

N° 19 | 2025

Immersion dans *La Nuit des rois*

« What Country Friends Is This? » : Anatomie et identité dans *La Nuit des rois*

Immersion dans le genre

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Publication en ligne le 20 septembre 2026

> Pour citer ce document

Dympna Callaghan, « "What Country Friends Is This?" : Anatomie et identité dans *La Nuit des rois* », *Shakespeare en devenir* [En ligne], n°19, 2025, mis à jour le 20/09/2026, URL : <https://shakespeare.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/index.php?id=3391>.



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ABSTRACT

This essay traces the semantic and phonemic reverberations of a single “unexplained” phrase in *Twelfth Night*: Viola’s opening question, “What country, friends, is this?” (I.2.1). Taking Frank Kermode’s lament about the neglect of Shakespeare’s language as its provocation, the essay argues that “country” initiates a chain of genital wordplay — country/cunt, count/cunt, cut, blank, nothing — that runs through the entire play and constitutes not merely its bawdy humor but its deepest structural and political logic. The play’s obsessive punning on anatomical identity reveals that the vertical axis of social hierarchy (count, county, countess, countryman) is grounded in, and mutually destabilized by, the horizontal plane of both sexual difference and sexual indistinction. Reading the play’s subtitle, *What You Will*, as both destination and answer to Viola’s opening interrogative, the essay demonstrates that Shakespeare’s genital wordplay is inseparable from the play’s interrogation of gender, hierarchy, and the limits of comic resolution.

KEYWORDS

Twelfth Night, Shakespeare, gender, sexuality, anatomical wordplay, genital puns, eunuchism, festive comedy, early modern theatre, *What You Will*

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article retrace les répercussions sémantiques et phonémiques d’une seule phrase inexpliquée dans *Twelfth Night*, la question d’ouverture de Viola : « Quel pays est-ce donc, mes amis ? » / « What country, friends, is this? » (I.2.1). S’inspirant de ce que déplore Frank Kermode en constatant la négligence dont la langue de Shakespeare fait l’objet, cet article soutient que le mot « country » déclenche une série de jeux de mots à connotation sexuelle (country/cunt, count/cunt, cut, blank, nothing). Ce fil conducteur traverse toute la pièce et constitue non seulement son humour grivois, mais aussi sa logique structurelle et politique la plus profonde. Les jeux de mots obsessionnels de la pièce sur l’identité anatomique révèlent que l’axe vertical de la hiérarchie sociale (comte, comté, comtesse, paysan) s’appuie sur la différence sexuelle et l’absence de distinction sexuelle du plan horizontal, tout en étant également déstabilisé par celui-ci. En interprétant le sous-titre de la pièce, *What You Will*, à la fois comme destination et comme réponse à la question posée par Viola au début de l’œuvre, cet article démontre que les jeux de mots sexuels de Shakespeare sont indissociables de l’interrogation que pose la pièce sur le genre, la hiérarchie et les limites de la résolution comique.

MOTS-CLÉS

La Nuit des rois, Shakespeare, genre, sexualité, jeux de mots anatomique, eunuque, comédie festive, théâtre de la première modernité, *Ce que vous voudrez*

In 2003 in the wake of feminist and new historicist approaches to literature, Frank Kermode lamented that Shakespeare criticism had lost its way. He complained that no one any longer took serious notice of the “unexplained bits of language that it might be thought important to understand” and that “[i]n the present state of the game there can be no assurance that anybody will”.¹ This essay, however, takes as its starting point both the meaning and the textual resonances of one of Shakespeare’s “bits of language” in *Twelfth Night*, a phrase that has been understood not to require explanation: “What country friends is this?” (I.2.1).² Editions of the play, including those published by Oxford, Cambridge, Arden, and Norton,³ take Viola’s question as self-evident and do not gloss it at all. Instead, textual editors invariably gloss the Captain’s response, “This is Illyria, lady” (I.2.2) with a note about the geographical location of the play.⁴ However, my analysis of Viola’s question and its reverberations throughout *Twelfth Night*, far from complying with Kermode’s hope that serious criticism would move away from issues such as gender and sexuality,⁵ instead returns to them with some insistence. I will argue that while the interrogative “What country?” is not necessarily a scurrilous inquiry (and my argument does not depend on its being so), it nonetheless instigates a chain of genital wordplay and association (country/ cuntry/ count/ cut/ cunt/ blank/ nothing/ thing/ will) that persistently refer to specific anatomical identity — or obtrusively — the lack thereof (eunuchism and gender indecipherability). There is, however, more at stake in this than the play’s irrepressible delight in dirty words and double entendres because the gender division in which men ruled women in early modern culture was the anchoring paradigm for all other forms of social hierarchy and political organization. Thus, the play’s language of wanton vitality implicitly suggests that who gets to govern whom, far from being fixed, natural, and ordained by the deity, is in fact, unstable and joyfully⁶ — or dangerously — arbitrary. Indeed, the all-male stage of the Elizabethan and Jacobean public theatres both permitted and enabled such investigations. Amid these social, political, and structural conditions, the play’s obsessive punning on anatomical identity, announced even in the scandalous intimations of the play’s subtitle, *What You Will* – vagina or anus, male or female, or any combination thereof —⁷ is constitutive not only of its potential for political critique but also of its comic logic.⁸

My essay, then, begins with Viola’s interrogative as a way of approaching the gamut of the play’s sexual language. I will argue that in an important sense, the play’s answer to Viola’s question “What country[...]?” lies in its subtitle: “What You Will”. In the absence of anatomical women, the play nonetheless relentlessly focuses its humor on genital identity, to reveal the radical intimation that anatomy may not be destiny.

Finding herself shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria, or what we now know as the Dalmatian coast, Viola inquires: “What country, friends, is this?” (I.2.1). Crossing the shoreline in *Twelfth Night* initiates the transformations of identity that will unfold in the play, and “country” articulates a sense of both belonging and exclusion, as well as the dynamic and unstable identity that it might confer. While national identity is paramount as a legal designation in twenty-first century understandings of ourselves, Viola’s use of the word “country” does not designate a nation state. Indeed, the “country” at which she has arrived does not refer to a tightly coherent territorial designation that correlates with the clearly-defined border of nationhood but a more loosely defined Duchy, a sovereign Dukedom, which indicates the more malleable boundaries of the territorial designation Shakespeare often favored as the scene of his comedies. Neither Viola nor the ship’s captain nor the sailors who are with them betray any indication that the inhabitants of Illyria speak a different language, let alone that they might encounter passport control, immigration restrictions, or any of the other of the impediments to travel and migration that are the requirements of modern bureaucracies.⁹ Rather than suggesting closed borders,

then, Viola's question literally opens the gender comedy of the play because the function of interrogatives is to invite response. Symbolically, her query represents the moment of metamorphosis, the migration from one place to another and from one condition to another. It is freighted with a range of possible, albeit unobtrusive, resonances: first, with the genital pun country/cunt (which I will explore in due course), and with political significance when she calls upon the affective bonds wrought by shared experience — "friends" — in her blithely informal mode of address to the Captain and his sailors. These are Viola's social inferiors, as we already know because the Captain has addressed her as "lady" (I.2.2). Yet, "friends" suggests not the verticality of hierarchy but the horizontal plane of affinity and equality. In Viola's "friends" there lies the potential to reimagine political relations according to what Jim Ellis has described in relation to the culture of the Inns of Court, which saw the earliest recorded performance of *Twelfth Night*, as "a fraternal and contractual model."¹⁰ Indeed, although she is still wearing female clothing at this point in the play, there is in Viola's exchange with the Captain a sense of mutual obligation — and perhaps, paradoxically, of *male* fellowship and homosocial bonds. Her subsequent inquiry about the fate of her brother continues in a similar vein: "Perchance he is not drowned. What think you, sailors?" (I.2.4).

The word "country" recurs just lines later, and this time it carries its charge into the verse's prosody itself. The Captain gives Viola hope Sebastian may still be alive:

For saying so, there's gold.
 Mine own escape unfoldeth to my hope —
 Whereto thy speech serves for authority-
 The like of him. Knowst thou this country? (I.2.16-219)

Viola's survival leads her to hope that her brother has similarly escaped drowning: "The like of him." But after that phrase, there is a midline cesura, and the meter falters. It seems to be a syllable short of the full complement of an iambic pentameter line. However, the line scans perfectly when "country" receives trisyllabic pronunciation. This added syllable, or, to use its technical term, anaptyxis, means that the word "country" would be pronounced as "cun/ter/ey."¹¹ The point is not that the play is here in the territory of crude sexual jokes — it isn't, though it will soon arrive there — but instead that this word is part of the soundscape that prepares the way.

Viola is so far from being distraught about territorial boundaries of "country" on whose shores she has landed and the dislocations of identity that they entail that she immediately proposes to become employed at one of the two noble houses of the region.¹² This is perhaps unsurprising since we are in the world of dramatic fiction and of the generic conventions of comedy, which is replete with socially liberatory possibility. Although not typically about the kind of impediments that present themselves in the mismatched gender pairings of this play, comedy as a genre is about overcoming obstacles to romantic love, and restoring familial and social unity after a period of separation and strife. Ultimately in comedy, all obstacles to belonging, whether legal, political, or familial — and even, and most importantly, in the case of *Twelfth Night*, possessing the ostensibly "wrong" gender identity — can be overcome. Although there is good reason to believe that the first performance of *Twelfth Night* was likely on Twelfth Night itself,¹³ the earliest performance for which a record survives puts the date at Candlemas, 2nd February 1602. Twelfth Night and Candlemas were connected feasts. The former was the last of the twelve days of Christmas, while Candlemas occurred forty days after Christmas Day, at the very end of the

liturgical Christmas season and celebrated the presentation of the Child Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem. As François Laroque points out:

Twelfth Night was the festival which brought to an end the long, eventful period of 'Yuletide' revels, although its festive emblems and decorations (ivy, holly and the Yule log) were not taken out of the houses until Candlemas [...] which would ritually eject the 'evergreen' of Christmas Day [...].¹⁴

These festivals were characterized by a carnivalesque spirit and the temporary inversion of social order. Known as "feasts of misrule," these celebrations of the topsy-turvy world, the world upside down, temporarily inverted social hierarchy allowing women and other groups (for example, apprentices) who were lower down the social pecking order to appropriate the roles and privileges of men and masters. While such moments arguably demonstrated the potential for the radical reorganization of society, there were strict temporal limits on festive disorder. In Shakespeare's play too, the sexual license of festivity is demonstrated by the figures of Olivia, the cross-dressed Viola, and the ingenious "Penthesilea" (Queen of the Amazons; II.3.172), Maria, in the cultural trope of the "woman on top." Female power in the form of Maria's cunning, Olivia's erotic initiative, and Viola's cross dressing is *almost* curtailed — albeit not unhappily — in the comic resolution of marriage. The report of Maria's marriage represents social advancement and thus retains a shade of the joyous transgression the play revels in. Viola is of course, still cross-dressed, but is to stay (erotically at least) on top in so far as she is to become Orsino's "master's mistress" (V.1.320). Since the Captain who holds her clothes — her "woman's weeds" is still in prison, it is not clear "when in other habits" she will "be seen" (V.1.380). She remains "a man" (V.1. 379) at the end of the play even though she has the prospect of becoming Orsino's "fancy's queen" (V.1.379), with "queen" being a pun on "quean"¹⁵ or harlot who could be either a female prostitute or a cross-dressed person of either gender. The gender hierarchy – almost, but not quite — reverts to its conventional, patriarchal order. Olivia still retains the economic power to pay for the double wedding celebration of the play's principals: "One day shall crown th'alliance on't, so please you/ Here at my house and at my proper cost" (V.1.312-313). So, although there is potentially some shift in the social arrangements and hierarchies here, marriage nonetheless places formal closure on all the ambivalence the play has generated. In contrast, Malvolio's fantasy of a permanent inversion of class hierarchy that he imagines in the prospect of marrying Olivia ("To be Count Malvolio," II.5.31) is savagely ridiculed and punished. Crucially, however, it is *not* contained, which becomes clear when Malvolio makes his final exit with the explosive pronouncement: "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" (V.1.371).

The opportunity for unrestricted erotic choice and the fulfillment of even transgressive desires, albeit within the designated temporal boundaries of festivity, as we have noted, can never be entirely foreclosed, and there remains an implicit critique of the status quo and its restrictions. Shakespeare's title, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, offers both celebration and the fulfillment of 'will,' in the sense of 'a passionate, powerful sexual desire.' However, "will" not only had the onomastic connection with Shakespeare himself, as he points out in the outrageously bawdy Sonnet 136: "My name is Will" (136.14) but also the sense that "Will" designates the relation between desire and identity. Further, "will" was slang for both male and female sexual organs. In the revised edition of his famous book *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, Eric Partridge pointed out the connection long ago, which had somehow escaped him in the first iteration of his study of

Shakespeare's vulgar expressions: "[W]ill does, as I have said, mean 'sexual desire; lust', but it also means, now the male, now the female, sexual organ, as a number of scholars have, ever since the book first appeared in 1947, hastened to tell me [...]." ¹⁶

The pivotal comic moment of the play is, of course, the gulling of Malvolio. In that scene, his fantasy of upward mobility by marrying Olivia appears to be confirmed by the letter Maria has forged in Olivia's handwriting. Upon reading it, he pronounces the most startling obscenity: "By my life, this is my lady's hand. These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus makes she her great P's. It is in contempt of question her hand" (II.5.85-88). The joke in Maria's missive is an allusion to female genitalia and to piss, urination ("great P's"). Old English in origin, "cut" and "cunt" were synonyms in the period. In London, York, Shrewsbury, and Oxford, streets associated with prostitution in the Medieval era bore the street name "Gropecuntelane."¹⁷ However, by the sixteenth century, the word "cunt" had become sufficiently offensive that these names were changed: to Grape Lane in York (hitherto known as "Grapcunt Lane"), to (the slightly less offensive) "Grope Lane" in Shrewsbury, and to "Magpie Lane" in Oxford. (The London location no longer exists).¹⁸

In *Henry V*, Princess Katherine attempts to repeat English words taught to her by Alice, her lady in waiting, who has a pronounced French accent. In doing so, she is led to utter the obscenities "fuck" ("le foot") and "cunt" ("le count")

KATHERINE. Comment appelez-vous "le pied" et "la robe"?

ALICE. "Le foot," madame, et "le count."

KATHERINE. Le foot, et le count. Ô Seigneur Dieu! Ils sont les mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user. Je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France, pour tout le monde. Foh! Le foot et le count! (*Henry V*, III.4.45-51)¹⁹

Notably, "count," which is the spelling in the Folio, is used here as an obscene synonym, and this is similarly the joke in Malvolio's hopeless ambition to marry Olivia: "To be Count Malvolio" (*Twelfth Night*, II.5.31). Interestingly, it is Maria herself who achieves Malvolio's objective of social advancement by the end of the play when Sir Toby marries her. He has earlier suggested that it is *she* who first intimated openness to a romantic relationship between them: "She's a beagle true bred, and one that adores me" (II.3.174-175). There is, then, a sense in which she ridicules her fellow servant for an aspiration which they share: "Maria writ/ The letter, at Sir Toby's great importance, / In recompense whereof he hath married her" V.1.357). As opposed to Malvolio, Maria escapes punishment in part because she operates *within* the gender hierarchy and apparently does so with dog-like loyalty and obedience — rather than against it.

Maria, who has worried Malvolio like a hunting dog, "a beagle," has sought not just to make him an object of scorn but specifically to "gull him into a nayword" (II.3.131). This is exactly the same "nayword" that Sir Toby, who connives to extort money from Sir Andrew, tells him that he can be titled if the scheme for Andrew to woo Olivia falls through: "Send for money, knight. If thou hast her not i'th'end, call me cut" (II.3.181-182). "Cut" here means both castrated (a eunuch) and "cunt". Maria achieves the objective of her gulling scene when Malvolio announces his aspiration to become a titled aristocrat, a count through marriage ("To be Count Malvolio", II.5.3). This is because, in the homonymic pun on "count", Malvolio has become a "cunt",²⁰ a

now feminized and/ or castrated object of *sexual* scorn. The pun, then, does not merely mock Malvolio, it *explains* him by revealing two things: first, that class hierarchy and gender hierarchy share the same anatomical foundation, and then, that the appropriate punishment for class overreach in this society is the linguistic conversion of the aspirant into the genitalia of the subordinate sex. The pun reveals that social titles and distinctions are *grounded in* and *guaranteed by* anatomical difference, and that Malvolio's class and gender humiliation are one and the same thing. Far from being merely a dirty joke, this is the play's deepest structural insight.

In retrospect, as an opening interrogative in I.2, "What country [...]?" may have suggested to an early modern audience something of the taunt Hamlet directs to Ophelia just before the performance of the Mousetrap: "country matters." The pun is not unique to Shakespeare, though *Hamlet* does provide the most famous example of it, which plays upon the idea of animal copulation and the notion that, in rustic environments, people exercise less sexual restraint than they do in courtly or urban environments:

HAMLET. Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
 OPHELIA. No, my lord.
 HAMLET. I mean, my head upon your lap?
 OPHELIA. Ay, my lord.
 HAMLET. Do you think I meant country matters?
 OPHELIA. I think nothing, my lord.
 HAMLET. That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.
 OPHELIA. A What is, my lord?
 HAMLET. Nothing. (*Hamlet*, III.2.108-114).²¹

There is real sexual aggression in Hamlet's language here as he repeatedly accuses Ophelia of sexual motives — that she thinks of sex, and that her thoughts are merely a reflection of her sexual orifice ("nothing"). Notably, Shakespeare's comedy does not entirely expunge this violent edge in its genital humor. The joke played on Malvolio may be funny, but it is also cruel, and it is not clear why Olivia merits having her private parts and indeed what goes on in her privy ("her great P's") graphically — literally in writing — exhibited by way of amusement for her household.

Although it is not inevitably the case, it seems probable that Shakespeare's overwhelmingly male audience at Middle Temple might be primed to make the bawdy association between "country" and "cuntry", "count" and "cunt", "County" and "cuntry". In the preceding scene, as Harold Jenkins pointed out, while Orsino's "If music be the food of love, play on" (*Twelfth Night*, I.1.1) is a magnificently poetic opening, it does not quite free him "from the risk of absurdity".²² Having witnessed what might be interpreted as the risibly pathetic ruminations of Orsino in the play's first scene, the audience may have been well ready to titter at the opening of the second: "What country friends is this?" (I.2.1). Even though the context is very different from Hamlet's misogynist jibe at Ophelia about "country matters", when Viola poses her question, ostensibly about geographical location, her inquiry constitutes the first instance of a term that fairly echoes through the entire play, finding its ultimate destination in Viola's assertion in Act V that she "was preserved to serve this noble count" (V.1.249-251). In addition to the eighteen instances of the word "count" in the play, there are two occurrences of the word "countess": "Were not you e'en now with the Countess Olivia?" (II.2.1), and "Here comes the Countess. Now heaven walks on

earth!" (V.1.93). In early modern English, "Countess" was probably homonymous with "county's", deriving from the French word *conté* and the Italian *conte* in a multilingual pun on *con*. Thus, there is another potential pun in Olivia's desire to pursue Viola/Cesario: "that same peevish messenger, / The County's man" (I.5.304-305).²³ "Man" here denotes sex but, more importantly, denotes that Cesario is in a position of service in Orsino's household. Notably in relation to this line, editors typically incorporate the eighteenth-century editor Edward Capell's emendation of "c-o-u-n-t-e-s" in the Folio of 1623 (the earliest surviving text of *Twelfth Night*) to the upper-case nominative County's. Their argument for doing so is the restoration of the meter. However, prior to standardized orthography, there may have been no issue with the metrical count of the line since the "es" in "countes" and the "y's" in "county's" could sound exactly the same. In other words, the original transcription did not necessarily mean "Count" singular as in "Count's", but probably always meant "County's". For all that, if we accept the pun on female genitalia in "the County's man", we land once again in the terrain of undecided and ambiguous gender identity — a sense of a pudenda that is possessed by, or, alternatively, itself possess a man, and not just a man, but a serving man, someone in a sexually and socially subordinate position. While capital C "County's" suggests possession, lower case "c-o-u-n-t-e-s," typographically at least, could also suggest a plural of counts with attendant scurrilous associations. Thus, the editorial emendation simplifies, at the visual and textual level at least, the conundrums around gender and sexuality that the play delights in presenting.

As "the County's man", Viola as Cesario is not quite a man: "Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy, as a squash before 'tis a peascod, or a codling when 'tis almost an apple. 'Tis with him in standing water between boy and man" (I.5.152-155). The lewd subliminal meaning here refers to the word "cods", which was slang for scrotum and testicles, which, of course, Viola does not possess. Crucially, the shipwreck, that ostensibly tragic event that disgorged Viola in a new country, but which nonetheless precipitated the pivotal transformation of the play, potentially marked her liberation from the constraints of early modern womanhood. Viola changed not from female to male, however, but from "lady" (I.2.1) to eunuch²⁴ servant to Orsino: "I'll serve this duke; / Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him" (I.2.54). Given the connection with Caesar and his caesarean birth, Cesario's name is appropriate for a eunuch, someone whose testicles have been severed, and links him both to Olivia's CUT and to his former and (albeit fictional) identity as Viola. However, since castration was not practiced in England, at least on human beings,²⁵ this is a designation outside dominant early modern gender categories and one that was not in England available as a lived identity. Eunuchism, then, is a more liminal and indeterminate category than unmutated masculinity. Viola famously suggests that she will make a plausible eunuch because she can sing, and thus references continental choral and theatrical practices which used eunuchs because of what was understood to be their vocal superiority to both soprano and falsetto voices. However, as critics and commentators have long noted, Viola never does so much as hum a tune in the play, let alone bursts into song.

Nevertheless, the eunuch was a definitively recognizable figure in the culture in part because English audiences knew it from the Bible:

For there are some eunuchs, which were so born of *their* mother's belly:
and there be some eunuchs, which be gelded by men: and there be
some eunuchs, which have gelded themselves for the kingdom of

heaven. He that is able to receive *this*, let him receive it. (Matthew 19, 11, *Geneva Bible*, 1567)

The passage is glossed in the Geneva Bible as follows: "The word Eunuch is a general word, and hath divers kinds under it, as gelded men and barren men". The proposition that there are people who have willingly engaged in self-castration was interpreted as an allusion to voluntary celibacy. This is the life of a renunciate to which Olivia, who wishes to live as "a cloisteress" (I.1.27), has consecrated herself albeit only for the limited term of seven years and not for the remainder of her life. Since all monastic houses had been closed and destroyed in Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s, even this biblically-ordained form of eunuchism was inaccessible in England.

In contrast to Olivia, however, Viola *is* a eunuch in the sense that she has engaged in self-cancelling gender identity. From one perspective, her identity is "secret as maidenhead" (I.5.210) and thus can be revealed at a later moment, but from another, her negated identity makes her "a blank" (II.4.110). A comparison of the lacuna that defines Viola, her "blank" history, and the "nothing" (the ostensible void of the vagina, or the absence of a penis) that lies in Ophelia's lap provokes the question of what, if anything, exactly lies in Cesario's:

VIOLA. My father had a daughter loved a man,
As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,
I should your lordship.
ORSINO. And what's her history?
VIOLA. A blank, my lord. She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' th' bud,
Feed on her damask cheek. [...] (II.4.107-111).

At this point in the play, Viola's projection of her future destiny is almost identical with that of the doomed Ophelia. Orsino asks, "But died thy sister of her love, my boy?" (II.4.119). Viola's response, "I am all the daughters of my father's house" (II.4.120), implies to Orsino that her father's daughter, like a figure from Ovidian mythology, pined away into evaporated nothingness, and thus became a void. What Viola conceals here is not only the — as yet — unrequited love she bears for Orsino, but also, of course, her "true" gender identity. Her "blank" is not the "fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write 'whore' upon" (*Othello*, IV.2.72-73) as in *Othello*,²⁶ and nor is it the phallus-less condition of Ophelia's nothing. Rather, hers is the blank of her intended identity as a eunuch (*Twelfth Night*, I.2.53). Laurie Maguire points out that while the Latin term for "blank" or "blank slate", *tabula rasa* is translated into English to mean a writing slate that is devoid of all impressions and is empty because nothing has been written on it, in Latin *rasa* means that something has been scraped or erased from the slate.²⁷ Viola is to be blank: empty contentless, void and bare (*OED*). "Blank" is cryptic, open to multiple interpretations. A blank may invite or await inscription or represent an erasure so complete that there is no longer a trace of what was there before. If the latter, in the context of the play's jokes about castration (not to mention the name Cesario itself), the queasy undercurrent of its humor, the blank may uncover the anatomical site of genital mutilation. More positively, unlike the tragic female identity defined by the nothing between a maid's legs in *Hamlet*, the blank of which Viola speaks, may suggest an entire — albeit unarticulated — identity; a person with a history and a future, rather than simply someone reduced to her pudendum ("nothing"). While the word "nothing" itself appears multiple times in *Twelfth Night* in contexts that often do not

encourage ribald interpretations, there are some occasions which arguably intimate them. For example, Viola's "nothing of my purpose" (III.4.250) in response to Sir Andrew's challenge — meaning that her offense must be inadvertent —, is reminiscent nonetheless of Sonnet 20's genital joke that the young man's "something" (his penis) is "to my purpose nothing". Potentially this means his genital equipment is either no use or, conversely, no impediment to the poet's sexual attraction; or as good as a vagina to him.²⁸ Similarly, when Malvolio is thoroughly deluded about Olivia's feelings for him, he declares that there is: "Nothing that can come between me and the full prospect of my hopes" (III.4.70). In a play full of dirty jokes, no instance of "thing" or "nothing" (no thing; no male member) can be entirely innocent. As Viola puts it in her aside to the audience: "A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man" (III.4.265-266). The allusion is to her undeveloped manhood as a boy actor who is not just playing the opposite sex but is also playing an adult character. This "lack" is analogous to the complete absence of genitalia that is the joke of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, when the puritan Zeal-of-the-Land Busy reiterates the main complaint of the period's antitheatricalists about male actors representing women. Since there are no female performers on the public stage, it seems to add concern about women characters dressing as men: "[Y]ou are an abomination; for the male, among you, putteth on the apparel of the female, and the female of the male" (*Bartholomew Fair*, V.5.82-84).²⁹ The puppet responds by obligingly lifts its skirts to show that, as a wooden doll, it has no sex organs whatsoever: "*It is your old stale argument against the players, but it will not hold against the puppets; for we have neither male nor female amongst us. And that thou may'st see [...]*". (V.5.87-90). At this, stage directions instruct the puppet to take up his garment while an observer remarks "By my faith, there he has answer'd you, friend, a plain demonstration", which obliges Busy to admit, "I am confuted, the cause hath failed me" (V.5.95-100).

Olivia, who indicts the mendacious metaphoricity of poetic artifice, initially suspects that Viola/Cesario is an actor — "Are you a comedian?" (*Twelfth Night*, I.5.177) — whose "poetical" (I.5.192) speech authored by Orsino for Viola to deliver, "is the more like to be feigned" (I.5.191). Feigning is of course the *raison d'être* for poetry and theatre, and it is precisely the capacity to feign — i.e., to simulate and to represent mimetically or diegetically — that constitutes the play's comic problem of gender identity. The play cannot show the anatomical apparatus of sex itself, but as the socially prescribed guarantor of gender, it endlessly refers to it. Thus, in Orsino's famous speech commissioning Cesario to be his emissary to Olivia, it is the boy's miniature sexual equipment, "thy small pipe," and *not* its absence, that makes him *like* a woman and makes him resemble a woman:

For they shall let belie thy happy years
That sayst thou art a man, Diana's lip
Is not more smooth and *rubious*; *Thy small pipe*
Is as the maiden's *organ*, shrill and sound,
And all is *semblative a woman's part*. (My emphases, I.4.28-33)

There is a joyful equivocality about the double entendres in this passage which describe Viola/Cesario's face and voice with language that intimates the genitalia of both sexes: the labia, the rubious lip, and the penis, the "small pipe".

That theatre and poetic language can produce, transform, or simply obscure, gender identities is the celebrated focus of *Twelfth Night*. When Olivia forbids Cesario to speak of Orsino at their

first meeting, she uses that freighted term, “blanks”: “For him, I think not on him. For his thoughts, / Would they were blanks rather than fill’d with me” (III.1.103-104). The point is that Orsino’s thoughts are not blank, they are rather too predictably filled in. Shakespeare draws our attention in *Twelfth Night*, as he does in the Sonnets, to the way that Petrarchan convention fills in the blanks of “a woman’s part” with a mechanistic itinerary of beautiful components that, by the end of the sixteenth century, amounted to little more than stale lyrical tropes. As Viola and Olivia’s exchange recognizes, poetry, especially the Petrarchan blazon, provided the orthodox and hackneyed elements, a fill-in-the-blanks exercise, of such characterization:

VIOLA. ‘Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white
Nature’s own sweet and cunning hand laid on.

Lady, you are the cruell’st she alive
If you will lead these graces to the grave
And leave the world no copy.

OLIVIA. O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted. I will give
out divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be
inventoried, and every particle and utensil labeled
o my will, as, item, two lips indifferent red; item,
two grey eyes with lids to them; item, one neck, one
chin, and so forth. Were you sent hither to praise me? (I.5.231-241).

Olivia is suspicious of lyrical hyperbole and panegyric, which is perhaps why she responds in prose to Viola’s verse. Poetic representation, with its stock chromatics and cruel, cold, chaste ladies, as Olivia’s concluding inquiry here makes clear, is what Shakespeare terms in Sonnet 130, the language of “false compare” that “belies” or misrepresents women whose beauty is not cosmetically or linguistically altered or exaggerated to meet cultural ideals. Aristocratic women, the women about whom poetry is written, are made by men or perhaps more accurately, *for* men — all artifice, art as opposed to nature, as Cesario points out in his brisk riposte to Olivia’s request for an assessment of her beauty when she first removes her veil of mourning:

OLIVIA. Is ‘t not well done?

VIOLA. Excellently done, if God did all. (I.5.234-235)

The play’s ribald insistence on genital identities, however, serves to rebuff stilted and deceptive artifice of Petrarchan ornament and its attendant deviation from truth, which is to say, from the object it purports to represent.

The editor of the current Arden edition (Arden 3), Keir Elam, claimed that feminist and queer critics have overplayed the “dramatization of currently fashionable issues such as gender and sexuality”³⁰ in *Twelfth Night*. However, not only have these issues been “fashionable” since at least the ancient world, but also throughout the history of the play’s criticism. In 1958, when C.L. Barber’s now canonical *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedies* was published, he insisted that “[t]he most fundamental distinction the play brings home to us is the difference between men and women”.³¹ Writing before the sea changes in our understandings of gender and sexuality, Barber was a creature of his moment and assumed gender to be natural rather than, as Frances. E. Dolan succinctly puts it, “manufactured and unstable”.³² But Barber was also onto something because *Twelfth Night* with its comic obsession with genital identity keeps asking precisely what constitutes that difference especially since, unlike Ben Jonson’s puppets, neither the play’s

characters nor its actors can make a “plain demonstration” by exhibiting their privy members. “Her C’s her U’s her T’s,” the apex of the play’s linguistic representation of genital anatomy is the closest we get to that and shows puzzle of gender identity to be synonymous with the complex problematic of mimesis itself. In the theatre, identities may dissolve or reconfigure.³³ Shakespeare makes no attempt at “plain demonstration” in the anatomical sense but rather shows convolutions and entanglements: “O time, thou must untangle this, not I/ It is too hard a knot for me t’untie” (II.3.40-41). With “knot”, we return once more to the play’s genital preoccupations and the play’s structural admission that it cannot undo what its own language has tied. “Knot” also referred to the “virgin knot”, as in female virginity or maidenhead, though it could also mean sexual congress.

“Knot” occurs only once in the play and, unlike “country”, not part of its soundscape. When the twins finally arrive together on stage for the first time in Act V, we hear the echo of “country” once again as Sebastian attempts to understand how he now sees the spitting image of himself: [to Viola] Of charity, what kin are you to me? / What countryman? What name? What parentage? (V.1.226-7).

Contra Barber’s assertion that the difference between men and women was the core of the play, neither Sebastian nor the other onlookers can discern any difference whatsoever at this moment.³⁴ Whatever difference there is within the fiction of the play is entirely obscured by Viola’s “masculine usurped attire” (II.1.246) which famously, as we have already remarked, is not revealed at the end of the play ostensibly because “[t]he captain that did bring [her] first on shore/ Hath [her] maid’s garments” (V.1.268-271). The result, as critics have long noted, is a handfasting (the ceremonial commitment to marry) between two characters, Viola and Orsino, between which there is no visible gender difference. Sebastian’s questions constitute the only attempt here to establish such distinction, and they have none of the open-endedness of Viola’s opening interrogative with its implicit invitation to events and circumstances to unfold in whatever manner they will. Of course, in the final Act, Sebastian needs to be in the business of folding things up and resolving the plot, but he does so in decidedly patriarchal terms. Thus, he demands to know Cesario’s origins and lineage: “What countryman? What name? What parentage?” (V.1.227). If Viola’s “What country [...]?” registered arrival and going forth, her brother’s “What countryman?” signals return. While the speech joyfully continues the verbal genital refrain of counties and counts that began with Viola’s arrival, it now also brings us back to the world of hierarchy, the vertical axis of power. “Countryman” may offer a subliminal connection with what has gone before, but because the play demands closure, it is now purged of its indecent connotations.

Scrupulously attending to the linguistic texture of a single “unexplained” phrase, “What country [...]?” ironically leads us back to the very issues Frank Kermode — and Keir Elam — wished to leave behind. This linguistic chain of obscenities, both obvious and oblique, used to represent genital anatomy is part of the play’s own obsessive logic. The play’s double meanings amount to more than smutty jokes — they expose the way the vertical axis of social power (count, county, countess, countryman) is grounded in, and ultimately inseparable from, the horizontal plane of anatomical difference (cunt, cut, blank, nothing). Crucially, they are mutually destabilizing. This is the political claim of *Twelfth Night*, and it is made through its language rather than despite it. Throughout, the play asks “What co[u]ntry?” — what object of desire, what orifice, what sexual organ, what identity — and its answer is the only plainly demonstrated thing in the play, linguistically rather than anatomically: *What You Will*.

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Notes

- ¹ Frank Kermode, "On Certain Verses of Shakespeare", in Marc Berley (ed.), *Reading the Renaissance: Ideas and Idioms from Shakespeare to Milton*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2003, p. 15-26.
- ² William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, Keir Elam (ed.), Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2008. In this essay, all citations from *Twelfth Night* will refer to the current Arden edition unless otherwise noted.
- ³ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, eds. Roger Warren and Stanley Wells, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994; Elizabeth Story Donno (ed.), *Twelfth Night*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; Keir Elam (ed.), *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2008; Stephen Greenblatt et al. (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., New York, W. W. Norton, 2016.
- ⁴ Emma Smith, "Introduction: What Country Friends, Is This?", in Emma Smith (ed.), *Twelfth Night, or What You Will: The State of Play*, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2026, p. 2.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁶ Alexa Alice Joubin, "Shakespearean Performance Through a Trans Lens", *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 14.2 (2023), p. 65-89, p. 69.
- ⁷ Simone Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations*, London, Routledge, 2016.
- ⁸ Jim Ellis, *Sexuality and Citizenship: Metamorphosis in Elizabethan Erotic Verse*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003, p. 4.
- ⁹ Emma Smith, "Not at Home: Migration and Displacement in *Twelfth Night*", in Emma Smith (ed.), *Twelfth Night, or What You Will: The State of Play*, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2026, p. 69-88.
- ¹⁰ Jim Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- ¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, Keir Elam (ed.), Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2008, p. 167, fn. 19.
- ¹² Tim Supple's Channel 4 production (2003) presented Viola, played by Parminder Nagra, and Sebastian, played by Ronny Jhutti, as asylum seekers escaping political violence in their home country. *Twelfth Night* exhibits none of the ambivalent attitudes towards strangers that Ruben Espinosa and David Ruiter notice in other Shakespeare plays. Ruben Espinosa and David Ruiter (eds.), *Shakespeare and Immigration*, New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 1.
- ¹³ Keir Elam, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

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- ¹⁴ François Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 153.
- ¹⁵ Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance*, 2nd ed., London, Macmillan, 1989, p. 178, 209.
- ¹⁶ Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, rev. ed., London, Routledge, 2001, p. 284.
- ¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "cunt."
- ¹⁸ Nigel Baker and Richard Holt, "Towards a Geography of Sexual Encounter: Prostitution in English Medieval Towns", in Lynne Bevan (ed.), *Indecent Exposure: Sexuality, Society and the Archaeological Record*, Glasgow, Cruithne Press, 2000, p. 187-98.
- ¹⁹ Thomas W. Craik (ed.), *Henry V*, Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, London, Routledge, 1995.
- ²⁰ Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 37.
- ²¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, London, Cengage, 2006.
- ²² Harold Jenkins, *Structural Problems in Shakespeare: Lectures and Essays*, ed. Ernst Honigmann, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2001, p. 122.
- ²³ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, eds. J. M. Lothian and Thomas W. Craik, Arden Shakespeare, Second Series, London, Methuen, 1975. See Keir Elam, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
- ²⁴ Keir Elam, "The Fertile Eunuch: *Twelfth Night*, Early Modern Intercourse, and the Fruits of Castration", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47.1 (1996), p. 1-36.
- ²⁵ Dympna Callaghan, "The Castrator's Song", in *Shakespeare Without Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 49-74.
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- ²⁸ Dympna Callaghan, *Reading Shakespeare's Poetry*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2023, p. 184-192.
- ²⁹ Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. Helen Ostovich, London, Routledge, 1997.
- ³⁰ Keir Elam, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- ³¹ C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1959, p. 245. Barber continues: "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

normal relations [...]. [W]hen the normal is secure [...] playful aberration is benign. This basic security explains why there is so little that is queasy in all Shakespeare's handling of boy actors playing women and playing women pretending to be men" (p. 245). It is important to remember that these attitudes, which now read as alarmingly retrograde, were orthodox and accepted for most of the twentieth century.

³² Frances E. Dolan, *Twelfth Night: Language and Writing*, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014, p. 20.

³³ Alexa Alice Joubin, "Are There Trans Characters in Shakespeare? Transposing Gender through Performativity," *Shakespeare Review*, 60.4 (2024), p. 741-64.

³⁴ Sawyer Kemp, "In That Dimension Grossly Clad: Transgender Rhetoric, Representation, and Shakespeare", *Shakespeare Studies*, 47 (2019), p. 120-26; 123.

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