final lines of her speech, rejects this "exchange system."[223] Portia hands the ring over to Bassanio, and says:

> I give them with this ring,
> Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
> Let it presage the ruin of your love,
> And be my vantage to exclaim on you.
> (*Merchant of Venice* 3.2.171-174)

As soon as, Bassanio offers the ring to Antonio, Portia secures the control of her relationship. She then uses this newfound power to readmit the ring so as to dissolve a homoerotic bond. She says to Antonio to "Give him this, / And bid him keep it better than the other." (5.1.253-254) By making Antonio acknowledge the marriage bond between herself and Bassanio, Portia causes the bond between the two friends to destroy itself. This destruction forces both men to recognize the weight of marriage. Howard is of the

[223] Karen Newman, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in The Merchant of Venice," 25-26.

same opinion as she claims, "in this play the woman seems to insist that marriage bonds have priority for her husband, as well as herself, over other affective and social bonds."[224]

Furthermore, compared to *Twelfth Night*, which prioritizes women's subordination in marriage, this text does not make it clear whether marriage will actually cause Portia to be subordinate to Bassanio. It is true that her submission to Bassanio in Act 3, Scene 2 is beautifully worded:

> You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
> Such as I am: though for myself alone
> I would not be ambitious in my wish,
> To wish myself much better; yet, for you
> I would be trebled twenty times myself;
> A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich;
> That only to stand high in your account,
> I might in virtue, beauties, livings, friends,
> Exceed account; but the full sum of me
> Is sum of something, which, to term in gross,
> Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised;
> Happy in this, she is not yet so old
> But she may learn; happier than this,
> She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
> Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
> Commits itself to yours to be directed,
> As from her lord, her governor, her king.
> (*Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.149-165)

This speech, nonetheless, seems purely formal, as it is *she* who manages the wedding, it is *she* who determines the date of the betrothal, it is *she* who sends Bassanio to Venice, and it is *she* who remains the mistress of the house. In fact, Portia's speech in Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 265-278 contrasts the subservient woman, as it is filled with imperatives: "Speak not so grossly … read it …. Unseal this letter …" Having expressly given over her house to Bassanio in Act 3, Scene 2, she says in Act 5, Scene 1: "I have not yet / Enter'd my house." (ll. 271-272). She also highlights her power by giving Antonio the

[224] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 117.

mysterious letter, but refusing to reveal how she got it: "You shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter." (ll. 277-278) It appears that Howard may be right in claiming that "Portia is in every way an unruly woman who refuses to comply to patriarchy's most basic requirements: namely, that a woman first obey her father and then submit to a marriage of his contriving."[225]

Thus, it is quite interesting to note how ambiguous and often conflicting the implications, suggested by Shakespeare's use of transvestism, are. But one thing is quite apparent – that we cannot possibly believe that the cross-dressed heroines of Shakespeare were always deliberate projections against male hierarchy. It is, of course, a mistake to simply equate the boy heroines in these plays with the real female audience members who watched them. In fact, Rackin maintains that it is indispensable to remember that all the heroines were the inventions of men: not only the playwrights who wrote their parts but also the actors who played them were male. Furthermore, the relation between theatrical representation and actual life is complex and problematic, it is a process that unavoidably involves anxiety. In every period, male writers have succeeded in delineating their own ideal women while at the same time maintaining "misogynist attitudes and practices in their responses to actual women."[226] Associating representation and reality is, in this case, extremely complicated because gender issues are thoroughly linked in early modern drama to the issue of theatrical representation itself.[227]

[225] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, 117.
[226] Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," 32.
[227] *Ibid.*

The Political Signification of the Semiotics of Transvestism

Transvestism and theatre are interrelated – not merely historically and culturally, but politically, and sometimes through the unconscious, and through language as a cultural construct. Transvestite theatre has the position of the Symbolic on the stage.

The theatrical representation of cross-dressing does not only enable a commentary on the feeling of unease concerning gender roles in our culture, but also allows a response to the fundamental issue of representation that underlies theatre itself. No analysis of the Shakespearean theatre that wants to interrogate its functional significance from a cultural, political and symbolic vantage point can fail to take into account the ambiguous role of cross-dressing or transvestism in it.

The reason why we focus so much upon this aspect of Shakespearean theatre is straightforward: though we have come a long way from Elizabethan times, the Elizabethan theatre is a cultural subtext which we can use to analyze the gender matrix and its fissures in our own culture. It is, despite the revolutionary changes that have since happened, in our attitude to study the notions of resemblance and difference between genders. To gain a perspective, consider Foucault's argument:

> At the beginning of the seventeenth century … thought ceases to move in the element of resemblance. Similitude is no longer the form of knowledge but rather the occasion of error, the danger to which one exposes oneself when one does not examine the obscure region of confusions …. The age of resemblance is drawing to a close.[228]

What we should draw from Foucault's statement regarding the end of similitude is that gender is a much more contested category, with a singular power of disruption, than it was in Shakespeare's time. But even then, at a time when the cultural ideology did not actually differentiate between the genders but took one as part of the

[228] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 51.

other, as we have seen, Shakespeare was alive to the historic possibility of transgressing that cultural code. The real significance of transvestism in Shakespeare lies in fostering this difference. As Elizabeth Abel quotes Barbara Johnson saying, "Literature ... inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals." Abel goes on to remark, "sexuality and textuality both depend on difference." [229]

The unhinging of the signification of dress by any men and women of any society has disruptive ideological implications. Every cultural site is a site of social struggle, and taking into consideration the details of that struggle can reveal the negligence and inconsistency of power that occasion alterations in the social structure. Dress was a means of struggle for the mutability of the social order in Renaissance society, just like in our own culture.

The power of dress as a tool of ideology, and the disruptive power of transvestism as a subversion of ideology are fundamentally notions that help us value the historical significance of cross-dressing as a theatrical tool. Ever since Althusser, much emphasis in the analysis of cultural environments has been on the success of miscellaneous apparatuses in interpellating subjects within dominant ideologies. The success of these various spheres granted insufficient freedom for theorizing change or resistance. However, it is crucial to stress what Althusser asserts but does not develop: that is to say, that "ideological state apparatuses" are not only the stake but the site of class struggle, and that resistance occurs within them.[230]

It is for this power of resistance that we still value transvestism as a cultural and political tool. Nonetheless, the critic's inclination has been to look through rather than

[229] Elizabeth Abel, ed., *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1.
[230] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Delhi: Aakar, 2006), 99.

at the cross-dresser and, consequently, to turn down a close encounter with the transvestite. Rather than looking at it as a literary or theatrical device, we will be justified in considering the phenomenon for its positive import – political, cultural and symbolic, as this chapter has demonstrated.

Chapter 4
REINSTATING THE OTHER: LEGITIMIZING FEMALE SEXUALITY

Reading Shakespeare's plays in the context of the cultural production of eroticism and gender in Renaissance society, as we have done so far, has demonstrated how Elizabethan theatre in the hands of Shakespeare used eroticism to challenge the patriarchal norms of sexual behaviour. I have analyzed how the heterosexual mores of the time were questioned and disrupted by the deft and subtle explorations of homoeroticism in his plays. I also investigated how the theatrical practice of cross-dressing and the use of boy-actresses as a convention of the time were appropriated by Shakespeare, only to be used as a disruptive tool against the discourse of male sexuality. In the present chapter, I take this analysis further, and set out to re-examine how these theatrical manipulations carried out within the plays of Shakespeare were spurred and defined by an irrational and elementary component which underlay much of the Renaissance culture: the fear of female sexuality. The chapter will look back at the historical rationale for this cultural assumption, and see how the Renaissance drama was overwhelmingly shaped by an axiomatic belief in the senselessness of female desire, but how Shakespeare, in his later works, chose to undermine this fear and strove to legitimize and reinstate the female sexual position in the gender divide.

Descriptions of women in Renaissance literature vehemently follow a long-standing argument about woman's nature being relative to man's. One could think of Milton, who makes Adam call Eve "this fair defect of nature" after the Fall (*Paradise Lost*, 10.891-2). The supposition that woman is a defective man – an error in nature's master plan, which was to produce man – is as old as Aristotle. So the position, or better, the lack of position of women in Renaissance theatre was not an accident. The analyses taken up

in the previous chapters have conclusively shown how in Shakespeare's dramas women characters just refuse to be marginalized, and indeed often try to assume centre stage. But this granting of a not-so-marginal space to women characters was easier said than done given the prejudices the Renaissance society nurtured against women. So Shakespeare had to resort to a handful of theatrical devices, like cross-dressing and disguises, to accord the roles he wanted to give to his women characters. All these subterfuges were culturally necessitated by the theatrical orthodoxy of the period. Whatever the plays wanted to say about women, the organization of the theatre business in England wanted to see that they were subordinate, even to the point of not being tolerated on the stage. A look into the history of the theatre in England will tell us as much.

The Stage without Women

Why were there no women on the Elizabethan stage? To our present-day society, it appears strange to forbid women to play their own gender. But in England, the appearance of women on the public stage did not take place until after the Restoration in 1660.

Most scholars dispose of the issue simply by claiming that the English stage acknowledged the quality of the performance of English male actors, which had been developed over a period of 100 years of professional play-acting. However, this argument alone does not seem adequate, as Shakespeare and his audiences could and did see women perform in a number of different settings. Women appeared in civic entertainments and village festivals; until their eventual suppression in the 1570s, they appeared in the guild plays, and there is evidence that there were even women amongst

the musicians and other performers who travelled through the English countryside.[231] High-born women also appeared in court masques in private entertainments in aristocratic households.

Examined within a European framework, the situation of the English public stage is completely atypical. On the continent, French, Spanish and Italian society accepted women performing on the stage, even though mainland Europeans were as preoccupied with female virtue as were their English counterparts. Indeed, the first professional actress recorded in France appears to have been performing in 1545.[232] Records show that Italian actresses performed in front of Henry II and Catherine de' Medici at Lyons in 1548, and they seem to have become established in Italy when the first permanent resident theatre companies were opened.[233] Spanish morality was more restrictive of women's behaviour than English morality, but nonetheless Spain followed suit by the end of the century and allowed actresses to appear on the stage with the explicit approval of both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The problem of female chastity was resolved by insisting that the actresses be married.[234]

Other countries, such as the Netherlands and certain areas of Protestant Germany, also forbade women to act. However, in such countries, it was not the women who were thought of as morally dangerous, but the theatre itself. The acting profession endangered the virtue of men and women alike. The solution was to ban the public stage as a whole – actresses were not tolerated, but neither were actors.[235]

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[231] James Stokes, "Women and Mimesis in Medieval and Renaissance Somerset (and Beyond)," *Comparative Drama,* 27:2 (1993), 7.
[232] Rosamond Gilder, *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 86.
[233] David Mann, *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.
[234] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations,* 2.
[235] *Ibid.*

Undoubtedly, the introduction of actresses was a dramatic development in the theatres on the continent, but by Shakespeare's time they were a common feature of the European stage, and audiences expected to see actresses.[236] For what exact reasons, then, did the English stage exclude women from the stage?

Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality

The suppression of female sexuality is a cultural phenomenon. It can be taken into consideration as one of the most extraordinary psychological interventions in our cultural history. As reported by Mary Jane Sherfey, the women's sex drive is by nature and intrinsically stronger than that of men and, in the past, it was regarded as an extremely powerful destabilizing threat to the patriarchal social order.[237] In order for a cultured society to develop, the stifling of female sexuality was apparently required or at least helpful. It was essential to keep to "the ruthless subjugation of female sexuality" if a civilized and well-founded way of life was to flourish.[238]

This phenomenon has never been an isolated occurrence in history. It has persisted through centuries in human civilization, though in varying degrees. The long history of gender discrimination makes it plausible to believe that Ideological State Apparatuses such as the family, schools, peer groups have collaborated to estrange women from their personal sexual desires and have thoroughly altered their (apparently) sexually uncontrolled appetites into a grim leftover.[239] In Renaissance England, this fear of

[236] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 1.
[237] M. J. Sherfey, "The Evolution and Nature of Female Sexuality in relation to Psychoanalytic Theory," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association,* 14:1 (1966), 28–128.
[238] *Ibid.,* 116.
[239] Manuela Du Bois-Raymond and Janita Ravesloot, "The Roles of Parents and Peers in the Sexual and Relational Socialization of Adolescents" in *Social Problems and Social Contexts in Adolescence* Klaus Hurrelmann and Stephen Hamilton, eds., (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1996), 175-197.

female sexuality reached an alarming proportion because it was aided by some kind of scientific explanation that made it look plausible.

Indeed, pseudo medical treatises of the period offered an innumerable quantity of differing accounts on gender, but the most persistent medical and anatomical line of thought from the time of Galen[240] cited similarities in the genital structures of both males and females. Writers like Thomas Lacquer have convincingly argued that sixteenth century experts in anatomy deemed female sexual organs to simply be an inverted male penis and testicles, carried internally rather than externally.[241] Sexual experience was thought to be much the same for both sexes: during sexual intercourse, both men and women ejaculate and experience an orgasm. They believed that the female seed was as important for conception as the male sperm. In every foetus was thought to be both female and male sperm. The sex of the foetus would be determined by "which seed is dominant and generates enough heat to press the genital organs outwards – that is, if the foetus is stronger, strength being conceived as heat."[242]

To put it differently, according to the authors behind this polarised rhetoric, we all begin as female, and masculinity is merely a progression of femininity; therefore, the female is an incomplete male. The medical literature from Galen's time onwards proves this theory by listing a number of examples in which women apparently turned into men while under some great stress or excitement. The most famous cited account describes a shepherd called Germain Garnier, who had been a woman named Marie until the age of

[240] Galen of Pergamum, also known as Galenos in Greek and Galenus in Latin (born 129 CE in Pergamum, Mysia, Anatolia [now Bergama, Tur.] – died c. 216). Greek physician, writer and philosopher who exercised a dominant influence on medical theory and practice in Europe from the Middle Ages until the mid-17th century. His authority in the Byzantine world and the Muslim Middle East was similarly long-lived. "Galen of Pergamum (Greek physician)" Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://britannica.gates.myschool.lu/bps/search?query=Galen>, August 2011.

[241] Thomas Lacquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 8-10.

[242] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations*, 20.

fifteen. Supposedly, her genitals turned inside out, changing her into a man, while she was chasing her pigs. Germain was still alive in Montaigne's time, but when he visited his town, Germain was away. Nonetheless, he questioned the villagers about the man, and made him a prototypical case study in his essay *Of the Power of the Imagination*. He did not doubt the authenticity of the metamorphosis saying, "this sort of accident is frequently met with."[243]

This sense that even biological sex was ambiguous, according to Orgel, was in no way unusual in the period in question, as Renaissance arguments rarely work in a "neat and logical way."[244] However, at the same time, some physicians, such as Sir Thomas Browne, were absolutely convinced that male and female genitals differed completely from each other. He was certain that Galen was wrong about the male and female organs being inverted versions of one another, because the female testicles are placed in such a way that they cannot extend outward.[245] However, earlier on, he had accepted "the mutation of sexes, or transition into one another," and that "not only mankind, but many other animals may suffer this transexion, we will not deny, or hold it at all impossible."[246]

It stands to reason that the idea of homology persisted because Renaissance society had a special interest in defining women in terms of men; "the aim," Orgel claims, "is thereby to establish the parameters of maleness."[247] The similarities found by Galen are only anatomical; by stating that women are similar to men, he does not mean that they are of equal status. The fact remains that women were still seen as inferior to men. Indeed, male and female were often presented within the Renaissance culture as binary

[243] Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Power of the Imagination" in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne,* Donald M. Frame, ed., (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 69.
[244] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations*, 22.
[245] Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or Enquiries into Tenents and Commonly Presumed Truths*, III:xvii, Online Version <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/pseudodoxia/pseudodoxia.shtml#III>, August 2011.
[246] *Ibid.*
[247] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 24.

opposites, with women found to be imperfect in comparison to men. Ian Maclean in *The Renaissance Notion of Women* stresses the differences which male writers of the period perceived between men and women and the ways in which women were regarded as less intelligent, more passionate and less in control of their affections.[248] Orgel claims that this imperfection was used to justify male domination over women.[249]

For Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, the most important aspect of this argument, however, is not the fluidity of gender, but the hypothesis that this movement from female to male worked in only one direction. The masculine form, after all, is what the human strives to be. Transvestite theatre of the time, as we see it in Shakespeare is, therefore, the logical culmination of the prevailing anatomic model of sexual difference in early modern England, a model that in effect casts away women's bodies as a whole. But one might note that this antagonism against the women's body on the stage resulted in an interesting paradox within the transvestite convention: in order to do away with women, it required males to turn into females.

Now, a question that comes up naturally is this: as many would argue, if it makes perfect sense to see Shakespeare's foregrounding of the boy actor in the theatre of his transvestite comedies as the logical end of the one-sex theory of the time, how are we to account for the disruptive power of his theatre against the propagation of the patriarchal ideology, as is claimed by the present study? It is partially in answer to this question that we investigated, in the previous chapters, how Shakespeare used the tools of patriarchal ideology of his time, like the play of homoeroticism and transvestism, to quietly disrupt and subvert the cultural logic of that ideology. Taking this argument

[248] Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 47-81.
[249] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 25.

further, it seems appropriate that we look at the elementary issue of gender and female sexuality from another perspective, as could be seen in his later plays – his "problem comedies" and some of his tragedies. In these plays, it seems that Shakespeare makes use of the notion of female sexuality in ambiguous and equally subversive ways. Even as he appears to generally have conformed to the prevalent fear of female sexuality, and worked towards its containment, at times he can be found to question the rationale of this cultural assumption.

The reversal of gender roles that takes place in some of his plays, like in *Macbeth,* should be considered in this perspective. This play in more than one way asserts that against the reigning anatomical theory of the male sex supremacy, Shakespeare commendably nurtured a broader view, accommodating both the sexes into constituting a dichotomy of equal and, therefore, reversible, halves. By taking a fresh look at *Macbeth* we shall see how, through an intriguing reversal of gender roles that was to be condoned and punished, Shakespeare succeeds, to a certain extent, to legitimize female sexuality, partly reinstating that subdued "other" into its rightful position in the dichotomy of the human self.

Gender Reversal in Macbeth

As we have seen, in the early modern period, the absolute measure of mankind was maleness, as only men were seen as fully developed human beings; Women were generally seen as deficient male beings. All biological, physiological and psychological aspects of the female were considered as underdeveloped, inverted male aspects. A woman's personality was described as lacking good-quality humours: the humours that generate male vitality, namely blood and heat. Instead, they were assumed to be

mundane and passive; women's mildness, for example, was caused by a lack of male courage. However, I would argue that through the manipulation of masculinity and femininity, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* contests the early modern ideology of the traditional gender roles – that of fierce men and frail women. This section, therefore, aims to explore the ways in which *Macbeth* challenges the traditional definition of a man as fierce, valorous, ruthless and commanding, and the traditional definition of a woman as gentle, silent, maternal and weak. At the same time, it will shed light on the Macbeth's downfall in relation to an adherence to these traditional ideals.

In *Macbeth,* Lady Macbeth does not only want to take on masculine personality traits in order to make herself a stronger person, she also wants to physically turn into a man, and in doing so shames Macbeth by attacking his own masculinity. However, even before she calls on the spirits to "unsex" her, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as lacking some of the characteristics of a woman's traditional role.[250] William Liston explains:

> As Macbeth's wife, Lady Macbeth is perceived and judged to the roles and functions that a proper wife fulfils and performs. Given her station, there are two: to provide heirs to her lord, and to be his hostess. It is in the latter capacity that Duncan regards her as he arrives at Inverness: 'See, see our honoured hostess!' (1.6.10) Surely it is no accident that Duncan's exclamation completes a speech of Banquo's that alludes to the child-bearing role:
>
> BANQUO
> This guest of summer,
> The temple-haunting martlet, does approve
> By his loved mansionry that the heavens' breath
> Smells wooingly here. No jutty frieze,
> Buttress, nor coign of vantage but this bird

[250] See Sian Thomas' essay "Lady Macbeth" for a brilliant discussion of Lady Macbeth as a character, who only resorts to this sort of rhetoric because she is unusually feminine; in *Performing Shakespeare's Tragedies Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 95-106.

> Hath made his pendant bed and procreant cradle;
> Where they most breed and haunt I have observed
> The air is delicate.
>
> (*Macbeth* 1.6.3-9)[251]

Indeed, Lady Macbeth is clearly failing to fulfil the second part of her role – being a mother to Macbeth's children – due to her infertility. In Act 1, there is a reference to this neglected duty: "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me." (1.7.54-55) Despite insisting on having "given suck" to a babe, no child is present within the play itself. Of course, Lady Macbeth had at least one child; the allusion to a past experience with "I have given suck" makes that clear. History may insist that it was not Macbeth's child; but Shakespeare selectively removed Lady Macbeth's earlier marriage.[252] Regardless, it is reasonable to assume that as there is no child, Macbeth's line of descents is not secure, and the witches' prophecy concerning the momentariness of Macbeth as king and the eventual ascendancy of Banquo's line reinforces this.

Lady Macbeth also has her failings in her role as a "fair and noble hostess," the first part of the traditional female role. Blissfully ignorant of the assassination that lingers, Duncan – as mentioned above – focuses attention on Lady Macbeth's welcome by calling her "honoured hostess" and "fair and noble hostess" (1.6.10; 23). Lady Macbeth, however, plots Duncan's murder by drugging his guards with a drink of mulled milk and wine but cannot bring herself to kill Duncan herself because he reminds her of her father. So, on the one hand, she violates her role as hostess by undertaking the various evil tasks needed to

[251] William Liston, "'Male and Female Created He Them': Sex and Gender in Macbeth," *College Literature,* 16:3 (1989), 234.

[252] There is a very famous long scholarly tradition of dispute that a babe is *Macbeth*'s most powerful symbol. See for example L.C. Knights, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" subtitled "An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism" in *Explorations* (London: 1946), 1-39; Cleanth Brooks, "The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness" in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 19-34; and Carol Chillington Rutter, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" in *Macbeth and his Afterlife* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 38-58.

promote her husband while, on the other hand, she also fulfils her role in Act 3, Scene 4 when she tries to keep the banquet going while Macbeth's state of mind is extremely close to ruining it: "Sit worthy friends. My lord is often thus / And hath been from his youth." (3.4.64-65) So even with the aforementioned deficiencies, Lady Macbeth is still a woman in mind and body. However, she does not like that fact and, hence, very early in the play she appeals to the spirits to make her less feminine and more courageous.

In fact, the relationship between gender and power is crucial to Lady Macbeth's individuality. In the age in which the play is written, women could only make something of themselves – as we have seen – with the support of a male guardian or proxy. Shakespeare, therefore, seems to stress the fact that Lady Macbeth embraces female techniques to acquire power – namely, manipulation – to serve her allegedly male ambitions. In *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Dusinberre is of the same mind when she says: "Women parry powerlessness by becoming adept plotters, channelling into premeditation the energy which men expend in performance …. A skilful woman acquires a man to act on her behalf."[253] Since Lady Macbeth doubts her husband's capabilities when she receives his letter, she comes to the decision to ensure the fulfilment of her husband's aspiration. She is of the opinion that Macbeth is too concerned with other people's welfare to carry out the murder. She soliloquises: "Yet do I fear thy nature, / It is too full o'th' milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way." (1.5.14-16) She then decides to discard her femininity and to develop more masculine characteristics:

LADY MACBETH
Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,

[253] Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 283.

> Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> Th'effect and it.
>
> (*Macbeth* 1.5.38-45)

Lady Macbeth does not want to be transformed into a hermaphrodite, as might be understood by the expression "unsex me"; in fact, she wishes to downright invert her sex. She wants to transform herself into a (cruel) man in the hope that this will allow her to both fulfil her personal ambition and help her husband – whom she considers as unmanly – to commit manly deeds. Calling up the spirits to "unsex" her and to "take [her] milk for gall," and finally claiming her preparedness to "dash the brains out" of "the babe that milks [her]," is her attempt to rid herself of any female characteristics and to enter the male sphere. This becomes even clearer when she asks the spirits to "make thick my blood" so that "th' access and passage to remorse" is blocked off, as remorse is a typical female characteristic. In her view, manliness manifestly excludes remorse, compassion, pity and nurturing. Lady Macbeth, however, completely miscomprehends the full meaning of manliness.

Lady Macbeth's shortcomings are contrasted with the actions and representation of Lady Macduff. Lady Macduff is, first of all, far more passive than Lady Macbeth and, secondly, has managed to beget sons for her husband. In fact, in Act 4, Scene 2, Lady Macduff is portrayed as a domestic and caring figure: although she harshly criticises her husband to Ross, maintaining Macduff is a traitor who lacks affection for his family (he "wants the natural touch" 4.2.9), the scene evokes the spectators' and readers' sympathy as she tries to be brave for her son. It is clear through her actions that she is a fiercely protective mother, who is not afraid to speak out. Her outspokenness is revealed when she wittily claims that husbands are replaceable, and if she found herself a widow,

she would be able to buy "twenty at any market" (4.2.40). Lady Macduff, however, proves herself a dutiful and loyal wife defending Macduff's reputation from the murderers' claims against him. When one murderer wonders where Macduff is, she bravely answers "I hope in no place so unsanctioned / Where such as you mayst find him." (4.2.81-82) Hence, Lady Macduff's brief appearance in the play places her in stark contrast with Lady Macbeth.

The failures on Lady Macbeth's part contribute directly to her eventual madness and death. Soon after the murder, she slowly starts to slide into madness – just as her craving for power influenced her more substantially than Macbeth before the crime, so guilt plagues her more substantially after the crime. Indeed, at the end of the play, she is diminished to a sleepwalking, insane woman, trying frantically to clean away an imperceptible bloodstain:

> GENTLEWOMAN
> It is an accustomed action with her, to seem
> thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a
> quarter of an hour.
> LADY MACBETH
> Yet here's a spot.
> DOCTOR
> Hark, she speaks. I will set down what comes from her
> to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.
> LADY MACBETH
> Out, damned spot; out, I say. One, two – why,
> then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, die, a soldier
> and afeard? What need we fear who knows it when none can
> call our power to account? Yet, who would have thought the
> old man to have that much blood in him?
> (*Macbeth* 5.1.24-34)

The doctor says later: "Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1.61-62); the guilt comes to plague her, and the unnatural mind leads to its own destruction. In other words, Lady Macbeth's late susceptibility turns into a weakness,

which she cannot handle. She commits suicide, which indicates her complete inefficiency to deal with their crimes.

Macbeth's manliness is, of course, at the heart of the play. In the first act, Macbeth is portrayed in a particularly positive light. The second scene of the play recounts Macbeth's intestinal fortitude – an indispensable part of masculinity within society – on the battlefield. Duncan compliments Macbeth's actions as those of a "worthy gentleman," (1.2.24) and Macbeth is considered a paragon of integral manliness when Duncan accords the title of Thane of Cawdor to "noble Macbeth." Indeed, Eugene Waith in "Manhood and Valor in Macbeth" notes that "Macbeth is a soldier whose valor we hear praised throughout the play …. In all these comments there is implied one ideal – the soldier's or, as Plutarch says, the Roman's ideal – of what it is to be a man."[254] What Waith wants to say is that masculinity can result in devastation if misused; a man without pity and remorse might become a dangerous weapon. A fuller, more serene manliness, however, should not only include physical courage but a sense of morality, too. This is illustrated in Macbeth's attempt to cope with the integrity of his future actions, as he reminds himself of all the reasons why he should not commit the murder:

> MACBETH
>
> He's here in double trust:
> First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
> Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
> Who should against his murderer shut the door,
> Not bear the knife myself.
> (*Macbeth* 1.7.12-16)
>
> We will proceed no further in this business.
> He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought
> Golden opinions from all sorts of people,

[254] Eugene M. Waith, "Manhood and Valor in Macbeth" from "Manhood and Valor in Two Shakespearean Tragedies," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History*, 17:4 (1950), 265-68; Rptd. in *Macbeth* (twentieth Century Interpretations), Terence Hawkes, ed., (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1977), 63.

Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.
(*Macbeth* 1.7.31-34)

This shows that he has begun to feel guilt-ridden and that he has resolved not to proceed with Duncan's assassination. Nonetheless, although Macbeth is portrayed as a physically strong character, he is also extremely weak-willed, and when it comes to taming his wife's desire for power, he fails.

Indeed, Lady Macbeth's ideal of manhood exemplifies a man's physical courage and is, therefore, tragically conventional: a man is one who acts. Lacking strength of character, Macbeth allows his wife to manipulate him by making him feel unmanly and cowardly:

LADY MACBETH
Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem
(*Macbeth* 1.7.39-42)

She succeeds in making him feel inferior to her. Macbeth appears weak in his remarkable ineffectiveness to override his wife's unfettered ambition. Macbeth, however, seems to understand the consequences of his actions and begins to feel remorseful. Waith notes: "his mental torment grows out of the conflict between a narrow concept of man as the courageous male and the more inclusive concept of man as a being whose moral nature distinguishes him from the beasts":

MACBETH
Prithee, peace.
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.
(*Macbeth* 1.7.45-47)[255]

[255] Waith, "Manhood and Valor in Macbeth," 64.

His wife quickly retaliates by saying:

> What beast was't then
> That made you break this enterprise to me?
> When you durst do it, then you were a man;
> And to be more than what you were, you would
> Be so much more than a man.
> (*Macbeth* 1.7.48-51)

Macbeth finally regains his masculine "qualities" by becoming brave and aggressive enough to finally commit the murder. However, his remorse quickly reappears after he sees Banquo's ghost in Act 3, Scene 4 and Lady Macbeth's only means of rallying him is to tease him with effeminacy: "Are you a man?" (3.4.58)

> O, these flaws and starts,
> Impostors to true fear, would well become
> A woman's story at a winter's fire
> Authorized by her grandma.
> (*Macbeth* 3.4.62-65)

Macbeth is by now too "unmanned" by his excess of manly action to actually care about her remarks. In fact, murdering Duncan has reduced him to the level of the murderer he hired to kill Banquo, whose claim "We are men, my liege" (3.1.91) provokes his scorn:

> Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men,
> As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,
> Shoughs, water-rugs, and demi-wolves are clept
> All by the name of dogs.
> (*Macbeth* 3.1.93-96)

This reflects the tragic dismay within Macbeth: on the one hand, he is too thirsty for power to permit his conscience to prevent him from killing his way to the top and, on the other hand, he is too self-conscious to accept himself as a murderer. Nonetheless, he now defines manliness in terms of brutish violence, leaving no place for qualms about regicide. "The deed which Lady Macbeth prophesied would make Macbeth

more of a man," Dusinberre posits, "reduces the warrior of the opening battle – 'Valour's minion' – to the shrinking, superstitious, bragging, hysterical wretch at Dunsinane who cannot look his enemy in the face, for he has 'cow'd my better part of man.'"[256]

In the end, Macbeth's death results from his actions as a figure of pure, unconstrained manly aggression – off the battlefield – lacking feminine graces of morality and emotion, which society could not condone without punishment. Unlike Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, Macbeth contemplates suicide, but rejects the idea: "Why should I play the Roman fool," he asks "and die / On mine own sword?" (5.10.1-2) Instead, he dies fighting, and the play comes full circle: it begins with Macbeth winning in battle and it ends with him succumbing in combat.

From what has been discussed, it seems justified to claim that *Macbeth* contests the traditional representation of gender roles through the manipulation of masculinity and femininity. The play works against the idea of the man as fierce, ruthless, valorous and commanding and the woman as soft, maternal and weak. "Shakespeare denies that masculinity ordains action," Dusinberre states, "and in doing so undermines the logic which declares women to be weak and ignoble."[257] Shakespeare seems to gesture towards a necessary societal and cultural change required to appreciate and understand both men and women. Macbeth and his wife's downfall symbolizes the result of an attachment to conventional ideals. The downfall of Macbeth stresses the need for the culture to construct a wholesome sexual identity, which combines the qualities of both genders.

[256] Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 285.
[257] *Ibid*.

Female Sexuality in the "Problem Comedies"

We have seen how, in Shakespeare, the sexual inversions depicted in the early "festive comedies" erode the equation of masculinity with sexual potency and control. As a result, gender categories begin to break down. And in *Macbeth*, the reversal of gender and sexual power and the subsequent loss of "masculine" dominance results in a slippage of gender identity.

The same gender ambiguity informs Shakespeare's later comedies, which are quite interestingly called "problem comedies" due to the starker and darker aspects of human relationships explored in these plays. The problematic relationship between gender and power, and power's capacity to imaginatively re-fashion gender identities, define the gender ambiguity that lies at the heart of plays like *All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*.

The generally accepted view regarding the comedies of Shakespeare is that they enact an essentially masculine narrative. They are dramas of "reified masculinity," as David McCandless would qualify them, which consign women to the mythical position of object/objective to the male hero's quest; the "other" out of which he creates himself. Female characters, no matter how much they seem to dominate a certain narrative (think of Lady Macbeth!), are in the end a mere accessory "to an underlying master narrative of masculine legitimation."[258]

But unlike the earlier comedies, the later "problem comedies" though inextricably entangled in the kind of masculine narratives, nevertheless deconstruct these

[258] David McCandless, *Gender and Performance in Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 4.

narratives to the point of near rupture, failing to resolve more aggressive diversions of the sex-gender system, observes McCandless.[259]

All the three plays present female figures who contest and confound "feminine Otherness". In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella tries to resist femininity though she is ultimately made to serve the male interests. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena destabilizes femininity by fusing unfeminine, erotic aggression with hyper-feminine modesty. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Cressida defamiliarizes femininity by enacting its multiple, seemingly contradictory issues. Such kind of unsettling of femininity inevitably thwarts the quests for manhood that the male characters in these plays have aspired to undertake.[260]

By subverting the culturally dictated gender roles, as we see it in *Macbeth*, and by suspending the contemporary conception of gender and sexual norms, as it happens in the problem comedies, Shakespeare might have used his stage for contesting impersonations of "man" and "woman" that underlie the theatricality of gender, even as the theatre of the time as a cultural construct demanded of an artist neat, easily categorized and authentic enactments of gender hierarchy. By consciously failing to substantiate it, it seems Shakespeare wanted primarily to disclose the inadequacy of gender as a cultural signifier of the essential human self.

[259] David McCandless, *Gender and Performance in Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, 4.
[260] *Ibid.*

Chapter 5
CONCLUSION: THE EROTIC POLITICS OF SHAKESPEAREAN THEATRE

The focus of this study has been the dynamic of the play of erotic desire and gender politics in Shakespearean theatre, and their cultural and political implications. For a contemporary reader, the chief interest in the Renaissance theatre lies in the fact that its surviving texts, even though safely naturalized into the literary canon as masterpieces, can offer us a model for the use of disruptive power of cultural production against the dominant ideologies of our own time.

Representations of eroticism are the most remarkable aspects of Renaissance drama for a contemporary reader, mainly because one can find intriguing parallels between our own unending struggles to still come to terms with the fluid nature of human sexuality and the Renaissance society's preoccupation with sexual and gender categorization of the human subject. The theatre of the time was also preoccupied with sexual desire and its manifestations, as well as the production of erotic desire and its representations on stage which called for a daring use of many theatrical devices like, for example, transvestism, boy-actresses and homoeroticism; all of which are present in those of Shakespeare's plays that we examined. Through the deft use of these theatrical devices, Shakespearean stage represented eroticism and gender and their interplay in ways quite subversive to the official representations of them in the hegemonic discourses: a kind of intellectualized sexual teasing was evidently one stock in trade of the theatre itself. It is this disruptive power of art embodied in Shakespeare's plays that renders them relevant even today, and it is this same power of disruption and subversion that has been the focus of this study, in order to appropriate it for our own cultural struggles.

The ambiguous and often contesting interplays of erotic desire and gendering of sexuality represented by Shakespeare unfailingly suggest that sex and gender are not historical fixities, but cultural sites of fluidity, overlap, slippage and subversion. Shakespeare's theatricality of erotic politics asserts that we need a more inclusive notion of sexuality, transgressing the confines of gender. Shakespeare directs our attention towards the inadequacy of gender as a concept to measure human subjectivity. As Judith Butler puts it:

> This 'being a man' and this 'being a woman' are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, signify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely.[261]

This remark might serve as a gloss, for instance, on the role of Ganymede in *As You Like It*. In Shakespearean theatre, as we have seen in some detail in the previous chapters, the female characters deconstruct gender itself and fail to occupy the genders that fail to determine them, leaving conventional categories of sexuality blurred, confused or even absent. The characters untiringly evade the normative genders they are assigned in the cultural space given to them by their own time. Therefore, in my opinion, by asserting their insubstantiality, Shakespeare's characters constantly strive to inject difference and diversity to a system that depends upon erasing it.

Sex and Gender as Political Constructs

Shakespeare's uses of transvestism and gender-bending on his stage are powerful pointers to the need for a revaluation of the logic of cultural categorization of sex into the binaries of gender. They accuse each and every one who endorses the instilled

[261] As quoted in David McCandless, *Gender and Performance in Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 4.

and obstinate cultural principle of two, and only two, sexes. Instead, we should use them to analyze the signification of intersexuality within the framework of history, culture and society. In fact, they are essential reading for everyone interested in the social and political constructedness of sexuality and gender.

For the society of the Renaissance, sex as well as gender were natural divisions, dictated by the divine scheme of things. However, it took much significant work to keep them that way. So the cultural politics of Renaissance society was organized around this naturally determined division of power. In our own time, this understanding has undergone a significant correction, and we have started to see gender as an artificial, cultural construct, orchestrated by the patriarchal ideology. But sex is still for us a natural, biological and, therefore, scientific division. This assumption, too, needs to be seriously questioned, as experiences and occurrences of intersexuality in our natural, real-life situations demand. While the representations of transexuality on the Shakespearean stage were conscious artistic creations and were still capable of questioning the assumptions of gender politics, the real experiences of intersexuality pose a significant challenge to the presumed "naturalness" of biological sex, with serious cultural implications.

The Cultural Construction of Sex

The sex categories ("female" and "male") are commonly assumed to be the biological basis on which gender ("femininity" and "masculinity") is etched. The distinction of sex and/or gender, which stems from the theory that gender is socio-cultural and sex biological, has been a key part of our understanding of the human self.[262]

[262] Germaine Greer in *The Whole Woman* writes: "Masculinity is to maleness as femininity is to femaleness. That is to say that maleness is the natural condition, the sex if you like, and masculinity is the cultural construct, the gender." Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London: Doubleday, 1999), 288.

But this assumed naturalness of biological sex, thought to be a scientific view, has been contested. Many biological and medical cases show that very often babies are born with ambiguous genitals. But our scientific culture does not accept it as "natural" and normal, because of the deeply inscribed notion of sexuality being strictly binary.

In the view of paediatric surgeons, endocrinologists and other specialists, intersex or "(pseudo) hermaphroditism" is simply a fixable birth defect with which only a few babies (one in every hundred) are born: the differences are considered as errors, abnormalities and deficiencies. By correcting these defects and deficiencies, actually what happens is that the assumed natural sex is often socially constructed. Suzanne Kessler, in a significant study, argues that intersexuality poses a significant challenge to the presumed "naturalness" of biological sex and asks us to view "sex" (as well as "gender") as socially constructed.[263] Hinged on interviews with physicians and parents of intersex children as well as intersex adults, Kessler discloses the heterosexist presumptions that underlie the management of intersexuality. She claims that biology does not methodically classify human beings into two differing categories. She maintains, "in the face of apparently incontrovertible evidence – infants born with some combination of "female" and "male" reproductive and sexual features – physicians hold an incorrigible belief that female and male are the only "natural" options."[264] Surgeons surgically (re)construct biological gender in ways that mirror and support the social construction of gender; the way society thinks what male and female "should" be like. When an intersex child is born, it is urgently dealt with exactly because it defies the "natural" categories. So as to promptly reconstruct the "natural" categorization of the two sexes, a team of specialists tests and checks the child's

[263] Suzanne J. Kessler: *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 12-13.
[264] *Ibid*.

condition and health, settles upon either female or male as a sex, briefs the child's parents on its "true sex," and the surgeons then operate. The operation is followed by an administration of hormones to get the child's body to adjust to the sex it has been assigned. In relation to present-day social constructions of sex, the "true sex" is chosen on the basis of the already apparent sexual organs and their assumed future suitability for heterosexual intercourse.[265]

This complicity between science, medicine, and the social notions of "sex" and "gender" is quite alarming, and even in our postmodern times raises pressing questions about how cultures dictate the norms for "normal" human conditions and behaviours.

The Gender Politics of Transvestism

Within the gender dynamics of transvestism, it is interesting to see how Shakespeare is particular in using female cross-dressing as a more potent tool of subversion. This, along with the understanding that women who dressed as men during this period were enacting a kind of hybrid gender, could lead to a strange conclusion. As Ruth Gilbert explains, "In these terms transvestite women were self-constructed hermaphrodites ('halfe male, and halfe female')."[266] And although during the early modern period, the figure of the hermaphrodite was subject to many different and conflicting representations and interpretations, to present-day society a hermaphrodite is usually regarded as a freak. It is important to note that Gilbert says that there is a crucial distinction between the "androgyne" and the "hermaphrodite," which were the prevailing models of gender hybridity during the early modern period. One must be reminded of Shakespeare's well-attested interest in Ovid in this connection and of the richness of the

[265] Suzanne J. Kessler: *Lessons from the Intersexed*, 16-30.
[266] Ruth Gilbert, *Early Modern Hermaphrodites: Sex and Other Stories*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 82.

references in his plays to the stories of the *Metamorphoses,* especially to Ovid's representations of androgyny and hermaphroditism.

Although the terms (androgyne and hermaphrodite) were often inter-changeable, she says that androgyny "is repeatedly (although not exclusively) linked to a condition of plenitude presenting a spiritual transcendence of the body. Hermaphroditism, in contrast, usually (although again, not absolutely) highlights sexual difference, whether in direct relation to the body or to the performance of gender."[267] Put differently, androgyny was an imaginary ideal, one that was often used to signal the perfect union of opposites — like, for example, man and woman in marriage.[268] However, the hermaphrodite made it possible for two different sexes to be physically embodied in one form – an idea, Gilbert argues that in theory was often found to be exciting but troubling in practice.[269]

When examining literary and theatrical portrayals of cross-dressed women in Shakespeare, Gilbert's distinction highlighted between androgyny and hermaphroditism is particularly useful. As such, Phyllis Rackin praises Shakespeare for his seasoned handling of the androgynous potential of the boy heroine in masculine attire on the stage, noting that "he uses his boy heroines' sexual ambiguity not only to complicate his plots but to resolve them."[270] Indeed, by successfully performing female roles, early modern boy actors seem to have accomplished a central principle of androgyny: surpassing the body and a single sex.

[267] Ruth Gilbert, *Early Modern Hermaphrodites: Sex and Other Stories*, 12.
[268] *Ibid.*, 17.
[269] *Ibid.*, 20-21.
[270] Phyllis Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," 31.

Michael Shapiro, however, in his discussion of boy actors on the Shakespearean stage, advises against interpreting cross-dressed theatrical figures as androgynous, claiming that "[i]nstead of abstract symbols of androgyny, the stage offered images of physical bisexuality, or hermaphroditism, which was generally regarded as monstrous."[271] Shapiro is right to recognize how worrying the representations of gender hybridity could be to spectators in early modern Europe, but he seems to forget that those images offered by the stage were carefully constructed illusions, not realities. The expressly illusory nature of theatrical gender mingling instigates a more nuanced reading of the hybrid gender identities suggested by cross-dressed female characters.

In fact, Gilbert argues that early modern hermaphrodites "represented stories that demanded to be told,"[272] and as the Shakespearean theatre sometimes illustrates, this demand could help female cross-dressing characters to tell their own stories. This personal narrative serves as an inducement for an audience or reader to listen to the female cross-dresser's story and to develop additional exciting and unusual hybrid genders.[273]

The Sexual Politics of Contemporary Cultural Production

The erotic politics of gender bending and transvestism in Shakespeare should be taken, in our own times, as pointers to the need for a revaluation of gender and sex as social constructs. The transvestite on a Shakespearean stage can accomplish even more than solely articulating the difference between sex and gender; transvestism can challenge the difference between appearance and reality that forms a great deal of the socially constructed knowledge of gender identity. According to Foucault, the association of a

[271] Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage*, 3.
[272] Ruth Gilbert, *Early Modern Hermaphrodites: Sex and Other Stories*, 1.
[273] *Ibid.*

seemingly natural "attraction" to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural combination of cultural constructs as means of procreation.[274] The debate that sex, gender, and heterosexuality are historical products that have been redefined as natural over time has recently received a good deal of critical attention not only from Michel Foucault, but also from social psychologists, gay historians and cultural anthropologists.[275] Such an understanding of the cultural artificiality and constitution of gender is of critical importance today, in our postmodern times, when there is a need for accepting and respecting difference and diversity.

The need of the time is to be able to recognize the intricate ways this political construction of sex and gender takes place. Judith Butler throws some light upon the problem of socio-political construction of gender and sex, when she places the spotlight on the miscellaneous acts by which cultural identity is constituted. The phenomenological theory of "acts," adopted by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead, attempts to explain the mundane way in which social agents *constitute* social reality through gesture and language.[276] Following the logic of phenomenology, Butler clarifies that "gender is in no way a stable identity from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts.* Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."[277]

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[274] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980), 154: "the notion of 'sex' made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle."
[275] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, 40:4 (1988), 525.
[276] *Ibid.*, 519.
[277] *Ibid.*

Adopting the phenomenological perspective to view the gender issue, as Judith Butler takes up to do, is particularly helpful for our purpose, as phenomenological theories of human representation and expression have been used to differentiate the various biological and physiological causes that form, both bodily existence and the *meanings* that embodied existence assumes, in the context of lived experience.[278] Merleau-Ponty in "The Body in its Sexual Being" in his *The Phenomenology of Perception*, disagrees with such descriptions of bodily experience and says that the body is not a natural species but a historical idea.[279] Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex,* cites exactly this statement in order to support her argument that "woman" or "man," is not a natural fact but a historical situation.[280]

Beauvoir not only maintains that the physical structure of a person is a historical situation, but that it also is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation.[281] Similarly, Merleau-Ponty states that the body is not only a historical idea but also a set of possibilities to be continually realized.[282] Both these positions point to the possibility that we can very much do away with the existing categorization of the sex and the gender of the body and reconstruct our understanding of it. For this, however, we need to find out how specific acts create and structure gender, and we need to find out how these acts occasion possibilities for the cultural transformation of gender.

Gender, then, is just like a script that requires actors to rehearse and act it out so as to present it as reality. But in what sense is gender an act? Victor Turner, an anthropologist, observes in his works on ritual social drama, that social action requires a

[278] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 520.
[279] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Body in its Sexual Being" in *The Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 198.
[280] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974), 38.
[281] *Ibid.*
[282] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Body in its Sexual Being," 178-198.

repetitious performance. According to Turner, this repetition is a re-experiencing of an assortment of values already deeply entrenched in society; it is the ritualized, mundane and most importantly, accepted procedure for their legitimation.[283] This kind of rehearsal was what was demanded of the theatre in Renaissance society by official ideology, and what was undermined by the contrary acts of erotic ambiguities in Shakespeare's case. The dynamic of sexuality, gender and theatricality in his plays have shown us how the cultural production of gender is enacted on a large political scale.

It is safe to say, then, that genders cannot be viewed as neither a truth or falsity, nor as real or apparent. Nonetheless, we are forced to live a life in which genders are made resistant to change, discrete, and in which they are incontestable signifiers. As a consequence, gender is made to look as either true or false which serves a social policy of gender control and regulation.[284] If a person performs their gender wrong, it results in a set of punishments. If a person performs it well, it reassures them that gender identity has a number of characteristics that make it what it is after all. "That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism," observes Butler, "should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated."[285]

Looking at the natural fact of the fluidity and insubstantiality of human sex and gender, and at the dynamic of politics involved in the process of cultural production of gender through Shakespeare's plays may look farfetched and arbitrary, but a starting point

[283] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 67.
[284] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 528.
[285] *Ibid.*

for this investigation was the belief that such an endeavour can be quite justified in our times. It occurs to me that it remains politically crucial to represent a human person as an essentially complete self, not just a woman or man. It is essential to review the works of our past cultural production by concentrating on the different perspectives that have been omitted so far, in order to offer alternative descriptions and prescriptions. Clifford Geertz suggests that in contemporary social theory the theatrical metaphor has been used in two, often opposing directions.[286] Indeed, on the one hand, Victor Turner focuses on social drama as a "regenerative process" in order to solve internal conflict situations within a culture.[287] On the other hand, figures as diverse as Emile Durkheim, Kenneth Burke and Michel Foucault thematize, settled within the terms of performance, political control and questions of legitimation.[288] This tension between the two is not actually a contradiction. As the present study has striven to show, a consideration of gender as a public performance in accordance with the prescribed order, as it happened in the plays of Shakespeare, has to be coupled with an examination of the cultural and political taboos and sanctions under which the dramas occurred. Such an analysis tells us the way in which art can function as a counterforce to ideology.

Claiming that the Shakespearean plays were outright subversive to the official ideology would be naïve indeed, given the historical fact that Shakespeare's plays were actually accepted into the official canon of the period. If they had been openly subversive, they would not have been adopted so enthusiastically as an official state culture. Instead of openly questioning the official ideology of gender, the canonization of Shakespeare's

[286] Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Thought" in *Local Knowledge, Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 27-28.
[287] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors,* 23-57.
[288] As quoted in Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 526.

comedies enshrined a model of gender play in the very heart of Anglophone culture. But an informed, revisionist reading of those plays, as I have attempted to do, cannot fail to see how the official faith in Shakespeare's plays was quite flawed and misplaced, and how his plays always carried an inherent power of subversion of the accepted ideology of sex and gender. Through subtle plays of erotic ambiguity, the Shakespearean theatre has provided provocative sites for ideological change around sexuality ever since. In fact, one could safely argue that Shakespeare's dramas represented a historic fissure in Renaissance culture whereby the modern was indeed born. And for us, living in the postmodern times, they still represent a place of evolving possibility. They gently remind us that human sexuality and gender are not monolithic and exclusive, but are fluid sites of diverse and contesting desires. I strongly feel that it will make perfect sense for our own times to re-appropriate the cultural sites of Shakespearean theatre as empowering spaces, which allow "other" voices, queer voices and muffled voices to make themselves heard, to stake a claim to cultural centrality.

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