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“He might well have been a woman”: gender malleability and female homoerotic desire in John Lyly’s *Galatea* (c. 1588)

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1 In *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber defines the cross-dressed actor as a destabiliser of gender categories, thus underlining the figure's subversive nature.[1] Several critics concur in describing the early modern boy actor as inherently transgressive. Alan Sinfield, for instance, quotes Garber when he states that "the boy actor has a profoundly radical potential."[2] Such potential is made clear in anti-theatricalist discourse by the likes of Philip Stubbes, who notably depict cross-dressing as disorderly and sinful. Drawing his arguments from the Bible in his *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), Stubbes contends:

> It is written in the 22. of Deuteronomy, that what man so euer weareth womans apparel is accursed, and what woman weareth mans apparell, is accursed also [...]. Our apparell was given to us as a signe distinctiue, to discerne betwixt sexe and sexe, and therefore one to weare the apparel of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his owne kinde.[3]

2 Stubbes vilifies cross-dressing as an abomination that threatens the gender binary by effacing gender difference. In the wider

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[1] "[The boy actor] is a provoker of category crises, a destabilizer of binarisms, a transgressor of boundaries", Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 89-90.

[2] Alan Sinfield, *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality: Unfinished Business in Cultural Materialism*, London/ New York, Routledge, Accents on Shakespeare, 2006, p. 118.

[3] Phillip Stubbes, *The anatomie of abuses containing, a discouerie, or briefe summarie of such notable vices and imperfections, as now raigne in many countreyes of the world: but (especiallye) in a famous ilande called Ailgna: together, with most fearefull examples of Gods iudgements, executed vppon the wicked for the same, aswel in Ailgna of late, as in other places, elsewhere. Very godly, to be reade of all true Christians: but most needefull to be regarded in Englande. Made dialogue-wise by Phillip Stubbes. Seene and allowed, according to order*, London, by [John Kingston for] Richard Jones, 1583, p. 37-38.

Elizabethan context, however, it appears that the gender binary, or the separation of men and women into two discrete categories, was not as clear-cut as Puritan moralists claimed. As Roberta Barker suggests, "the distinction between male and female, so crucial to modern actors and spectators, was far more porous and unstable in the culture that produced the boy-actress."[4] She illustrates this point by mentioning Galen's single-sex model, which located masculinity in behaviour rather than in human anatomy by conceiving of male genitalia as the merely externalised version of female reproductive organs.[5] Besides, far from being an anomaly in the early modern English cultural landscape, the cross-dressed actor was a familiar sight. As a dramatic convention, boy-acting was common, and even commonplace. In Elizabethan England, "a world where masculinity was always in question," the boy actor then "holds a mirror up to nature – or more precisely, to culture."[6] Qualifying Garber's assertion, we could therefore suggest that the boy actor does not so much provoke a category crisis as he reveals an already-existing one. The omnipresence of the boy actor further calls into question the radical potential of cross-dressing on the

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[4] Roberta Barker, "'Not One Thing Exactly': Gender, Performance and Critical Debates over the Early Modern Boy-Actress", *Literature Compass*, vol. 6, n°2, 2009, p. 468. It should be noted that not all boys took on female roles – especially in troupes composed entirely of boys, such as the choirboys of St Paul's Cathedral, who played *Galatea*. That is why Roberta Barker uses the feminised version of the term "boy actor" to describe more specifically those who would. On the porosity of the gender binary in the early modern era, see also Jean E. Howard, "Cross-dressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 39, n°4, 1988, p. 435.

[5] See especially Bruce R. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 106. Though the single-sex model was growing out of fashion in XVIth-century England, it still existed alongside other medical theories.

[6] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 153. See also Bruce R. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

Elizabethan stage if we bear in mind Judith Butler's take on subversive performances. In her view, the transgressive nature and political valence of a performance stem from its originality. Consequently, a subversive performance necessarily loses impetus as it is reiterated.[7] In other words, the radical utterance or act is defined according to both its political and original natures, the first stemming from the latter. Radicality thus defined finds its polar opposite in the banal, the commonplace, or the run-off-the-mill. The notion of radicality, however, begs to be questioned when it is applied to the early modern context mostly because, in the tradition of classical rhetoric, literary invention (or *inventio*) was not understood as pure inventiveness, but rather as inspiration – from ancient sources predominantly. In writing the pastoral and mythological comedy *Galatea* (c. 1588), for instance, John Lyly drew heavily on the Ovidian myth of Iphis and Ianthe, which recounts the love of two virgins for each other. Unbeknownst to Ianthe, her lover is actually a girl disguised as a boy, which makes their union impossible until Iphis's anatomy is changed through godly intervention. The radical potential of early modern cross-dressing thus needs to be reconsidered. More specifically, we need to question the subversive element associated with the destabilisation of gender identity in John Lyly's comedy since it relies on a particularly elaborate interplay of cross-dressing and mistaken identities which is itself redoubled by the use of boy actors. This play was moreover a major source of inspiration for other cross-dressing comedies, such as Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599) and *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601). In addition, it is crucial to bear in mind that *Galatea* was originally written for court performance. As he makes clear in the prologue, Lyly's aim was to please Queen Elizabeth I,

[7] "[S]ubversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition", Judith Butler, "Preface", *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York / London, Routledge, 1999, p. xxi.

which once again begs the question of whether or not the play can carry a transgressive message.

3 This paper aims at moving the focus away from the radical potential of cross-dressing in *Galatea* and onto what the disruption of the gender binary does to the expression of same-gender love in the play. It is my contention that Lyly's treatment of gender malleability, though it is not radical per se, is worth analysing for what it reveals of his handling of desire between virgins, which is characterised by a paradox: while the love of Galatea and Phillida for each other is repeatedly presented as impossible by nature on Lyly's stage, it constitutes the backbone of the comedy's main plot. As we will demonstrate, the gender trouble brought about by cross-dressing opens up a gap in which desire between women can be expressed. In other words, the liminal space the two main characters find themselves in with regards to their gender identity is precisely what enables their feelings to blossom. Gender indeterminacy, which is encouraged by the symbolically charged space of the mythical woods, thus appears as a safe space for the expression of queer love. Going back to Garber's argument, we can therefore agree on the fact that cross-dressing should not be underestimated as a mere dramatic device which had next-to no symbolic value in the eyes of theatregoers and the wider public.[8] Conversely, neither should it be overestimated as always-already transgressive.

[8] Marjorie Garber, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Questioning the radical potential of cross-dressing in court performance

4 One of the questions underlying our analysis is that of knowing to what extent Lyly can afford being subversive in a play written specifically for Queen Elizabeth I. As G. K. Hunter indicates, if rehearsals at the Blackfriars were open to reduced audiences, the courtier-playwright's dramaturgy was aimed at royal favour, not popular success.[9] In *Galatea*, if a few direct addresses to the courtly audience members testify to such an aim, it is most obvious in the obsequious tones of the prologue:

> Your Majesty's judgement and favour are our sun and shadow, the one coming of your deep wisdom, the other of your wonted grace. We in all humility desire that by the former receiving our first breath we may in the latter take our last rest (The Prologue, II.3-7).[10]

5 Lyly uses what first appears as an antithesis in opposing the nouns "sun" and "shadow." Both terms, however, are connoted positively as the shadow he wants the monarch to provide symbolises her protection. Via an image recalling Plato's representation of knowledge, where the sun is the utmost source of truth, queen Elizabeth I is pictured as the supreme source of wisdom, shining truth on her subjects. Through that image, the playwright expresses the desire to receive both inspiration from the queen's light and the

[9] George K. Hunter, "Introduction", in George K. Hunter & David Bevington (eds.), John Lyly, *Galatea and Midas*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 5.

[10] I am using the following edition: John Lyly, *Galatea*, ed. Leah Scragg, Revels Student Editions, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012. All references to this edition will be made parenthetically.

assurance of having the queen's blessing and protection. After running on the metaphor of wisdom as light emanating from the ruler, Lyly goes on to praise Elizabeth I's judgement, all the while precluding any accusation of offence:

> […] so have we endeavoured with all care that what we present Your Highness should neither offend in scene nor syllable, knowing that as in the ground where gold groweth nothing will prosper but gold, so in Your Majesty's mind, where nothing doth harbour but virtue, nothing can enter but virtue (II.13-18).

6 The playwright here asserts that if the ruler finds anything to her disliking in the play, it was not his intention to cause offence. Unsurprisingly asking for his audience's leniency while acknowledging that unsavoury elements in the play might have escaped his judgement, Lyly indirectly praises the queen's unmatched one. Through a simile likening Elizabeth's mind to auriferous grounds, Lyly reassures himself in the certainty that any potential offence would have no consequences on the monarch because she is so virtuous that nothing can sully her. In addition to flattering the Virgin Queen by praising her impenetrable virtue, the playwright thus justifies in advance the lewd jokes that she will hear in the comedy, such as Rafe's description of the Alchemist engaging in sexual intercourse with a woman: "I saw a pretty wench come to his shop, where with puffing, blowing, and sweating, he so plied her that he multiplied her." (V.1.20-22). Exposing once more his first master's charlatanism in a scene that ties up the three brothers' subplot with their reunion, Rafe here implies that this woman is all the Alchemist could multiply thanks to the "philosopher's stone" which "[lies] in a privy cupboard" (V.1.24-26) – a clear reference to

the Alchemist's testicles.[11] In addition to giving reason for the bawdy aspects of the play, Lyly might be justifying beforehand the subversive potential of the plot, which he seems to be aware of.[12] However, I do not believe that, in the context of the play, subversion – and potential offence – lie in gender confusion. The cross-dressed boy actor, who was becoming an increasingly common sight on London's commercial stage at the time of performance, was even more familiar to monarchs and their courts. As Hunter reminds us, the tradition of court entertainment by choirboys – aged between 12 and 17 roughly – dates back to the Middle Ages.[13] It is also worth noting that the queen's expression of her own gender identity appeared as somewhat pliable and multifaceted. She famously underlined her masculine traits to establish her authority and gain credibility as the head of the army in the speech she delivered to the troops at Tilbury in August 1588. She is reported to have declared: "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too."[14] One should nonetheless bear in mind that the queen destabilises the gender binary for reasons that are chiefly political. If this near mythical fact concerning the queen's public image can hardly tell us anything of how she might have reacted to the display of utmost gender confusion at court, it can give us an idea of the extent to which gender identity was considered pliable at the time. As such, it could easily be trifled with in order to shape

[11] Leah Scragg rightly points this out in the notes to these lines (*ibid*., n. 22-28, p. 100).

[12] In that regard, the wariness and flattery he displays in the prologue can should be read as authorial conventions. While it remains unclear whether Lyly's prologue is sincere, we can nonetheless analyse the posture he takes and the image he wants to give off as a courtier-playwright.

[13] George K. Hunter, *op. cit*., p. 9.

[14] Quoted in Marjorie Garber, *op. cit*., n. 12, p. 393. Extant descriptions of the event date from long after Tilbury and cannot entirely be taken for granted.

opinions, bringing emphasis on the fact that appearances may be deceiving.

7 Though it is unlikely that Elizabeth should have taken offence from the cross-dressing element in the play, Lyly's ambiguous praise of virginity may have raised a few eyebrows amongst the courtly audience of *Galatea*. Describing the play as an "oddly constructed paean to virginity," Theodora Jankowski argues: "If this play is meant either to validate virginity or flatter the Virgin Queen, it is a decidedly curious construct."[15] Curious as it may seem, *Galatea* does appear as a celebration of virginity inasmuch as this theme takes centre stage in the play. It is glorified through the tutelary figure of Diana, who appears as a "ruler-like" presence.[16] As Jankowski contends, Diana, her nymphs, and the other virgins in the play – notably the main characters Galatea and Phillida – flatter the queen "merely through their intact bodily condition[.]"[17] The glorification of virginity through the presence of Diana and her train is all the more important since the cult of the Virgin Queen was in full swing at the time Lyly had *Galatea* performed in court.[18] Elizabeth's virginity was emphasised with connotations of purity

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[15] Theodora A. Jankowski, "'Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection': Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly's *Gallathea*", in Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan & Dympna Callaghan (eds.), *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, Cambridge / New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 256; p. 253. See also Theodora A. Jankowski, *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, Late Tudor and Stuart Drama, Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2018, p. 72. Since Jankowski's 2018 publication repeats some of the ideas expressed in her 1996 chapter, I will occasionally cite them simultaneously.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 71.

[17] *Idem*.

[18] "Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I", Royal Museums Greenwich. URL. Accessed 7 April 2023.

and self-sacrifice, as is visible in her portraiture. In *The Sieve Portrait* (c. 1583) by Quentin Mestys the Younger, for instance, the eponymous prop links the monarch to the Roman Vestal Tuccia, who performed a miracle by carrying a sieve full of water without spilling a single drop, thus proving her virtue.[19]

8 The playwright's apparent celebration of virginity is nevertheless two-faced. Galatea and Phillida are sent into hiding because of the barbaric tradition of sacrificing virgins to Neptune, who represents patriarchal violence in the play.[20] At the end of the comedy, they are also reintegrated into the system of patriarchal marriage with the "heterosexual loophole" offered by Venus when she gives them her blessing to marry on the condition that one be magically changed into a man: "Then shall it be seen that I can turn one of them to be a man, and that I will" (V.3.151-152).[21] Parallel to this ambiguous depiction of virgins, Lyly could potentially give offence by extolling the virtues of love in front of the Virgin Queen. Ellen M. Caldwell interprets the play as yet another attempt by a court entertainer to woo Elizabeth to the idea of marriage. In her opinion, Lyly is particularly tactful and manages to put forward a persuasive

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[19] "*Sieve Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I*, c. 1583", The British Library. URL. Accessed 7 April 2023. As critics and historians have pointed out, the queen had only partial control over her image (see for instance Andy Kesson, "'It Is a Pity You Are Not a Woman': John Lyly and the Creation of Woman", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 33, n°1, 2015, p. 39; Theodora A. Jankowski, *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 15).

[20] See for instance Theodora A. Jankowski, "'Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection': Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly's *Gallathea*", p. 267; *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 83.

[21] Simone Chess, "'Or Whatever You Be': Cross-dressing, Sex, and Gender Labour in John Lyly's *Gallathea*", *Renaissance and Reformation*, vol. 38, n°4, 2015, p. 165. On the final gender change as triggering a shift to heteroeroticism, see also Theodora A. Jankowski, *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 82.

argument in "[offering] a personal, not public, reason for marriage."[22] The playwright's tact notwithstanding, he might have used the prologue to anticipate the queen's potential irritation in the face of yet another argument for marriage. Not only does the play dramatize the virtues of matrimony but it also articulates a larger praise of love. This is particularly visible in Cupid's direct address to the audience in Act II, scene 1 ("And then, ladies, if you see these dainty dames entrapped in love, say softly to yourselves, 'We may all love'" (15-17)). In the epilogue, Galatea also addresses the "ladies" in the audience: "You ladies" (I.1); "Yield, ladies, yield to love, ladies" (I.5); "Confess [Cupid] a conqueror, whom ye ought to regard, sith it is impossible to resist; for this is infallible, that love conquereth all things but itself, and ladies all hearts but their own" (I.11-13). Contrary to the stilted prologue, the tongue-in-cheek epilogue, in clear reference to the Virgilian theme of "*Omnia vinquit amor*," carries the playful accents of comedy. It thus appears as an exercise in courtly humour in which the playwright, addressing the audience through the intermediary of a character's voice, can venture on the fine line separating humour and affront. This goes to show that pleasing the queen and her court does not merely involve flattery, but also wit and inventiveness. As Caldwell points out, nothing in the epilogue is as straightforward as it seems. Galatea's urge to "yield to love" is simplistic since she levels the distinction made throughout the play between the excessive and disorderly type of love represented by Cupid and the pure, sincere love embodied by his mother Venus. All love is now defiantly related to

[22] Caldwell describes Lyly's argument as "personal" because, instead of dwelling on the political reasons for marriage, it dramatizes a "marriage of true minds" which seeks to reconcile the different parts of the queen's "divided nature" as she is torn between "her competing urges for separateness and union, or for chastity and love", *cf*. Ellen M. Caldwell, "John Lyly's *Gallathea*: A New Rhetoric of Love for the Virgin Queen", *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 17, n°1, 1987, p. 23.

the young god, who is supposed to be deemed "a conqueror" – something Lyly knows for a fact Elizabeth will not do.[23]

9 Yet, no virgin is sacrificed in the course of the play as Hebe, the third most beautiful maiden in town, is shunned by the sea-monster Agar. What is more, none will ever be sacrificed to Neptune again because, in the general climate of resolution typical of comedies, he offers to backtrack on his brutal demand of a virgin sacrifice: "Diana, restore Cupid to Venus, and I will for ever release the sacrifice of virgins" (V.3.75-76). This decision amounts to a victory over the patriarchal economy of marriage since, as Jankowski points out, the virgin sacrifice constitutes a metaphor for marriage in that it is also a contract forged between men – more precisely in this case between men and a male god – through the means of a virgin's body.[24] In addition to this, the play has opened a space for a "separate 'society' of virgins" in giving centre stage to the world of Diana and her nymphs, which Jankowski describes as "a woman-only 'corrective' to the early modern sexual economy."[25] If Galatea and Phillida return to the men's world of society in the end and conform to some extent to its norms, a gap has been opened and

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[23] *Ibid*., p. 39.

[24] In the same way as marriage ensures the transmission of patrimony from father to son necessary for a patriarchal society to function, sacrificing a virgin to Neptune each year is initially considered as the only way to save the country from the god's wrath, which would manifest itself in river Humber overflowing and flooding the land. In both cases, the woman is a mere bargaining chip, and her virginity is an absolute requirement (Theodora A. Jankowski, "'Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection': Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly's *Gallathea*", p. 254-257; *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 72).

[25] Theodora A. Jankowski, "'Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection': Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly's *Gallathea*", p. 258; *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 74.

something remains of the destabilising potential of this society of women gathered around Diana.[26]

10 In the same way as Lyly's play offers an ambiguous celebration of virginity, it encourages a complex view of the role and place of cross-dressing in early modern drama. Even if, as we will demonstrate later, the function of cross-dressing exceeds that of a mere dramatic instrument, the inner workings of *Galatea*'s plot and subplots still lay emphasis on its utilitarian nature. It is, to start with, what triggers the love plot. Had Galatea and Phillida not been cross-dressed and sent into hiding, they would not have stumbled onto each other in the woods, and they would not have considered each other as boys. Their love story, then, would not have been written. The function of cross-dressing as a plot device is perhaps most obvious in the Cupid subplot. The young god, who feels slighted because he is considered as a minor deity, wants to prove the extent of his power by having Diana's nymphs, who are supposed to remain chaste, fall in love. In order to approach them, he appears onstage dressed as one of them: "[*Enter*] Cupid *alone, in nymph's apparel, and* Neptune *listening*." (II.2.1*SD*). To start off a soliloquy in which he spells out his scheme, Cupid declares: "Now, Cupid, under the shape of a silly girl show the power of a mighty god." (II.2.1-2). His male-to-female cross-dressing device functions as a ploy in the service of chaos in the economy of the play rather than as a transgressive element at the service of gender confusion. When she unmasks him, Diana, blaming the scheme on her rival Venus, also underlines the deceptive quality of the disguise: "Doth she add craft

[26] In this regard, the ending of *Galatea* can be likened to that of cross-dressing comedies by Shakespeare. In *As You Like It*, the return to normal brought about by the resolution scene, where Rosalind notably reveals her true identity, is equally partial insofar as it cannot efface the destabilisation produced by her actions as Ganymede (see especially Valerie Traub, "The Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy", *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, London, Routledge, 1992).

to her malice, and, mistrusting her deity, practise deceit?" (III.4.80-82). In addition to being a plot device, cross-dressing retains a strong comic potential. Though one cannot go as far as to see it merely as such, cross-dressing must still be considered as part of the entertainment offered to the queen and her court. It is particularly engaging as the source of dramatic irony in *Galatea*. Since the audience is made privy to Melibeus and Tityrus's schemes, they know from the onset that Galatea and Phillida are virgins in male clothing. We spectators therefore have the upper hand and, on top of laughing with the characters, we can laugh at them when we see them experience more confusion than we do. This is the case for instance when the two main characters first meet, leading Phillida to declare in an aside: "It is a pretty boy and a fair. He might well have been a woman, but because he is not, I am glad I am." (II.1.21-23). The irony of her confession, which was already present in the misconception "It is a [...] boy," is all the stronger as she thinks Galatea is so beautiful she could have been a woman. The fact that her joy stems precisely from this misreading of Galatea's person has a comic effect at Phillida's own expense and encourages an appropriate response from the part of the audience, to whom this aside is directly addressed. Cross-dressing, then, is both – though not exclusively – a plot device and a source of entertainment. Even though I do not want to go as far as to state that this necessarily precludes any radicality on the part of the playwright, I believe it goes to show that to transgress gender norms was not Lyly's primary aim with *Galatea*.

11 The play's resolution constitutes another instance that helps qualify the idea that Lyly's destabilisation of gender norms is inherently subversive. As suggested earlier, Venus's intervention can be seen as a "heterosexual loophole" whose aim is to bring confusion to an end in the topsy-turvy world which is typical of early modern comedies. Such an end is only possible if the norm is reinstated,

which Venus does in metamorphosing one of the virgins. The goddess thus brings upon the comedy's expected happy ending in enabling the love plot to find completion in wedlock. The ending can however be read in a different light when we realise that what Venus offers is the permanent cross-dressing of one of the virgins. In *Galatea*, the return to normal occurs in the form of a gender change, or, in modern terms, a transition.[27] It thus follows that, in the economy of the play, permanent gender change is deemed more acceptable a solution than a lesbian union. This is especially noteworthy as Phillida and Galatea agree to this even when they do not know which one of them will be turned into a man. Venus's offer is unspecific: "How say ye, are ye agreed, *one* to be a boy presently?" (V.3.156-157, my emphasis). Her only condition is quite clear: "Neither of them shall know whose lot it shall be till they come to the church door. One shall be." (V.3.184-186). As a matter of fact, the audience will never know which one of them is metamorphosed since the whole party but Galatea exits at the end of the scene, and the wedding takes place outside of the dramatic frame, after the epilogue. Some critics have endeavoured to find clues in the text as to which virgin is the most likely to have been metamorphosed during the wedding.[28] I believe, however, that the ending's effect is to give the audience the impression that both remain men *en puissance* since they have both agreed to this way out of the deadlock, and since we are never told who is eventually

[27] Bearing in mind that one's social transition does not involve any change to one's anatomy. We can infer, however, that Venus's offer involves an anatomical change (on "the necessity of a penis" in the play, see Theodora A. Jankowski, *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 83). The queer potential of *Galatea* has led critics to offer refreshing analyses putting to use the tools of transgender studies. See especially Simone Chess, *op. cit*.

[28] See for instance Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978, p. 209.

turned into a man.[29] Like Schrödinger's cat, they experience two different states at the same time. In the famous thought experiment, the cat is simultaneously dead and alive in a sealed box. Similarly, Galatea and Phillida leave the stage in an undefined state of gender identity. The two girls dressed as boys are both potentially soon-to-be boys and will remain so in our mind since we have no way of knowing which will remain bride and which will become groom in the traditional unfolding of heteropatriarchal marriage. In the same way as we do not know whether Galatea or Phillida will eventually be turned into a man upon reaching the church door, we do not know whether we should read the ending as conventional in its reinstating the patriarchal norm or as the epitome of gender trouble. That is because it is simultaneously neither and both. The destabilisation of gender identity to the extent of putting in jeopardy the existence of a gender binary does subvert patriarchal norms, but such subversion is part and parcel of the entertainment offered to the Virgin Queen, which puts its radical nature into perspective. If, as we have demonstrated, the malleability of gender identity can be exploited to its full capacity, the final recourse to gender change sets emphasis upon the impossibility for Galatea and Phillida to live out their love in their original gender identities. While gender identity can easily be trifled with in the mythical world of pastoral comedy, the real point of contention seems to lie in the realm of desire.

[29] "[The] sex change actually *is* made as soon as the lovers agree to it", Simone Chess, *op. cit*., p. 164.

Virginal love as *amor impossibilis*

12 A recurring motif in *Galatea* is the age-old theme of *amor impossibilis*, or impossible love. When concerning two women, love is impossible because it is forbidden by both social and natural norms. This is made evident by Golding's addition, in his 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, of moralising lines concerning Iphis and Ianthe:

> A Cow is never fond / Uppon a Cow, nor Mare on Mare. The Ram delyghts the Eawe / . . . . But never man can shewe, / That female yit was tane in love with female kynd. / . . . Beholde the blissful tyme / The day of Mariage is at hand. Ianthe shalbee myne, / And yit I shall not her enjoy. Amid the water we shall thirst.[30]

13 To Caldwell, Ianthe's "outpouring of concern" in Golding's translation strikes a sharp contrast with Galatea's and Phillida's soliloquies in the play, none of which, though they are steeped in frustration, "[raise] the issue of unnatural desire."[31] Caldwell argues that

> Lyly takes pains never to present the love of the two women as anything but genuine, superior to the other infatuations in the

[30] Ovid, *The. xv. bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis, translated oute of Latin into English meeter, by Arthur Golding Gentleman, a worke very pleasaunt and delectable*, trans. Arthur Golding, imprynted at London, by Willyam Seres, 1567, p. 122; quoted in Ellen M. Caldwell, *op. cit*., p. 25.

[31] *Ibid*., p. 25.

> play's subplot, and completely independent of the often frivolously aimed arrows of Cupid.[32]

14 Though I agree with her depiction of the love the two protagonists share as a counterpoint to the feelings the god of love infuses into the nymphs, I do not subscribe to the idea that the lovers exclude the question of the (un)naturalness of their love from their soliloquies. On the contrary, I believe it is the very source of their frustration. On multiple occasions, they indeed express desperation when they suspect their beloved might also be a woman, as is the case with Phillida at the end of Act IV, scene 4:

> Poor Phillida, what shouldst thou think of thyself, that lovest one that, I fear me, is as thyself? And may it not be that her father practised the same deceit with her that my father hath with me [...]? If it be so, Phillida, how desperate is thy case! (IV.4.40-5)

15 It is precisely because Phillida shares the widespread cultural belief that love between women is impossible by nature that she feels such "fear" at Galatea being a maiden. Her desperation, we understand, is caused by the deadlock she would supposedly find herself in. This is not to say, however, that the feelings she has for Galatea cannot be pure and genuine. In Caldwell's view, the virgins' describing their own feelings as potentially unnatural would preclude such feelings from seeming genuine. I think, however, that the contrary happens since the supposed unnaturalness of love between virgins strikes a sharp contrast with its actual purity, which is a way for Lyly to show that, more than anything, it is deeming it unnatural that is most unnatural – a point I will return to later.

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[32] *Idem*.

16 The trope of impossible love is repeatedly invoked by other characters such as Cupid. The god of love explains his scheme to have Diana's nymphs fall in love: "I will make their pains my pastimes, and so confound their love in their own sex that they shall dote in their desires, delight in their affections, and practice only impossibilities." (II.2.7-10). He then goes on to describe their newly developed feelings as "their exercise in foolish love" (II.2.12). We realise that, if making the nymphs develop amorous feelings was a trick by and of itself because Diana's followers are supposed to remain chaste, Cupid is taking his ruse one step further by having them fall for none other than Galatea and Phillida – that is to say, other women. Thus, not only would Telusa, Eurota, and Ramia engage in such a behaviour as is unacceptable considering their position, but they would also feel love for someone of their own gender, which is not so much considered unacceptable as squarely impossible. Their love would thus be vain, and the butt of Cupid's practical joke would lie in the fact that the nymphs would jeopardise their position as members of Diana's train for no valid reason.

17 In the final scene, Galatea and Phillida leave the protection of the woods to join the rest of the characters onstage. They are recognised by their parents, which leads them to acknowledge each other's actual gender identity for the first time in the play. The gods' reactions to their relationship status unsurprisingly match the general belief in the impossibility of love between women:

> DIANA. Now, things falling out as they do, you must leave these fond, fond affections. Nature will have it so; necessity must.
> […]
> NEPTUNE. An idle choice, strange and foolish, for one virgin to dote on another, and to imagine a constant faith where there can be no cause of affection (V.3.132-141).

18 In the end, the goddess of virgins and the devourer of said virgins do agree on one point. Once again, rhetorical insistence is set on the impossibility by nature of love between women, as manifested through the epizeuxis in Diana's line ("fond, fond") and through Neptune's emphatic use of the near synonyms "idle," "strange," and "foolish." Moreover, this love appears as all the more unnatural as it is deemed so by two gods who represent the natural world itself in their respective positions of woodland and sea deities.

19 The audience of *Galatea* is faced with a constant dramatization of the impossibility of love between women, especially as the lovers themselves express despair in its face. And yet, one cannot deny that the play's main drives consist in the blossoming of the feelings uniting Galatea and Phillida. In that regard, there appears to be a clear discrepancy between the discourse surrounding their love and the events occurring onstage.

Staging "impossible" love

20 Galatea and Phillida's love story constitutes the plot's backbone. This becomes clear right from their first encounter at the start of Act II, when they immediately feel attracted to each other, as shows for instance the aside quoted above ("It is a pretty boy and a fair." [II.1.21]). Soon afterwards, they each lament their love for the other in soliloquies that take up most of scenes 4 and 5, whose mirroring effect functions as one of the many rhetorical and structural parallels in Lyly's play. They meet again in Act III and engage in an amorous dialogue fraught with innuendoes as they question each other with the aim of clarifying the situation:

> PHILLIDA. Have you ever a sister?
> GALATEA. If I had but one, my brother

> must needs have two. But, I pray, have you ever a one?
> PHILLIDA. My father had but one daughter,
> and therefore I could have no sister (III.2.40-44).

21 Phillida asks Galatea a question, to which she answers in riddles before asking Phillida the same question, to which she answers in a similar manner. In addition to being another instance demonstrating Lyly's taste for parallel structures, these lines show how alike the two lovers are, and thus lay bare the budding feelings that animate them.[33] These riddles, however, are easily legible and take their speech away from insinuation to bring it closer to confession, which leads, at quite an early stage in the play, to realisation on both sides. In that regard, I find myself in agreement with Andy Kesson, who points out that "the girls realize one another's genders at the center of the play (3.2)," while the common assumption is that they remain "unaware of each other's gender until the end of the play, continuing their courtship in the mistaken belief that it is heterosexual."[34] This is made obvious by their asides:

> PHILLIDA. [*Aside*] What doubtful speeches be these!
> I fear me he is as I am, a maiden.
> GALATEA. [*Aside*] What dread riseth in my mind!
> I fear the boy to be as I am, a maiden.

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[33] On the constant parallel between the two lovers, see especially Ellen M. Caldwell: "The play makes a point of presenting Gallathea and Phyllida as nearly alike as possible" (*op. cit.*, p. 33). The fact that their coded language concerns their siblings is reminiscent of Viola's own riddle to Orsino in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* ("I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too" [II.4.120-121], Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, ed. Keir Elam, The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series, London, Bloomsbury, 2008). This may indicate that Shakespeare drew inspiration from Lyly to write this cross-dressing comedy. I thank Imke Lichterfeld for pointing this out in discussion.

[34] Andy Kesson, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

> […]
> GALATEA. [*Aside*] Ay me! He is as I am,
> for his speeches be as mine are.
> PHILLIDA. [*Aside*] What shall I do?
> Either he is subtle or my sex simple (III.2.32-48).

22 The last two lines are characterised by an assertive tone which prevents us from taking seriously any later backtracking of theirs.[35] At the end of the scene, Phillida beckons Galatea to walk deeper into the woods: "Come, let us into the grove, and make much of one another, that cannot tell what to think one of another." (III.2.62-63). The meaning of "make much" being purposefully vague, the verb invites diverse interpretations with regards to the action it describes.[36] In the context of Galatea's and Phillida's tentative yet undeniable courting, we are encouraged to give it an erotic reading as a near synonym of "enjoy," implying that Phillida is offering her beloved a sexual encounter.[37] The reason behind her invitation to have a closer look at each other lies in the fact that words are not proof enough of their actual identities. This is confirmed by their trading in riddles and circumlocutions because of the taboo surrounding love between women. Because of this taboo, they "cannot tell" what they really think of each other, which underlines yet another discrepancy within the play between words and actions. Since a verbal revelation is impossible despite the two characters' best efforts, the recourse to other means of accessing knowledge is

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[35] Such backtracking comes in the form of the emphatic surprise they express when their actual identity is revealed: "GALATEA. Unfortunate Galatea, if this be Phillida! / PHILLIDA. Accursed Phillida, if this be Galatea!" (V.3.120-121).

[36] Theodora Jankowski describes it as "inconclusive language" ("'Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection': Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly's *Gallathea*", p. 263; *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 79).

[37] Critics generally concur on this point. See for instance Simone Chess, *op. cit*., p. 147.

necessary, including physical action through potential sexual intercourse. The fact that this encounter happens offstage for obvious reasons of propriety also adds to the ambiguity of its nature, since neither the audience nor the reader is made privy to what it consists in exactly. We are therefore left to wonder what Galatea and Phillida got up to in the idyllic space of the grove, which appears as a *locus amoenus* in the amorous pastoral tradition the play calls to mind. In other words, both Phillida's choice of words and the place she beckons her beloved to indicate the possibility of a sexual encounter.

23 Another argument pointing in that direction is that we do not see the two maidens again onstage until Act IV, scene 4, when they engage in yet another amorous exchange that is still fraught with uncertainty. The ambiguity of their exchange could be deemed surprising if they have indeed engaged in sexual activity. For that reason, it has called for diverse interpretations. According to Jankowski, it shows that Lyly is envisaging forms of sexuality that do not involve genitalia, thus giving virgins access to eroticism: "*Gallathea* invites us to speculate on the possibility of a kind of desire and an economy of pleasure that is focused on the lovers' *entire* selves rather than a small portion located between their legs."[38] Kesson and Chess, however, do not take the couple's behaviour later on during the play at face value. According Kesson, their surprise when they discover each other's real identities at the end "may be a performance for the benefit of those around them," and Chess points out that "the lovers do not allow [the sexual encounter] to disrupt their mutual gender performance."[39] My

[38] Theodora A. Jankowski, "'Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection': Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly's *Gallathea*", p. 263. See also *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 80.

[39] Andy Kesson, *op. cit.*, p. 43; Simone Chess, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

interpretation is closer to Chess's in that I believe that, though their escape into the grove might have given them a clearer idea of each other's anatomy – assuming a correspondence between their anatomy and gender identity –, they still dwell in ambiguities. Even when the two of them are alone onstage, they do not express their identity freely and carry on performing masculinity as boys, though they would allegedly not need to anymore. The fact that they persist in putting on a show for each other indicates that there is more to their gender performance than faking it for the sake of other characters. I would argue that this ongoing performance is due to their adhering to the general opinion that love between women is unnatural. Therefore, the only way for them to live their love at that stage is to retain the veil of opacity that first characterized their love language. In other words, if they face the fact that they are both virgins, then they must also face the deadlock they supposedly find themselves in. Refusing stable definition appears as the only viable solution if they are to let their love flourish.

24 Galatea and Phillida still see virtue in settling on terms to describe their relationship, as testified by the latter's proposal: "Seeing we are both boys, and both lovers, that our affection may have some show and seem as it were love, let me call thee mistress." (IV.4.17-19). Strikingly enough, Phillida seems to be accepting the possibility of male homoeroticism when female homoeroticism is excluded. The reason could be that male homoeroticism is deemed more acceptable by the characters, since it was more visible than female homoeroticism in the early modern culture, and especially so in pastoral literature.[40] In that sense, it may have been easier to

[40] On the general invisibility of female homoeroticism in the early modern period, see especially Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture, vol. 42, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

envisage in the lovers' situation since it does not concern them as female characters, thus granting them the comfort of fictional distance. It also acts as a metatheatrical reference to the sexed bodies of the boy actors playing these characters. However, one should bear in mind that Phillida's proposal reflexively puts emphasis on its own falsity, since we know for a fact that the assertion "we are both boys" is not true. The cross-dressed maiden is uttering a syllogism whose first tenet is obviously false, which exaggerates the idea that her rhetoric does not hold water. Phillida is lying anyhow because she knows herself to be a girl, but her lie could also extend to include Galatea, since we can surmise from their earlier exchanges that she knows her to also be one. Whether or not Phillida is knowingly uttering lies regarding Galatea's gender identity does not alter the destabilising effect of her lines: if she is in the know, then she is outrightly lying for the sake of cultivating ambiguities, and if she does not know, then her assertion turns out to be a strong instance of dramatic irony underlining the ambiguity of the situation. The terms they settle on are therefore self-reflexively vague, and the solution they find is profoundly destabilising since the two characters are basing them off untruths. This impression is reinforced by Phillida's oscillation between an assertive tone ("Seeing we are both boys") and a tentative one – visible in the use of the modal "may" and of the subjunctive mood with "seem as it were" – as well as by the paradox of Phillida accepting a male homoerotic pattern of relation all the while asserting the desire of folding into the heteroerotic groove by calling her beloved "mistress."[41] Conversely, Phillida's choice of words can be interpreted as a way for her to secretly acknowledge

[41] The ambiguity surrounding the gender identity of the love-object is reminiscent of the "master-mistress of my passion" in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 20" (see William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2010, p. 151).

her beloved's actual gender identity, and, thusly, to tacitly accept the fact that she loves another woman. At any rate, while she claims to bring about some sort of order through defining their relationship, Phillida is doing the opposite. At the start of the final scene, the two lovers are alone onstage one last time. They engage in one last coded exchange before other characters enter, and the plot gradually moves towards its unravelling.

25 On top of setting emphasis on the veil of uncertainty Galatea and Phillida are constantly cloaking their love story in, this short summary of their encounters in the woods will have proved that their allegedly impossible love story is well and truly unfolding before our very eyes. In other words, Lyly is setting the focus on the impossibility of their love all the while making it the backbone of his comedy. By doing so, as part of his larger encomium of the Virgin Queen, he dramatizes the most important characteristic of virginal love, which is that it is eternal and unconditional. Once Galatea and Phillida fall in love, their romantic fate is sealed. The irreversibility of their feelings is made clear by the materialisation of their union through Cupid's love knots. In Act IV, scene 2, Cupid, who had been wreaking havoc in Diana's woods, is punished by the goddess and her nymphs for his ruse: his wings are clipped, and he is made to untie the love knots that symbolise the feelings he aroused in the woods' denizens, making them fall out of love. Two love knots remain fast in spite of Cupid's best efforts. The first is described as follows: "It is the true love-knot of a woman's heart, therefore cannot be undone." (IV.2.36-7). The god of love indicates that he did not tie this knot himself, but that it stemmed spontaneously from "a woman's heart," and that it is consequently "true." A woman's love, when it is not spurred by the god's art, is then deemed particularly

pure and durable.[42] The adverb "therefore" implies a strong link of causality between the origin of the feelings and the knot being impossible to untie, indicating that, in Cupid's view, a woman's love is naturally everlasting. A second knot stands out because it shares the same characteristics:

> RAMIA. Why do you lay that knot aside?
> CUPID. For death.
> TELUSA. Why?
> CUPID. Because the knot was knit by faith,
> and must only be unknit by death (IV.2.48-52).

26 The feelings materialised by this knot, we hear, originated in "faith," which underlines their purity by conferring them a sacred aura all the while linking virginal love to fidelity. For this reason, the feelings in question can only dissipate when the lovers die, which emphasises their everlasting quality. The plot's focus on Galatea and Phillida's love story inevitably leads us to think that these are their knots, especially as they are contrasted with the nymphs', which, being the fruit of Cupid's machinations, untie easily.

27 This rhetoric of fidelity finds its way into the protagonists' lines at the end of the play, as they exclaim in front of the other characters:

> GALATEA. I will never love any but Phillida;
> her love is engraven in my heart with her eyes.
> PHILLIDA. Nor I any but Galatea; whose faith
> is imprinted in my thoughts by her words (V.3.135-138).

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[42] According to Theodora Jankowski, this testifies to Lyly's "predisposition to consider women's love truer than men's love." (*Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly's Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 75).

28 In this instance of parallel construction presenting once again the two girls as very much alike and therefore inseparable, the words "engraven" and its near synonym "imprinted" underscore the idea that their love is immutable. Furthermore, Phillida echoes Cupid's description of the second knot that was impossible to untie when she mentions Galatea's "faith." At that stage in the play, after their true identity is revealed, they reiterate their feelings for each other, underlining the fact that under no circumstances can they renege on them.

29 Being virgins, Galatea and Phillida love with an intensity that outshines any other forms of love, including – and especially – the ones inspired by Cupid. Their love being pure and eternal, they cannot simply turn their back on it, even when gods demand they should. Thusly, however "fond" their affections, Galatea and Phillida are destined to carry them through. In the economy of the play, as we have come to understand, the issue is not that the girls are cross-dressing, or even that they fall in love with each other, since, allegedly, they did not know at the start that they were developing feelings for another woman. The point of contention, rather, is that they should remain in love in spite of the revelation of their gender identity. I argue that this is precisely why they claim to be unsure about each other's identity throughout the play, until the resolution towards the end of the final scene. In other words, as long as the realisation is not complete and that some sort of ambiguity regarding gender identity remains, they can still express love for each other without fear of it being suppressed. This goes to show that, in *Galatea*, depicting two virgins embracing their love for one another is deemed more subversive a gesture than having them highlight the instability of gender identity by disrupting the codes of gender presentation.

Gender indeterminacy as “safe space”

30 In *Galatea*, gender malleability appears as the steppingstone to female homoeroticism in that it lays the ground for its expression and dramatic representation. The liminal space the two protagonists find themselves in with regards to gender identity is precisely what enables their feelings to bloom. In this regard, we could argue that the ambiguities surrounding gender open a “safe space” for the expression of queer love. It would be anachronistic to argue that Lyly is following a progressive feminist and antihomophobic agenda in *Galatea*, but he is at least displaying, as Kesson puts it, a desire to “[imagine] non-phallic forms of love and desire,” in addition to creating, in Jankowski’s words, “a place in which virginity ‘rules’ and creates its own society.”[43] I would take Jankowski’s compelling feminist argument one step further in arguing that in *Galatea*, the gender trouble brought about by cross-dressing is, on a par with the “separate ‘society’ of virgins” Lyly creates,[44] another space opened by the text. In the same way as Galatea and Phillida find shelter from Neptune’s patriarchal dominance in Diana’s woods, they can safely express their love for each other thanks to undefinition. The specific forms of love and desire which appear in the play do so within a celebration of virginal sexuality which is materialised as love between virgins, making of Lyly’s comedy the literary locus where such love finds its

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[43] Andy Kesson, *op. cit*., p. 43; Theodora A. Jankowski, “‘Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection’: Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly’s *Gallathea*”, p. 261; see also *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly’s Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 77.

[44] Theodora A. Jankowski, “‘Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection’: Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly’s *Gallathea*”, p. 258; see also *Elizabeth I, the Subversion of Flattery, and John Lyly’s Court Plays and Entertainments*, p. 74.

expression. On top of being both a dramatic and a comic device, cross-dressing is also instrumental in enabling Galatea and Phillida to overcome the hurdles of *amor impossibilis* by expressing their feelings to each other in the gaps left open by gender indeterminacy.

31 From a presentist perspective, it is crucial to interrogate the radical potential of Lyly's play. Firstly, such enquiries destabilise the preconceived ideas one might have regarding the construction of gender in the early modern period. If transgressing traditional gender norms was not subversive per se in Elizabethan drama, what might be considered radical is our own effort to show how run-of-the-mill such transgression was at the time. In addition, such interrogations enable a queer reclaiming of the literary canon, as exemplified by Emma Frankland's recent production of *Galatea* in Shoreham-by-Sea as part of the 2023 edition of the Brighton Festival. For this first professional revival of the play since its original performance in 1588, the director chose to work with a largely queer cast and to adapt the play to contemporary issues of LGBTQI+ identity.[45] Building on Lyly, Frankland and her collaborators have, for instance, comically and refreshingly done away with the "heterosexual loophole" at the end of the play to picture queer love as transcending traditional conceptions of gender and to uphold the validity of non-binary identities.

[45] *Cf.* Emma Frankland's website: URL. Accessed 8 June 2023.

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