



**Facultade de Filloxía**

**Grao en Inglés: Estudos Lingüísticos e Literarios**

***Twelfth Night's Performances:***

**An Analysis of Gender Presentations and Sexuality in  
Shakespearean Drama**

**Vo. e Pe. do director:**

GOMEZ  
BLANCO  
CARLOS  
JUAN



**Student: Manuel Cabeza Añón**  
**Director: Carlos Juan Gómez Blanco**  
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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
1. Gender—now and then.....	3
1.1. Historical materialism, gender and sexuality .....	3
1.2. Shakespeare’s time or the performance of actions .....	6
1.3. The present or the performance of identity .....	10
2. Structure and discourse .....	12
2.1. The dramatic structure.....	12
2.2. Cautionary tale vs. challenge to authority .....	15
3. Performances.....	18
Conclusions .....	28
Works cited .....	31
Appendix .....	33

## Abstract

Literary works are quite relevant in the study of a certain period's social attitudes and concepts such as gender and sexuality. This is especially true for drama as it provides a way to observe the characters as they construct an identity through their performances. This essay intends to analyse the ways in which gender, sexuality and overall masculinity and femininity were developed as social constructs in Shakespeare's time. Using the theory of performativity (the belief that gender and sexuality are social performances characterized by their similarity to a given standard that is considered canonical) as a framework along with a comprehensive description of the history of gender and sex, an interpretation of the characters from *Twelfth Night* has been crafted that presents their acts of speech within a narrative context as a direct modifier of their material conditions. For this purpose, a materialist approach to history and politics has been assumed to assess the intents and purposes of the play's narrative both in its form and from a pragmatic point of view. Additionally, Shakespeare's historical context has been thoroughly explored in terms of gender—its conceptualization and power dynamics—and sexuality (due to its potential socio-political impact in the society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century). The results of this study support—in general—the subversive nature of Shakespearean drama as well as the fact that his characters construct their identities through performative acts that allow them to effectively achieve social mobility between different social classes thanks to the establishment of homosocial relationships.

## Introduction

Shakespeare's work has been the subject of an amount of discourse surrounding its nature as a push for subversion—vs. containment—within his time period. While some scholars argue that his representations of gender dissidence function as a consolidative narrative, many assert that his characters are a subversive force that intend to evidence—not necessarily rebel against—the existence of power imbalances and oppressive social structures through comedy and drama. This essay will defend the performative character of gender presentations within *Twelfth Night* using the subversive interpretation of Shakespearean drama as a basis.

The first chapter contains a diachronic analysis of the different concepts of gender and sexuality that have existed throughout history. For this purpose, a materialist assessment of Shakespeare's period and conditions has been compared to a description of contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality as socially constructed concepts. On the one hand, the Elizabethan period has been observed through the descriptions of various authors pertaining to the socio-political relevance of gender divisions and sexuality—and sexual behaviours—within the time frame of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and onwards. On the other hand, a brief literature review of queer and gender studies has been provided to show the contrast between both periods—actions vs. identities—and to justify the retroactive analysis of Shakespeare's characters through a modern lens. This first chapter is also concerned with providing a general picture of sex, sexuality, and gender across history and how they have been conceptualized until present times.

The second chapter uses the previous assessment of Shakespeare's material conditions and society to analyse the place and function of *Twelfth Night's* narrative within the academic debate of subversion vs. containment. This section intends to provide

a full description of both containment (consolidative) positions—a.k.a. Shakespearean dramas as cautionary tales of sorts—and subversive interpretations of his characters and narrative—inherently evidencing the flaws of the system. Most of this chapter defends subversive intentions through a careful exploration of the narrative devices and character arcs. For this purpose, the play has been divided into its five stages following the classical dramatic structure to offer an interpretation of each section and the purpose they serve.

The third and final chapter is concerned with the analysis of the characters' performances following a contemporary perspective on the social nature of gender, sexuality and sex. The term 'performance' as it has been used here—and for the rest of this essay—does not refer to the actual dramatic performance, but rather to gendered performances within the framework of the theory of performativity. Performativity as a concept is vastly explored in this chapter, and it can be briefly described as the construction of social identities through the performance of acts of speech that have a direct influence on an individual's material conditions (Cavanaugh). In other words, this section explores the ways in which the characters' disguises and actions affect their state within the societal context they find themselves in, as well as the metatextual elements that can influence their interpretation.

The studies and ideas used to craft a theoretical framework for the performative analysis of the characters come from numerous sources and academic currents. First of all, the nature of this study makes it necessary to delve not only into gender studies—for an assessment of power structures and imbalances—but also into the field of queer theory to understand the intersections and nuance between the marginalization of dissidence as well as the construction of gender identity and sexuality. Specifically, studies regarding the nature of gender as a social construct built through performative acts of speech and specific language conform the main basis for this essay. On a more general note, historical

materialism is assumed as the method to establish relationships between different social groups in certain time periods. The three main types of relationships have been taken into account to explore the ways in which the characters interact with each other and with the system itself: consolidation (the maintenance of hegemonic power and influence), containment (the use of force to repress opposition) and subversion (direct opposition to the system and its core values).

The retroactive analysis of classical works using contemporary frameworks could be considered anachronistic; however, this essay does not intend to simply apply modern labels to situations that were not categorized as such, but rather to provide a possible interpretation of the representations of dissidence in Shakespeare's time. As such, performativity is just a means to the end that is to explore the *queer* ways in which characters interact with the institutions and with themselves and their identity.

## 1. Gender—now and then

### 1.1. Historical materialism, gender and sexuality

Gender and sexuality as identities are relatively new. The current understanding of gender as a social construct dates from but a few decades back, whereas sexuality was barely being studied by the first half of the twentieth century. The *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* was one of the first attempts at actually studying and redefining such concepts. Opened in 1919 by Magnus Hirschfeld, this institution introduced the first ideas about divergence regarding gender identity and sexuality to the academic field (“The First Institute”). From there on, these topics have been in a state of constant evolution and change throughout the last century until now. Thus, it would be unfathomable to try and build a detailed timeline of how such complex ideas have been conceptualized across all history; however, for the purpose of performing an accurate analysis of Shakespeare's

work, it is necessary to observe and compare the ideas of his time and contemporaries to the ones that are considered mainstream as of now.

There are plethora of perspectives from which gender can be analysed through history: from a structural assessment of its inner workings and power relationships to a more specific point of view concerned with how individuals navigate their identity in a given set of material conditions. It is undeniable that the context and societal norms of a given period influence the way subjects address their own position within the system, even if they are not aware of the intricate ways in which it intersects with them. It is for this reason that the best way to look at gender at a certain point in history is to observe both the material conditions of the period and the way people managed to construct a sense of self within that context in order to adapt to their society. But it would not be enough to look at just one period; to understand the significance and convoluted history of the construction of gender from the basis of sex it is necessary to at least acknowledge briefly what the timeline appears to look like up until the pertinent period.

Greek philosophers had a particularly homogenous view on sex and sexual difference: male and female organs were one and the same, just turned inside out. Aristotle—by virtue of being a naturalist—also insisted upon the fact that the only way to assess sexual characteristics was through the examination of physical traits rather than an immaterial concept of maleness—that he also defended, paradoxically (Laqueur 28). This does not mean, however, that there existed no social norms or characteristics attributed to both men and women. For instance, the associations between certain gods and their masculinity (Ares, Zeus; war, adultery) or femininity (Hera, Aphrodite; family, beauty) were quite common. Up until that moment, the explanation for physical disparities was given through theological means. For instance, many believed that it was the gods' doing. It is not until much later—in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—that a “two sexes” model

is presented to justify the social differences between men and women. This model will be later furthered by Freudian analyses to defend that masculine and feminine sexualities are radical opposites and that the repression of feminine sexuality contributes to the stabilization of the traditional family and society in general. As opposed to this biological destiny perspective, newer studies and academics suggest that gender—as in the social construct—and sex shall be separate concepts (although gender is indeed built upon the concept of two sexes, it is not necessarily coincident). Gender is, therefore, conceptualized in a contemporary context as an identity that is culturally constructed through the performance of various acts (mostly but not limited to acts of speech).

Literature as a product of its time and ideology is an invaluable resource to explore different perspectives on the human condition. Some analyses of history tend to separate literary sources from their background, deeming them irreconcilable; however, even if the literary medium is rather unique in its ways it cannot be separated from the social constructs and structures that intersect with the production process. Thus, a study that navigates the material conditions of gender and sexuality through the critical reading of period literature is not only possible, but rather relevant. Certain historians tend to support a rather monolithic understanding of the human condition in which individuals and their ideology are defined by their conditions, while a materialist analysis provides a much more rich and complete view on a given period. This way, it is possible to assess how individuals—or rather their representation in fiction—interact with the status quo and how their actions can be consolidating a given system, subverting its ways or containing such subversion—for example, through the policing of language.

There is no doubt that, in a lot of ways, the historical context shapes the way people develop their own ideas about gender, sex and sexuality but—from a materialistic point of view—individuals are rather defined not just by their position in the system but



by their relationship and attitudes towards it. To assume the non-existence of radical opposition from the subjects of a certain society is to ignore the many ways in which dissidence—of gender, sexuality, and political, even—has manifested itself at any and every point in the history of humankind. It is under this premise that the following analysis intends to make a contribution to the already extensive exploration of Shakespearean literary works.

## 1.2. Shakespeare's time or the performance of actions

Mainstream ideas regarding gender and sexuality in the 17<sup>th</sup> century are quite diffuse and wildly different from the current rigid and specific labels that we have created during the last hundred years. The transition to new modes of production and the shift in the relationships that people develop with and within the system have triggered many changes in the way gender—let alone sexuality—is perceived by individuals. As a matter of fact, the alienation of the working class from the fruits of their work and from each other as well as the enforcing of new gendered roles designed to optimize mass production have created what it is known today as the “monogamous family” as well as the roles associated with it (Engels). The concepts of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ were not created along with capitalism, of course, but the way in which we interact with them has changed deeply in a matter of decades.

Foucault describes the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a time in which “sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit” (3). The material impact of sexual dissidence lay in the power imbalance of the individuals involved rather than on the identification of the behaviour itself and, in practice, it was often ignored. Laqueur asserts that “the issue is not the identity of sex but the difference in status between partners and precisely what was done to whom” (53).

The socio-political consequences of subverting power within sexual relationships (e.g., man being in the receiving end—the feminine role—or women occupying the men’s position) were of great importance to historians due to the impact that it had as a form of *queering*<sup>1</sup> the classical structures of power. Power imbalances can be observed in Shakespeare’s work in the form of, for instance, Cesario and Orsino—who find themselves in wildly different social classes and yet they do share a certain common ground in the territory of masculinity. As for femininity, there started to arise, also, a sense of camaraderie that can be seen in the way gentlewomen and maids share their insights on wifhood and isolation in cases such as that of Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello*.

Though the 17<sup>th</sup> century may be a little early to speak of established homosociality between men and women, the concept of separate sexes rather than a single sex with two appearances—and consolidative relationships within manhood specifically—was already forming in the collective mind. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “sex as we know it was invented” (Laqueur 149) and the conceptualization of its characteristics had to be enforced by means of restricting language pertaining to it. Throughout the rest of the century and with the arrival of the bourgeois and middle classes, containment became more common due to widespread new ideas of gentlemanliness—and other concepts surrounding masculinity. The new class avowed to a new code of respectability that outlawed many discussions about sex—as in, sexual practices—resulting in a general will to infringe these norms. Ironically, the crude enforcement of a new vocabulary and discourse gave birth to an irreverent attitude towards it. Thus, “indecent speech” became rampant (Foucault 18).

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<sup>1</sup> As in the destabilization of power structures and established orders through inherently contradicting actions and/or identities.

In order to understand Shakespeare's own material conditions and the ideas of gender that would have been enforced upon him, it is necessary to present them in opposition to the current system so that the differences and similarities of both periods become apparent. Nonetheless, gender is a rather abstract concept in and of itself, and there are countless experiences and interpretations that could be applied here. Shakespeare's drama could have very well been a subversion of authority; a defiance of the mainstream. Thus, the analysis conducted here seeks to explore the *queer*—inherently destabilizing—ways in which gender and sexuality were represented both in his plays and in his time overall.

As a general rule, it would be anachronistic to talk about the state of homosexuality, transness or queerness in general within this time period, for such concepts did not exist as such. Foucault would argue that these kinds of labels are quite young and a product of the material conditions of late capitalism. It is more accurate to explore the ways in which certain actions could be related to those modern concepts as a way of rebellion against a standard. This is not to say that there existed no such thing as what would be now considered a gay or trans person back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but rather that those people's understanding of themselves as well as their position within their society are excruciatingly different. It is also important to indicate that even if certain actions were in and of itself revolutionary (e.g., the subversion of what a man/woman should have been) certain kinds of human behaviour have existed long before there was even a categorization; a.k.a. the fact that they happen under a system that actively marginalizes individuals that perform these activities is inherently political but not necessarily rebellious.

As for the identity politics of Shakespearean drama, Dollimore and Sinfield state that the term 'sodomy' covered what would now be lesbianism, homosexuality, adultery,

anal sex, marginalization and even political insurgence (132). It is sort of an umbrella term for almost any kind of deviation from the conventional and traditional. However, never was it used as a self-identifier but rather as an accusatory (legal, even) term. With a general character, it can be considered a term that lumps all divergent desires together to condemn them as one and the same evil. The vagueness of the term reflects the vagueness of the concepts that it is trying to represent: same-gender attraction and desire, gender dissidence and even female emancipation (in the form of witches and witchcraft) are all different issues, and yet they share the fact that, in some way or form, they break the establishment and expectations that gender poses on individuals. In other words, gender as a power structure that is passively and actively enforced existed, even if the actual concepts were not being weaponized yet.

Thus, homoerotic desire was ever-present at the time even if it was far from an identity or identifier; not only that, but there existed awareness about it in the form of persecution and/or fear (fabricated by religious institutions). Just as this can be considered similar to today's homosexuality, transvestism could—in some cases—be very well related to the current understanding of trans and non-binary people—as in, proving the social character of gender. Drama is inevitably tied to performance, and it is through this medium that this analysis can explore the similarities between the actual performance of characters and the gendered performance. Transvestism and cross-dressing as described by Dollimore and Sinfield were pleasurable explorations of the defiance of the natural order of things (141). After all, theatre's purpose, especially in the case of comedies such as the one that is the subject of this study, is to entertain. As such, there are plethora of interpretations as to what was the purpose of cross-dressing in the context of drama. One could assume automatically that the breaking of designated gendered performances would cause a ruckus, and yet people at the time observed such shows with fascination and

desire—a sort of yearning for what is forbidden. This way, drama created a sort of suspension of disbelief through which the audience could indulge in otherwise unthinkable acts. Drama was, therefore, a medium that allowed the blurring of gender norms with no material consequences. This issue begs the question of whether cross-dressing was in and of itself anti-establishment or a way for playwrights to create carefully threaded cautionary tales that set an example.

### 1.3. The present or the performance of identity

Disguise is widely used both in drama and in *Twelfth Night* more specifically. It is the ultimate vehicle for actors to represent their characters and for the characters to achieve their objectives. In reality, this can be said about any and every single comedy within the 17<sup>th</sup> century. What makes this play worthy of the extra attention is the way in which it makes a compelling argument for the conceptualization of gender itself as a performance. From this point onwards, the connection between dramatic performance (and transvestism) and the performance of gender as an identity rather than as a set of actions becomes clearer.

Butler presented the theory of gender as a series of performative actions that, together, contribute to the construction of a certain identity, be it gender, sexuality or desire (*Gender Trouble*, 16). Rather than actions defining a performance, the performance defines a certain identity that is recognizable by all parties and results in a series of expectations and interactions. However, it goes beyond gender in and of itself, for they argue that any part of their identity that is related in some way to the same system that enforces the standard of gender—that is, ‘man’ and ‘heterosexual’—constitutes an identity of its own (372).

As it has been stated before, the current understanding of gender and sexuality is a product of the material conditions of the present time under late capitalism. If we accept this to be true, then there must be a historical reason why identity has become an integral part of us as individuals as well as a reason for 17<sup>th</sup> century people's lack of a real sense of self-identification regarding forms of desire. There must be a crucial difference between the relationship that they had with the overarching societal structure then and the way we interact with power structures and hierarchies now. It could be that identity rises due to the need for organized action against oppression, but oppressive systems are far from new. It can also be the fact that that communication has allowed people to find a sense of community through shared struggles, but that phenomenon is also present throughout human history as a whole. The difference between us and them is, therefore, no other than *time*. Gender and sexual identity as a sense of self and community may not have existed back then, but individuals that partook in certain activities for which they had no other reason than desire and enjoyment—even when facing the possibility of punishment and death—did so knowing that it would turn them into outcasts; it turned them *queer*, in a way.

Our understanding of identity as an *I* rather than *I do* is just the natural evolution of individuals becoming aware of the fact that they are marginalized. In other words, theories of gendered performances may be applied retroactively to people who lacked awareness of their identities simply because the conscious performance of the traits that would later result in the appearance of those identities was indeed present. Even if they did not know *what* they were, they performed it—both in a social and dramatic sense. The difference between our time and theirs can be summarized by observing how and why were 'identities' performed. In the present, identity is an integral part of self-expression because of the way it intersects directly with every single part of the being

whereas in the Elizabethan period there was no such thing as an *I* referring to the expression of desire (sexuality) or dissidence (gender identity; transvestism). Nonetheless, an acknowledgement of the effects in the material conditions of individuals as a result of acting upon their desires existed, even if it was rather vague.

Literature and specifically drama is the perfect source to analyse gender and sexuality through their performative nature—even if no labels are involved. *Twelfth Night* specifically contains the diegetic performance of the main character as another gender, as well as the metatextual performance of the actor that partakes in the role.

## 2. Structure and discourse

### 2.1. The dramatic structure

At first glance, the play follows the classic structure of a comedy: the juxtaposition of opposed elements that, when confronted in the final act, create a humorous situation. In this case, Viola (Cesario) arrives to Illyria in the aftermath of what they<sup>2</sup> think is the death of their brother in a shipwreck. Afterwards, as soon as they encounter Orsino, they make the decision of wooing him. For this purpose, disguise is introduced as a way for them to approach the duke: “Conceal me what I am, and be my aid / For such disguise as haply shall become / The form of my intent”, say they (Shakespeare 1.2.56-58).

Disguise and deception are arguably the main elements that create the conflict in this story, as well as the source of humour. The clash between reality and lies is often used for the sake of comedy in many instances throughout the play, such as Sebastian questioning whether everyone has gone mad due to them mistakenly thinking he is his sibling (Shakespeare 4.1.27). However, despite the undeniable nature of this work as a

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of consistency and clarity, Cesario/Viola will be addressed with neutral terms in this analysis to avoid ambiguity.

comedy, the conflicts that these situations arise result, also, in tragic resolutions as, for example, Antonio ending an outcast with no place in the finale other than rejection from Sebastian in favour of a traditional marriage.

The structure of the play follows the Freytag Pyramid, a modification of Aristotle's conception of the dramatic action as a triangle. Aristotle divided dramatic structure in three acts, namely *protasis* (introduction), *epitasis* (conflict or climax) and *catastrophe* (conclusion), whereas Freytag complicates this structure adding a 'rising action' stage and a 'falling action' one ("Classical Narrative"; "Freytag's Pyramid"). *Twelfth Night* is divided in these five stages and fits neatly within this mold.

The first act presents the main characters—Cesario, Sebastian, Orsino and Olivia—as well as the setting and the conflicts that will unfold in the next stages. The order of events sets the course for the audience to understand what the main points of the plot will be: the play opens with Orsino mumbling about his quest for Olivia's love, immediately followed by the appearance of Viola and their consequent transformation in Cesario. The position of these events foreshadows Cesario's eventual relationship as a servant in Orsino's court. Next, it is shown how Olivia falls in love with Cesario's *persona* and thus the course of events is set. The second act adds to the plotlines that have been presented and further reinforces the connections and conflicts that the characters share, as well as how they are about to be unfolded towards the climax. For instance, Sebastian is revealed to be alive—which can interfere with Cesario's plans—and Olivia starts acting on the feelings she has for Cesario, luring them towards her side through trickery (and ignoring her bows to mourn her brother for years to come).

The climax and subsequent falling action stages have the main character either failing to overcome obstacles or being able to circumvent most of the difficult situations. *Twelfth Night's* nature as a comedy prevents these stages from resulting in the failure of



the protagonist: Cesario is time and time again trying to dismiss Lady Olivia but their efforts are in vain for Olivia is relentless on her quest for requited love. It is at this stage that Cesario even starts to question his own identity and objectives as their disguise is coming to light as a part of themselves rather than a deception. Antonio then gets intertwined in their affair and offers himself to protect who he thinks is Sebastian—Cesario seems to look fairly the same as their brother—from Sir Andrew. The arrival of Sebastian ensues even more chaos but it is the ultimate catalyst of the climax; the different plotlines converge and they are resolved with ease. Sebastian functions as a replacement for Cesario, with whom Olivia seems to be pleased. As conflicts start closing, each of the characters break their façade and start to fit within the social position that they were meant to fill in the first place.

The conclusive act is merely a means to close the remaining plotlines, that is, Cesario's relationship with Orsino and Antonio's search of Sebastian after their separation. Antonio is revealed to be a public enemy due to his past as a pirate and he tries to warn Orsino that Cesario—he is thinking of Sebastian—has been with him for the past few weeks but he gets dismissed. After this brief confusion, Orsino processes the fact that Cesario has been in disguise as a man. Nevertheless, in a subversive turn of events—and still referring to them as Cesario—Orsino decides to take them as his mistress (possibly soon-to-be spouse). From a general point of view, every character is now fulfilling the societal expectations for what their fate should be: Sebastian and Cesario find themselves in (seemingly) traditional relationships.

While this may seem like the end, the play concludes with Feste singing a song<sup>3</sup> that contradicts that expectation. Feste speaks of rain and storms, referencing the fact that

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix.

the struggles of the characters do not end with them marrying; they are bound to encounter obstacles due to their nature, even if they are conforming to societal norms.

## 2.2. Cautionary tale vs. challenge to authority

As was discussed in section 1.1., a materialist analysis of the ideology and conditions of a certain period needs to address the relationships of the individuals with and within their social classes under a certain system. In his theory of Historical Materialism, Marx postulates that the main contradiction (opposition) in the society he lived in was, of course, class—a matter of proletariat vs. bourgeoisie. According to him, there are three ways in which different social groups interact: the consolidation of a pre-established order (the system perpetuating itself), the subversion of such order (revolution and/or organization) and the containment of subversion (repression). This is also applicable to other contradictions in society, namely gender and, by extension, sexuality.

Some authors argue that Shakespeare's representation of order amidst chaos and the violent subversion of peace in plays such as *Henry IV* make him an actor in favour of consolidation. Tillyard<sup>4</sup> asserts that some of the metaphors he uses “served to express the unimaginable plenitude of God's creation, its unfaltering order, and its ultimate unity” (23). This perspective understands his representations of subversion as cautionary tales that seek to preserve and promote the established system. Under this premise, *Twelfth Night* could make a compelling argument for consolidation: the use of the contradictions between nature and disguise resulting in chaos, the ultimate fate of the characters fitting their traditional roles and even the characters' own introspections about their situations are some elements that could lead to the belief that the Bard was trying to set an example.

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<sup>4</sup> Tillyard's analysis is based on the concept of the divine providence to postulate that Shakespeare and his contemporaries during the Elizabethan era were the utmost exponents of orthodoxy. His claims, however, are biased (he tries to extend the general ideology of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to individual authors) and ignore a myriad of facts, which is why most of his works regarding the study of the literary cosmovision have been debunked to some extent.

To a greater extent, the nature of this play as a comedy that uses the breaking of social norms for the sake of comedy could be interpreted in and of itself as a statement about the rightful order of things. However, the perspective of absolute orthodoxy fails to address plethora of instances in which Shakespeare was subversive towards the status quo. Pieces such as Feste's song cannot be fully understood as calls to perpetuate tradition unless they are taken at face value.

For sure, all the aforementioned elements can be individually interpreted as examples of tradition enforcement, but to present such an analysis is to ignore the subtext that contextualizes each of these phenomena. The song that gives closure to the play can only be seen as a critique of marriage as the ultimate solution (and the sole fate of these characters). Bernard J. Paris postulates in reference to Shakespeare's historical characters that "a strictly functional analysis of such characters is highly reductive, since it neglects a vast amount of detail that is there primarily for the sake of the mimetic portrait" (17). Something similar can be said about the characters of his comedies: it is unwise to analyse each character individually as an autonomous agent—giving meaning to each of their actions separately—instead of as a piece of the much larger puzzle that is the narrative crafted by the author. For instance, someone akin to Tillyard would interpret Sebastian's choice to marry Olivia as a pro-traditional marriage statement. However, an analysis of Sebastian as a character within a narrative that is possibly criticising the institution of marriage would take into account the reasons why he chooses to marry her, as well as the repression of a not-so-subtle homosexual desire towards Antonio.

As Dollimore concurs, there existed "reluctance to use the theatre as a means of 'educating men's minds to virtue'" (77), in other words, it is very unlikely that the ending of *Twelfth Night* was devised as a means of lecturing the audience about the right ways of life. Evidence suggests, then, that a subversive interpretation of Shakespeare's *oeuvre*

is more than plausible and actually sensible if the tendencies of his time and contemporaries are taken into account.

The element that makes this play such an interesting exercise of subtle subversion is the fact that the very ending recontextualizes most of the play's narrative. Feste's comments on the characters and events as an outsider provide a unique point of view that is mostly separate from the rest of the cast. Even if it is not stated outright, Feste serves as the embodiment of the audience's (or even the author's) thoughts. His song expresses that both Cesario and Sebastian are bound to experience sorrow in their lives even after marriage, for it is not the end of their story. There can be speculation about what kind of turmoil afflicts them in a hypothetical future, but based merely on the dramatic structure a safe assumption can be made about what those conflicts may be about as well as their significance within the bigger picture of 17<sup>th</sup> century's society. The introductory acts present a series of conflicts that are eventually resolved; however, there is not really a sense of closure for either of the siblings. Cesario achieves their objective of becoming Orsino's mistress but their turmoil regarding the blurred lines of their disguise and their true self is never really addressed (and Orsino does not seem to care as long as their relationship is socially acceptable). Sebastian considered the possibility of requiting Antonio's feelings, and yet he dismissed his innermost desire as soon as he met a stranger that was willing to marry him. As far as text is concerned, these characters go from point A to point B and overcome the conflicts that torment them (albeit in a humorous way, this is still first and foremost a comedy) but Feste's final words and a fair amount of subtext suggest that they simply weighed their options and their choices provided them with the best possible future to which they could aspire—that is, considering they had a say at all by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> act.

The subversive character of Shakespeare's plays and *Twelfth Night's* specifically makes it possible to interpret how individual characters' performances—within a greater context, never isolated—construct a sort of unconscious identity that puts them in a certain position within the socio-political system of the contemporary society. In other words, if Shakespeare's discourse is to be taken as anti-establishment, the representations of characters that break said establishment through individual actions can be considered genuine manifestations of dissidence—that can be analysed from a performativist conception of gender and sexuality<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Performances

*ORSINO: Cesario, come,  
For so you shall be, while you are a man,  
But when in other habits you are seen,  
Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen.  
(Shakespeare 5.1.408-411)*

Performative acts of speech can be described—in a humorous note—as iterations that “do things with words” (Austin). This categorization goes above and beyond previous instances by presenting the possibility that acts of speech, by virtue of being carried out, bring change into the state of the world. Butler goes on to establish the relationship between this characteristic and the development of social processes that are related to gender, sex and sexuality (*Excitable Speech*).

Cesario's turning point in the play is, precisely, the impending realization that his disguise has material implications in the way they are perceived by everyone and they

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that identity politics existed as such in the early-modern period but rather that individual actions still created a shared unconsciousness around the concepts of gender and sexuality. Post-structuralist theorists postulate that the performance of such actions is the basis for these social constructs.

themselves. The climax sees the protagonist loathing their situation and becoming aware of the possible consequences of their actions and the harm they could cause to the characters around them. As a man they cannot love Orsino, and as a woman it is impossible to accept Olivia's love. It is particularly interesting, the way Cesario analyses their conflict: the effectiveness of their disguise has allowed them to be treated by the male characters as one of their own and not only that, but it has given them an insight of masculinity that allows them to observe their relationship with Orsino from a masculine point of view, and it has also caused poor Olivia to develop an attraction to them. Cesario continues to address their situation using the juxtaposition of the masculine and feminine parts of his *persona*. They often comment on their own masculinity when confronted about it<sup>6</sup> but at the same time they are tormented by the internalized reminder that they are a woman by birth<sup>7</sup>. In a way, Cesario is conscious of their upbringing and social position as a woman while being able to adapt quickly to their current condition as a man to a point in which they are not aware of the radical change of their material conditions. In other words, concepts of masculinity and femininity are being assimilated at this period in a way that allows individuals to conform to them without really noticing.

It could be argued that most of Cesario's turmoil is there for the sole purpose of creating humorous situations. In fact, it most certainly is. However, Shakespeare is prone to introduce bits of tragedy and seriousness within his comedies and vice versa; it would be unwise to ignore the subtext that suggests there is more weight in their words than it seems at first. Proof of this is the quote that opens this section. Orsino's response to Cesario's revelation and true nature is quite interesting for a plethora of reasons, namely

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<sup>6</sup> "I hate ingratitude more in a man than lying, vainness, babbling, drunkenness, or any taint of vice whose strong corruption inhabits our frail blood." (Shakespeare 3.4.372-375).

<sup>7</sup> "How easy is it for the proper false in women's waxen hearts to set their forms! Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we..." (Shakespeare 2.2.29-31).

the fact that a major element in comedies (and in the dramatic structure itself) is the resolution of conflicts—the closure of character arcs—and the settlement of characters within a comfortable position. Orsino, on the other hand, insists on addressing Cesario as a boy (at least when they wear masculine garments).

The ramifications of Cesario's decision to declare himself a man at the beginning of the play are, therefore, palpable at such a later stage. There are many implications, too, in Orsino's words. Throughout the play, Cesario tries numerous times to woo Orsino while maintaining their disguise as they best can. Such attempts are not fruitful, for it cannot occur to Orsino that the stories Cesario tells of impossible love and secret affairs are about them. At least, that is what the text suggests. Although the possibility of him understanding—and therefore purposefully ignoring Cesario's attempts—exists. When confronted with the fact that Cesario was not, in fact, a man (by sex terms, that is), Orsino is quick—very quick—to switch the object of his desire towards them. This paired with the fact that he keeps addressing them as a boy (partially) may hint to the fact that he has, in fact developed a sort of homosexual attraction to Cesario by the conclusion of the story.

As was addressed in the first section of this essay, the understanding of desire and gendered terms was based on actions. Taking this into account, Orsino's insistence (and Cesario's willingness to oblige) in keeping the masculine performance of his now lover is quite interesting. If Orsino has been and is indeed attracted to Cesario *as a man*, then his words attain a new meaning. Cesario's performance of masculinity is beyond a simple disguise. In their efforts to fit within Orsino's court, they developed a sort of homosocial<sup>8</sup> relationship. Cesario is considered an equal and as such they are no longer subjected to the status quo but rather a part of it. Homosocial relationships are said to be, to some

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding homosociality: relationships between same gender individuals, usually men. A term used to describe the consolidative role that masculinity and relationships between men have within the patriarchy (Hammarén and Johansson).

extent, homoerotic due to the tendency to uphold masculinity over femininity—and men over women, by extent. Cesario’s performance mimicked that of man in such a way that it made no difference in practice; to Orsino, Cesario *is* a man that is socially (externally) regarded as a woman—which allows him to act on his desires with no repercussions whatsoever.

It should be noted that the link between homosexuality—a.k.a. the sexual—and homosocial bonding is quite volatile but it exists nonetheless. Homosocial relationships in male-dominated societies are in one way or another related to the upholding and perpetuating of patriarchy. This is not to say that any social bond between men is inherently misogynistic, but rather that the intersection between overarching power structures and the individual interactions between male individuals is a part of a continuum that contains both homosocial and homosexual desire—the latter being the subject of homophobia at the hands of fellow men (Sedgwick). This homophobia is in and of itself misogynistic, not just by virtue of othering the femininity that is present in male individuals, but also directly affecting women in the process. For instance, the triangular structure composed by Sir Toby, Maria and Sir Andrew as they take advantage of the latter’s gullible character, which later results in Sir Toby and Maria getting together off-scene.

Sir Andrew’s masculinity (or lack of thereof) is the object of comedic remarks uttered by Sir Toby, who entices Sir Andrew into duelling Cesario for Olivia’s love. Sir Toby plays with Sir Andrew’s lack of manliness—his cowardice and feminine mannerisms—and uses it as a motivator to force him to battle Cesario. Duels, war and battles, being traditionally masculine, men-to-men activities, are the perfect setting both for Sir Andrew’s playful humiliation and for Cesario’s funny comments about ‘what he lacks as a man’. Sir Toby jokingly describes Cesario to Sir Andrew as “a very devil. I



have not seen such a firago. I had a pass with him, rapier, scabbard, and all, and he gives me the stuck-in with such a mortal motion that it is inevitable” (Shakespeare 3.4.284-287). ‘Firago’ acts (possibly) as a modified version of ‘virago’, a woman of manly character (bad-tempered; strong). In this case, however, it is used in reference to Cesario as a means to frame them as a great warrior, perhaps stronger than the most furious woman. The allusions to the rapier and scabbard and Cesario’s comment about how much he lacks of a man (Shakespeare 3.4.315-316) also add to the comedic character about their masculinity.

The duel scene is also rather interesting for the juxtaposition of rivalry (and homosocial relationships on the basis of power) and actual desire. Although the motivator for the duel is indeed Sir Andrew’s concern about Olivia (an agenda pushed by Sir Toby) it is not really what is at stake. The reason Sir Andrew partakes in this scheme is no other than the challenge to his masculinity: his qualities as a man are being questioned by his lack of motivation to fight for Olivia. On the other hand, when Antonio finds Cesario (who he thinks is Sebastian) he is willing to fight on their behalf, motivated by his affection towards Sebastian. The woman in this sort of triangle is a mere object for the masculine characters to assert their manhood, whereas Antonio (who is the exception that proves the rule) is just moved by actual genuine desire—as opposed to rivalry.

Although Cesario does comment upon their own lack of physical manhood (genitalia) there are many instances in which they (Cesario) conform to the image of men and masculinity in such a complex and nuanced way. In a conversation with Orsino they postulate that “we men may say more, swear more, but indeed our shows are more than will, for still we prove much in our vows, but little in our love” (Shakespeare 2.4.128-130). They are implying that men are quite flamboyant when declaring their love towards women, whereas women are more invested in long-term demonstrations of faithfulness

and affection. However, that seems contradictory when their own displays of romanticism for Orsino are taken into account, which could be described as melodramatic at times. For instance, their ultimate declaration of love<sup>9</sup> has them stating they would gladly give their life for the man they love—notably, right after he threatened to kill them. Cesario thinks of herself as a woman for most of the play but their ways of acting upon their feelings resemble those of their own ideas about masculinity, which is consistent with other male characters such as Antonio and his overt displays<sup>10</sup> of love for Sebastian or Orsino himself and his insistence in wooing Olivia. Cesario’s way of conforming to masculinity is, however, peculiar in some instances. For example, the self-conscious thoughts that arise when they are faced with the reality that Olivia is indeed on love with them. These contradicting representations are first and foremost material manifestations of the conflict that the disguise is causing. Nonetheless, it would be unwise to immediately discard the possibility that such conflicting thoughts could be a deliberate choice to show that Cesario is assuming the masculine identity in an unconscious way while trying to enforce the feminine expectations on themselves—again showing how biases are ingrained deeply in individuals’ minds.

On a metatextual level, it is also worthy of observation that the actors representing every single character were men. In other words, in the case of Cesario, a man performed the role of a woman pretending to be a man, which adds to the homosocial character of the character’s relationship with Orsino. It should also be noted that men interpreting women was rather common at the time, but it was far from a standard and there existed backlash against these representations, which can be traced back to the unsettling

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<sup>9</sup> “After him I love, more than I love these eyes, more than my life, more by all mores than e’er I shall love wife. If I do feign, you witnesses above punish my life for tainting of my love” (Shakespeare 5.1.138-142).

<sup>10</sup> “I could not stay behind you. my desire, more sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth” (Shakespeare 3.3.4-5).

character of transvestism. Transvestites—as in people wearing garments traditionally considered to be exclusive of the other gender—were known in these contexts for using cross-dressing as a way to challenge evaluations of women that deemed them to be inferior to men (Dollimore and Sinfield). In the case of characters such as Cesario, although some parts of their character can be considered an effort for containment, the implication that the actor—not just the character—is transgressing heteronormativity in some way is in and of itself destabilizing the belief system that supports these norms.

Butler maintains that performative acts of gender and sexuality are not passively enforced upon individual subjects, but rather taught as directives to enforce upon oneself within the confined space of the body (“Performative Acts” 526). This fits within Dollimore and Sinfield’s perspective of radical dissidence in Shakespeare’s drama being not an active opposition to systematic oppression, but rather an acknowledgement of a set of rules that conform political domination over a certain group (141). Cesario is very well aware of their surroundings and the rules that prevail in a 17<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal society, even if they do not actually have the means to analyse them from a purely theoretical standpoint—again, the perks of *Twelfth Night* being first and foremost a comedy. What they do have the ability to do is to become aware of the repercussions of their performance and, at the same time, to assess that they are effectively breaking the established order of the *status quo*, which causes them to be in distress from the point of their realization onwards. In fact, it is no other than Cesario himself who is concerned with the anti-natural character of his actions. Ironically, most of the characters do not happen to be worried about societal pressure at all: Olivia is more than willing to ignore the mourning of her brother as soon as she develops feelings for Cesario, Orsino was favourably disposed towards indulging in his desires and Antonio partook in nothing but

melodramatic displays of affection towards Sebastian. It seems as though Cesario is the only one being self-conscious about the contradictions of his state.

Awareness, of course, does not imply revolution or even vindication. It is, however, a good indicator that there existed extensive knowledge about the ways in which the dominant system enforces a set of behaviours upon individuals—and by extension the ways in which dissident subjects navigated such a system. With this in mind, the conclusion of Cesario's arc can be interpreted as a representation of the flimsy containment efforts of the dominating (patriarchal and heterosexual) group that insists upon the orthodox belief that sexual difference is undeniable—and that the disguising of one's gender is inevitably severing the divine connection between the body and the soul. It is proof of the social nature of gender as opposed to sex. This knowledge is, in and of itself, a threat to the establishment: it debunks gender segregation as a concept and by extension the consolidative narrative that supports it—divine providence, in the case of the Elizabethan period.

Despite the focus of the play being Cesario's relationship with Orsino, another way of looking at their character is through comparison with the one who is arguably the most similar to them, a.k.a. Sebastian. The fact that they look notoriously alike is crucial in many instances: most of the characters confuse them for each other, resulting in humorous interactions (e.g., Antonio being willing to sacrifice himself for who he thinks is Sebastian or Sir Andrew being eager to fight a disoriented Sebastian). The choice to make them physically the same bears some implications to the interpretation of their roles in the story. On a surface level, it is safe to assume that them being indistinguishable supports the point against gender difference; no one can actually tell who is who without Cesario coming forth and confessing. Once again, this is worthy of attention from a pragmatic point of view as for what was the intention of this representation. Their roles

within the play are not only a subversion of the traditional dramatic roles of men and women but also evidence for the social nature of gendered categories. A deeper analysis of the juxtaposition of their characters shows that they are doing more than just reversing gender roles; their actual role—as in, the actions that move the plot forward—is also reversed.

If we consider Cesario to be a woman by 17<sup>th</sup> century standards, then *Twelfth Night* is one of the few—although not that uncommon at the time—plays to be starred by a female character. Of course, female protagonists have existed since classical times, but a representation of women as the driving force of the plot is quite uncommon. This process of women adopting the ‘masculine’ role can be observed in other dramatic works such as *Antigone*<sup>11</sup> by Sophocles, in which the protagonist can be considered the catalyst that triggers the chain of events that lead to the tragic ending. Thus, in addition to adopting a masculine *persona* and behaviour, Cesario is also partaking in the traditional masculine role of storytelling. On the other hand, Sebastian is little more than a bystander that suffers the consequences of his sibling’s deception. The weight of his interventions—regarding the overarching plot—is so insignificant that he himself comments upon whether he is “mad, or else this is a dream . . . If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep!” when surprised by Olivia’s proposition, for he has not done anything to deserve such honour (Shakespeare 4.1.64-66). It could even be said that Sebastian fills a ‘feminine’ role when compared to other female characters: he is the recipient of both Antonio and Olivia’s love declarations and his character arc is widely influenced by the main character’s decisions (he is attacked in place of Cesario and Antonio tries to defend him).

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<sup>11</sup> In *Antigone*, the homonymous protagonist decides to bury her brother against the wishes of her uncle, causing him to condemn her to prison. Her impervious personality and strong ideals regarding the traditional cult to the gods make her a very complex and nuanced character.

It has been stated before that this play acknowledges dominance over the minority, but it is in no way a representation of revolution. Antonio is the best example of this notion. He is probably the most genuine character of the play; his actions are motivated purely by his affection towards Sebastian and—even if a bit melodramatic at times—he feels truly betrayed when ‘Sebastian’ (actually Cesario here) neglects him. Not only that, but just after a few weeks caressing Sebastian, he is more than willing to risk his life by accompanying him to Orsino’s court (he is wanted by the law because of some unspecified stunts related to piracy). Despite being the most virtuous character among the cast, his fate is arguably the worst of them all: once he exits the scene (presumably to be sent to prison) his whereabouts are unknown. Antonio’s melodramatic nature and performance mirrors that of Orsino (towards Olivia) and Cesario (towards Orsino) in a sense, and yet he is the only one that suffers the consequences. There is, indeed, a difference between him and the other two, which is that even if Orsino and Cesario’s relationship is not-so-traditional, they are still—in the eyes of society—a traditional couple. Antonio is the only character that effectively and directly expresses romantic feelings for someone of the same sex and his tragic ending can be interpreted as punishment for his actions. However, if that were the case, then the author would not have established the parallelism between him and the other ‘normative’ characters. The play, therefore, acknowledges that within the society he lives in, it is impossible for him to actually pursue his feelings for Sebastian but it presents his feelings as a genuine demonstration of love through a performance that echoes heterosexual relationships.

All of these performances have some characteristics in common, namely the fact that they are considered dangerous by the establishment. The characters that perform disavowal do so in a way that makes their dissidence hardly identifiable. The construction of their identities is subtle and the result of many smaller acts of divergence. However,

these identities—if they can even be referred to as such—are not specific for a reason. Even though performativity and social constructs have always existed, categorization is very young (dating from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and responds to the need for rallying. The reason for this is that the lines between desire and identity are quite blurred and it is not easy to separate them. The performances of *Twelfth Night's* characters are mainly based on their (romantic and sexual) desires rather than a motivation to find community and vindication. The fact that characters such as the ones here are not really containable—in a materialist sense—is what makes them inherently subversive.

Masculinity and femininity are presented in binary opposition, but at the same time attention is drawn to the similarities between them and the ambiguousness of their nature as social constructs. Characters constantly subvert expectations of gender, both through their words and their actions. This is a symptom of the contemporary understanding of sex as one entity divided into two forms as well as the fact that inter-gender conversations were rather encouraged in some spaces (not generally).

## Conclusions

The exploration of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its characteristics has provided evidence that concepts of gender in Shakespeare's time were starting to shift towards a more modern understanding of roles and power. Homosocial relationships started to appear not just in real-life contexts, but in fictional representations such as the one analysed in this essay. Comparing the early establishment of the concept of two different sexes (later genders) to the current understanding of gender as a social construct has shed light on the many similarities and connections between both situations. For instance, the consolidative character of inter-class masculine relationships is represented in the form of *Twelfth*

*Night's* main character. This is an example of how gender similarities and shared experiences were starting to transcend something as relevant as social classes.

The analysis of the play's narrative structure and political context has also been rather clarifying. While it is undeniable that more research is needed to assess whether Shakespeare's works had a subversive intention, a careful deconstruction of the devices that are used in each act presents a rather compelling point for subversion as opposed to containment. Many instances of the author representing chaos as a result of disguise—the breaking of the divine order—could have been interpreted as an argument for the cautionary-tale perspective. However, such an assessment, as it has been proved, fails to at least recognize not only textual elements that contradict this (such as Feste's song or Cesario's fate) but also the fact that the representation of certain actions in a period such as the 17<sup>th</sup> century is in and of itself a contradiction to the system—taking into account that the sole knowledge of the social nature of gendered categories was unsettling. Thus, enough support has been found for the argument that Shakespeare's plays can be interpreted as subversive pieces of literature within the context of 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Besides, due to the recontextualization of the narrative—courtesy of Feste's song—even the instances of failed social mobility through “disguise” can be interpreted not as an attempt to bring virtue to the minds of people, but rather as a social critique.

The nature of disguise in the play has also been analysed to address its relationship to the character's performances and how it is correlated to the social origins of gender. For instance, the fact that disguises demonstrate that gender roles are a social construct is, as it has been commented before, a sort of “dangerous” knowledge, which supports the idea that the negative consequences that the characters suffer due to their deceptions is actually repression. Nonetheless, the positive outcomes outweigh the actual conflicts that the characters have to face, which is in and of itself evidence that the characters'



performances have a permanent effect on their material conditions—and not just a negative one.

Finally, the exploration of performative acts of speech and gender has provided reasonable evidence to assert that the language the characters' use to describe themselves and each other has a direct influence in the social position that they occupy. As the central element of the play, Cesario has been proved to be such a complex and subversive creation that not only do they show how such an individual navigates society as a man—going as far as to establish a relationship with Orsino as equals—but also how sexuality is also perceived to be the product of socialization. Orsino's logic is that Cesario may be a man when in such guises and a woman when wearing feminine garments. This way, he indulges in a more than likely homosexual attraction towards Cesario and, at the same time, he is relocated into a “traditional” marriage. Although it may seem like the order is re-established in the concluding section of the play, certain details suggest that the characters' turmoil is anything but resolved with this arrangement, which proves that the intent of these characters is beyond—but not separated from—the comedic purpose.

The evidence that has been found within this essay is considered enough to propose that the performativity of gender and sexuality can be attested by the characters' interactions and development; however, more research is necessary to explore the early knowledge of these social constructs as well as the ways in which they were represented in fictional works from a subversive point of view.

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## Appendix

Feste's song (Shakespeare 5.1.412-431):

When that I was and a little tiny boy,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
A foolish thing was but a toy,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man's estate,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came, alas! to wive,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
By swaggering could I never thrive,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came unto my beds,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
With toss-pots still had drunken heads,  
For the rain it raineth every day.

A great while ago the world begun,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
But that's all one, our play is done,  
And we'll strive to please you every day.