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It has long been the fashion in feminist criticism on Shakespeare and contemporaries to assign staged cross-dressing a visible place within the known patriarchal world. As a result, critics have re-imagined cross-dressing on the Elizabethan stage as a phenomenon always within patriarchal structures; whether specific instances of cross-dressing are interpreted as transgressive or as reaffirming patriarchal power, they nonetheless become inevitably defined only in relation to “the patriarchy.” For example, Jean Howard has posed the question: “Did the theater, with its many fables of cross-dressing, form part of the cultural apparatus for policing gender boundaries *or* did it serve as a site for further disturbance?”¹ The structure of Howard’s question is telling: staged cross-dressing *either* ultimately reasserted the patriarchal construction of gender *or* it created an arena for anxious questioning of real gender boundaries. The inherent assumption here is that to discuss staged cross-dressing is always primarily to discuss patriarchal notions of gender. Further, Howard goes on to speculate about women’s “transgressions” of “gender boundaries” off the stage. That Howard can leap directly from discussing the policing of gender boundaries to a discussion of female transgression indicates an implicit assumption within the scholarship on this topic that cross dressing on the Elizabethan stage was, and is, fundamentally and necessarily about women.

Howard is in no way alone in her assumptions. In the process of re-imagining early modern gender many critics have re-*constructed* it in a fashion inescapably

influenced by the discourse of modern gender and sexuality. Indeed, words such as “confusion” and “anxiety” abound in the literature on this topic, suggesting that cross-dressing necessarily represents a form of transgression so intrinsically uncomfortable that it must be “resolved.” One critic argues that Viola remains “trapped” in her “male garb” at the end of *Twelfth Night* as part of the play’s anxiety-inducing refusal to restore heterosexual norms.² Juliet Dusinberre has claimed that Viola must “return to a world where she must be Orsino’s lady after the momentary freedom of a Twelfth night masculinity.”³ Yet the expectation that the drama dissolve into heterosexual certainty in order to dispel the tensions of ill-defined gender categories very well might be a modern imposition. I want to argue that, while Elizabethan staged cross-dressing does of course interact with patriarchal society in complex and often transgressive ways, cross-dressing may evade gender categorizations in a way that makes it difficult to associate it entirely with patriarchy. In suggesting that cross-dressing on the Elizabethan stage may not be *primarily* about gender, I hope to somewhat free this discussion of its recourse to discussions of women’s relationship to patriarchy simply by suggesting other possibilities for why cross-dressing was such a fascinating spectacle to Elizabethan audiences.

Several critics have offered intriguing alternatives to the assumption that staged cross-dressing always interacts transgressively or obediently with patriarchal structures. In her book *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, Jean Howard questions the relationship of every cross-dressing plot to patriarchal concerns. By suggesting that these theatrical cross-dressing plots resist an absolute drive to “heterosexual closure”⁴ Howard poses a challenge to much of the criticism on this topic. Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones have suggested in their recent book

Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory that early modern concerns over cross-dressing reveal a preoccupation specifically with clothing that has as much to do with class distinction as with gender identity. Valerie Traub has astutely insisted on the inadequacy of a view that “conflate[es]...gender and eroticism.”⁵ Traub in particular points out and challenges another prevalent binary in scholarship on this topic of “desire/attraction” on one side versus “anxiety/phobia” on the other. None of these claims is mutually exclusive, and none of them purports to exclude the obvious gender identity concerns intrinsic to every staged instance of cross-dressing. Yet the fact that critics have become unsatisfied with much of the existing analysis of this topic indicates that much of the literature that already exists on the topic is strongly influenced by contemporary sex/gender concerns and may benefit from some re-evaluation.

Critical efforts by critics Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin have challenged the certitude with which early feminist criticism on cross-dressing classified the binaries of an early modern sex/gender system. In her 1987 article “Androgyny, Mimesis and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage,” Rackin complicates the picture by proposing that sexual ambiguity is not an anxiety to be dispelled in Shakespearean comedies but an agent that in fact not only “complicate[s] the plot” but also “resolve[s] them.”⁶ Howard has employed historical facts about the presence of women in Renaissance playhouses to suggest that we “read the situation less within the horizons of masculinist ideology and ask whether women might have been empowered, and not simply victimized, by their novel position within the theater.”⁷ This bold contention has paved the way for critics such as Valerie Traub to construct a female economy of gazing and to theorize about the “circulation” of specifically feminine desire

in Renaissance theatrical venues. Despite the significant advances in thought on this topic due to the relatively recent consideration of female subjectivity and desire, an alternative criticism that focuses on female empowerment in place of patriarchal oppression still speaks to a fundamental concern with female *power struggles*, inevitably working within the discourse of two dichotomous and battling sexes. In contemplating the meaning of transvestism in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*, Stephen Orgel has brought to light the fact that gender may not always be the "central element" in cases of cross-dressing.⁸ As counter-intuitive as this contention may seem, it nonetheless seems to be entirely true of Elizabethan cross-dressing. I would like to contend that one does *not* find the kind of absolute male/female distinctions one might expect to find in a society so dominated by patriarchy. Instead, within certain social groups, such as cross-dressers and other sexual transgressors, the discourses surrounding male and female identities are surprisingly conflated.

Contemporary legal records show condemnation of both male and female cross-dressers and the rhetoric surrounding the accusations as well as the punishments for both sexes vary surprisingly little. If we return to cross-dressing comedies with this knowledge, the possibility begins to emerge that gender dichotomies challenged or reinforced by staged cross-dressing might not be as absolute as has previously been conjectured. A court record from Bridewell Hospital from 20 December 1576 indicates the accusation and condemnation of a man, Richard Watwood, for "bawdeye" behavior and "whoredome."⁹ The grounds for his examination, the language surrounding his accusation and his punishment differ in no significant way from the corresponding elements in concurrent cases of female sexual misdemeanor. It seems that men and

women were equally likely to behave in a visibly “lewd” manner: “Richard Briggs...lewd fellow vehementlie suspected to live an adulterous life.”¹⁰ Men, like women, were also likely to be taken in by the watch and examined nearly identically on similar charges of sexually inappropriate behavior. In some cases in the legal records, one even finds the names of men and women bracketed together accompanied by the documentation of identical condemnations. For example, the wife of one John Hall, taken to Bridewell for being a “notorious and shameful bawde” was condemned along with her husband who “hathe confessed the same Bawdry and hathe bene openly ponysshed for the same.”¹¹ This “bracketing together” of female and male sexual transgressors poses a definitive challenge to the argument that female sexual disobeyers were marginalized according to their specific feminine status. In fact, Michael Shapiro has published transcripts of legal records collected by R. Mark Benbow that indicate instances of *male* cross-dressing. Again the language describing the offenses and the specific punishments for the offenses (usually the pillory) is identical to the language used to condemn women who donned man’s apparel, as is evident in the case of “Robert Chewtyn” who was “comytted to warde for goynge abrode in the Cytte yesterdaye in womans apparell.”¹²

The fact that legal records reveal conflated discourses for male and female sexual “offenders” poses a challenge to the way literary critics have read the legal implications of staged female cross-dressing. In an article on *The Roaring Girl*, Stephen Orgel examines the legal records of the real Moll Cutpurse’s misdemeanors and concludes that: “Her masculine attire and comportment are, moreover, assumed to constitute licentious behaviour that is *specifically female*, implying that she is a whore and a bawd.”¹³ Yet a careful examination of other legal records indicates that the assumed link between cross-

dressed attire and licentious behavior, and further the specific designation of transgressors as “whores” and “bawds,” was in no way limited to females. Recognition of the existence of similar cultural discourses to deal with the misdemeanor of both sexes demands a critical re-reading of many of the cross-dressing plays, the scholarship on which has been dominated by an assumption that “whoredom” and cross-dressing were gendered “female” issues in the early modern period.

Shakespeare’s late romance *Cymbeline* demonstrates this principle rather well. Imogen’s cross-dressing is a rather unimportant aspect of the play, at least in comparison with the kind of extended joking and quibble that surrounds the cross-dressing in *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. Further, the audience is made very much to speculate on male bodies, I would argue even more than on female bodies. Although much of the plot revolves around the assessment of Imogen’s chastity, and indeed Iachimo’s condemnation of her revolves around a piece of information he garners specifically about her body in the voyeuristic bedroom scene, I would argue that more of the play is devoted to *male* disguise. Although the male disguise in this play is not cross-gender, we are meant to ponder the male body, specifically when Cloten contemplates his own body in comparison to Posthumus’: “I mean, the lines of my body are as well drawn as his”¹⁴ or when Imogen herself takes inventory of the dead body: “I know the shape of ‘s leg. This is his hand,/His foot Mercurial, his Martial thigh,/The brawns of Hercules.”¹⁵ In fact, this speculation on the male body is not surprising given the fact, as Rackin has argued, that much of Shakespearean cross-dressing seems explicitly “designed” to call attention to the male body.¹⁶ Indeed, the male disguises in this play are more transgressive than the female cross-dressing: Imogen’s cross-dressing is a process of dressing “down” as she

becomes more weak-willed and “roguish” as a boy. Yet her mission is to prove her chastity, rather than to engage in some kind of sexually inappropriate behavior which would constitute the usual assumed purpose of female cross-dressing. Instead, it is the men who engage in disguises for ill-found purposes. These “reversals,” I would argue, are not anomalous in the early modern period but reflect the fact, all too often neglected by modern critics, that men are just as implicated in sexual misdemeanor and the immorality of disguise as women are. This similarity across sexes also appears in the law, as the discourses surrounding male and female sexual misdemeanor are largely identical.

On the stage, satirical reversals of gender anxieties could be particularly humorous; further, such reversals sometimes revealed certain ways in which many anxieties normally gendered female could also have applied to men. In Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene*, Morose’s nearly pathological desire for a “silent woman” has everywhere been interpreted as evidence of a prevalent patriarchal anxiety about what Gail Kern Paster calls “leaky vessels.”¹⁷ That is, Morose’s insistence on policing the orifices of his prospective wife resonates with the prominent early modern masculinist fear of women who somehow “seeped out” of their domesticities. Erotic and sexually deviant symbols included women leaning out of windows or standing in the doorways of their homes. In his essay “Patriarchal Territories” Peter Stallybrass proposes that these anxiety-inducing images are evidence of a potent patriarchal need to “enclose” female bodies and to block their orifices, including their mouths.¹⁸ Indeed women’s “use of language” was restricted to “verbal interchanges within their own homes,”¹⁹ again enclosing their orifices. The “policing” of feminine orifices was always inextricably linked to sexual behavior: those women who were “loose of tongue” were immediately assumed to exercise a kind of

sexual freedom that would have been fervently condemned.²⁰ And yet, at least in the case of *Epicoene*, there appears a counter discourse of the “leaky” male. It is Morose, and not Epicoene or any other women in this play, whose speech is abundantly out of control. While Jonson’s reversal of gendered anxieties is satirical, it does seem to suggest a current in early modern culture of concern over policing *male* orifices. Additionally, Jonson’s employment of a “leaky” male points to the extremely unusual gender dynamics in this play. The play is one of the rarer types that involves male rather than female cross-dressing. The ultimate revelation that Epicoene is in fact a boy does little to actually *resolve* any of the confused notions of gender encompassed within the play. Indeed, the revelation of Epicoene’s masculine identity does more to further confound the relationship between “actual” and “played” gender identities than to unify various levels of cross-gender disguise. As Laura Levine notes, Epicoene’s “undressing” in the final act and the indication that “she” is “really” a boy raises a number of questions about the gender identities of the Collegiates who are also on stage.²¹ Does the removal of Epicoene’s disguise implicitly undress the Collegiates and reveal masculine identities beneath their costumes? The impossibility of restoring Epicoene’s “male” identity without implicitly raising questions about the genders of virtually every other character on stage indicates that male-to-female cross-dressing is just as problematic and elusive as female-to-male cross-dressing.

There is yet another factor that inevitably poses a challenge to primarily gender-focused criticism of staged cross-dressing. While modern discomfort with transvestism might lead critics to focus solely on cross-dressed disguises, it seems that, when viewed in the context of entire dramatic works, these disguises recur as instances *among* many

other disguises. We should therefore not view moments of cross-gender disguise only as a disclosure of sexual anxiety around which the entire play revolves (although their recourse to questions of gender and sexuality is clearly undeniable). Rather, the cross-gender disguises often appear in the context of many other non cross-gender disguises so as to suggest that cross-gender disguise might be comparable to or work within some wider scheme of disguise that does not have only to do with gender and sexuality. *Twelfth Night* is a perfect example of this principle. While Cesario's hermaphroditism and the abundance of homoerotic desire (Olivia for "Cesario" and "Cesario" for Orsino) deserves much attention, the curious side plot of Malvolio's misdirected courtship and the disguise he undertakes must be examined in conjunction with the confused genders and sexualities that result from the central cross-dressed disguise. Malvolio's "courtship" of Olivia seems a comic parallel to the confused love triangles that arise due to Viola's central cross-gender disguise. Malvolio's specific contemplation of the donning and doffing of very particular articles of clothing resonates with Viola's primary disguise scene. Indeed, "Olivia's" letter insists to quite an extent on Malvolio's dressing in "yellow garters."²² In Malvolio's case, as is mentioned in "Olivia's" letter, the disguise is related to class and status rather than gender, but the parallels allow us to equate this hierarchically transgressive disguise with Viola's cross-gender disguise in a way that makes any declaration about the exclusively gender-focused notion of disguise in this play tenuous.

If cross-dressing is not primarily about gender designation and placing women in a particular space in relation to patriarchal figures, what else might it be about? It is true that cross-dressing, although not technically a crime in and of itself, was assumed evidence of some form of sexual crime. At the same time, there was something visually

intriguing about cross-dressing, as evidenced both in theatrical texts and in legal rhetoric. The cross-dressed figure was an object of visual fascination for Elizabethan audiences in precisely the way youthful and virginal figures were. A figure inevitably caught in between two categories, the cross-dresser is in a state of constant transformation. This transformative nature lent itself easily (and delightfully) to performance. The cross dresser on stage becomes a spectacle due to the open possibility of transformation in either direction by maintaining an in-between doubleness, a state of being that could potentially (but not yet) resolve into masculine or feminine. This state of being is not uniquely about gender but finds its parallel in other theatrical fascinations of transformative performability, including the virgin who exists as a being in transition, and the boy, who is potentially to become a man. In all of these cases, the audience is meant to speculate on these relatively “invisible” transformative identities, such that they become not transitional states to be passed over and resolved but the centrally spectacular aspects of the plays themselves as the actor is arrested in a state of potentiality, always on the verge of transformation.

Legal records reveal a peculiar interest in the *sight* of the cross-dresser. At the same time that the transvestite’s “visibility” subjected him or her to stern condemnation, it was often the case that the spectacular quality of the punishment matched that of the crime. Women “caught” cross-dressing were forced to stand on the pillory *in man’s apparel*. One Dorothy Clayton, accused of going “aboute...apparyled in mans attyre” was made to stand on the pillory “apparyled in suche manner and sorte and in such kynde of mans apparell, as at the tyme of her apprehension did [wear].”²³ Oddly, the very same apparel that stirred such strict condemnation was also the object of a visible fascination

that was performed both on stage and on real social ground. The existence of a fascination with the appearance of the cross-dresser in the legal records indicates that theatrical renderings of this visual fascination did truly reflect reality on some level. Further, while it is most certainly true that displaying a cross-dresser on the pillory serves the purpose of offering an example to other possible transgressors, a kind of theatricality is also prevalent in this system of punishment. The legal system made use of the pillory for a variety of crimes, but the specific order that Dorothy Clayton appear on the pillory in her cross-dressed attire is telling. Clothing in this period was such a stronger marker of identity and social standing that punishment for transgression strikingly often included details about stripping the offender. A most elaborate example appears in the Repertories of the Court of the Aldermen in which it is ordered that “Davyd Evans Baker and Anne hys wyfe” for their cruel beating of a young child are to:

be stripped bothe of them naked...and tyed to a carte tayle at Newgate at nyne of the clocke in the forenone, And from there bothe of them to be whipped with rodde alongest thold baylye to Ludgate, And so through Ave Mary lane into Newgate Markett And from thence alongest Cheapesyde and downe the Pewltrye up Cornehill to Leadenhall²⁴

The order in Bridewell Hospital that all sexual transgressors be dressed in a “Bleu gowne” has a similar purpose to “strip” the offenders of the standing in community that their clothing offered them. Yet the cross-dressed offender is not stripped but appears in very specific costume; this costume indeed becomes a pleasurable view for the onlookers in the way that parading two naked offenders through the streets tied to a cart offered a spectacular view. Yet in the case of the cross-dresser, the mere view of the cross-dressed disguise was enough to be a spectacular performance, and the presence of slightly

differing punishments suggests a recognition that the cross-dressed garb in and of itself constituted a spectacular performance.

Jones and Stallybrass propose that the Renaissance spectator's attention was directed specifically towards "speculat[ing] upon a boy actor who *undresses*" with a "fetishistic attention to particular items of clothing."²⁵ This speculation is certainly readily available in the legal records, as authorities harped on the specific items of clothing the offender wore: one woman is described as having worn "cape and cloke" and "hose and dublett"²⁶ while a male cross-dresser is condemned specifically for donning "a scarf on his necke."²⁷ Similarly, Jones and Stallybrass' proposition rings true when we consider the sheer number of "preparation" scenes in cross-dressing plots. By "preparation" scenes, I merely mean those in which the audience is privy to the description of the particular act of donning and doffing disguise. *As You Like It* is an apt case for contemplating the specific attention to the *process* of *changing* clothes. Celia fabricates the primary escape plot, which recalls escape plot scenes between lovers such as Hermia and Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Jessica and Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*. Only after Celia has formulated an elaborate plan does Rosalind add cross-dressing to the list of transgressions these two disobedient women are about to commit. The cross-dressing in this play, then, is quite explicitly unnecessary and is deliberately tacked on to an already viable escape plot as a titillating performative gesture. Rosalind further highlights the fundamental theatricality of her cross-dressed disguise through specific mention of the "curtal-ax" and "boar spear."²⁸ Her particular attention to the details of her disguise catches her in a moment of imaginative transformation that becomes specifically playful and therefore precisely suited to the

theatrical medium. The attention to the act of *changing* clothes discloses a certain fascination with the cross-dresser's particularly performative transformation. The moment of Rosalind's decision to cross-dress and her verbal enactment of undressing and dressing forces the audience to pause over, and revel in, the precise instant of undressing and indeed to speculate the specifically *theatrical* capacities of the transformative.

We find a similarly titillating "preparation" scene in *The Merchant of Venice*. Much has, justifiably, been made of Nerissa's question "What, shall we turn to men?"²⁹ Indeed, this question indicates the inherently intertwined discourses of female sexual transgression and cross-gender disguise in the early modern period. Nerissa's suggestively bawdy question resonates strongly with the prevalent anxieties of female sexual freedom that accompany cross-dressing. Still, there is another way of reading this scene, one that suggests alternatives to Nerissa's seemingly definitive threat to the patriarchy. Portia carries the word "turn" to its comic heights: "Fie, what a question's that,/If thou wert near a lewd interpreter!" While the bawdy implications of the word "turn" would certainly have evoked or reflected a certain amount of anxiety, it is equally the case that the very word "turn" signifies an entire discourse of pleasurable spectacle of which the cross-dresser constitutes only one example. Indeed, Nerissa and Portia's pausing over this question of "turning" arrests them in a state of great transformative *and* performative power. By simultaneously speculating turning *into* men and drawing attention to their necessarily female sexual behavior *with* men, the two women look forward to transformation *while* maintaining specifically feminine identities. That is, at this very moment, they *are* the "undressed" boy actor, *in between* doffing women's

clothing and donning men's. I would argue that this "in between" is not primarily a moment of anxiety; rather it *is* the central theatrical principle in many of these plays.

The performativity of in-betweenness is in no way limited to the cross-dresser. A figure one comes across repeatedly in Renaissance performance is the female virgin—she is indeed a widespread fascination for Renaissance dramatists. Virginity was a thoroughly transitive state in the early modern period. As Marie Loughlin notes, the virginal body was "culturally valued" for its "transitionality,"³⁰ a body ultimately "naturally and physiologically intended for marriage."³¹ Yet Loughlin locates the centrally paradoxical essence of the virginal body in the early modern period: while the transitive virginal body was indeed culturally valued, the hymen's "unquantifiability" created a discourse of virginity predicated upon its very absence.³² I would argue that the very elusiveness of the virginal state is precisely what made virginity perfectly suited to theatrical performance. Speculation upon this transitional, indefinable state of the body is very similar to speculation upon the transformative potentiality of the cross-dressed body and is particularly suited to what may be extremely pleasurable play on the invisibility of certain kinds of identity.

It seems to be that virginity opens up space in the discourse of sexuality for female-female interaction in a way that might be condemned among married women. In other words, virginity is often tied with female-female relationships (whether suggestively erotic or not) and is frequently manifested in the visibility of groups of women. Legal records seem particularly anxious about groups of women, suggesting that there is an implicit fear of a return to this virginal "state" or "aura"; that is, a fear that women might return to a premarital space of same-sex intimacy that becomes impossible

once marriage separates them. In 1604, a certain “Ann Bowell” was taken into Bridewell and examined for “keeping company with another mans wife.”³³ The name of the other woman does not seem to be as important as the fact that she is “another mans wife.” Shakespearean comedy will attest to the fact that pre-marital female friendship was more tolerated than post-marital female relationships. In short, married women were not supposed to interact at any great length. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when Hermia tells Helena of her elopement plot, she linguistically signifies the necessary replacement of their youthful intimacy with marriage and, ultimately, the loss of virginity: “And in the wood where often you and I/Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie,/Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,/There my Lysander and myself shall meet...”³⁴ Once she and Lysander “meet,” Hermia’s virginal intimacy with Helena “upon primrose beds” will be irretrievable. Her post-marital state quite literally writes *over* her pre-marital virginal one.

As Valerie Traub astutely points out, there seems to be little recognition of the possibility of female-female eroticism both within the plays themselves and in the general critical view. For instance, the “twinn’d lamb” friendship between the youthful Leontes and Polixenes in *The Winter’s Tale* recurs in critical view as anxiously “homoerotic” while Celia’s comment in *As You Like It* that she and Rosalind “have slept together” like “Juno’s swans...coupled and inseparable” seems to evoke no trace of erotic attraction.³⁵ General critical view may not be entirely off base here. Legal authorities did not condemn post-marital female fellowships as threatening because they engendered the possibility of female-female eroticism. Rather, post-marital female-female friendships were assumed evidence of adultery and sexual incontinency: “Agnes Robson wyfe of

John Robson of Clarkewell here in corte confesseth that she hath offended in whoredome with her owne body and also that she hath entysed one Jane Fackett to playe the harlot before she was warned of late and is sorrye for yt.”³⁶ We see this fear of females enticing other females into “lewd” behavior repeatedly in legal records. Female fellowships evoke anxiety not about homoerotic desire but about supposedly whorish behavior specifically with *men*.

While post-marital female friendships were particularly sexually transgressive in the early modern period, little mention is made of virginal consorts in the legal records. Indeed, virginity was something of a magical, and as some argue powerful, state of being that is invisible to legal sanctions *except* when its *absence* is suspected. Theatrical renderings of virginity seek to prolong precisely the invisibility of this transformative stage. It is no coincidence, I think, that so many early modern plays operate in a time period that arrests the female between marriage and consummation. *Married* virgins such as Portia and Bess Bridges are of particular interest because they seem to defy the absolute dissolution of the virginal state into marital consummation. In fact, they operate much like Portia and Nerissa in the moment of their contemplation of “turning” simultaneously both *to* and *into* men. Already transcribed into the social space of marriage, these women nonetheless maintain their pre-marital virginity, simultaneously re-enacting a pre-transformation state from what should be the other side of the transformation. These women can then simultaneously contemplate virginity and non-virginity in the same way that Portia and Nerissa simultaneously assert their femininity while also contemplating transforming themselves into men. The theatre thus capitalized on its imaginative capacities by refusing to identify characters as pre or post certain

transformations in favor of prolonging indefinitely the experience of transformation itself.

Theodora Jankowski has argued that Olivia in *Twelfth Night* maintains a form of virginal “power” by marrying Sebastian, a poor man without means, rather than the patriarch Orsino.³⁷ While I do not entirely agree with designating the lovelorn and arguably effeminate Orsino the icon of patriarchy, the claim that Olivia in part calculates a marriage bond that retains some element of her virginity is an intriguing one because it renders virginity somewhat independent of the sexual act itself. The common collapsing of post-marital chastity and pre-marital virginity further illustrates that virginity was not merely and strictly associated with the sexual act. For instance, Heywood ends his play *The Fair Maid of the West* by celebrating Bess Bridges as “so fair a virgin and so chaste a wife.”³⁸ That the “fair virgin” and the “chaste wife” may be equated even though the latter clearly cannot *technically* be a virgin indicates that virginity in the early modern period referred to something other than merely the individual who has not yet had sex. What, then, *is* virginity if not merely the condition of the body before sex? It is precisely the inability to detect virginity that lends it a strange kind of magical force. In reference to Olivia, Jankowski seems to propose that virginity is *not* a biological condition but a state of being or premarital “aura”—in other words, a stage of development. Jankowski further argues that the virgin was never a formed persona; rather female virginity, in literature as well as law, was always merely a means to an end. The theatrical space is one of free reign for virginity and other “invisible” merely transformative natures. Indeed, the virgin is of central interest to many of the comedies, and her virginal state is prolonged as something that *enables* performance.

The Merchant of Venice presents an interesting problem to the normative trajectory of comedy that opens space for the kind of speculations on “invisible” identity embodied in the virgin. Portia and Bassanio marry towards the middle of the play, resolving the comic tension that remains to the last moments of most Shakespearean comedies. The question inevitably arises as to what can possibly occur in the remainder of the play if the end of the comedic trajectory has already been achieved by the end of act three. As in the case of *Bess Bridges*, the projected consummation in this case is separated from the actual marriage. Many critics have argued that the delay of the sexual act results from the homoerotic bond between Antonio and Bassanio in which Portia must intervene and re-establish heterosexual dominance. This restoration of “normative” heterosexuality, the argument goes, constitutes the logic behind Portia’s cross-dressed disguise as Balthazar and the ring exchange. This withholding of sex is representative of the comic trajectory, but it is emphasized in this play as Portia wields an unusual amount of power, even as an authoritative law-enforcing individual, and as she undertakes a concerted effort to ensure her place in the sexual economy of marriage. Portia and Nerissa re-dress in female attire and return to the “fairytale” land of Belmont to reclaim their heterosexual bonds with their husbands. Yet the end of the play does not secure a satisfyingly complacent consummation for the future. Instead, it continues to play with homoerotic possibilities by extending the image of the cross-dressed Portia past its material reality on stage. As Bassanio suggestively quibbles: “Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow./When I am absent, then lie with my wife.”³⁹ Indeed, “homoerotic” possibilities are in no way foreclosed at the end of the play, as Portia proclaims that should the “doctor” come to her house, she will deny him neither “my body” nor “my

husband's bed."⁴⁰ Indeed, the suggestion and extensive play on the division versus the unity of Portia and the doctor Balthazar renders the play in a sense unwilling to settle on a definitive "end" of the male-female spectrum. The sense that Portia's "virgin power" or cross-dressed state could "leak over" from Venice to Belmont suggests a fascination with representing the ambiguities of the transformative virgin state.

The most obvious source to look at in contemplating interactions between the transformative states of virginity and cross-dressing is John Lyly's play *Gallathea*. Lyly, not unusually, uses cross-dressing as a disguise; but what is truly telling in this play is the fact that it is never clear what *exactly* the cross-dressed disguise disguises. Do Tityrus and Melibeus guard their daughters' femininity specifically? Or can it equally be argued that it is precisely their virginity, or "maidenhood" to use Lyly's term, that must somehow be shrouded by the donning of male garb? Phillida introduces the possibility that her male garb disguises her virginity: "Suppose I were a virgin (I blush in supposing myself one), and that under the habit of a boy were the person of a maid."⁴¹ While there is plenty of quibble on the male/female confusions engendered by the girls' disguises (which is subsequently heightened by their falling in love with one another), many of the jokes in this play suggest a slightly different kind of cross-dressed disguise than we find in the Shakespearean canon. While Rosalind may joke about her existent or non-existent beard, the humor and mystification in Phillida and Gallathea's disguises seems to rest on an attempt to shroud their maidenhood. Later, Phillida comments on her mistake: "I had thought that in the attire of a boy there could not have lodged the body of a virgin, and so was inflamed with a sweet desire which now I find a sour deceit."⁴² At this point, it seems that Lyly equates "virgin" with "girl." Even so, by suggesting that cross-dressing

might be conceived of as a disguise of virginity, Lyly not only writes within a discourse that necessarily equates cross-dressing and virginity on some basic principles but raises the question of the extent to which these “transformative” states evade the spectator’s gaze. At the end of the play, we are left with an ending that does not quite resolve largely due to a theatrical prolongation of what should be a *premarital* virginal fellowship between Phillida and Gallathea. Venus proclaims that she will simply “turn one of them to be a man,”⁴³ but it is never clear which of the two girls will be transformed. Indeed, when Gallathea reappears to deliver the epilogue, it is unspecified what garb she wears and what gender “she” should display. The transformation never materializes on stage, and the girls do not seem to care whether they are both girls, both boys, girl and boy, or any other combination. Just as *The Merchant of Venice* plays with the idea of preserving Portia as a powerful virginal figure and maintains its homoerotic playfulness past the point of supposed resolution, *Gallathea* plays with the possibility of a female-female relationship that symbolically transgresses the developmental window for virginity. This play purports to resolve with a very marked transformation that should end the theatrically “in-between” state occupied by the girls as well as their same-sex premarital relationship. Yet the supposed transformation is just as ambiguous and magical as the ambiguously gendered (and ambiguously virginal) relationship between the two “girls.”

Virginal fellowships like the ones we find in *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Gallathea*, *Epicoene* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, to name only a few, seem to last only until marriage. The interpretation of a lack of post-marital female-female friendship in early modern literature has been unified in modern scholarship around a point of view that suggests that married women were anxiously guarded within their

households. However, these arguments have lately been complicated by Phyllis Rackin, among others. Noting how often “feminist scholarship” situates itself within a “patriarchal master narrative,”⁴⁴ Rackin reminds us that the expectation that women be “chaste, silent, and obedient” may be more prevalent in recent scholarship than in the literature of Shakespeare and contemporaries. Rackin goes on to challenge the public-private gendered space dichotomy by referencing women’s “prominence in the marketplace” and by astutely noting that even the household itself was “the site where much of the economic production of the nation was conducted.”⁴⁵ Thus, Rackin argues, even if women were indeed kept inside the household in the early modern period, this space designation did not necessarily marginalize them because “the household had not yet been limited and specialized to its modern status as a residential unit.”⁴⁶ It has often been argued that the early modern anxieties about female travel (“going abroad”) bespoke a primarily patriarchal concern with keeping women away from the “promiscuous male gaze” that is inevitably threatening to their sexual purity and enables whorish behavior. Linda Woodbridge, for example, has argued that women who gazed out of windows “may glimpse men” and were therefore “presumed whore[s].”⁴⁷ While evidence for this is certainly well-documented, I would like to suggest that there also existed considerable fear of females’ visibility to *each other*. This female-female visibility relates to “transformative” states because it engenders a kind of female community reminiscent of pre-marital virginity.

Legal records abound with female testimony, and the authorities seemed to make great use of female witnesses, particularly to testify on the misdemeanor, usually sexual, of other women. One Jane Barlye testified at Bridewell Hospital that “she knoweth that

one Katheryn Jones had to do carnally with many men in her house in St Johns Streate &...with many strangers & others & she had them half alwayes of the monye for there whoredome.” A Margarett Grey “being examined” testified that “Katheryn Stephens nowe called Katheryn Roberte that kepeth Mr Captayne Carewes howse is a comon bawde & harlotte...”⁴⁸ The records of female testimony on the sexual misdemeanor of other females gets as detailed as the witness Margarett Underwood’s who claimed to have seen through her “key hole” one Jeremy “laye his hand about her [Elizabeth’s] necke and with his other hand under her clothes kissing of her and...did caste her uppon the bedd and shortly after he strucked out the candell with his hatt and then went to their unlawfull wickedness...”⁴⁹ It seems, then, that a female’s visibility to other females denoted something transgressive: the moment a married woman becomes visible to another woman, it is immediately in the context of witnessing a misdeed, and, not insignificantly, a sexual misdeed at that. Indeed, in the legal records the notion of the female witness is intimately tied with the “threat” of the woman who “opens” her door or leans too far out her window. Summoned to Bridewell Hospital, Anne Dutton “saythe that she neuer enticed Margaret Adam...to any Follie” but she continues to offer an account of a particularly transgressive scene that seems to have been called into suspicion for its threat to the boundaries the door to the house should impose:

But the saide Alice sayeth that on Weddensdaie laste wente to Adams howse for a pott of Ale saide Anne Dutton beinge in the howse of the saide Adam And the saide Anne Dutton fell in talke with them & tolde them that she wolde come to them at nighte And so she came & the saide Margaret with hir to hir howse, And knocked at the Dore at X aclocke at nighte & at the first they did not answeere & then she wente to bed againe And then they knocked againe and she wente againe downe in hir smocke & she answered them she wolde not open the Dore And the saide Margaret saide she might open the dore for there were no bodie but she & one more & so she opened the Dore and then she willed them to go with

her...& they sholde but tarrye till mornynge...she nowe confeseth that she spake wordes being Dronke And uppon amendment is ordered to be discharged.⁵⁰

Apparently, “opening the dore” is suggestive of misbehavior and leads only to being enticed to leave the house to engage in some kind of unruly activity. Indeed, a woman who indiscriminately opens her door not only threatens to “go abroad” in the streets, but, by making herself visible to other women, also threatens to “entice” other women into misbehavior, usually of a sexual nature. Again, there is rarely a suggestion of enticement to homosexual behavior; rather, women who “leak” out of their homes seem to threaten the chastity of other, usually married, women by enticing them to engage in whorish behavior with men.

Translated onto the stage, the sexually transgressive female to female gaze was exploited as something with great theatrical potential. Surely an example such as the epilogue to *As You Like It* in which Rosalind appeals directly to the tastes of female audience members should speak to the theater’s reveling in what may have been a societal anxiety about women’s visibility to other women. The epilogue to this play has understandably been the object of much critical attention. Yet it is not as unique as critics may otherwise wish to make it. While it may play more explicitly and transgressively with gender ambiguity, it constitutes yet another example of the continuation of transformative identity past the supposed resolution of the play. Although, unlike Viola, Rosalind literally “escapes” her cross-dressed garb at the end of the play, her playfully indecipherable gender identity in the epilogue suggests an ability to return to a pre-marital transformative state, simultaneously virginal, youthful and, indeed, gender ambiguous. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia’s travel is enabled by her quest for the

consummation of her marriage, but, I would argue, it is only possible on the grounds that she is still a virgin *and* that she is cross-dressed. These two are inseparable from each other and from her ability to be mobile. In addition, she necessarily travels with a virginal cross-dressed companion, and even though they are married, they simulate a pre-marital state of transformative capacity by virtue of their fellowship and travel.

Jonson capitalizes on the notion of female fellowships in *Epicoene*, in which a group of seemingly hermaphroditic “Collegiates” figure significantly. Their strangely magical “authority” arises by virtue of their traveling and appearing on stage always as a *fellowship* of female companions. Truewit calls them: “an order between courtiers and country madams, that live from their husbands and give entertainment to all the Wits and Braveries o’ the time, as they call ‘em, cry down or up what they like or dislike in a brain or a fashion with most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority...”⁵¹ These women travel from their husbands and maintain friendships with each other, transgressively simulating a pre-marital state of sexuality that causes Truewit to be perplexed about their gender identities. Indeed, he identifies them as particularly “in *between*” genders. Appropriately, these women have a performative function—they “entertain.” The link between “in between-ness” and theatricality seems particularly well expressed in this case. By virtue of their post-marital behavior as pre-marital virgins, these women become “hermaphroditical,” assigned the specifically theatrical title of “in-between” that also characterizes the staged cross-dresser.

There is another transitional aspect that often accompanies cross-dressing that seems to be too often overlooked. Staged cross-dressing is frequently accompanied by a fascination with or high valuing of the youthfulness of the boy. Stephen Orgel and

Michael Shapiro have both commented that boys, and particularly young male performers, prove difficult to categorize on a spectrum of male to female. Orgel has specifically posed the question: “What do boys and women have in common that distinguishes both from men, and renders both objects of desire for men?”⁵² While it is familiar for us to “view boys as versions of men,” this assumption may be misguided when imposed on Elizabethan notions of sex and gender. Orgel prefers to align boys with women, pointing out that the Elizabethan ideal of womanhood was particularly “boyish,” favoring “slim-hipped and flat-chested” women.⁵³ However, rather than placing boys on either of the extremes of the gender spectrum, I would argue that boys, like virgins and cross-dressers, present another case of transformative fascination, again particularly well suited for theatrical spectacle. If boys in the Elizabethan sex/gender system were not simply “little men,” then a woman who dresses *specifically* as a boy is not necessarily aligning herself with the “masculine.” A woman who disguises herself as a boy rather than as a man enters into a state of even more heightened ambiguity because boys are likewise caught in an intrinsically transitive state of existence.

All of the Shakespeare plays with female-to-male cross-dressing make mention of the youthful beauty of the cross-dressed female as “boy.” Even in *The Merchant of Venice*, which contains decidedly few joking references to the woman under the male disguise in the court scene, the Jew comments on the judge’s youthfulness: “How much more elder art thou than thy looks!”⁵⁴ and Shylock repeatedly calls her “young judge.”⁵⁵ We find similar comments in both *As You Like It* and even more so in *Twelfth Night*. Phoebe in *As You Like It* becomes bewitched by the “pretty youth” and the “pretty redness in his lip.”⁵⁶ But it is *Twelfth Night* that provides a particularly intriguing

example of this phenomenon. It is worth noting that Viola has no female companion, no Celia or Nerissa in whom to confide. The result is that all of the recognition of her feminine identity beneath the disguise occurs in asides or in some suggestive language within her dialogue with others who do not know she is disguised. It might be argued, therefore, that Viola's "transformative" nature is even more potent as compared to the cross-dressed Rosalind and Portia because she never *fully* steps out of her disguise within the world of the play, as Rosalind does the moment she addresses "Celia" and not "Aliena." Any time "Cesario" calls attention to Viola, it is necessarily part of a gesture that removes her from the play and communicates instead with the audience. In fact, "Viola" is really only present on stage for one very short scene, and this scene is already caught within the discourse of cross-gender disguise as Viola prepares to undress and re-dress as Cesario.

Viola disguises herself specifically as a "eunuch," asking to be "concealed."⁵⁷ This is quite different from Rosalind's "gallant"⁵⁸ disguise, and while Rosalind dresses up, Viola *covers* up, remaining rather "undressed" or castrated in some way rather than "adding" layers of identity as Rosalind does. Viola, timid and powerless, needing a man to prepare her disguise, becomes a "eunuch," endlessly caught *between* masculinity and femininity, and indeed endlessly "undressed." The "speculation" on the undressed boy actor that Stallybrass and Jones have aptly noted is present in both plays, but more attention is drawn to the physical body itself in *Twelfth Night* than in *As You Like It*. Viola's inherent "transformability" as an uncertainly gendered figure opens up space for play on the nature of her disguised boyhood. The co-occurrence of cross-dressing and a fascination with boyhood in all of these plays indicates a strong sense of their relatedness,

and this relatedness lies in their similar recourse to the performance of transformation. Olivia's love for Viola seems neither anxiously homosexual nor heterosexual. Rather, Olivia becomes enchanted with Viola's boyishness. I would further argue that Orsino's "love" for the youthful "Cesario" is also predicated on his pretty boyishness and not on the particular love for a man, a woman, or a woman dressed as a man. When Orsino praises Cesario's "smooth and rubious" lip and his "small pipe," he does gesture towards the "woman's part," but at the same time, he notes the "shrill and sound"⁵⁹ timber of Cesario's voice, gesturing towards the youthful high-pitched sound of "his" voice and drawing attention to his situation within the transformative stages of puberty. While this comment is of course humorous and suggestive due to the double cross-gender disguise at play here, it also illuminates the real and fascinating beauty of the boy, even sans disguise.

Michael Shapiro rightfully argues against the general notion that the "complex figure of male actor/female character/female character/male disguise" dissolves into "a single androgynous entity."⁶⁰ It is more accurately the case that these mazes of male/female disguises more readily embody the "young male performer" who is *not* "genderless" but the "young m[a]n, not yet but potentially [the] adult male."⁶¹ Shapiro's language "not yet but potentially" suggestively points to the centrality of the "transitive" in the identity of the young male. Indeed, the early modern young male cannot be merely equated with a lack of clear gender designation, nor, I would argue, is he merely a less mature man. He is this "not yet but potentially" whose identity depends precisely upon his transformative nature. The security of his identity, then, is paradoxically predicated upon his existence as an unsecured transitive being. It is exactly this paradox of identity

that intrigued Renaissance audiences. The theatre provided audiences a space for prolonged speculation on these transitive states of being, whether they were embodied in the boy, the virgin, the transvestite or the actor himself, whose volatility was particularly theatrical and spectacular.

Another fascination specifically with the boy and the doubled nature of the cross-dresser may be found in *The Roaring Girl*. In the case of this play, closure is made tenuous by the failure to dissolve the doubled nature of the two Marys, Mary Frith and Mary Fitzallard. Quibbles on the shared name of this character abound in the play in a way that does not allow us to pass the double naming off as coincidence. In the very first scene, Sebastian calls Mary Fitzallard “Moll” in moments of greatest intimacy, and yet, in very close proximity to this affectionate name-calling, he refers to the other “Moll,” Mary Frith.⁶² Later, Mary Frith very directly jokes about the shared name: “I pitied her for name’s sake, that a Moll/ Should be so crossed in love...”⁶³ The appearance of Mary Fitzallard on stage dressed as a page would have been extremely striking to the audience, as it further solidifies the “doubled” nature of the two Marys. She even wears clothes fitted by Moll Frith’s tailor.⁶⁴ There has been much debate over the extent to which the purportedly deviant Moll is excluded from the supposed reconstruction of normative sexuality embodied in the closing marriage between Mary Fitzallard and Sebastian. Marjorie Garber has argued against the long-held critical consensus that Moll Frith is decidedly “cast out” of the society forged at the end of the play: “Moll is not so much a role model as a recognition and a phantom, not a sign of the road not taken or a metaphor for the aspirations of early modern feminists but a sign of the double division of the concept of the ‘roaring girl’ ... Not either/or but both/and.”⁶⁵ Read alongside Orgel’s

contention that much of the erotic excitement that surrounds Moll Frith is predicated upon her nearly constantly visible “double” nature as simultaneously male and female,⁶⁶ Garber’s argument seems to suggest that Mary Frith and Fitzallard never “divide,” and that, in some sense, Mary Fitzallard never sheds the masculine attire she dons to attain her marriage. Instead, Moll Frith and Mary Fitzallard remain thoroughly doubled in a way that refuses to complete Mary Fitzallard’s transformative trajectory towards marriage, the end of which should also constitute the culmination of the play. Further, it is quite specifically this transformative capacity that renders Moll Frith arousing for characters within the play and spectators alike. Laxton’s sexual fantasies about Moll are quite consistently predicated on her precise placement *in between* masculinity and femininity: “That were excellent: she might first cuckold the husband and then make him do as much for the wife!”⁶⁷ As Orgel notes, it is the “polymorphous quality” of Moll Frith that so attracts and intrigues Laxton, among others in the play.⁶⁸ This would mean that it is not specifically the female’s dressing as a boy that excites male sexuality but the “dressing up” as something utterly mutable and indeed becoming someone whose very identity depends on changeability. Perhaps, then, Sebastian’s seemingly homoerotic comment about kissing the cross-dressed Mary Fitzallard—“Methinks a woman’s lip tastes well in a doublet”⁶⁹—is not an expression of desire for a boy, or even a woman dressed as a boy, but for the simultaneous presence of both “woman” and “boy,” a doubled presence which actively keeps open the possibility of transformation in either direction.

A very similar arousal at the woman known to be dressed as a boy also marks the somewhat troubling end of *Twelfth Night*. Just as Orsino finds out that “Cesario” is

indeed a woman and as the play arrives at its logical conclusion, Viola remains in her male garb. Interpretations of Orsino's comment: "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"⁷⁰ range everywhere from a gesture towards homoeroticism to a preservation of the sense of suffering that characterizes Viola's relationship with her masculine attire throughout the course of the play. I would argue, however, that this comment functions very much like Sebastian's realization that he enjoys a woman in a doublet. Without disrupting the disguise plot, Orsino is free in the last few moments of the play to make explicit his similar preference for woman-as-man. Yet, again, I would argue that it is not merely woman dressed as boy that he prefers but woman *and* boy at once, and what perhaps excites him even more is the ability to imagine or contemplate Viola's future transformation into womanhood (by virtue of her changing into woman's "weeds" at some unspecified future moment to which the audience will not be privy) *all the while preserving the sight of her in male attire*. This simultaneity, this *possibility* for transformations along the spectra from male to female, virgin to non-virgin, boy to man, homosexual to heterosexual, is precisely what made what I am calling "transformative" states so fascinating and exciting for early modern audiences.

The inextricable link between gender and notions of "transformation" is not surprising given the Galenic concept of human sexual anatomy that dominated scientific discourses on sexuality in the Renaissance. The widely accepted notion of male/female anatomical differences in the Renaissance comes from Galen who theorized that the female body is an "imperfect" formation of the male's, that she is a version of masculinity not quite achieved, purportedly due to a "lack of heat" at the time of

conception. In consequence, the female's genitalia were like a man's, just not "pushed outside" of the body. What this does to discourses of gender/sexuality is precisely to create a notion of the inherent transitivity of the female. That is, the female is always an "in-between," or rather, an in-between that has been "imperfectly" prolonged. This sense of a "continuum" of gender can also be extended to sexuality. As Jean Howard notes, Renaissance sexuality was not a matter of "distinct" identities. Paraphrasing Alan Bray, Howard points out that homosexuality "constituted a potential within everyone, a point on a continuum of possible sexual practices."⁷¹ This "continuum" is an intriguing observation: might it be, with recourse to the anatomical theories of Galen, that gender identity from male to female is also a spectrum? Indeed, a man "passes through" the state of a female on the way to becoming a male. Perhaps, in a less teleological manner, the lived experiences of gender and sexuality also existed on a spectrum in which any degree of masculinity/femininity and homosexuality/heterosexuality could exist in any variety of combinations at any time.

If gender, particularly the female, and sexuality both constituted "spectra" of possibilities in which transformation was always possible, the theatre was a space in which to speculate on these transformations, often in a transgressive manner, but more importantly in a manner that drew on their spectacular and theatrical potential. This potential was recognized by authoritative structures such as the legal system which fostered a simultaneous condemnation of and fascination with cross-dressing, a state of being predicated on both transitivity and the invisibility of gender and sexual identities. Perhaps the threat, then, of cross-dressing was not so much *about* gender per se or about the relationship between femininity and the patriarchy but about the inability to pinpoint

sexual identity; and perhaps theatre, most notably in the form of cross-dressed comedy, transgressively capitalized on this principle of the sexual “spectrum” for its suitability to theatrical performance. Perhaps, then, cross-dressing on the Elizabethan stage was in large part *about theatricality*. And perhaps the fascination with cross-dressing in the theatre rested, at least in part, not on the cross-gender garb per se but on the space it provided for imagining a proliferation of *other* equally plausible disguises, as the spectator speculates on the undressed boy actor, capable of any series of transformations.

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Notes

¹ Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 105, emphasis mine.

² Carol Thomas Neely, "Lovesickness, Gender, and Subjectivity: *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 286.

³ Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*. 2nd ed (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), 267.

⁴ Howard, 17.

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