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Gender Play in Early Modern Drama

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Female Desire in *Gallathea* and *Twelfth Night*

To identify or construct the core themes of a play, dramatists and scholars must pay close attention to the ebb and flow of power within the play's dramatic world. Class and gender are two of the clearest channels of power, which is why so many dramatic analyses gravitate towards them. In this essay, I will first argue that although Christopher Wixson's reading of John Lyly's *Gallathea* is overly dismissive of the play's overt homoeroticism, his context-conscious analytical approach is useful and sound. Then, I will draw on Denise Walen's "Constructions of Female Homoerotics in Early Modern Drama" and Gail Paster's *The Body Embarrassed* for Early Modern cultural context and attempt to apply Wixson's approach to a comparative analysis of female autonomy and desire in John Lyly's *Gallathea* and William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Ultimately, I will conclude that these early modern dramas gave a literal stage to the possibilities of female interiority at a time when women were harshly excluded and subjugated in public life.

While it can be tempting to focus solely on apparent dramatic parallels to contemporary queer and feminist topics, anchoring analyses of early modern drama in their historical and cultural context is essential to creating a fuller understanding of the dynamics at play. In his critical essay "Crossdressing and John Lyly's *Gallathea*", Christopher Wixson argues that court plays like *Gallathea*

...were essentially extended metaphors full of mythological characters with allegorical significance, typically legitimating the power, wisdom, and benevolence of a ruling figure as a thinly veiled tribute to the actual head of state (Wixson 244).

Class, he concludes, is the primary locus of power in *Gallathea*, not gender. Wixson's context-conscious analytical approach is a useful tool, although he falls somewhat short in its application. He addresses gender more explicitly near the end of the paper, but ultimately his disproportionate focus on Neptune and the two girls as symbols of class solidarity leaves no room for the obvious: Two female characters fall in love, and remain in love even after the disguises drop. Rather than dismissing female-female desire in the play as Wixson does, it is worth exploring the expectations that would have been placed on the bodies on stage in the settings they inhabit. By doing so, we can more directly identify and approach the biopolitical concepts and questions that drive the conflict.

As Wixson points out, *Twelfth Night* was published more than a decade after *Gallathea*, and in a vastly different theatrical context. However, the frame of reference of each audience would have overlapped significantly in terms of cultural notions about gender and sexuality. In "Constructions of Female Homoerotics in Early Modern Drama", Denise Walen finds that "Indeed, available legal, religious, medical, and literary sources support a cognizance of female homoerotic desire in early modern England, with various responses to the desire between and within each discourse" (Walen 416). It is reasonable to conclude that sapphic sex and relationships would not have been a foreign concept at the time. Walen argues that because theatre relies on the audience's imagination filling in gaps, it was likely that the audience could pick up on and imaginatively expand homoerotic implications, such as when Phillida flirtatiously

suggests to Gallathea: “Come, let us into the grove, and make much of one another, that cannot tell what to think of one another” (3.2.65), or when Viola expresses delight at seeing *two* Cesarios, and afterwards goes to great lengths to keep Viola close to her. While a reality-based frame of reference allowed the audiences of Shakespeare and Lyly to imagine the implications of these scenarios, the conventions of the theatre allowed their characters to manipulate and occasionally transcend the social limits of early modern England.

With the exception of Viola, the women in these two plays enjoy either privacy or agency, but not both. Gail Kern Paster thoroughly examines privacy and agency in relation to gender roles in *The Body Embarrassed*, describing how “norms of restraint” (26) in the context of ‘urinary segregation’ fortified a class-based social etiquette around galenic theory. Most relevantly, she connects social class and the urban/rural divide to gender roles. Paster cites a passage from *The Metamorphosis of Ajax*, in which John Harington observes that milkmaids and country housewives can go to the woods to euphemistically “...gather strawberries &c” (qtd. in Paster 29) interpreted to imply urinating outdoors, but that women of the upper class cannot. The extent of the erotic exploration in *Gallathea* may be attributable to the rural setting and the freedom that cross-dressing offers the characters to sidestep shame— Their flimsy male personas enable their erotic explorations of one another, but even after the pretense is dropped, the desire remains. Away from the expectations of their fathers, Gallathea and Phyllida are able to “make much of one another” (3.2.65) in the grove, just as Harington’s milkmaids and country wives are able to gather strawberries. While the two women ultimately reap the benefits of the forest’s privacy as their love blossoms, their social position as young virgins initially relegates them to being mere property of their fathers’, and grants them no agency in the decision to don male disguises and enter the woods in the first place.

In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia is able to exert control over most aspects of her life in her court, yet must conform to her class and gender role while enduring the endless sexual objectification of Malvolio and Orsino. Because the fortification of social etiquette further partitioned the public into hegemonic class and gender categories, Paster tells us that the excretory behavior of wealthy women was more strictly policed. The cross-dressed Cesario/Viola maintains a unique freedom for the majority of the play. Unlike the lovers of *Gallathea*, the disguise was of her own devising, and she enjoys the range of motion a man would, while keeping her true identity private. This makes Viola an ideal subject for Olivia's erotic desires, embodying a femininity and power inverse to Olivia's own. Whether or not this desire can be considered sapphic, it is interesting to explore what it means for female characters on the early modern stage to be active and direct in their erotic desires.

While it is obvious that the female characters in *Twelfth Night* and *Gallathea* were not played by female actors, the playwrights were both aware that women would be in the audience. For Lyly, this meant catering to one of the most powerful women of all time. For Shakespeare, this meant attempting to decipher the complexities of gender dynamics and romance, exploring how they could be tied up in confusing knots only to be straightened back out again. The compulsion to restore their invented worlds to the real-life status quo is consistent in each, as *Gallathea* ends with an unspecified one of the pair being transformed into a man, while *Twelfth Night* neatly sorts the characters into heterosexual pairs after all is revealed. However, it would be cynical to dismiss these plays for their endings without acknowledging what the playwrights do not erase: the reality of female desire. Despite their reinforcement of the heteropatriarchal status quo, they created spaces for the public to engage with and witness modes of female autonomy and interiority. I conclude with John Lyly's Cupid, addressing the women in the

audience: “And then, ladies, if you see these dainty dames entrapped in love, say softly to yourselves, ‘We may all love’” (Gallathea, 2.2.15). Lyly seems to firmly hold that love is a human experience, not a gendered one.

Work Cited

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