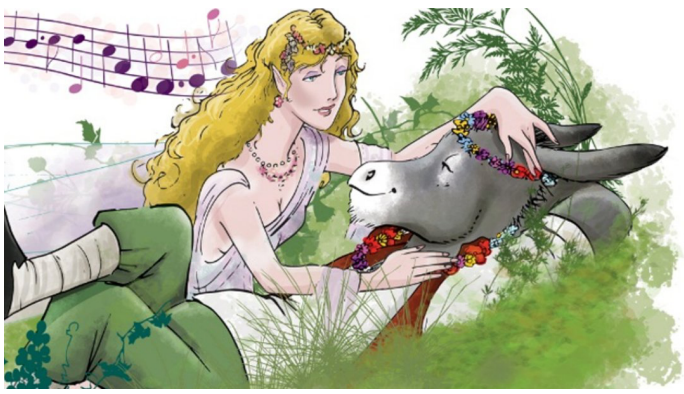
Feminism and Queerness in Early Modern Drama.

INTRODUCTION:

Early modern drama or theatre roughly includes plays performed between 1576 – 1642 and for many of us our first introduction is in childhood, mostly in the form of animated Shakespeare plays in school, then study in every year of the curriculum following. However, regardless of many of the plays being steeped in crossdressing, people falling in love, and adaptations leaning into the 'queerer aspects' it is not until university that I first heard explicitly of how 'queer' some of these plays really are, or at least can be perceived to be. Equally playwriters from Lyly to Shakespeare perhaps surprisingly write of feminine power and influence ahead of their time, their female characters often vital to the plot, autonomous, and outspoken just as their male characters are. During school we often had lessons centred around the question 'was Shakespeare a feminist' looking at various early modern works of theatre and pondering them from a feminist perspective yet there was rarely any room to consider them from an intersectional feminist perspective. This leaflet takes a brief glance into how the intersection of queerness and femininity exists in three early modern plays (*Galatea, Twelfth Night, and A Midsummer Night's Dream*) as well as considering their more modern productions and adaptations. The intent behind this leaflet being a brief introduction to the world of queer feminist early modern drama as well as an opportunity to touch on the importance of seeing intersectional marginalised identies and voices in the historical and literary cannon where they are so often ignored, erased, or dismissed.

(Figure 1)

(Figure 2)

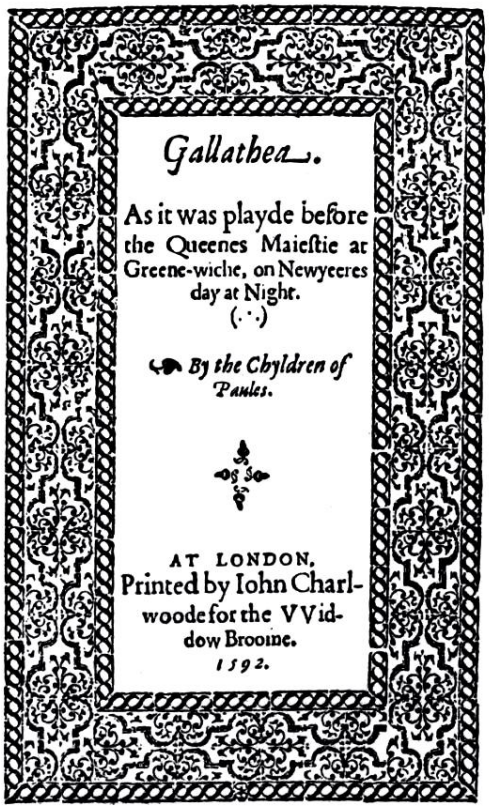


(Figure 3)

GALATEA:

Galatea sometimes also spelt *Gallathea*, written by John Lyly, is an Elizabethan pastoral comedy first performed around 1588 at Greenwich Palace for Queen Elizabeth I by the Children of St Paul's. Lyly born around 1554, was a forerunner of the now more well-known Shakespeare, yet was arguably one of the most fashionable writers of the 1580's. Lyly's writing was characterised by a style known as euphuism, named for his own novels and often recognisable by the use of similes taken from natural history and classical mythologies, frequent alliteration, as well as short parallel phrases. The writing style of Lyly's work was suggested to be "ornately symmetrical prose style filled with fantastic similes and constructed in rhythmic swirls of alliteration and antithesis".[1] Lyly's euphuistic style is an apt mode of communicating a story so nuanced in contradiction and inversion of norms.

(Figure 4)



Gallathea.

As it was playde before the Queenes Maieſtie at Greene-wiche, on Newyeeres day at Night.

By the Chyldren of Paules.

AT LONDON.
Printed by Iohn Charlwoode for the VViddow Broome.
1592.

(Figure 5)

The narrative primarily follows two young women, Phillida and Galatea, disguised as boys to avoid being chosen to be a virgin sacrifice to appease the wrath of the god of the sea Neptune. The women hide in the forest where they meet, both believing the other is a man, but knowing themselves to be women, fall in love with one another. Several sub plots also take place and intermingle with the women's plot. One follows the minor god Cupid, also in the wood, who decides to cause some trouble for the goddess Diana and her nymphs. The other explores the story of three brothers who have been shipwrecked close by. All three plot lines eventually collide in the same final scene, in which Phillida and Galatea are revealed to both be female (yet their love remains unchanged) and are married, one of them turned into a man by Venus off stage.

Gender and sexuality in the narrative of the play and in the performance of it are therefore incredibly complex and somewhat fluid. The concept of self-contained gender is disrupted, as is the concept of what love and attraction can look like regarding gender presentation.

(Figure 6)

The way that the play was originally performed by the Children of St Paul's, a troupe of boys likely between the ages of eight and sixteen, meant that the players were crossdressing to play in the majority female characters. While the element of crossdressing in Elizabethan theatre was the norm, women overwhelmingly not allowed to act, *Galatea* seemingly goes a step further by then having its female protagonists to cross-dress as men. In other words, the play calls for boys to present as female to play female characters, but to also then to present as boys as the characters do in the narrative to play women cross dressing as men. Boys crossdressing as women to play women crossdressing as men, certainly sounds complicated and definitely speaks to the way that gender and gender presentation in the play is complex inside and outside of the narrative itself. From a modern queer and or gender studies perspective the way that gender presentation is presented as an internalised and socialised thing. One example is the way that upon first coming across Phillida, both in their male presentations Galatea resolves that she will essentially 'learn of him how to behave' like a man suggesting that the concept of gender is, at least, partially performative aligning with Judith Butler's suggestion that "gender is a kind of impersonation and approximation".[2] Galatea is in fact resolving to learn and imitate the male gender from a woman pretending to be a man, who is in fact played by a male actor.

Gender presentation in *Galatea* is further complicated by the love story of Galatea and Phillida, how they present themselves and their respective attractions to one another regarding gender but also aside from it. In many ways their love story depending on where they are in the narrative can be described as a straight romance, gay romance, a lesbian romance, and potentially a relationship between one or two people who are gender non-conforming or trans in their identities/presentation. The final scene of the play in which they are to be married arguably offers a direct challenge to heteronormativity with the essentially lesbian marriage and repeated public declarations of their love for one another with the goddess Venus acting as a priest figure. The constancy of Phillida and Galatea's love throughout the play in many ways recognises gender and gender presentation but also occurs aside from it. From a queer studies or women's studies angle it can be suggested the idea that the play seemingly presents gender, sex, and sexuality to be separate along with challenging heteronormative constructs of marriage and love. "By exploring representations of love and desire between female characters"[3] it is arguable "that the dramatic literature of late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England recognized and constructed richly diverse tropes of female homoerotic desire"[3] of which *Galatea* is an example. Therefore, *Galatea* offers a potential insight to the convergence of feminine and queer identities on the early modern stage, by playing with the perception and attractions of its characters.

TWELFTH NIGHT

Twelfth Night is a comedy play first performed around 1602, written by William Shakespeare, and originally published in Shakespeare's First Folio in 1623. Shakespeare, born around 1564 in Stratford Upon Avon, is often referred to as one of England's greatest writers. The narrative of the play follows Viola who, after an unfortunate shipwreck, is separated from her beloved twin brother Sebastian. Following the shipwreck and separation Viola decides to disguise herself as a boy, calling herself Cesario, and begins to work for the duke Orsino. Viola, still presenting as a boy, falls in love with the duke who is madly in love with the countess Olivia, whom Orsino sends the disguised viola to essentially court for him. The countess however falls for Cesario unaware that he is in fact a woman in disguise. Sebastian, viola's missing brother then also turns up causing further confusion and chaos. The play concludes happily with Sebastian and Olivia marrying and viola revealing herself to be a woman and marrying Orsino.

(Figure 7)

Much like the crossdressing within the narrative of *Galatea* and in it's performance, the crossdressing in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in which we are likely to have male actors crossdressing to perform female roles of female characters crossdressing to present as male provides the opportunity to consider what Simone Chess terms "the idea of 'queer heterosexuality'".[4] Arguably what Chess is considering are the "Moments of desire and sexual encounters in early modern texts"[4] that involve crossdressing and how they can "offer a unique opportunity to explore the overlap and interplay of sex, gender, and desire in the early modern imagination."[4] Another aspect of the dynamic being "'gender labor,' wherein romantic partners co-create their […] cross-dressed lover's gender."[4] Therefore, to put it simplistically, the way that the gender roles and the oppression of women in early modern England resulted in the male domination of the early modern stage and the need to cross-dress to perform provides the opportunity to consider the performance of gender itself. Additionally, the frequent elements of female to male crossdressing in the narratives of the plays themselves allows audiences to consider the relationships between gender and attraction, as well as the extent to which they have influence on one another.

The carnivalesque nature of the play and the way that gender binaries, as well as heteronormativity, are disrupted gives the play a sense of licensed disorder or transgression. Playgoers witness the characters perform gender regardless of their assigned sex or previous socialization and engage in same sex attractions yet in many ways it is all barrelling towards a very heteronormative conclusion with the women of the play 'safely' married and under the control of their husbands with no need for concern about future 'transgression'. Therefore, despite the crossdressing in the play offering an opportunity to consider the collapsing of the gender binary or how/if gender is performative in cohesion with the genuine attractions between those of the same sex, the concluding heteronormative marriages can seem like resounding act of reordering back into the normative. Almost as if the disorder and transgression of the play acts as a release valve only to strengthen the return to the normative gender roles, binaries, and attractions. However, on the other hand Shakespeare seemingly defers the heteronormative closure, the audience left with a moment of incompleteness in that *Twelfth Night* is arguably an open-ended play. Perhaps Shakespeare instead of leaving us with a conservative closed ending which restores order instead creates an open ending that continues to provoke questions and invite audiences to explore the possibilities outside of the 'normal'.

(Figure 8)

(Figure 9)

One modern production of *Twelfth Night* that is interesting to consider in terms of gender and queer studies approaches is the 2013 globe on screen production that utilises an all-male cast. The all-male company, similar to that that would have performed the play for early modern audiences and in the context of a 2013 audience added to a level of the humour. For instance, at the very beginning of the play backstage is purposefully slightly visible and audiences can witness the players getting dressed dismantling the illusion before the play has even started and adding to the effect of the crossdressing. Equally, the late Elizabethan gendered humour translates better to a modern audience as they are seeing it performed by a troupe of men, the jokes about gender more apt. The overall effect is not unlike a pantomime. Witnessing the ways in which the men are transformed in this production also adds weight to the way the play invites the questioning of the gender binary and the performativity of gender. The elements that make up feminine costumes, the saturated colours of the make-up, the high pitch voices, the wigs that don't look quite convincing, even the way the female characters seem to float in their long dresses, all combine to provide a comedically exaggerated performative femininity. The cross dressing, and audiences' blatant awareness of it, on top of the exaggerated performed gender combining to only exaggerate these performative elements.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

(Figure 10)

(Figure 11)

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a another of Shakespeare's Comedy plays, written around 1595. The narrative of the play is set in Athens and follows two Athenian couples, the quarrel of the fairy queen Titania and the fairy king Oberon, and a group of mechanicals who are preparing to perform a play within the play. The four Athenian lovers run away into the forest, Hermia and Lysander flee to escape Hermia's father's demand that she marries Demetrius. While Helena is in love with Demetrius and to gain favour with him tells Demetrius of his fled fiancé. Both Helena and Demetrius also run into the wood to pursue them. However, while the lovers chase one another around the woods their paths coincide with the fairies. The king and queen of the fairies have quarrelled about the fate of a changeling boy and as a result and in retaliation king Oberon enlists the fairy Puck to play a trick on his wife Titania using the flower 'love in idleness' that will make anyone fall in love with the first person they see. He also enlists Puck to distribute some of the love potion/flower to the Athenians however Puck mistakenly gives it to the wrong one making both men fall in love with one of the women. Meanwhile the mechanicals enter the wood to rehearse, Bottom who is part of the troupe gets transformed his head becoming that of a donkey and Titania, under the effects of the potion falls in love with him. Eventually Oberon rights the chaos he and Puck have caused, and the play concludes with the happy weddings of the Athenian lovers and the comedic play within the play performed by the mechanicals.

However, the 2019 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed by the bridge theatre and broadcast by national theatre at home, chose to add to the comedy and chaos by switching the roles of Titania and Oberon as well as casting several 'gender bent' roles. The effect was that it was Oberon who instead fell in love with Bottom and it was Titania who held the power enlisting Puck to essentially drug her husband and unexpecting Athenians. When considering the play and this particular production from a queer studies or feminist perspective the reversal of Titania and Oberon's actions has a huge impact on the power dynamics of the play and in the perception of the comedic value of fairy royalty falling in love with a mortal with the head of an ass.

In terms of power in the play the reversal of the roles of the fairy king and queen feels steeped in the context of historical, traditional, and more contemporary gendered experience. The love in idleness or love potion of the play is essentially a love drug that, at least from a modern point of view, invokes questions concerning consent that in many ways are far more serious than the comedy initially invites audiences to consider. By making it the female in this production that is misusing her power to play with the autonomy of mainly the men of the play, but also the emotions of the women of the play, there is an added emphasis on gendered control and violence. In other words, by shifting the power and roles between Titania and Oberon it emphasises the role of gender in the violence of the behaviour but also the extent to which it is perceived as comedic.

Additionally, the reversal of Oberon and Titania's actions goes beyond the power shift due to the fact that the woman is essentially love drugging a man to fall in love with a *man* who has been transformed into a donkey, making the plays questionable dealings with consent acquire layers in that the relationship is now between two men on top of the pre-existing elements of bestiality. Meaning that many of the criticisms, insults, or glee at the cruelty of the situation usually referring to the bestiality element now also are connected to the homosexual component. On one hand, the relationship between Bottom and Oberon and the jokes, insults, and critiques of it by the other characters can be perceived to almost be equating bestiality and homoromanticism/homosexuality or at least the receptions of it. On the other hand, it can be perceived to suggest that the idea that the relationship is queer or between two men is actually irrelevant in the world of the play and normalised to the extent that it goes unnoticed. The focus of the negative or comedic reception on the bestiality and the 'comedy' of Oberon having relations with someone he wouldn't have otherwise chosen, not because of his gender but because of his mortal and animal state. Yet, in the context of the real world of the audience, especially because the audience are quite involved in the play, this remains a little unclear because in reality homosexual relationships are rarely normalised to this extent. Equally the choice to have the actor who plays Bottom costumed not in a fully transformed donkey head but only adding relatively small ears to signify his transformation added to the ambiguity of whether the laughter, disgust, and discomfort at the Oberon-Bottom relationship was deriving from the lack of consent, the bestiality, or the homosexual nature of it.

(Figure 12)

The mortal Athenian lovers also offer interesting opportunities to consider the ways the play and modern productions deal with gender, gender roles, and heteronormativity both in the way that productions adhere to the original text and divert from it. The gender and power dynamics in the couple's pursuit of one another both under the love potion's effects and without the fairy meddling. The infamous 'spaniel scene' for example in which the desperately in love Helena says to the uninterested Demetrius "I am your spaniel and Demetrius the more you beat me I will faun on you" elicited an audible intake of breath or gasp from the collective live audience of the 2019 production. Yet following Demetrius's interaction with the love potion and his subsequent falling for Helena she then proceeds to tell him "Let me go you are pathetic", thinking that he is trying to play a cruel joke by pretending to be in love with her, and the audience cheers. Audience reaction to these exchanges and to Helena's pursuit of Demetrius which is arguably a subversion of the heteronormative gendered pursuit of a love interest not only in role but also in that Hermia is aggressive and vocalises her frustration in her "we cannot fight for love as men may do" speech. This coupled with the fact that in order for the plays happy ending and the marriages to align Demetrius has to stay under the effects of love in idleness raises further questions about consent, violence, and threat in the context of traditional gender roles and heteronormativity.

(Figures 13, 14, 15)

There are also several moments in the 2019 production that are not quite insinuated in the original play text such as when Titania and Puck administer the flower to the Athenians while they are all together resulting in both of the men kissing and both of the women kissing. Yet the men still supposedly under the effects of the love potion and 'in love' with each other rush to watch their female counterparts kiss, captivated, suggesting or satirising the hyper sexualisation of female/female relationships by men in a heteronormative patriarchal society. Interestingly when the couples say farewell at the end of the play following their respective heterosexual weddings the men shake hands after leaning in suggestively and deciding not to kiss, while the women embrace and kiss passionately anyway. Again, either suggesting or satirising the way that patriarchy and heteronormativity impact same gender interaction – men not able to show affection and women presented as overly emotional.

The 2019 production utilises the already fertile foundation of the original text to emphasise the role of gender, attraction, and power in the play in order to provoke a modern audience or simply to make them laugh.

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Further reading:

- Pamela Bickley and Jenny Stevens, *Shakespeare and early modern drama: text and performance.*
- Julie Sanders, *The Cambridge introduction to early modern drama, 1576-1642.*
- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex.*
- Judith Butler, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*.
- Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.*
- Simone Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations.*
- Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England.*
- Denise Wallen, *Constructions of Female Homoeroticism in Early Modern Drama.*