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FEMALE CROSS-DRESSING AND FRAGILE MASCULINITY IN
LE ROMAN DE SILENCE AND TWELFTH NIGHT

A Thesis
Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

August, 2018

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how fragile masculinity has been portrayed in Medieval and Renaissance literature by analyzing the impact of female-crossing dressing on male characters in Heldris of Cornwall's *Le Roman de Silence* and William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. In the 13th century French Romance that centers on the debate between nature and nurture, Silence is a female raised as a male to circumvent patrilineal inheritance laws who becomes a celebrated knight. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola cross-dresses as Cesario, an act that results in the unintentional winning of Olivia's love as well as confused (and ultimately resolved) romantic feelings from Count Orsino. By disrupting the traditional gender expectations for women and succeeding in masculine spaces, Silence and Viola reveal the malleability of the constructed gender binary, the complexity of the concept of "nature," and the fragility of other cultural categories, particularly socioeconomic classes. Both texts are implicitly subversive by creating a sense of distance by using an ironic narrator or a carnivalesque inversion, and both end in culturally necessary stabilizing gestures that on the surface, undercut the subversive messaging. However, the successful crossing of the gender boundary highlights the superficiality and flexibility of the boundaries themselves, resulting in enduring subversion.

Introduction

While we still have a long way to go, Western culture is slowly moving towards greater acceptance of gender variance. A 2017 Ipsos poll found that 71% of Americans believed that the United States was becoming more tolerant of transgender people. As our culture progresses and non-traditional gender expression has had greater visibility, there has been a strong anti-trans backlash. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, 21 anti-trans bills have been introduced in the United States since the beginning of 2018. In politics, religion, and media, the most vocal proponents for anti-trans legislation are typically men. In fact, the same Ipsos poll found a significant gender gap between men and women in terms of transgender rights, with women favoring trans rights at a 10.7% increase compared to men.

Greater support among women for marginalized groups is not unusual. Particularly in matters that threaten the sharp social distinctions between gender and sexuality, men often seem to have the strongest negative reactions. Power is certainly the common denominator in any situation where the rights of a marginalized group are vulnerable. When power is threatened, there is often an instinctual reaction to maintain that power. If power is specifically connected to masculinity, then, it becomes important for some men to reinforce their masculinity when they feel that their power may be taken. A man who feels stripped of otherwise entitled power, whether through poor economic conditions, lack of romantic success or general unhappiness may lash out against those he blames for his own lack of power. This is what I will refer to as fragile masculinity: a man's discomfort with outward projections of femininity and potential threats to his own supremacy. This fragility comes with the often-subconscious understanding that socially constructed identities like gender and sexuality are less permanent than would support traditional patriarchal views, which can lead to a desire to reinforce one's own masculinity and to panic

when women are successful in the male realm -- or demonstrate independence from men entirely.

Today, fragile masculinity is in the headlines regularly. Recent women's rights movements have been met with responses like the "Meninist" movement that views progress towards gender equity as an effort to subjugate men, and these men are quick to push back against recent movements like Me Too and Time's Up that have lead to a reckoning for high profile men exposed as sexual abusers. Gaining more attention lately are Incels, (Involuntarily Celibates), an online group of primarily white, heterosexual men who resent women due to the men's perceived entitlement to sex that they are unable to obtain. Incel community participants/sympathizers have been connected to at least 45 deaths, notably Eliot Rodger's 2014 UC Santa Barbara attack and most recently Nikolas Cruz at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and Alek Minassian in a Toronto van attack that killed ten.

We tend to view the violence, misogyny, and inhumanity of the past as something that we have largely left behind, and we credit western culture for our progress, but the violent consequences of patriarchy are clearly still reverberating today. Patriarchy is as old as human civilization – because of this, fragile masculinity is not limited to time and place. Throughout history, our understandings of gender and sexuality have evolved and shifted, but what has endured is the desire to stabilize an ultimately unstable cultural category.

One influential model of viewing gender prior to the 18th century was the Galenic "one-sex" model defined by historian Thomas Lacquer which characterizes gender as somewhat fluid. Men risked feminization if they "lost heat," and women could become masculine if their bodies "heated up." In addition, early modern medical theory explains male and female genitalia as structurally similar but spatially inverted versions of each other. The structures of the male penis

and female vagina are the same, but the male's is outward and visible while the female's is internal and hidden (Lacquer 26). The idea that the structures are the same lends itself to the possibility of gender transformation by a simple inversion of the genitals. Renaissance scientist Johann Weyer states "although women are feminine in actuality, I would call them masculine in potentiality" (qtd in Charles 123). This means that with the right traumatic physical circumstances, a woman hypothetically could invert her genitalia and obtain a penis, transforming her into a male – in this way, gender can theoretically be transcended as the only clear anatomical difference is negotiated with a simple inversion. Because gender identity required performative action and the civic status of women was extraordinarily low, some men experienced a need to confirm their masculinity and enforce gender boundaries (Mottier 6-7). When sex is not exactly "fixed," men are threatened by effeminacy. The one-sex view of gender persisted well into the 18th and 19th centuries, and it certainly contributed to Medieval and Renaissance anxieties regarding masculinity.

One way that Renaissance England deals with the fluidity of gender and maintaining clear gender roles was by rigorously enforcing specific behavior for the gender to which one is aligned, even if this somehow changes. Stephen Greenblatt offers the case of Marie Germain, who, while "robustly chasing her swine," managed to develop a male penis (81). Upon this sexual transformation, Marie changed her name to "Marin" and lived her life as a male. Even biologically intersexed individuals were forced to align themselves with one gender or the other, and when the individual behaved against that imposed alignment, he or she was severely punished. Gender and sexuality may be more fluid in the Renaissance, but gender roles were certainly well enforced (83). According to Thomas Lacquer, pre-enlightenment texts treated gender as a "real" cultural category and part of the order of things, but the one-sex body seemed

“to have no boundaries that could serve to define social status,” and therefore “order and hierarchy” were “imposed upon [the body] from the outside” (52, 62). For this reason, “the one-sex body of the doctors, profoundly dependent on cultural meanings, served both as the microcosmic screen for a macrocosmic, hierarchic order and as the more or less stable sign for an intensely gendered social order” (Lacquer 115). Female cross-dressing (i.e., females dressing as males), as a result, would be a threat not only to masculinity but to hierarchical social structures in general.

The emotional and often violent reactions some men have to women crossing gender binaries and succeeding in a masculine space are demonstrative of the persistence of fragile masculinity in western culture. While this fragility can certainly be viewed through the lens of men entering female spaces or the blurring of other traditional social distinctions, I intend to explore through literature how medieval and Elizabethan patriarchal systems respond when women cross the gender boundary into a male space. In Heldris of Cornwall’s 13th Century French Romance, *Silence*, the title character subverts the gender binary by cross-dressing as a male knight, while in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Viola successfully passes for the male “Cesario” and unwittingly wins the heart of a woman. Both texts’ subversion occurs somewhat covertly either through an ironic narrator or a carnivalesque inversion, and both end in culturally necessary stabilizing gestures that on the surface, undercut the subversive messaging. But the successful crossing of the gender boundary highlights the superficiality and flexibility of the boundaries themselves, so an enduring subversion persists despite efforts to re-establish normative patriarchal ideas.

Gender Disruption and Fragile Masculinity in *Le Roman de Silence*

Heldris of Cornwall's *Le Roman de Silence*, a 13th century Arthurian romance discovered only in the 20th century, feels topically current because of its modern depiction of cross-dressing and the nature vs. nurture debate, topics that intrigue modern readers. Today's feminist and queer theorists are particularly captivated by the tale of Silence, a female¹ raised as a male in order to circumvent the patrilineal inheritance laws of the misogynistic King Evan of England. Silence not only succeeds in her gender deception, but actually transcends all men in her success as a knight -- not to mention her sexual appeal to women (and men). Throughout the text, Nature and Nurture (personified as women), battle for primacy, and the battle seems to be won by Nature -- for better or for worse. If Nature is more powerful than Nurture, Silence, a biological female, must naturally be talented, for even though raised as a male, she is a success – an undoubtedly feminist message that divorces traditionally “male” traits from being exclusive to a particular gender. But by the tale’s end, the author seems to undercut the subversive message entirely by revealing Silence’s femininity and marrying her off to the very king whose misogynistic law is responsible for her deception in the first place.

The ending’s incongruity to the rest of the text’s subversive messaging is a struggle for modern critics. Is this accidental? The result of poor planning and writing? Is the author a misogynist and just oblivious to the feminist undercurrent present earlier in the text? Or is the ending simply a farcical parody of chivalric life? In my view, the disruption of the gender binary throughout the text as well as the fragile masculinity of King Evan are evidence for an ironic

¹ I recognize that terms like “female,” “female-sexed” or “biological female” can be determining and are at times problematic. Here, they are used in the absence of more acceptable alternatives.

interpretation of *Silence*, one that supports the subversive feminist ideas that exist early in the text and seem to irrevocably contrast with the disappointing ending.

The narrator opens the poem by addressing the author, Heldris of Cornwall, in the third person. While not uncommon for an author to reference oneself in this manner, it does have the effect of distance between the author and the narrator. This leaves room for the poem's narrator to take on a satirical persona that will serve to mediate the author's true social commentary. The narrator refers to a "manuscript" from which he tells the tale – with this frame, the story exists in one form and the poem that we receive is filtered through the lens of this narrator (2690). From the opening moments, the narrator is revealed to be easily distracted by moral soapboxes and has no fear of interjecting his own moral judgements of the characters and events.

Before even mentioning a character, the narrator is on a seemingly tangential rant about the modern day and its propensity for greed:

...[stingy folk] are all drunk,
Intoxicated with Avarice,
Their sovereign lady and wet nurse. (39-40)
[...]
Generosity, jousting and tourneying,
Wearing ladies' sleeves and making love
Have turned to heaping up mounds of dung. (43-47)

The narrator makes a good case for generosity and avoiding greed – something that few would rebut. And as this section is a departure from the tale in the "manuscript," I am comfortable crediting these views to the narrator alone. While an ordinarily positive moral message, this section is actually a preview of the narrator's misogynistic views that are more fully revealed as

the text progresses. In this commentary on greed, the narrator genders vices as largely female and virtues as largely male. Avarice, the primary target of his derision, is clearly female, described as greedy people's "sovereign lady" (40). The virtue Generosity, on the other hand, is male-gendered, as he can be found "jousting and tourneying" (43). The lady Avarice's wickedness has overtaken Generosity, however – a woman's influence has "intoxicated" the masculine Generosity, and his former virtue has been turned to "dung" (47). Later, Love (likely a reference to the mythological Cupid) is characterized with a masculine pronoun when "he took up a dart / sharper than a lance's point, / and struck Cador just beneath the breast" (680-682).

Shame, on the other hand, is not only female, but viciously characterized by the narrator: "Shame has been received at court for far too long; / she is at everyone's beck and call. She'll always be an old maid" and "Shame is death to him who yields to her (1563-1565, 1574). Additionally, Greed is feminized: "Greed has robbed many a man of his freedom, / and more than that if he gets hooked – / she makes him trot till he is dead" (330 – 332). Again, male virtue is destroyed when it succumbs to female vice, according to this narrator – and this theme continues throughout his mediation of the tale.

The narrator rarely misses an opportunity to remind his audience of the generally dishonest, irrational, and fickle nature of women. During his recounting of the Queen's seduction of the cross-dressed Silence, he goes on a long rant regarding the tendency of women to hold grudges:

Woman does not hesitate to claim
A man's love openly and fiercely;
She'll never leave him for fear of public opinion.
But her love is not steadfast;

It's irrational and unstable.

She loves and hates with equal ease.

[...]

As soon as she has a grudge against a man,

She doesn't give up hating easily. (3906-3911, 3923-3924)

It is important to recognize here that the narrator applies this quality to *all* women. Further, women manipulate men with emotions: “a woman always cries as a strategy / when she wants to accomplish something deceitful” (4158), and “She is much quicker at finding ways to harm a man / than at thinking up something beneficial” (5015-5016). “There is much that could be said on the subject of woman’s / deceitfulness” (5241-5242) he further laments; “Doing the right thing comes unnaturally to her” (6691). According to this narrator, women are so entirely villainous that for him,

there is no more precious gem,

nor greater treasure, than a virtuous woman.

No man can assess the value

of a woman who can be trusted. (6633-6637)

A virtuous woman is the rare exception, not the rule – and in fact, most women are ruinous to men in the eyes of this narrator.

The narrator makes these very broad generalizations about women, but of the three female characters in the poem, only one resembles these generalizations even remotely. When the narrator describes the actions (presumably documented in the aforementioned “manuscript”) of Eufemie, Silence’s mother, and Silence herself, both are presented as entirely virtuous. Eufemie, “the wisest doctor in the land,” (594) cures the King’s nephew, Cador after his heroic

defeat of a dragon. Despite the narrator's explicitly misogynistic portrayals, Eufemie is extended agency that is ordinarily reserved for men – she is offered any eligible man in the kingdom if she successfully saves Cador. We are used to seeing women used as leverage without care for their own free will, but here, all the eligible men in this kingdom are deprived of their agency for the purpose of preventing the king from “[dying] of sorrow” (610).

Further, Eufemie and Cador's story is one of true romantic love, and both experience the classic love-longing of Arthurian romance. Their union has a sense of authenticity and reciprocity. In advocating for their union, the king describes them as “...similar in age, / beauty and high lineage” and “equal in youth / and beauty” (1269-1272). Their equality is seen from the outside, but also Cador views Eufemie as his equal as well. “You shall take a noble husband / precisely when I take a wife who is my peer,” he tells her in their courtship (1002-1003). While the narrator illustrates a sexist mistrust of women, Cador, a literal hero, is not threatened by women at all; in fact, he respects both his wife and later, his daughter. As protagonists, Cador and Eufemie seem to reveal a moral voice for how women should be viewed and treated, supporting an ironic interpretation of the misogynistic narrator.

One need look no further than the narrator's characterization of the cross-dressed Silence to solidify this sense of irony. Nature makes Silence hyperbolically beautiful in a traditionally feminine sense while embodying the masculine qualities of a knight: “the most beautiful of all, / he was more valiant and noble / than all the others put together.” (2397-2398). The struggle between Nature and Nurture is allegorically addressed, with Silence torn between the arguments of remaining a “man” or becoming the “woman” she was born to be. In her introduction to *Silence*, Sarah Roche-Madhi points out that “Heldris has Nature employ deviant speech

(sophistry) and argue precisely from a conventional view of what is natural in both her major and minor debate with Nurture....” (xix).

Nature argues that no man should have the power to betray heredity:

A little bad nurture
harms a good nature more
than lengthy instruction in doing good
can mend a heart intrinsically evil. (2339-2342)

In turn, Nurture is characterized as a villain: “I have succeeded very well / in turning a noble child into a defective male” (2601-2602). This villainous perception of Nurture reflects on to Silence, who struggles with the potential consequences of disregarding her “nature.” Nature plays upon this to remind her

There are those who love you now
Who would hate you with all their hearts
If they knew what you really are!
They would consider themselves misused,
having their hopes so cruelly dashed.
It’s a very nasty thing you’re doing to me,
Leading this sort of life. (2518-2522)

This same conflict is echoed in *Twelfth Night* when Viola celebrates her successful disguise as the male Cesario, only to experience immediate regret when she realizes the suffering she will cause Olivia who has fallen in love with “him.” Silence laments:

Was any female ever so tormented
or deceived by such vile fraud
as to do what I did out of greed?

I certainly never heard of one!” (2583 -2586)

Silence believes that she has rejected her core identity for financial gain and is sickened by it. I must wonder, however, if she is more averse to the ruse (as dishonesty seems to be against her nature), as she does not seem compelled by the “pastimes of a woman’s chamber” – she only fears that she will not be able to behave the way she is expected to if her ruse is discovered (2633). This hints at the larger thought that perhaps the lifestyle of a woman is not truly “natural” to anyone? Silence identifies as a female in her soul, but not with the totality of outward expression of femininity.

Reason, also personified as female, underscores this idea when she intervenes in the conflict and reminds Silence that she will lose her identity, her ability to train as a knight, and her “horse and chariot” should she give up her faux masculinity. (2593-3655). Also, the King will not simply just allow her to inherit even though she was previously a man. Silence

...saw, in short, that a man’s life
was much better than that of a woman.
“Indeed,” he said, “it would be too bad
to step down when I’m on top. (2637-2640)

Silence realizes what she stands to lose, and therefore denies Nature. However, the narrator defends Nature as more powerful:

Neither praise nor blame
can restrain an evil man
from what his heart counseled him to do.

And thus I say that Nature
is superior to Nurture. (2420 – 2424)

Heldris likely is foreshadowing the tale's end, as Silence eventually is outed by Merlin and she relinquishes her masculinity and embraces her femininity. Implicitly, however, as a biological female, Silence must truly possess these positive qualities if nature is superior to nurture, implying that these qualities are not fixedly tied to gender. For Heldris to overlook this implication seems far-fetched, as he would have to be extraordinarily obtuse – another reason why I believe the narrator's naïveté is intentional.

Katherine Terrell discusses the “unstable concept” of gender in *Silence* -- the very idea of a woman successfully masquerading as not only a man, but a celebrated knight “puts pressure on traditional notions of gender” (38). *Silence*’s disruption of traditional gender binary construction is best viewed through Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity. Most literary critics concur that Heldris tends to reinforce the traditional binary, but intentional or unintentional, Silence’s success in passing as a masculine knight supports Butler’s view of gender as merely a social construction and not a biological mandate. Erika E. Hess and Elizabeth Waters conceive of Silence’s gender as occupying a “third space.” Both argue that Silence provides a perfect example of one who subverts the gender binary, and instead occupies a “third space” for gender

– not a third distinct gender specifically, but a place that allows for a “space for resistance,” in Waters’ words.

Hess focuses on the view of cross-dressing in the Middle Ages, revealing that in late medieval French narrative, men and women cross-dressed for different reasons: men to have access to women they desire (the nun, in the case of *Silence*), and women to benefit from masculine privilege. She mentions that historically, females cross-dressing as males were looked upon more favorably as it was assumed that they were striving to improve themselves in the social order, and she points out that when Silence is presented with the conflict over her “duplicitous performance,” she ultimately accepts her “dual nature for the masculine advantages that it provides” (43).

By disrupting the gender binary, the patriarchal political structure itself is disrupted: a threat to masculinity. Silence thrives outside of the dominant paradigm while many biological males can achieve nowhere close to her success. Ad Putter also acknowledges the disruptive force of cross-dressing: “He or she, or rather he *and* she, exist beyond the reach of classifications, revealing that all it takes to upset the certainty of our gender assignment is a different selection from the menu of cultural signifiers: dress, make-up, or gesture” (279). If women can just change clothes, get a sunburn, and assume the socially more powerful position of manhood, what happens to the privilege of being male? Although he keeps maleness in a privileged position, Heldris clearly seems able to see, as Karen A. Lurkhur argues, “beyond the binary system of gender that structures his society and that continues to structure ours” (221).

Silence’s disruption of gender norms has direct consequences for male characters and their adherence to or deviation from traditional masculinity. Vern L. Bullough details the classical view of masculinity in his “On Being Male in the Middle Ages,” where he

acknowledges the classical belief in male superiority to women both physically and intellectually. However, this belief has negative consequences for men as well as women, putting “limitations on male development” (33). According to Bullough, medieval men are defined by impregnating women, protecting dependents, and serving as provider to one’s family. Failing at these tasks leads not only to challenges to one’s masculinity, but also to fear of being labeled as showing feminine weakness, however a society defines that. This puts restrictions upon the man that, though quite different from those on the woman, are nonetheless burdensome. (34)

In the case of King Evan, his masculinity is diminished as he fails according to traditionally defined masculinity. Early in the text, King Evan is introduced as a just, generous, and virtuous King: “with the sole exception of King Arthur, / there was never his equal / in the land of the English” (109-111). According to this narrator, “he never tired of doing the right thing” (126) and was “generous, courteous, and without treachery” (1548). The narrator’s insistence on Evan’s virtue, however, is immediately undercut by both further description as well as the King’s behavior:

This King Evan who ruled over the English
was a very wise man indeed.

He enriched all his friends
and placed them in positions of great honor,
so that when the hour of greatest need came,
they got him out of any trouble. (139-144)

The narrator takes this to be evidence of the King’s virtue. However, what he’s describing is the kind of crooked political cronyism with which we modern Americans are all too familiar. He

grants his buddies powerful positions so that he will have the political support he needs when the time comes. This may be politically “wise,” but doesn’t seem to be as virtuous as the narrator professes.

He goes on to describe a King who has allowed his kingdom to suffer greatly in war against Norway – a war which “began over something trivial” but has led to “many houses … set on fire,” “many cities put to the torch,” and “many feet and haunches sliced” (150-152). The narrator describes such devastation, and the near destruction of Norway. Evan only stops the destruction when the daughter of Norway’s King Begon is offered as a political bargaining chip.

When Evan heard this, he was overjoyed,
And replied to the messengers like the well-bred man he was,
“Now I have fought a good fight indeed:
It was well worth the hard work
If I can have this woman to wife... (177-181)

The choice of “well-bred” to describe King Evan underscores the narrator’s approval of him, while I imagine it would be clear to most readers that the behavior described is that of a crooked, war-mongering politician who operates strictly for personal gain.

King Evan seems to have trouble with women from the start. Even in his marriage, he wants nothing more than to marry the beautiful Eufeme, from whom he would also inherit a great deal. But Eufeme shows signs of hesitation from the beginning:

The king lingered to kiss her
and then saw to her comfort,
for her heart was a little bitter
from the tiring journey across the sea.” (243-246)

As we see by her infidelity later in the text, she is more than simply wearied by travel, and it the author must know this – this may be another sign of a naïve and obtuse satirical persona narrating the tale. The very comparison to the greatness of King Arthur is ironic – he is also a cuckold in his marriage, a hit to his chivalric masculinity – and Evan is second to *him*.

Evan does show some sympathetic qualities, particularly in his concern that both Cador and Eufemie are “willing” to marry one another as he hopes, “If they are not, I cannot accomplish this, / unless I want to prove myself a liar -- / I would rather God struck me dead” (1280-1282). I suppose that he cares for their interests mainly because they have cared for his own and have been able to serve him. He has not been so compassionate towards the hypothetical love matches for either Cador or Eufemie, or for the countless Norwegians slaughtered for “trivial” reasons. Even though King Evan has assured Eufemie that she could marry any man and Cador any woman as reward for their service, neither trusts King Evan at his word.

Now they want to test him

As their friend in time of great need.

Both are burdened with the fear

That the king will prove false,

And his word unreliable. (1160-1164)

For a person who can’t seem to stop “doing the right thing” and is matched only by Arthur himself, it seems odd that both of these demonstrably wise and remarkable people would find him to be untrustworthy. The narrator chalks this up to them both being crazy in love: “The heart of a lover is no more able / to retain its memory / than a piece of wax its victory / over the

written letter” (1174-1177). However, I believe this is yet another example of a purposefully obtuse narrator whose sycophancy to the King is ironically highlighted.

As we have mentioned, King Evan explicitly rewards those who can benefit his own personal interests. This kind of self-serving, political behavior is further shown when he magnanimously offers to reward Cador and Eufemie the territory of Cornwall, the property of Eufemie’s father, Renald. “Now the king wants to bestow the land / on this lady and you. / Isn’t he doing you a tremendous favor?” a count ironically asks (1460 – 1463). The reality is that King Evan’s own ruling regarding patrilineage is all that’s keeping Eufemie from inheriting the property herself.

The battle over inheritance between the husbands of twin sisters that instigates King Evan’s female inheritance ban furthers the farcical depiction of male insecurity. With neither twin able to definitively establish inheritance rights as the eldest sibling, the counts are willing to risk life and limb to claim what they view to be rightfully theirs. Both men die “trying to prove themselves right” (308), and rather than criticizing the men for their reckless behavior, King Evan [flies] into a terrible rage” (308) and bans female inheritance, blaming the “two orphaned girls” for los[ing] two good men” (310-311). The counts’ roles in their own demise is so abundantly clear to the reader that King Evan’s (and the narrator’s) blame of the girls can only be interpreted ironically. Even when King Evan seems to attribute some responsibility to the counts, a “woman” is still to blame: “Greed has robbed many a man of his freedom, / and more than that if he gets hooked – / she makes him trot till he is dead” (330 – 332). King Evan concedes that the men were greedy – but it was that nasty woman, Greed, who made them that way. Clearly, it is far easier to control women than to try to change toxic male behavior – especially when that behavior allows them to retain power.

Losing power or primacy seems to be a consistent threat to masculinity throughout *Silence*, and, men with threatened masculinity are rarely portrayed in a favorable light. However, the narrator seems to show them more sympathy through his own commentary. For example, when Silence runs away with a pair of talented minstrels, Count Cador (in a move mirroring the Draconian measures of King Evan), issues a ban against all jongleurs in his land. While he expresses no opposition to King Evan's unilateral ban on female inheritance, he points out the injustice when these men are negatively impacted:

a thousand people were doomed on account of one man;

because of two, whatever they might have done,

it happened that a thousand were persecuted.

I don't care what anyone says; in my opinion,

Those minstrels were not at all to blame

For whatever loss the count had suffered... (3127-3133)

But in their words and actions, the reader can't possibly have as much sympathy for them as that narrator seems to. The jongleurs loved Silence at first, until his natural ability became a threat: "He doesn't even have four years' experience / and he's outdone us like this!" (3249-3250).

What's further illustrated here is that while the minstrels are unaware that Silence is actually female (which would certainly cause them more distress), Silence is double-cross-dressed, as she is now masquerading as one of a lower class: "Their foreheads dripped with sweat at the thought / that they were slighted because of a serving boy" (3161-3162). Here, the minstrels demonstrate masculine anxiety – that someone of lower social rank will take their power. While Silence is perceived as male and of lower class (although the minstrels have likely

seen through his class cross-dressing), the threat remains that Silence is younger and less experienced, and the jongleurs feel entitled to more.

He was so handsome and accomplished,
and put much more effort into giving a fine performance,
put much more of himself into his art
than the others ever did. (3223- 3226)

The minstrels feel unfairly slighted, but Silence is winning on merit. Silence may have natural talents, but “no one could out do him” because of hard work and perseverance (3232). Their insecurity leads to jealousy, which leads to violence. The men attempt to murder Silence:

Friend, I feel so eager to do it
That my heart is nearly bursting –
The way they raise him above us and praise him
And the way they all favor him
And silence us so that he can perform. (3308-3312)

This choice of the word “silence” is no accident. They don’t know that this boy is called Silence, yet the irony is that he will be the one to “silence” them. The act of silencing someone strips them of power. These men are afraid of being “silenced” – just as women are, as King Evan lamentably states, “only good for one thing, / And that is to keep silent” (6401-6402).

Similarly, King Evan experiences the loss of power and inability to compete with a superior “male” specimen. Lorraine Kochanske-Stock describes Evan as a king who “lacks the qualities expected of a king – decisiveness, physical dependability, and permanence” (9). His power literally comes from his wife, and his “own petty wrath undermines his regality and even feminizes him” (10). The King also must resort to allowing others to act on his behalf, requiring

Silence to literally fight his battles, and for the King of France to rectify the situation between Silence and Eufeme.

King Evan's wife's unsuccessful seduction of Silence is perhaps the greatest threat to his manhood, highlighting his lack of romantic and reproductive success. According to Bullough, maleness in the Middle Ages was "somewhat fragile, and it was important for a man to keep demonstrating his maleness by action and thought, especially by sexual action" (41). Evan's assumed inability to satisfy his wife weakens his power and leads to the insecurity that informs his poor decision-making. Evan's wife, Eufeme, is portrayed as hyper-sexed, duplicitous, and physically violent. Her depiction as a "female satan" (3699) is so hyperbolic that once again, signs point to a satirical narrator.

When Silence rejects Eufeme's sexual advances (for many reasons, not least of which is the lack of physical equipment), she flies into a rage and accuses Silence of homosexuality (in her mind, the only possible reason for Silence's lack of interest in her). She then commits physical violence on herself: "she began to tear her hair. She gave herself a punch in the nose, / so that she was covered with blood" (4076-4078). She accuses Silence of rape and demands from King Evan that he "take [his] vengeance on this man immediately! / Don't wait for a trial!" (4146-4147). Although behaving truly irrationally, Evan's queen demonstrates the kind of decisive action that would be expected of a King and that he fails to execute. He spares Silence by sending him to France, where again Eufeme attempts to destroy him by switching letters and calling for Silence's death. When finally Evan's wife convinces him to get revenge against Silence, it is only in order to preserve his own honor and protect his masculinity – but he is still being manipulated by his farcically insane wife, described as a "whorish lady" and "wicked slut /

aroused [and] inflamed with lust (5748-5750). John Carmi Parsons claims that in the Middle Ages,

immodest or shameful female behavior [...] weakens male claims to virtue, control or status. The male dominated by a wife or besotted with a woman invites ridicule; he has lost his autonomy and may be the less able to protect his dependents. (285)

Clearly, Evan's position as a cuckold and one largely ruled by his wife diminishes his position, and his insecurity as a result is implicitly ridiculed.

King Evan's narratively purposeful emasculation becomes clear when he is juxtaposed against the arguably most traditionally masculine character, Cador. When a dragon threatens Evan's kingdom early in the poem, he "wept and lamented" (372) and relied on Cador to save his people. Cador, nephew to the King, is young, strong, and valiant. The narrator's description conveys him as the picture of traditional chivalric masculinity, and his actions seem to match. He slays the dragon and saves the Kingdom when the King himself will not (or cannot). He suffers love-longing and ultimately wins the love of the beautiful and talented Eufemie, whose agency in marriage he respects. He is religiously reverent, and he earns the respect of his father-in-law who implicitly trusts him:

The count made Cador overlord of all,
without asking his oath of fealty.

There was never any discord between them,
or bad faith or treachery. (1604-1607)

With Cador as the superior man, he can serve as perhaps the author's true voice – Cador is never concerned that his child will be inferior if she is female – only that she will not be able to inherit

due to King Evan's law, "through which females have lost so much" (1694). He supports his child, swearing

...up and down

that he wouldn't give a trifle

to exchange his girl for a boy,

for he had never seen such a beautiful thing. (2028-2031)

Cador and Eufemie are consistently portrayed positively throughout the text, even though they contribute to their child's suffering. Cador and Eufemie respectively serve as model representatives of traditional masculinity and femininity.

When viewed unironically, this positive view of Cador and Eufemie supports Elizabeth Waters' notion that while *Silence* has subversive qualities, Heldris actually "reiterate[s] hegemonic norms" (43), which is clear when we look at the winners and losers in the text – those who adhere to traditional gender norms (or return to their biologically mandated ones) seem to thrive in the end, while those who deviate suffer dire consequences. Eufeme, a traditionally-gendered female, is boldly outspoken and oversexed, leading her to a swift and unceremonious death upon the revelation of her lover (who has hilariously been masquerading as a nun to maintain proximity to Eufeme). The "nun" is also executed immediately, a clear mandate against gender norm deviation.

In terms of farcical depictions, this final scene with the revelation of the nun takes the cake. Viewed in terms of medieval perception of cross-dressing, a man cross-dressing as a woman would have far reaching implications, from deeply distressing to a medieval joke. According to Ad Putter, medieval romance generally treats knights in drag as a joke – something that was a regular occurrence in Arthurian tournaments and the world of chivalry. Putter argues that

“...medieval romance shows us not how indistinguishable men and women can sometimes be, but how different they are from each other and how preposterous, therefore, is the idea of someone trying to be both at the same time” (280). The outrageous idea that this man would not only lower himself to dress as a woman, but it results in sexual conquest may simply be just a farcical medieval joke – one that might support subversive messaging in that the man dressed as a woman was able to make a cuckold of the King himself. The King is humiliated by this revelation: he seems to be the last to know, to his great shame. Merlin intimates that all have been the victims of deception, but “the share in the deception is not equal for all parties / concerned, / for one of us is dishonored by it” (6521-6523). Further, “the courtiers had no trouble believing the whole thing. / The king still had his doubts” (6567-6568). Evan’s denial only adds to his pathetic portrayal and demonstrates the depths of fragile masculinity.

In the end of a tale defined by gender disruption, Heldris sets the world back on its traditional axis, with men and women settling back into their nature-mandated roles; King Evan and the newly-female Silence are the winners at the end, wed to one another. But with Silence’s identity and success as a knight, does marrying King Evan really qualify as a win? Lorraine Kochanske Stock points out that a successful and fruitful marriage is highly unlikely. “What [Evan] admired and valued in the old ‘masculine’ Silence, courage, physical strength, feudal loyalty, perhaps even sexual potency (if he half-believed the Queen’s allegations), will be excised from her newly feminized persona” (25). The choice of Merlin to reveal the deception and trigger the unsatisfyingly traditional dénouement of the poem may hint towards an ironic ending. While some critics have argued that Merlin’s laughter is directed towards the concept of uneven power allocation by gender in general, Sarah Roche-Mahdi believes that instead, there is a sense of

derisive irony behind his mocking laughter as he usually laughs when he is about to reveal something ruinous for a character:

In *Silence*, Merlin's uncanny, unnerving laughter heightens tension: it does not relieve it. It is the distancing laughter of a supernatural being who mocks mortals for their blindness and their futile attempts to escape their destiny. It is the spiteful laughter of one who takes particular pleasure in revealing women's secrets; it is no more liberating than the laugh that precedes his betrayal of his own sister's adultery As coldly as he mocks the other fools, he mocks Silence.

(*A Reappraisal...* 17)

As Merlin has suffered at the hands of Silence (and one who struggles with his own issues with women, having the foresight to know that a woman will be responsible for his downfall), Merlin's laughter is one of delight in her punishment. While the ending seems to set the universe right and Silence has a classic fairy tale ending, the reader is all too aware that this is not a happy ending for Silence – Merlin has the literal foresight to be completely certain of this.

In a rant against his wife and Merlin's derisive laughter, the king's misogynistic views are just comically so over the top, and in no way represent Silence's former identity:

A woman's role is to keep silent.

So help me God, I think

A mute can tell what women are good for,

For they're only good for one thing,

And that is to keep silent. (6398-6402)

This characterization of femininity hardly conveys what Silence is “good for,” and is an outrage to her outstanding character, especially when compared to King Evan. How can this marriage be

the reward for a character who has demonstrated nothing but noble qualities? The most logical conclusion, again, is one that Erin F. Labbie makes – the ending is not to be interpreted literally (68). She claims that “if we read the romance as teaching morals by showing what is *clearly wrong*, the details and the multiple layers of voice in the story suggest that the text critiques the subordinate status of women in order to change it” (69). Outside of the chance of a literally obtuse author, there are clearly layers of irony in the depiction of femininity and masculinity in the Middle Ages. Rigidly defined gender roles and expectations for male chivalric culture leave much to be criticized, and it is my contention that this hyper-masculine culture fraught with fragile masculinity is the subject of and purpose for Heldris’ ironic writing.

Disrupting Nature’s “Bias:” Fragile Masculinity in *Twelfth Night*

According to Leslie Hotson, *Twelfth Night* (in an early iteration) was first performed for Queen Elizabeth and her guest, Don Virginio Ursino, Duke of Bracchiano, on January 6, 1601. William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will* reflects the eve of the festival of the Epiphany for which it is named and when it was performed. The Elizabethan Twelfth Night revelers celebrated in much the same manner as Roman Saturnalia: Elizabethans would appoint a “Lord of Misrule” who would lead a collective nose-thumbing at the social order in a celebration of life and freedom. In his 1965 publication *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin defines the idea of Saturnalia and festival as the literary technique of the *Carnivalesque*, or the literary use of “ritual spectacles” to upset the dominant social order and free its participants from the rigidity of class, gender, and other socially normative distinctions. Carnival celebrated the pathos of change and renewal and true communication. All were considered equal during carnival time, as there was complete “suspension of all hierarchical precedence” that allowed for “a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” (10).

The saturnalian reversal in *Twelfth Night* begins when Viola finds herself shipwrecked in Illyria, her twin brother likely lost at sea. She seeks information from a Captain who tells her of Duke Orsino and his desire to woo the grieving Olivia. Without much choice but to trust the Captain’s word, Viola hesitantly trusts him, but comments on nature’s ability to conceal, indeed to represent things as potentially their opposites: “...nature with a beauteous wall / Doth oft close in pollution...” (I.ii.51-52). With this statement, Viola establishes this motif of concealment and the malleability of identity. “Conceal me what I am,” she asks of the Captain, implying a “natural” state of identity that will be disrupted when she masquerades as Cesario, a young man styled after her brother, Sebastian (I.ii.56). When the gender farce is ultimately revealed at the

play's end, Orsino marvels, "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons! / A natural perspective, that is and is not!" (V.i.226-227). By "perspective," Marjorie Garber explains in *Shakespeare After All*,

... [Orsino] means the kind of perspective painting that Shakespeare will use as a telling comparison in other plays, like *Richard II* and *Antony and Cleopatra*: a picture constructed so as to produce a fantastic effect, seeming distorted except from one particular point of view, or appearing different from different vantage points. (518)

In a way, this anamorphosis illustrates the complexity of interpreting *Twelfth Night*'s gender messaging. While seemingly explicitly subversive of gender norms, *Twelfth Night*'s gender subversion functions similarly to that of *Silence*. While the main female character demonstrates the fragility of gender distinctions by successfully masquerading as a male, the disruption is only temporarily permitted. In both cases, the characters are allowed on a carnivalesque upheaval of norms of gender and sexuality, but compulsory heteronormativity seems to be re-established by a stabilizing action at the text's end. In this way, both texts suggest, at least on the surface, that there is some sort of underlying "natural" order that must unquestionably be put back into place. The plays stabilizing gesture comes when Sebastian reveals to Olivia "you have been mistook; / But Nature to her bias drew in that" (V.i.71-72). The implication is that nature has an inherent truth and order that ultimately will be followed. However, this kind of ideology is flawed in that it presupposes a kind of literal truth and order to nature – but as the Captain's words show, nature itself is involved in dissembling; nature does not have an easily accessible truth and in fact, conceals truth.

In 1959, C.L. Barber interpreted the play as a “mockery of what is unnatural;” a celebration of “vital pleasures” and of “moments when nature and society are hospitable to life” (6-7). He contends that Viola’s cross-dressing

is exploited so as to renew in a special way our sense of the difference [between men and women]. Just as a saturnalian reversal of social roles need not threaten the social structure, but can serve instead to consolidate it, so a temporary, playful reversal of sexual roles can renew the meaning of the normal relation. (278)

Although only a temporary disruption, I would argue that the ability for these social orders to be so easily disrupted actually weakens the borderlines between gender and class and negates the idea of a “natural order.” What is underscored is the socially constructed nature of these categories and the weakness of these categories in general.

Lorna Hutson supports this idea with the reality that Viola’s “successful masquerade of masculinity” was originally intended to be performed by a boy: “Suddenly, instead of being about the discovery of one’s “true” identity, or a “natural” social and sexual order, it seemed that what the comedies were about was the ease with which systems of sexual difference could be dismantled, and the notion of gendered identity itself called into question” (Hutson 141). Consequently, the saturnalian reversal, while temporary, reveals a social system whose “natural” categories are not always so “natural” – leaving the system vulnerable to more lasting shift in power. As *Twelfth Night* was performed for the queen herself, the play is an artifact of power; it would be socially and politically necessary to put the pieces back into their rightful places in a play that subverts dominant order and hierarchies so overtly. The solution is to frame these subversions as “just” a joke or a dream – just a temporary diversion that has no lasting effect.

But while the play seemingly stabilizes Elizabethan social hierarchies in the end, it is impossible to truly erase the disruption of binaries that has occurred in *Twelfth Night*.

Feste

Like many of Shakespeare's plays, the "wise Fool," tends to provide a moral voice through humor. If we look to the Fool, Feste, as a source of the play's underlying conceit regarding gender, class, and the concept of "nature," there are some significant and sometimes conflicting notions. Feste is one of the first to comment on the gap between signifier and signified, and the illusion that clothing can create. In a riddle-filled repartee with Olivia, Feste rejects that he is the "fool" that Olivia has bade them "take away." "Misprision in the highest degree! Lady, *cucullus / non facit monachum*. That's as much to say as, I / wear not motley in my brain" (I.v.53-55). The Folger publication translates his Latin to the proverbial "A cowl does not make a monk." While he wears the clothing of a "fool," he is in fact quite wise beneath his motley. Later, Feste playfully banters with Viola/Cesario on the ambiguous and "wanton" nature of words.

Fool: You have said, sir. To see this age! A sentence is

But a chev'ril glove to a good wit. How quickly the

Wrong side may be turned outward!

Viola: Nay, that's certain. They that dally nicely with

Words may quickly make them wanton.

Fool: I would therefore my sister had had no name,

sir.

Viola: Why, man?

Fool: Why, sir, her names a word, and to dally with

that word might make my sister wanton, But,
indeed, words are very rascals since bonds dis-
graced them. (III.i.11-22).

Feste's play on the term "wanton," meaning "ambiguous" but also "unchaste," conveys a surprising conservativism. It highlights the dangers of linguistic ambiguity through a comparison to female sexual promiscuity. The essence of a glove is both what's out and what's in -- here, Feste ironically gestures to something quite natural behind what is on the outside.

Viola-Cesario and Olivia

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola and Olivia are positioned as variations on a theme: they are both female by "nature," high-born, grieving a lost (or apparently lost) brother, and their names are nearly anagrams for one another. While on the surface Olivia follows the "natural" order, Viola *violates* this order through her cross-dressing – an idea that is often underscored by frequent oppositional costuming choices in live performances that dress the mourning Olivia in black and Viola/Cesario in the contrasting white. However, in carnivalesque terms, Olivia defies the festival tradition of embracing nature and life (Barber 7). Through her mourning period, Olivia has been living "like a cloistress," remaining isolated and rebuffing all romantic advances (I.ii.30). Viola-Cesario flirtatiously scolds her for this behavior:

‘Tis beauty truly blent, whose rose and white
Nature’s own sweet and cunning hand laid on.
Lady, you are the cruel’st she alive
If you will lead these graces to the grave
And leave the world no copy. (I.v.238-242)

For Olivia to act against her “natural” role to marry a man and reproduce is moving away from “life” and violates Twelfth Night. The play’s criticism of Olivia wryly mirrors a frequent criticism of the Queen (and audience member) herself, who was routinely pressured about producing/ naming an heir. This parallel between Olivia and Queen Elizabeth is highlighted in Mark Rylance’s 2012 portrayal of Olivia where he wears an elaborate black Elizabethan gown with a large, white ruff and a royal-looking headpiece (and later a crown) that gives him the appearance of having walked out of the *Sieve Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I* (Figures 1,2).



Figure 1: Mark Rylance as Olivia, 2012

Figure 2: Sieve Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I,
c. 1583, Quentin Mestys the Younger

This violation of nature isn’t allowed to last long when Olivia is quickly taken in by Viola-Cesario’s romantic wooing on behalf of Orsino. Although she rejects Cesario’s words at first when taken on behalf of Orsino, Olivia becomes more interested when the flirtation becomes hypothetically personal:

If I did love you in my master’s flame,
With such a suff’ring, such a deadly life,

In your denial I would find no sense [...]
 [I would] Write loyal cantons of contemned love
 And sing them loud even in the dead of night,
 Hallow your name to the reverberate hills
 And make the babbling gossip of the air
 Cry out “Olivia!” (I.v.266-268, 273-277)

Olivia’s desire is clear in her embarrassment over her responses once Cesario leaves, and her attraction is both to Cesario’s words and physical appearance: “Even so quickly may one catch the plague? / Methinks I feel this youth’s perfections / With an invisible and subtle stealth / To creep in at mine eyes” (I.v.301-304).

While there is a homoerotic aspect to their relationship, both Viola and Olivia outwardly seek heterosexual relationships – Viola performs as Cesario at first for self-protection, but ultimately to gain the love of Orsino. At face-value, Olivia is deceived by Viola’s cross-dressing and falls in love with Cesario, who she believes to be a man. When Viola realizes Olivia’s love, she delights in the success of her ruse: “I am the man” she proclaims, with both shock and a glimmer of self-satisfaction depicted in most stage presentations (II.ii.25). Realizing the conflict and with sympathy for Olivia, she laments, “Poor lady, she were better love a dream” (II.ii.26). The success of her cross-dressing has created an untenable love triangle:

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 come of this? As I am man,
 My state is desperate for my master’s love;

As I am woman (now alas the day!)

What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe! (I.ii.33-39)

Viola, the “poor monster” who is both man and woman, upsets the gender construct -- she has been successful in the masculine realm where at least two biological men have not. The play also seems to hint that upsetting the gender construct is wrong as not only is Olivia a victim to it, but Viola as well.

Like *Silence*, Viola-Cesario curses her dual nature as something that is dissonant from her “true” nature and struggles to find a way to cope with both her femininity and false masculinity. Certainly, Viola has not succeeded in becoming a “man” -- arguably, it is her femininity that has allowed her success in a masculine realm of wooing a woman. Olivia is taken by Cesario’s non-threatening subservient nature, as well as her feminine appearance. As Viola has taken on the stature of one who serves Orsino, Cesario subordinates himself to Olivia, which seems to please her. Feste’s song predicts Olivia’s love for Cesario: “*O mistress mine, where are you roaming? / O stay and hear! Your true love’s coming, / That can sing both high and low,*” a literal description of the cross-dressed Viola who sings “high” while her alter-ego Cesario sings “low” (II.iii.40-42). Olivia falls in love with Cesario immediately: “Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit / Do give thee fivefold blazon” (I.v.297-298). As Marjorie Garber points out, the Elizabethan “blazon” is a poetic device describing a *woman’s* beauty (517 SAA).

All the qualities extolled by Olivia are authentic to Viola’s female nature, disrupting nature’s “bias” towards opposite sex desire. Olivia’s desire has a level of complexity – she has rejected most male suitors but is open to Cesario who has masculine gender expression and feminine qualities. Viola’s masculine ruse is not entirely convincing – “Cesario” reads as

effeminate – boyish at best, as she has chosen to masquerade as a “eunuch.” Malvolio describes him:

Not yet old enough for a man, nor young
 Enough for a boy – as a squash is before ‘tis a
 Peascod, or a codling when ‘tis almost an apple. ‘Tis
 With him in standing water, between boy and man.
 He is very well-favored, and he speaks very shrew-
 ishly. One would think his mother’s milk were
 scarce out of him. (I.v.155-161)

Mark Albert Johnston supports the idea that a eunuch might be exactly what an “authoritative woman” might desire:

[she] might find a subordinate boy erotically appealing precisely because of his sexual availability, inferiority, and impotence – his mimicking, in effect, an acquiescent, infertile dildo. [This] points us back to an underestimated early modern discursive tradition augmenting the history of eroticism: the sexual pursuit of subordinate, sterile boys by powerful, libidinous women. (576)

This makes clear sense in the case of Olivia, given that according to Sir Toby, “She’ll none o’ the’ Count. She’ll not match above / her degree, neither in estate, years, nor wit. I have / heard her swear’t” (I.iii.106-109). On paper, Orsino seems to be a logical match for Countess Olivia, but Olivia prefers a man who can be dominated.

We see this in her aggressive pursuit of Cesario, particularly seen in Kyra Sedgwick’s 1998 portrayal of Olivia pursuing Helen Hunt’s Cesario. Hunt’s Viola-Cesario does nothing to mask her feminine voice – while the actress’s voice is naturally in a lower register, there is no

mistaking the femininity of her speech. She seems very matter-of-fact and self-assured; her masculinity is not so much the possession of manhood as it is the absence of girlishness (for which Sedgwick's Olivia seems to compensate in abundance). Cesario attempts to woo on behalf of Orsino for the second time when it becomes clear that she has eyes for the servant "himself." Expecting her love interest, Sedgwick's Olivia loses her mourning clothes in favor of a bright pink gown that accentuates her décolletage. Her hair is literally unveiled, now in a long, blonde, and wavy Grecian-style. Olivia's appearance is strikingly similar to Viola's female appearance at that beginning of the play, which accentuates the mirroring that occurs in their rapid stycomithia:

Olivia: Stay. I prithee, tell me what thou think'st of me.

Viola: That you do think you are not what you are.

Olivia: If I think so, I think the same of you.

Viola: Then I think you are right. I am not what I am.

Olivia: I would you were as I would have you be. (III.i.145-149)

Viola-Cesario tries to tactfully lead Olivia away from herself,

but Olivia is her rhetorical match.

Olivia dramatically and enthusiastically declares her love to Cesario, ending with an aggressively un-reciprocated kiss (Figure 3). Viola is visibly uncomfortable; she throws her arms in the air to show lack of complicity, and scurries away. She clearly and specifically reinforces her romantic declination and tells Olivia that no woman shall be the mistress of her heart. Undeterred, Olivia confidently expresses belief that she'll win Cesario.



Figure 3: Helen Hunt as Cesario; Kyra Sedgwick as Olivia, 1998

Olivia's preference for a subordinate man does not answer the question of why Olivia so easily transitions from loving "Cesario" to loving Sebastian, when Sebastian seems to have the natural masculinity that Viola-Cesario lacks. While Cesario panics at the thought of fighting Sir Andrew ("Pray God defend me! [Aside.] A little thing / would make me tell them how much I lack of a /man" (III.iv.314-316)), Sebastian is far more assertive. "Go to, go to, thou art a foolish fellow. Let / me be clear of thee" (IV.i.2-3) he says to Feste who has mistaken him for Cesario, and he easily and aggressively fights back against a shocked Sir Andrew who had previously received little fight from Cesario. However, Sebastian's assertiveness wavers as he easily bends to Olivia's will – she is already quite forward with Viola- Cesario, and she appears even more so when her flirtation, in Sebastian's eyes, is towards a stranger. He responds to her advances in much the way modern audiences would expect any red-blooded, heterosexual man to respond: "Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep; / If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep!" (IV.ii. 65-66). While he questions Olivia's mental state as well as his own, he ultimately rationalizes and justifies this as just "good fortune" and easily concedes to a hasty marriage. In this relationship, Sebastian's agreeableness and seemingly androgynous appearance may still fit the bill for Olivia's desire for a "boy."

Orsino and Viola-Cesario

At the same time Viola-Cesario is enduring unwitting homoerotic love advances from Olivia, a homoerotic undertone develops between the servant Cesario and his master Orsino, who also seems to be attracted to/confused by Viola-Cesario's concurrent femininity and masculinity. Unlike her foil Olivia, Viola seemingly has no same-sex desire: "By innocence I swear, and by my youth, / I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth, / And that no woman has, nor never none / Shall mistress be of it, save I alone," she tells Olivia (III.i. 165 – 168).

Orsino's sexuality is a bit more nebulous, and the actors who have played him have approached him with varying levels of traditional masculinity. In a 1998 production, Paul Rudd the arrogant and misogynistic Orsino as slightly more sexually free, hippie-like, sexy pirate. His clothes are pinks and purples, loosely sheer, and always desperately clinging to a shoulder and usually baring his chest. He wears a great deal of jewelry, perhaps to show his wealth and status, but he also bears the style of one who is in love-longing and attempting to woo a lady. While Cesario is really Viola and her love for Orsino is heterosexual, Orsino sees Cesario as his male servant and a homoerotic undertone emerges. Orsino admires Cesario's "smooth and rubious" lips and his "shrill and sound" voice, and his affections fall in line neatly with the characteristic master/servant homoerotic relationship (I.iv.32-33). In one stage representation of *Twelfth Night*, Orsino is depicted as clearly homosexual, whose obsession with Olivia is nothing more than what reviewer Don Shewey calls a "romantic spasm of compulsory heterosexuality" (Shewey 1). In the 1970 BBC Depiction, Gary Raymond's Orsino (Figure 4) is noticeably handsy with Joan Plowright's Viola-Cesario—Orsino massages Cesario's shoulders and lovingly strokes "his" hair, and Liam Brennan's 2012 Orsino is equally confused by his sexual attraction to his boy-servant, while overtly played in a more traditionally masculine demeanor. The 1998 interaction between Paul Rudd's Orsino and Helen Hunt's Viola-Cesario is clearly sexual – largely because of Orsino's overt sexuality. The attraction is mutual, as Orsino carefully removes Viola-Cesario's scarf from her neck after Viola-Cesario disrobes Orsino before he takes a dip in an on-stage pond (Figure



Figure 4: Gary Raymond as Orsino and Jean Plowright as Viola-Cesario, 1970



Figure 5: Paul Rudd as Orsino, Helen Hunt as Viola-Cesario, 1998

5). They later speak closely to one another, Viola-Cesario's mouth open, somewhat longingly as Orsino speaks. "shall I to this lady?" Viola distractedly asks, Orsino responding by caressing her face gently with both hands and leaving a lingering kiss upon her forehead (II.iv.134). They embrace as she slowly runs her hands down his back, stopping just short of a scandal.

The revelation of Cesario as the female Viola

is a convenient, obligatory heterosexual relationship for Orsino. However, in that same way that Olivia seems to be attracted to Viola's feminine qualities rather than her masculine masquerade, Orsino also is attracted to Viola's femininity, causing less of a crisis for the general patriarchy. But what's strange about their attraction is that it appears to be purely physical on Viola's end – at least from the perspective of a modern audience. As Cesario, Viola has seemed confident, smart, and self-possessed. Orsino, on the other hand, seems whiny, self-absorbed, and demandingly misogynistic. "There is no woman's sides / Can bid the beating of so strong a passion / As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart / So big, to hold so much; they lack retention" (II.iv. 103-106). While Orsino has shown moments of compassion to Viola-Cesario, there isn't much in Orsino that seems attractive to someone like Viola. Orsino perfectly represents the toxic effects of patriarchy. He expresses masculine anxiety over the idea of losing power, but more importantly, losing or failing to attain something he wishes to possess.

When ordering Viola-Cesario to woo on his behalf, she objects, reminding him of Olivia's mourning period and disinterest in male suitors. Orsino responds that Cesario should

“Be clamorous and leap all civil bounds / Rather than make unprofited return” (I.v.23-24). That is, ignore Olivia’s boundaries and desires, and instead do whatever it takes to acquire his target. As a woman, Viola respects Olivia’s agency while Orsino clearly does not acknowledge it at all. In Act V, Orsino once more begs for Olivia’s love, this time in person:

Orsino: Still so cruel?

Olivia: Still so constant, lord.

Orsino: What, to perverseness? You, uncivil lady,

To whose ingrate and inauspicious altars

My soul the faithful’st off’rings have breathed out

That e’er devotion tendered – what shall I do?

[...]

Kill what I love? (V.i.113-117, 121)

He accuses Olivia of being “perverse” – a reference to her lack of interest following nature’s course of marriage, and a nod to her perceived violation of *Twelfth Night*’s bend towards life. From desperately in love to violently angry, Orsino represents the kind of toxic masculinity that empowers men to expect to always get what they want. He has status and power, and therefore to not get what he desires is unacceptable. If he cannot have Olivia, no one can, and he threatens to kill her. He describes his behavior as a “savage jealousy/ That sometimes savors nobly” – he admits that this jealousy is a symptom of his socioeconomic status. For Olivia’s love, Orsino is willing to “sacrifice the lamb that I do love,” Cesario, who he now realizes is the object of Olivia’s love (V.i. 133). Says Mark Albert Johnston,

While Orsino recognizes Cesario as the ideal vehicle for awakening the countess's erotic interests, however, he naively fails to predict that Olivia will view the boy as an ideal substitute for – rather than a mere supplement to – Orsino himself. (596)

Clouded by his arrogance and status, Orsino has been unable to picture a world in which he would not gain the woman he desires, much less be bested by someone of lower status (and literally less of a man) than he. And as we have seen, the less-masculine, more humble qualities of Viola-Cesario have been far more attractive to Olivia.

Upon the revelation of the twin ruse, Orsino is instantly (and suspiciously) over his undying love for Olivia, realizing that "If this be so, as yet the glass seems true, / I shall have share in this most happy wrack" (V.i.277-279). But Orsino's fragile masculinity and sexual anxiety is clearly evident, as he is quick to establish clear distinctions between her two identities:

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 (V.i.385-388).

Though revealed as a woman, Viola is still dressed as a man. In accordance with the view of strict gender roles, Orsino will only refer to her as her male identity while dressed in her men's clothing. She will only be a woman when dressed as a woman and can only be his mistress then. By having an initially homoerotic relationship, Orsino and Cesario may challenge social views, but heteronormativity and patriarchy is re-established with Orsino's strict enforcement of gender roles and their now clearly heterosexual relationship. Like *Silence*, their marriage is another victory for patriarchy and toxic masculinity: the arrogant misogynist who has been wholly unworthy of the love of a bold, self-assured and talented woman, wins not only her

hand, but seemingly her authentic love and affection – as “nature” intends? However, the heteronormative resolution of Orsino and Viola is not entirely resolved – while Orisno requests her “woman’s weeds,” we never actually witness Viola’s return to femininity (V.i.286). This resolution is, in fact, haunted by irresolution, leaving the subversion active.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek

While Viola’s affected faux masculinity conveys as farcical, Sir Andrew Aguecheek provides a stark foil wherein his “natural” masculinity is every bit as comical and affected. While only a minor character, Sir Andrew reveals that while Viola must literally “perform” her masculinity, *all* masculinity is performed – even by “natural” men. Maria introduces him to the audience as the “foolish knight” brought in to be the “wooer” of Olivia (I.iii.15-16). Toby (perhaps facetiously) defends Sir Andrew as having “all the good gifts of nature”: he’s brave, makes a good income, and can speak several languages (I.iii.27-28). Maria counters that he is a



Figure 6: Roger Lloyd Pack as Andrew, 2012

fool and a coward. On the stage, Sir Andrew’s appearance favors Maria’s assessment. In the 2012 Globe production, Roger Lloyd Pack’s Aguecheek wears a large Elizabethan frilled collar, frilly cape, feathered hat and shock-white pancake makeup (Figure 6). His nature is somewhat effeminate, especially compared to tacky and typically masculine Toby and the

assertive and dominating Maria. In the 1970 BBC film, Andrew’s effeminacy is pushed further through John Moffatt’s portrayal (Figure 7). Donning a long, light



Figure 7: John Moffatt as Andrew, 1970

blonde pageboy haircut and colorful puffy sleeves, tunic and tights, he dramatically enters the room, punctuating each line with florid hand and finger movements. He is sweet-natured, but vacant behind the eyes.

Upon Sir Andrew meeting Maria, Toby not-so-subtly encourages him to attempt to woo her—which Andrew misunderstands, fumbles, and covers by standing on ceremony: “By my troth, I would not undertake her in / this company. Is that the meaning of “accost”?” (I.iii.57-58). Here, Toby encourages Andrew to assert his masculinity, and he fails miserably. “An thou let part so, Sir Andrew, would thou / mightst never draw sword again,” Toby childishly taunts. (I.iii.60-61). Maria attempts to salvage the situation by flirting with him, implying that Andrew should take her for a drink. Either obtuse or immune to feminine flirtation, Andrew again completely misses the opportunity and earns Maria’s derision.

Sir Andrew is a comic character rife with contradictions. He is in Illyria with the hopes to woo and win Olivia, and yet seems utterly hopeless in romancing a woman – he spends more time drinking with Toby and admiring the “leg” and “sweet a breath to sing” of the Fool than acting on behalf of his expressed purpose (II.iii.20-21). While earlier Toby listed a knowledge of languages as one of Sir Andrew’s finer qualities, Aguecheek can’t recognize a very common French word and laments that he left little time for the “arts,” rather spending his time “fencing, dancing, and bearbaiting” (I.iii.90-93). While dancing seems plausible, one could hardly picture the foppish Sir Andrew participating in bloodsport, and his lack of combat skills are well-established later in the play. While some interpret and portray Sir Andrew as latently homosexual, Elizabethans do not view male effeminacy in terms of transvestism or homosexuality, but rather as something closer to “self-indulgent,” “voluptuous,” and hence

“womanish” or enslaved to women. (Garber VI 27). This does seem fitting given Andrew’s apparent status, appreciation for Sir Toby’s crowd, and his pursuit of Olivia.

Having been bested by another “suitor” and with the mischievous encouragement of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew attempts to confirm his masculinity by challenging Cesario to a duel. Toby amplifies Sir Andrew’s fighting aptitude to terrify the similarly ill-equipped Cesario, but he clearly views Andrew as a weak coward: “...For Andrew, if he were / opened and you find so much blood in his liver as / will clog the foot of a flea, I’ll eat the rest of th’ anatomy” (III.ii.59-62). In turn, Toby inflates Cesario’s martial prowess, describing a “very devil,” a “fencer to the Sophy” who “will not now be pacified” (III.iv.285-292). Having witnessed the feebleness of each character, the audience can revel in the irony of Andrew and Cesario separately fearing a skirmish in which their masculinity will be tested. Andrew fears that he will be revealed as weak and a lesser man, while Cesario’s fear is more literal: “Pray God defend me! A little thing / would make me tell them how much I lack of a man” (III. Iv. 314-316).

The literal battle between Sir Andrew and Cesario is a representation of society’s expectation of demonstrable masculinity. Neither truly desires a fight and neither has the capacity to fight successfully, but combat is a sign of masculinity that will reinforce the categorical definition, so both must oblige – one to confirm his masculine position in society, and the other to maintain her disguise. By drawing their “swords,” they demonstrate masculine physicality, but their inability to carry it out underscores the performative nature of masculinity.

Antonio and Sebastian

Before the two can engage in battle, Antonio, a sea captain who has rescued Sebastian and become devoted companion, intervenes in defense of Cesario, who he mistakes for his beloved Sebastian. In an act of traditional masculinity, Antonio bravely jeopardizes his own safety and freedom on behalf of another. On stage, Antonio is depicted as hyper masculine in both appearance and behavior: he is usually portrayed as muscular and bearded with strong physicality (Figure 8). The subject of his affection is Sebastian, who usually behaves in a traditionally heterosexual and masculine way but is described as quite feminine both in appearance and demeanor. When confiding the tale of his “lost” sister Viola, Sebastian describes “A lady, sir, though it was said she much / resembled me, was yet of man accounted beautiful-/ful (II.ii.24-25). Of his demeanor, Sebastian says of himself, “...My bosom is full of / kindness, and I am yet so near the manners of my mother that, upon the



Figure 8: John Paul Connolly as Antonio (2012)



Figure 9: The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, Il Sodoma, 1525

least occasion more, mine / eyes will tell talks of me” (II.ii.38-40).

Sebastian himself reminds the audience of his namesake St. Sebastian, now an emblem of queer iconography but then a well-known Christian reference in the Renaissance. A picture of exquisite suffering, St. Sebastian’s arrow-riddled, bare body represents the idea of the “penetrated” man – just as Shakespeare’s Sebastian is perhaps the object of Antonio’s desire to penetrate (Figure 9). St. Sebastian also survives his wounds, serving as a model of triumph over

adversity – just as Shakespeare’s Sebastian survives the shipwreck from which he is thought to be dead.

As Feste says, *cucullus / non facit monachum*, or “A cowl does not make a monk” (I.v.53-54). While Sebastian has an androgynous appearance and a self-described feminine nature at times, Sebastian doesn’t seem to have a need to prove his masculinity. He seems strong and confident (in a way that we have sometimes seen from his sister Viola), but is capable in battle as seen when he fights Sir Andrew offstage. Interestingly, Antonio, the most outwardly “masculine” character, has a strong homosocial bond with another male character that arguably crosses into a romantic relationship. Antonio expresses such devotion to Sebastian that he is willing to risk his life to follow him to Illyria where he is wanted: “But come what may, I do adore the so / That danger shall seem sport, and I will go” (II.i.46-47). The pair are together exclusively between the shipwreck and the play’s resolution, and they have developed a clear sense of intimacy. Antonio describes his love for Sebastian as “witchcraft,” which led him to give Sebastian “life” with the addition of his “love, without retention or restraint, all his in dedication” (V.i.76-82). While Antonio is undoubtedly masculine, Elizabethans do not equate effeminacy with homosexuality. In Elizabethan discourse of male friendship, homosocial bonds were extraordinarily important, and often more meaningful than heterosexual bonds with women. Male friendships are crucial to reinforcing patriarchal power.

While male friendships are important for stabilization of the patriarchal power structure, what does pose a problem is the fine line between homosocial relationships and sodomy. Mario DiGangi explains that for Elizabethans,

“Homosexual” identity is not a category – “homoerotic practices were “normal” aspects of even the most socially conventional relationships. The “homosocial”

and the “homoerotic” therefore, overlapped to a greater extent, and with less attendant anxiety, in the early modern period than would later be possible under a modern regime of sexuality. [...] early modern gender ideology integrated orderly homoeroticism into friendship more seamlessly than modern ideological formations, which more crisply distinguish homoeroticism from friendship, sexual desire from social desire” (1-2, 12).

This idea is seen in many Shakespearean male friendships that exhibit a level of homoeroticism. *Coriolanus* features two military foes who form an allegiance, then a friendship that lapses into homoeroticism -- at least in terms of Aufidius’ desire for Coriolanus. Horatio’s loyal devotion to his best friend Hamlet also reads as homoerotic in a context of Hamlet being simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by female sexuality. These male homosocial-homoerotic relationships typically have a one-sided sexual desire or exist well within a context of compulsorily heterosexual relationships or marriages; a literal romantic bond between men would have no enduring viability in a patriarchal culture.

In his relationship with Sebastian, Antonio seems to be on the side of this homosocial bond that crosses into the homoerotic. Antonio shows both trust and generosity to Sebastian when he asks him to hold his “purse” in Act III. Thomas



Figure 10: Steven Mackintosh as Sebastian, Nicholas Farrell as Antonio, 1996

Lacquer explains that the word “purse” comes from *Bourse*, the word for scrotum – it referred to “not only a purse or bag but also to a place where merchants and bankers assemble. As bag, purse or sack it bridges male and female bodies handily. “Purse” could mean both scrotum and

uterus in Renaissance English” (64). So in a way, Sebastian now holds Antonio by the “purse,” or possesses his testicles. In the galenic definition, the crossing of genders is referenced here, but also that there is a kind of sexual possession that Antonio offers to Sebastian. This double-meaning of “purse” is supported later when Viola-Cesario encourages Olivia to “keep your purse” when she clearly is attracted to Cesario, who, as Viola, does not reciprocate (I.v.289).

Valerie Traub suggests that male homoeroticism is not itself threatening unless it is exclusive—male homoeroticism was more a “pattern of bisexuality.” When exclusive, non-monogamy and non-reproduction are threatened (141). In terms of the twelfth night festival, Antonio and Sebastian will violate the same festival rules as Olivia if they are allowed to have an enduring homosexual relationship – they will be defying life by pursuing a non-reproductive sexual relationship. Again, festival violators are punished in this text, and therefore Antonio, whose feelings for Sebastian seem far more homoerotic than Sebastian’s homosocial affection, suffers. Like all other homoerotic relationships in *Twelfth Night*, Antonio and Sebastian’s must end when again compulsory heterosexuality hastily enters into Act 5. Antonio loses his male lover to Olivia, and he is left alone after having sacrificed himself for Sebastian. “Nature’s bias” has lead each character to the requisite heterosexual relationships that society has deemed appropriate, but in this case, Antonio’s pure (but homoerotic) love loses out.

Malvolio

While a woman successfully cross-dressing as a man is overtly disruptive to patriarchy, critics have long argued that gender transgression is often a vehicle for other crises of social hierarchies and binaries. In *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber argues that gender cross-dressing contributes to what she calls “category crisis.” When one particular “category” fails to uphold its definitional distinction, the category is revealed to have a permeable border that permits addition “border crossings” between traditional social binaries (16, 22-27). Gender disruption, then, often

serves in a literary sense as a cultural stand-in for more “dangerous” hierarchical upheavals, particularly class distinctions. Elizabethan sumptuary laws were one method of reinforcing gender categorization and regulating class distinctions. Sumptuary laws, while not rigidly enforced, did emphasize the importance of distinguishing one’s social role -- while they were also meant to protect English industries by emphasizing native products. Marjorie Garber argues that at the same time, they “attempted to mark out as visible and above all *legible* distinctions of wealth and rank within a society undergoing changes that threatened to blur or even obliterate such distinctions” (VI 25-26). By obeying sumptuary laws, one showed deference to one’s position within the social hierarchy – they were largely enforced to prevent people from moving between social classes. The implications of these laws turned gender into a symptom of larger concern with wealth and rank (VI 22-23, 27).

In *Twelfth Night*, the more egregious “cross-dresser” is arguably the uptight, ambitious and sometimes puritanical Malvolio, steward to Olivia whose aspiration of class ascension is summarily squashed by a cruel and elaborate ruse perpetrated by Toby and Maria. As James W. Stone points out, “Malvolio embodies ill will (*mal*: evil; *voglio*: I will or desire) because his narcissism and desire for absolute rule in his lady Olivia’s household threatens to subvert class hierarchy” (33). In our first glimpse of this behavior, Olivia tasks Malvolio with “returning” a ring to “Cesario.” Visibly irritated by Cesario’s refusal of the mysterious token, Malvolio throws the ring to the ground. “If it be worth stooping for, there it / lies, in your eye; if not, be it his that finds it” he obnoxiously utters, clearly viewing Cesario as lower than him in rank, although (at least in the disguise of Cesario) they are both presumably of the serving class (II.ii.15-16).



Figure 11: Alec Guinness as Malvolio, 1970)

Malvolio has an authoritative air and has a tendency of morally policing others, including those above him in the hierarchy.

My masters, are you mad? Or what are you?
 Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty but to
 gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do you
 make an ale-house of my lady's house. That you
 squeak out your coziers' catches without any miti-
 gation or remorse of voice? there no respect of
 place, persons, nor time in you? (II.iii.87-93)

Even Sir Toby, who seems to favor those who enjoy a drink and a laugh irrespective of class, invokes class hierarchy anxiety when he responds to Malvolio's scolding with " Art any more than a / steward? Dost thou think, because thou art virtu- / ous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" (II.iii.113-115). He encourages him to rub [his] chain with crumbs," referring to his steward's chain that marks his profession in keeping with Elizabethan sumptuary laws, but metaphorically could represent a "chain" that keeps him in servitude (II.iii.113-115, 119-117).

Critic C.L. Barber views Malvolio's humorlessness and fun-policing as the main reason for his victimhood in the play, as his behavior goes against the true spirit of twelfth night festivities. However, Toby derisively points out Malvolio's lower status in response to his chiding, and Maria is mostly offended by Malvolio's artifice and pretention:

The devil a puritan that he is, or anything
 Constantly but a time-pleaser; an affectioned ass
 That cons state without book and utters it by great
 swaths; the best persuaded of himself, so crammed,

as he thinks, with excellencies, that it is his grounds
of faith that all that look on him love him. And on
that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause
to work. (II.iii.145-152)

Besides the fact that Malvolio is an utterly humorless kill-joy, the greatest justification for retribution against him are his insufferable efforts to elevate his status. This is more than a festive temporary reversal of hierarchy – Malvolio seeks to permanently disrupt the social order. Maria criticizes his “affectioned” (affected) nature, using elevated language only to give the appearance of higher rank. Malvolio believes that he is better than he is (he’s “crammed” with “excellencies”), and Maria views this as his greatest vice. Because of this, her plan to trick Malvolio into believing that Olivia is secretly in love him will certainly succeed.

The villainous crew surreptitiously watches him as he receives the forged letter from “Olivia” and written by Maria, commenting that he’s an “overweening rogue” and he “jets under his advanced / plumes!” (II.v.30-31). Worse is that Malvolio is not just accused of ambitious self-aggrandizing, but he’s patently guilty. He audibly envisions the life he will have as “Count Malvolio,” wearing a “branched velvet gown,” attire expressly forbidden to one of his low status according to Elizabethan sumptuary law (Garber VI 37). As “Count Malvolio,” he dreams of being able to summon the villain and now “kinsman Toby”:

Malvolio: ...I frown the while, and per-
chance wind up my watch, or play with my – some
rich jewel. Toby approaches; curtsies there to me –

Toby: [aside] Shall this fellow live?

[...]

Malvolio: Saying “Cousin Toby, my fortunes, having
Cast me on your niece, give me this prerogative of
Speech ---”

Toby: [aside] What, what?

Malvolio: “You must amend your drunkenness.” (II.v.59-74).

Much about Malvolio’s motivation is revealed in this brief comedic display. To begin, Malvolio’s serving-class rank is evident in that he cannot even credibly envision what being of true nobility would be like – he searches for rich people activities, and laboriously settles on perhaps just handling an expensive jewel (although actors like Stephen Fry interpret this line more suggestively). He presumes that his “fortunes” will now allow him the ability to more authoritatively police Toby’s behavior. In this fantasy, Olivia is only mentioned to be “left sleeping” while Malvolio enjoys luxury and moralizes (II.v. 48).

Clearly this fantasy is not about the love of a woman, but the elevation of status only. Equally interesting is the strange request for Toby to curtsy, an act of subordination expected of women only. Malvolio views his advancement as a chance to punish Toby for lording his noble status over him, and he will not only subordinate him, but emasculate him.

Reading the letter that Maria has planted as from “Olivia” in order to humiliate him, Malvolio obsesses over the line “*Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and / some have greatness thrust upon ‘em’*” (II.v.149-150). The forged “Olivia” is attempting to assuage Malvolio’s potential fears of marrying his social “better,” but she assures that while some (like

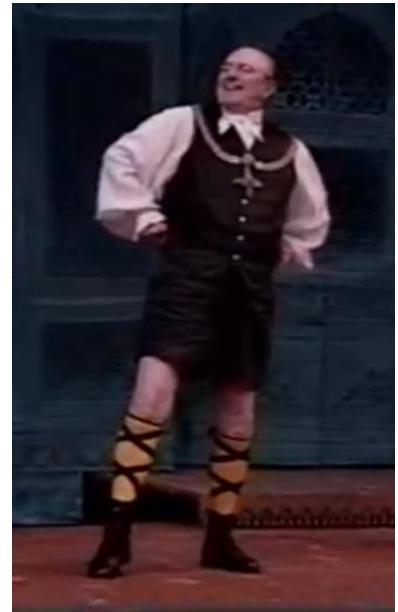


Figure 12: Philip Bosco as Malvolio,
1998

her) are born into high status, a person can potentially move from one class to another through achievement or perhaps, good fortune. This idea would be music to Malvolio's ears whose ambitions threaten the relatively static Elizabethan economic hierarchy.

The quote takes on a sexual meaning on its second uttering when Malvolio seeks to woo Olivia in person. In this case, the quote may disrupt the social hierarchy, but it reinforces the gender hierarchy. In this play, "greatness" is associated with masculinity: there are those who are "born great" (men), "achieve greatness" (Viola, who has "achieved" manhood), and those who have greatness "*thrust upon them*" (women, like Olivia). As the one who "thrusts," Malvolio reinforces his masculinity, and therefore he establishes a higher social rank.

A second aspect of Maria's comic ruse is to encourage Malvolio to wear yellow, cross-gartered stockings, grotesquely out-of-fashion and indicative of someone young and single (Figures 12, 13). This dress is also depicted as feminizing -- as he is wooing a woman, he has dressed in a feminine manner, with bows on his stockings. His "cross-dressing" is comedic in its subversion. As Marjorie Garber argues,

Just as sumptuary laws primarily regulated status rather than gender infractions, so a play like *Twelfth Night* marks the seriousness of Malvolio's transgression as a contrasted with Viola's. But ... this overlay of class or status anxieties points towards the centrality of the transvestite as an index of category destabilization altogether. (36)

Far more dangerous than gender transgression, for Elizabethans, is the destabilization of the class hierarchy.

This destabilization is carried out in another of Maria/ "Olivia's" written directives: that Malvolio "be opposite with a kinsman, surly with / servants; let thy tongue tang with arguments

of / state; put thyself into the trick of singularity” (III.iv.75-77). In his literally “crossed” dress, Malvolio treats his social superior in the way of a servant, carrying out the comic reversal of the saturnalian twelfth night festivity. But in order for this inversion to have comedic effect, it must be set back to its “natural order” by the play’s end. Malvolio has signaled belief in inherent quality, or some sort of natural order – he responds to his tormenters, shouting “Go hang yourselves all! You are idle, shal- / low things. I am not of your element. You shall / know more hereafter (III.iv. 133-135). He views himself as of an inherently higher quality than his social betters.

Malvolio is allowed to engage in his fantasy, but he must suffer consequences for his class-crossing – for their “pleasure and his / penance” (III.iv.146-147). As Olivia already thinks him mad for his odd behavior, the crew label him a madman and have him locked away. Malvolio desperately proclaims his sanity to Feste who is masquerading as Sir Topas, the parish priest. Feste points out a few things that underscore Malvolio’s madness – he asks for his “lady,” to which Feste notes “How vexest thou this / man! Talkest thou nothing but of ladies?” (IV.ii.6-27). Through Malvolio’s downfall, he has been made a fool, but has also been emasculated. His preoccupation with “ladies” underscores a point that James W. Stone makes of the “misogynistic tradition that holds that a male is effeminated by becoming the lover of a woman” (36). He becomes womanly, which in turn lowers his status. This serves another stabilizing gesture in the play – punishing Malvolio for his class transgression has served to reinforce the dominating hierarchies.



Figure 13: Stephen Fry as Malvolio, 2012)

In the final act, nature's "bias" reaches its conclusion through Olivia and Viola/Cesario's relationship. Says Sebastian to Olivia, "So comes it, lady, you have been mistook; / But Nature to her bias drew in that" (V.i.71-72). As Sebastian goes on to say, Olivia has married Sebastian and narrowly avoided an unintentional homosexual union through yet another case of false identity: "Nor are you therin, by my life, deceiv'd: / You are betroth'd both to a maid and man" (V.i.274-75). Stephen Greenblatt explains in *Fiction and Friction* that "maid" refers both to the near homosexual coupling of Olivia and Viola and to Sebastian's male virginity (71). Since Olivia cannot be betrothed to Viola, it is proper that Olivia is betrothed to Sebastian who is both "maid" and "man." This return to the socially accepted course is Nature's "bias" that Sebastian refers to –Viola/Cesario, Olivia, and Sebastian have all been involved in homoerotic relationships either knowingly or not, yet the "natural order" is inevitably restored.

Cultures that celebrate Carnival allow for this temporary hierarchical inversion on the basis that it is just that: temporary. The festive reversal allows for a frivolous emotional release that serves to humorously subvert and subsequently reify the hierarchies once they are put back into place. In that way, *Twelfth Night* disrupts gender norms throughout the plot while retreating back into compulsory heteronormativity. No matter how far the line is crossed, "nature's bias" towards heterosexuality in *Twelfth Night* makes the abundance of homoerotic relationships non-threatening to the dominant sexual order. The text itself avoids overt subversion by instituting compulsory heterosexuality in Act 5 that is in direct accord with social mandates – likely a politically necessary act. By depicting the homoerotic relationships in *Twelfth Night* as temporary and requisite replaced by heterosexual relationships, the play does not threaten Elizabethan hierarchies directly. However, the disruption of hierarchies and the gender binary itself demonstrates the feebleness of these socially constructed categories themselves. When

constructions like socioeconomic and gender distinctions become less fixed, the power-imbalance that comes with patriarchy and rigid class structures is at risk – creating anxiety for men that benefit from that power imbalance, as well as for those who desire that power.

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