

Constructions of Female Homoerotics in Early Modern Drama

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The cross-dressed heroine was a popular convention in early modern drama.¹ In his book *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage*, Michael Shapiro lists nearly eighty texts that include the character type.² Women dress as men in plays to help lovers or to follow them, to avoid rape, scandal or death, (although it can also be an expeditious means to pursue death, as in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*), to freely travel the countryside, and, as is the case of Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*, simply by choice. Women in male disguise in early modern dramas, when encountered by other female characters, can also signify the representation of a same-sex attraction. Roughly thirty plays in 1580–1660 use cross-dressing to construct scenarios of female homoerotic desire. However, not all cross-dressed heroines evoke a female-female erotic tension, and not all female homoerotics issue from disguised female characters. Why then is the disguised heroine such a common plot element in plays that evoke female same-sex desire? What benefit does she offer, or what use is the convention to early modern playwrights? And, how do these plays signify their homoerotic constructions?

Textual representations of female-female desire and sexual behaviors existed in sixteenth-century England, which were available to playwrights and at least the educated members of their audience. Therefore, when female characters were positioned together in erotically coded situations, dramatists could be confident that a portion, if not all of their audience would discern the homoerotic references. To construct an erotic tension between two female characters, playwrights often employed the narrative convention of the cross-dressed female heroine. Since the disguised

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¹ This essay focuses on the female subject rather than the boy actor. As Michael Shapiro has argued with his theory of "dual consciousness," at any given moment in a performance the early modern audience could be aware of the female character, even in male disguise, presented by a male actor. Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 7–8, 45–46.

² *Ibid.*, 221–23.

heroine's sartorial codes signify her as male, she becomes a potential object of desire for another woman. The erotic energy that passes between the disguised heroine and the desiring subject resonates with the broader cultural discourse of female-female desire and sexual practices, signifying those very behaviors and longings to the audience. However, from the viewer's perspective, the disguised heroine's mistaken identity also alleviates the desiring subject's guilt over her feelings for and actions toward another woman. Cross-dressing shields the characters from the kind of hostility directed at homoerotics in non-fiction because the attraction can be excused as error rather than intent. The disguise presents ambiguous sexual tensions that allow an audience to perceive the homoerotic attractions as benign and therefore acceptable. Playwrights employed the disguised heroine as a dramaturgical device to construct pleasurable homoerotic situations between women. Relying on cultural representations of transgressive sexual expressions, playwrights were able imaginatively to present a trope of female homoerotic desire.

In this essay, I demonstrate the connection between dramatic literature and other literary material by examining Robert Wilson's play *The Three Ladies of London* through the lens of Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti*. Aretino's non-dramatic text provides graphic images of female homosexual activity that open Wilson's play to an analysis of its homoerotic content. I then explore some of the textual evidence that illustrates an awareness of female-female desire and sexual activity available in early modern England. The knowledge that women enjoyed one another sexually and found avenues for same-sex encounters existed in a variety of literary material. The main section of the essay investigates how the cross-dressed female character evokes homoerotic images in a number of plays, both prominent texts such as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and John Lyly's *Gallathea*, as well as lesser-known works like Robert Greene's *James IV*, and *Love's Riddle* by the popular poet Abraham Cowley. Early modern drama abounds with erotic imagery, and homoerotic constructions add to the complex and evocative nature of these plays. This essay works to reveal how compositional structures are developed that might otherwise be dismissed, ignored, or misinterpreted in these works.

Expanding on Douglas Bruster's concept of the "sexually imaginable," I suggest that female homoerotic desire in early modern drama is encoded in the imaginative realm of a spectator's psyche, created when textual events, situations, or relationships are filtered through the existing cultural file of female homosexual behavior and activity.³ Though early modern playwrights do not script instances of female-female sex, members of the audience know such behavior is possible. The playwrights construct an expectation of female homoerotics but deny its fulfillment, relying on the spectator's ability to pull references from various cultural discourses inscribing female homosexual behavior. Audience reception of the plays would have functioned analogously to viewing films under the early Production Code. Deliberate ambiguity, both in language and presentation style, afforded a "textual indeterminacy" that positioned the spectator as the creator of narrative signification.⁴ The plays provided multiple

³ For his theory of the "sexually imaginable" see Douglas Bruster, "Female-Female Eroticism and the Early Modern Stage," *Renaissance Drama* 24 (1993): 24.

⁴ Richard Maltby, "The Production Code and the Hays Office," in *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, ed. Tino Balio, *History of the American Cinema* vol. 5 (New York: Scribner's, 1993), 40-41.

viewing positions whereby sophisticated audience members could read female homoerotics encoded in the means of representation. Spectators, cognizant of female homoerotic desire and sexual activity, could contrive incidents never implicitly articulated through character, plot, or dialogue, given representations of female same-sex desire subtextually encoded in the presentation.⁵

Brantôme's *Lives of Gallant Ladies*, begun sometime before 1584, illustrates that in the cultural context of late sixteenth-century Europe educated individuals could piece together a female homosexual paradigm from both the social and literary sources available, exercising the type of sophisticated reading I suggest would be necessary to perceive female homoerotics in early modern drama.⁶ In a section theorizing whether women who make love to each other can be guilty of adultery, Brantôme interprets several works by Lucian, Martial, and Juvenal as describing female homosexual activity and invokes Sappho as a specific example. Brantôme writes about women across the continent who enjoy sex with each other, both as a precursor to heterosexual relationships and as an exclusive desire, and identifies several by name, describing their escapades in some detail. He also describes the practice of tribadism and the use of dildos in women's sexual encounters. Elizabeth Wahl invokes Brantôme to argue that female homosexuality was a "conceptual category" in early modern England.⁷ That people could and did contextualize female homosexual behavior from disparate sources and compare fictive and social narratives is clear from Brantôme's writing. In a theatre reliant on audience imagination, how easy would it have been to see the sexual potential in homoerotic desires between two female characters? The playhouse was an imaginative space where two female bodies erotically positioned in the narrative could signify sexual practice.

I

Two texts printed in London in 1584, Robert Wilson's play *The Three Ladies of London* and Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, illustrate the overt representations of female homosexual behavior and homoerotic desire expressed in early modern writing and echoed in English drama. Aretino's erotic prose text describes the fictional autobiography of its main character's life as nun, wife, and courtesan, marking the convent as a special location of adventurous sexual behavior where nuns and monks indiscriminately copulate in orgiastic groupings.⁸ At one point Nanna, Aretino's primary speaker, voyeuristically watches eight bodies, both male and female, skewered together at the same time, with the men and women both penetrating same (the

⁵ Maltby explains that Hollywood musicals and screwball comedy relied on its audience's "preexistent knowledge" of sexuality for them to read the sexual events in ambiguously constructed plots. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

⁶ Brantôme, *Lives of Gallant Ladies*, trans. Alec Brown (London: Elek Books, 1961), 128–37. For the date of this work see Georg Harsdörfer, Introduction, *Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies*, trans. A. R. Allinson (New York: Liveright, 1933), especially xxviii.

⁷ Elizabeth Susan Wahl, *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 45–52.

⁸ One of Aretino's biographers argues that this "pornographic" text, including scenes of orgies, bestiality, and flagellation, did not startle its sixteenth-century audience. See James Cleugh, *The Divine Aretino: Pietro of Arezzo, 1492–1556: A Biography* (London: Anthony Bland, 1965), 209–15. Ian Moulton's discussion of Aretino in his book *Before Pornography, Erotic Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 119–57, provides a more complex analysis of his work.

women using dildos) and opposite sex partners, both vaginally and anally.⁹ The work also describes an occasion when Nanna and another nun become so aroused by looking at a small pornographic book that they take turns sexually satisfying each other with a glass dildo: "My little friend arranged it so nicely between her thighs, that one would have thought it was a man's machine pointed before the object of his temptation. I threw myself on my back, . . . my legs placed upon her shoulders, and she, putting it sometimes into my proper opening, sometimes into the smaller one, soon made me finish what I had to do; then, in her own turn, she took the place I was in, and I rendered her a thousand for one."¹⁰

Of course, the convent can be a ghettoized site of same-sex eroticism, based on a presumed scarcity of men, and the activity Nanna describes with the other nun emerges from the need to assuage their sexual arousal in the absence of a male partner. However, in part two of the *Ragionamenti*, Aretino advances the possibility that a woman could be sexually stimulated by her desire for another woman. Late in the dialogue a midwife describes her reaction to the body of another woman, whom she was watching make love to a young man:

My God, her neck And her breasts, Nurse, those two tits would have corrupted virgins and made martyrs unfrock themselves. I lost my wits when I saw that lovely body with its navel like a jewel at its center, . . . But her thighs, her legs, her feet, hands, and arms . . . The front parts of her body drove me wild, but the wonder and marvel which really drove me wild were due to her shoulders, her loins, and her other charms. I swear to you . . . that as I looked at her, I put my hand on my you-know-what and rubbed it just the way a man does when he hasn't a place to put it.¹¹

Here, unlike the convent scenes, the desire is specifically homoerotic. The midwife's long description obscures the male lover as irrelevant to her erotic reverie, making the same-sex eroticism of the scene more prominent. Her remark about corrupting virgins suggests that all women were susceptible to sexual arousal by other women. Aretino seems to leave little doubt that women were sexually attracted to one another and that a homoerotic desire was sufficiently stimulating enough to find relief in a sexual action.

Ian Moulton examines the complex nature of Aretino's vast English popularity, and argues that while once considered an important social critic, reception of Aretino's work devolved into prurient emphasis on its sexual explicitness.¹² According to a brief reference in *American Notes and Queries*, allusions to both the *Ragionamenti* and to Aretino's *Sonetti* appear in the writing of Spenser, Robert Greene, Gabriel Harvey, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, John Marston, John Donne, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, and others.¹³ Aretino's work was obviously known by England's playwrights, and a surprising similarity exists between Aretino's midwife and a scene in Robert Wilson's play *The Three Ladies of London*, provocatively questioning their potential connection.

⁹ Pietro Aretino, *The Ragionamenti: The Lives of Nuns, The Lives of Married Women, The Lives of Courtesans* (London: Libra Collection, 1970), 31. Moulton identifies this scene as the text's bawdiest, *Before Pornography*, 130.

¹⁰ Aretino, *The Ragionamenti*, 49.

¹¹ Pietro Aretino, *Dialogues*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Marsilio, 1994), 350.

¹² Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 146–57.

¹³ Saad El-Gabalawy, "Allusions to Aretino's Pornography," *American Notes & Queries* 13 (1974): 35–36.

Wilson's comic morality play, *The Three Ladies of London*, was printed the same year that Aretino's *Ragionamenti* was published in London.¹⁴ A popular play that generated a sequel and a reprint in 1592, *The Three Ladies* also bears the dubious distinction of being attacked by name in Stephen Gosson's *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*.¹⁵ Wilson belonged to the Earl of Leicester's company and was then taken up by the Queen's company. His play is likely to have appeared regularly in both repertoires, although its production history is unknown. As the subtitle states, here "is notably declared and set forth, how by the means of Lucar, Love and Conscience are so corrupted, that the one is married to Dissimulation, the other fraught with all abomination." The "abomination" of Conscience is not merely her criminal descent, but her acquiescence to the erotic seductions of another woman. In the play, Lucar is a kind of female crime boss, ordering murders, committing fraud and extortion, and engaging in prostitution. In contrast, Conscience lives with Love and Simplicitie, attempting an honest though humble life. Throughout the play Lucar preys upon Conscience and eventually bankrupts, then seduces her, only to use Conscience's modest house as the location for her illicit assignments.

The two female characters verbally spar with each other throughout the play, and the text continually returns to their relationship. Conscience asserts a robust, though not dogmatic, Christian ethic in the face of Lucar's dismissive, callous hedonism, creating a tension that draws the women together. In a scene late in the play, Lucar approaches Conscience during the depths of her poverty and offers her financial help. Conscience begins to waiver and rationalizes that since everyone else follows Lucar, why not herself? She consents to becoming a bawd—keeping the cottage she rents from Lucar at the disposal of her new mistress. Lucar then retrieves money for Conscience but immediately dismisses the servant who brings the chest of coins, leaving the women alone and Lucar seductively to seal her bargain:

Hold here my sweet, and then ever to see if any want,
The more I do behold this face, the more my mind doth vaunt:
This face is of favor, these cheeks are red and white,
These lips are cherry red, and full of deep delight.
Quick rolling eyes, her temples high, and forehead white as snow,
Her eyebrows seemly set in frame, with dimpled chin below:
O how beauty hath adorned thee with every seemly hue,
In limbs, in looks, with all the rest, proportion keeping dew:
Sure I have not seen a finer soul in every kind of part,
I can not choose but kiss thee with my lips that love thee with my heart.

[sig. Eiiiv]¹⁶

¹⁴ Scholarly criticism of the play has focused primarily on its anti-Semitic discourse. See Lloyd Edward Kermode, "The Playwright's Prophecy: Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* and the 'Alienation' of the English," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 11 (1999): 60–87; and Daryl W. Palmer, "Merchants and Miscegenation: *The Three Ladies of London*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *The Merchant of Venice*" in *Race, Ethnicity, and Power in the Renaissance*, ed. Joyce Green MacDonald (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 36–66.

¹⁵ H. S. D. Mithal, ed., *An Edition of Robert Wilson's Three Ladies of London and Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* (New York: Garland, 1988), xxi; and Irene Mann, "The Text of the Plays of Robert Wilson" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1942), 212.

¹⁶ Robert Wilson, *A Right Excellent and Famous Comcedy Called The Three Ladies of London* (London, 1584). Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

Lucar seduces Conscience by articulating her attractiveness, and the kiss promised in this speech is an unprecedented physical manifestation of female homoerotic desire. The image of the worldly Lucar's sensual corruption of Conscience's innocence, perhaps caressing her cheek, touching her mouth, holding her chin, and ending in a passionate onstage kiss, are visually striking in a theatre where women do not often appear together in intimate stage scenes. Although the play presents an allegorical reading of the corrupting influence of money, because commerce is metaphorically represented by a greedy woman, her seduction of purity, in the form of Conscience, is coded as homoerotic. On one level, goodness is corrupted by capital gain, but on the surface one woman uses sexual flirtation to seduce another woman. Conscience desires Lucar, meaning both financial resources and the female character representing them. In fact, the scene suggests that Conscience hesitates over her potential profit. She has spent most of the play after all condemning the debasing quality of greed and espousing the Christian virtues of poverty. However, Lucar offers more than money. Ultimately in the scene, Conscience is seduced by physical desire rather than currency, and Wilson plays upon a homoerotic, charged double entendre when he has Lucar explain that Conscience's change of heart is expected, "for poverty and desire for Lucar do force them follow my [Lucar's] mind" (sig. Eiv). An early modern audience member or reader of Wilson's play familiar with Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, especially the midwife's homoerotic tale of physical desire and the nun's exploits, might imaginatively expand the erotic plane of the drama's female relationship. Lucar's seduction of Conscience resembles the erotically charged description of the promiscuous midwife, and conceiving that Lucar and Conscience might satisfy each other sexually, knowing from Aretino's writing that women certainly can, must have been possible for the early modern imagination. In the already excessive carnality of female prostitution, the sexual possibilities for Lucar and Conscience are limitless.

II

An abundance of female homoerotic textual images appeared near the end of the sixteenth and in the early seventeenth century, demonstrating an ongoing discourse of which Aretino's *Ragionamenti* was a part. 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. Many of the non-fictional texts, which often present overt descriptions of female-female sex, condemn female homosexual practices, while the fictional literature, primarily displaying homoerotics but not sexual activity, suggests no reproach. Early on, Judith C. Brown and Louis Crompton examined legal and religious legislation against female homosexual activity.¹⁷ Despite their solely continental examples, to presume the English had no knowledge of these juridical precedents is implausible. All theological and later secular legislation condemning female-female sex issues from interpretations to Romans 1:18–32.¹⁸ St. Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, the penitentials of

¹⁷ Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: the Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3–20; Louis Crompton, "The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791," *Journal of Homosexuality* 6.1/2 (1980/81): 11–25.

¹⁸ The second half of Bernadette J. Brooten's book covers these early interpretations in exhaustive detail. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 189–358.

Egbert of York, the Venerable Bede, and Theodore of Canterbury all denounce women's sexual practices with other women.¹⁹ Probably the most influential theological work to reference female homosexual activity was Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, which defined as "unnatural vice," "copulation with an undue sex, male with male, or female with female," and references Romans.²⁰ Even the anatomies which appeared as the seventeenth century began condemn, as Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia* does, "wicked women" engaging in sexual activities with each other.²¹

Brown and Lillian Faderman argue that transvestite female sex was more severely punished by the courts in early modern Europe than were relations between women where no cross-dressing occurred.²² Written narratives about transvestites demonstrate the harsh legal ramifications for cross-dressed women who enjoyed sexual relations with other women. Both Michel de Montaigne in his 1580–1581 *Journal de voyage* and Henri Estienne in the 1566 *Apologie pour Hérodote* provide accounts of transvestite women whose corporal punishments, hanging and being burned alive, were associated with their use of an artificial phallus for sexual intercourse.²³ As a character that appeared on the early modern stage then, the cross-dressed woman evoked images of illicit sexuality. Cross-dressed heroines who enjoy erotic encounters with other women suggest the specter of the early modern tribade.

The literature of the period also presents images of homoerotic desire, though not necessarily same-sex sexual activity. The absence of sexual acts in fictive literature may signal its avoidance of moral censure. These texts also use the figure of the cross-dressed woman to construct homoerotic desires. However, an obvious discrepancy exists between the animosity leveled at female homoerotics in juridical, religious, and

¹⁹ Judith C. Brown, "Lesbian Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1989), 67–75. See also Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550–1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 138.

²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St Thomas Aquinas*, 2.2. QQ. CXXI–CLXX, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1921), 158. Aquinas ultimately dismisses an argument that adultery, seduction, and rape are worse offenses since they injure another party, but "unnatural vice" concerns only love between individuals.

²¹ Valerie Traub, "The Psychomorphology of the Clitoris," *GLQ* 2 (1995): 93. See also Harriette Andreadis, *Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics 1550–1714* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 39–43.

²² Brown, "Lesbian Sexuality," 73; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981), 47–51.

²³ Michel de Montaigne, *The Journal of Montaigne's Travels in Italy by Way of Switzerland and Germany in 1580 and 1581*, ed. and trans. W. G. Waters, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1903), 36–38; Henri Estienne, *Apologie pour Hérodote*, ed. Isidore Liseux, vol. 1 (1566; Paris, 1879), 178. For other Renaissance cases involving transvestite women see also Catalina de Erauso, Michele Stepto, and Gabriel Stepto, *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, *Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), 55–63; Helmut Puff, "Female Sodomy: The Trial of Katherina Hetzeldorfer," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30.1 (2000): 41–61; Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern Bullough and James Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 202–3; Patricia Crawford and Sara Mendelson, "Sexual Identities in Early Modern England: The Marriage of Two Women in 1680," *Gender & History* 7.3 (1995): 362–77.

medical texts, represented above, and their treatment in literature. For example, Janel Mueller describes John Donne's by now familiar elegy "Sappho to Philaenis," written in the 1590's, as "a master trope for utopian sexuality."²⁴ Playing upon similarity, and describing the masturbatory fantasy Philaenis provokes, Donne allows his Sappho an explicitness not matched in other late sixteenth-century literature:

And, oh, no more; the likenes beinge such,
 Why should they not alike in all parts touch?
 Hand to strange hand, lipp to lipp none denies;
 Why should they breast to breast or thighes to thighes?
 Likeness begettis such strange selfe-flatterie,
 That touching my selfe, all seemes done to thee.²⁵

Unlike Donne's coterie poems, available only to a small audience of friends, the homoerotically charged texts of Ovid were readily available in English translations. Ovid's most popular work to deal with homoerotically charged material is the fascinating story of Iphis and Ianthe from the *Metamorphosis*, also translated into English in 1567 and frequently reissued. Not surprisingly, this story was dramatized at Cambridge in 1621 in the Latin play *Iphis* written by Henry Bellamy, which probably served as the model for the play titled *Iphis & Iantha, or a Marriage without a Man* entered in the Stationers' Register of 1660.²⁶ Other tales of female cross-dressing that construct homoerotic desires appear in the story of Ide and Olive from the 1534 translation of *Huon of Bordeaux*, Philoclea's reaction to the supposed Amazon Zelmane from Philip Sidney's 1590 *Arcadia*, Fiordispina's passion for the Amazonian Bradamant in John Harrington's 1591 translation of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Britomart's homoerotic couplings with Glauce, Malecasta, and Amoret in Edmund Spenser's 1596 *The Faerie Queene*, as well as the various erotic exchanges both Oronce and La belle Sauvage have with other women in the widely popular *Amadis de Gaule*, and the familiar story of Philismina along with the curious actions of Ismenia in the 1598 translation of Jorge De Montemayor's *Diana*.²⁷ Ismenia's story is different from the rest in that she openly seduces another woman, pretending later to be a disguised man.

²⁴ Janel Mueller, "Lesbian Erotics: The Utopian Trope of Donne's 'Sappho to Philaenis,'" in *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*, ed. Claude Summers (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1992), 106–8. George Klawitter offers an alternate reading of Donne's poem as articulating desire between two men in *The Enigmatic Narrator: The Voicing of Same-Sex Love in the Poetry of John Donne* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 51–61.

²⁵ John Donne, *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, vol. 2 (London, 1873), 103–5.

²⁶ Henry Bellamy, *Iphis*, Renaissance Latin Drama in England, First Series, vol. 10 (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1982). See also Bruster, "Female-Female Eroticism," 11.

²⁷ *Huon of Bordeaux*, trans. John Bourchier, Early English Text Society, Extra Ser. 43, 50 (1534; London, 1884, 1887), 725–27; Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (The New Arcadia), ed. Victor Skretkovicz (1590; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 148–49; Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. John Harrington, ed. Robert McNulty (1591; Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 280; on Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* see Kathryn Schwarz, *Tough Love: Amazon Encounter in the English Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 168–74; on *Amadis de Gaule* see Winfried Schleiner, "Le feu cache: Homosocial Bonds Between Women in a Renaissance Romance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 45 (1992): 292–311; on the English popularity of this romance see John O'Connor, *Amadis de Gaule and its Influence on Elizabethan Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970); [Jorge de Montemayor], *Diana of George of Montemayor: translated out of Spanish into English by Bartholomew Yong of the Middle Temple, Gentleman* (London, 1598), sig. B3–B5, sig. E1v–F4.

The above examples suggest a distinction between texts representing female homoerotic desire and those presenting sexual acts. Bruce Smith, in his important work *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, makes a distinction between the acceptance of male homoerotic desire represented in poetic discourse and male homosexual acts legislated against by moral, medical, and legal discourse. I believe that English playwrights used the knowledge of female-female sexual acts but manipulated narrative strategies in their texts to construct acceptable representations of female homoerotic desire in dramatic literature.²⁸ Play scripts tend to embed this homoerotic tension in the ambiguity surrounding cross-dressed female characters.

Of course, the mere presence of a transvestite character alone would not evoke female homoerotics in a literary narrative. As with sexuality, while public discourse ridiculed and condemned female transvestism,²⁹ in literary discourse female transvestism could be lightly comic, valorous, or tragic.³⁰ On one hand then, male disguise references the transgressive sexuality of the public discourse. As Kathryn Schwarz argues, the incongruity between gender and sex presented by a masculinized female figure could lead to an "assumption of deviant sexuality," both homo- and heteroerotic.³¹ The cross-dressed heroine in early modern drama evokes the specter of illicit sexual practices and interests through her disguise. However, female homoerotic desire is constructed without the threat it will be fulfilled since in the world of romantic comedy the characters are otherwise heterosexually encoded. As Jean Howard states, "the meaning of cross-dressing varied with the circumstances of its occurrence, with the particulars of the institutional or cultural sites of its enactment, and with the class position of the transgressor."³² Situated in fiction, and more

²⁸ Both Bruce Smith and Valerie Traub discuss the contradictory nature of the legal, religious, moral, and literary responses to male homosexual experience in early modern England. See Bruce Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 11–22; and Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 106.

²⁹ For general discussions of the cross-dressing debates see Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540–1620* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy About Women in England, 1540–1640* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985). For contemporary accounts of female cross-dressing see William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen (1587; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), 147; George Gascoigne, *The Steele Glas: Complainte of Phylomene*, *The English Experience* 597 (1576; New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), sig. liv; Barnabe Riche, *Barnabe Riche His Farewell to Military Profession*, ed. Donald Beecher, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 91 (1581; Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1992), 128–29; Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, *New Shakespeare Society Publications Ser. 6* Nos. 4, 6, 12 (1583; Vaduz: Kraus Reprint, 1965), 73; and Shapiro, *Gender in Play*, 15–28, 225–34.

³⁰ For examples of the figure used comically see Thomas Lodge, *Rosalynde: Euphues' Golden Legacy*, ed. W. W. Greg (1590; London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 158–59; A. J. Mill, ed., *Philotus*, *Miscellany Volume*, *The Scottish Text Society 3rd Ser.* vol. 4 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1933), 83–93; and Riche, *Farewell*, 74–80, 98, 199. For two valorous cross-dressed figures see the story of Fredericke of Jennen in Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 8 (London: Routledge, 1975), 63–78 and the ballad of Mary Ambree in Robert Bell, ed., *Early Ballads Illustrative of History, Traditions, and Customs Also Ballads and Songs of the Peasantry of England* (London, 1877), 158. For a tragic figure see *Soliman and Perseda* in W. Carew Hazlitt, ed., *A Select Collection of Old English Plays*, 4th ed. vol. 5 (London, 1874).

³¹ Schwarz, *Tough Love*, 6.

³² Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 94.

specifically in romantic comedy, the cross-dressed female character provokes humor rather than anxiety. These characters do not fit Valerie Traub's femme/tribade binary, making them more flexible in the homoerotic subtext they construct.³³ Early modern playwrights use transvestism to present a homoerotics but are careful that their characters avoid censure for too masculinized or sexualized behavior.

III

One of the earliest plays to present the cross-dressed female character is the anonymous *Clyomon and Clamydes*, printed in 1599.³⁴ The play belongs to the vogue of romantic drama popular in 1570–85, and while its production history is unknown its accreditation to the Queen's company, the major Elizabethan troupe before the Lord Chamberlain's Men, attests to its merit.³⁵ The play resembles the episodic structure of medieval romances. Clyomon and Clamydes are knights, and the dual plot relates the adventures that bring the two warriors together. The cross-dressed character in the play is the princess Neronis, who loves Clyomon. After Clyomon has left her father's court to pursue a sworn combat with Clamydes, Neronis is kidnapped by Thrasellus, the King of Norway. To escape the king, she takes the disguise of a page and runs off to the nearby forest, spending the last third of the play in male disguise. Told by a shepherd who employs her that her "brave" appearance will make her desirable to all the women in town, Neronis responds that she can flirt as well as any woman and welcomes the attention. Neronis's performance of male gender dominates her biological identity since the codification of gender performance conflates sex with the gender being performed. However, the audience is conscious of the discrepancy between gender and sex and is, therefore, open to multiple possibilities of reading gender and sexuality among, as Michael Shapiro has demonstrated, the disguise, the character, and the actor.³⁶

Mistaken sexual identity works much the same way in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Olivia's attraction to Viola is predicated on Olivia's belief that Viola is a male page. Traub explains that Viola is not a passive object in the love intrigue since she "woos Olivia with a fervor that exceeds her 'text.'" "I agree, but as soon as Viola becomes aware of Olivia's passion, her own language becomes far less eroticized toward Olivia as Olivia's grows more seductive: "Cesario, by the roses of the spring, / By maidhood, honour, truth, and every thing, / I love thee so" (3.1.149–51).³⁸ Although Viola loves Orsino, is careful to deflect Olivia's interest, and hints at her own female identity dissuadingly, Olivia's repeated flirtations create a homoerotic tension in the narrative space. What is more, as Shapiro explains, the three scenes between Olivia and Viola happen privately, raising the expectation of physical intimacy between the characters.

³³ Valerie Traub, "The Perversion of 'Lesbian' Desire," *History Workshop Journal* 41 (1996): 23–25.

³⁴ *Clyomon and Clamydes*, The Malone Society Reprints (1599; London: Oxford University Press, 1913), v. See also Victor O. Freeburg, *Disguise Plots in Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915), 63; and Shapiro, *Gender in Play*, 221 who dates performance sometime between 1570 and 1583.

³⁵ Betty J. Littleton, *Clyomon and Clamydes: A Critical Edition* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), 34.

³⁶ Shapiro, *Gender in Play*, 7–8, 45–46.

³⁷ Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, 130.

³⁸ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 403–42. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

In production these scenes present possibilities for more or less sexual tension or comic farce, depending on the approach.³⁹

More interestingly, the final scene presents homosexual pairings within the heterosexual unions. Shapiro and DiGangi have examined the lack of interest Orsino and Sebastian have for Olivia while their real passions are directed toward male figures—Sebastian's toward Antonio and Orsino's toward Cesario.⁴⁰ I want to suggest that Olivia's interest in this scene is directed toward Viola rather than Sebastian. When Olivia enters act 5 she disregards Orsino and directs her words to Viola, growing more emotional at each denial Viola makes of their union. She does not speak to Sebastian, even in response to his direct address: "So comes it, lady, you have been mistook" (5.1.259–63). Her earlier exclamation, "Oh, most wonderful" (5.1.225) is an ambiguous and non-directed reaction to seeing two Cesarios. The revelation that Sebastian and Viola are twins silences Olivia, who only speaks in reference to Malvolio until she strikes on a plan. Olivia suggests a double wedding: "To think me as well a sister as a wife, / One day shall crown th'alliance on't, so please you, / Here at my house and at my proper cost" (5.1.317–19). Not only does Olivia instigate the event, she also proposes they should take place together at her estate by her expense. Her urgency belies a desire to keep Viola as close as possible, and when Orsino agrees to her plan, Olivia's outburst, "A sister you are she" (5.1.326), demonstrates that her emotional investment is in Viola rather than Sebastian. In performance, Olivia's visual focus on Viola would be enough to support this reading. The play thus closes on an even more homoerotically constructed passion, for Olivia is aware in this concluding scene that Viola is a woman; however, the ambiguity of the gender disguise, the confusion wrought by the reconciliation of Viola's identical twin, and the heterosexual unions suppress the female homoerotics.

Phebe's attraction to Rosalind is similarly constructed in *As You Like It*. A female body, garbed in male attire, is an attractive object to another woman. One female character's desire directed toward another weaves what Terry Castle calls a "lesbian counterplot" into the dominant heterosexual narrative.⁴¹ As DiGangi explains, Phebe's desire is constructed as both homoerotic and heteroerotic, for at the same moment Phebe thinks she is attracted to a male body, the audience knows the body she craves is female.⁴² This dual erotic allows an audience conscious of the cultural discourse on female homosexual behaviors to perceive the homoerotic potential in Phebe's pursuit of Rosalind. In fact, as Traub has persuasively argued, Shakespeare tips the balance toward a homoerotic reading, for Phebe's speech in act 3 reveals her attraction to the conventionally feminine qualities of Rosalind's disguised Ganymede.⁴³ Although neither of Shakespeare's plays presumes to break heterosexual authority by presenting a mutual attraction, and Rosalind's affection for Orlando is given textual precedent, they manipulate character and story to fashion a homoerotic tension between the actual and the perceived.

³⁹ Shapiro, *Gender in Play*, 151–54.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 162 and Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 41.

⁴¹ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 66–74.

⁴² DiGangi, *Homoerotics*, 59. See also Traub, *Desire & Anxiety*, 124.

⁴³ Traub, *Desire & Anxiety*, 125.

Another late sixteenth-century play to include a homoerotic female page is Robert Greene's *James IV*, printed in 1598. The play was probably written for the Queen's Men for a production at court in the early 1590s, and since Greene was a popular playwright with several London companies, it is likely to have been "sundrie times publicly plaide," as the title page states.⁴⁴ With the succession of the English throne still undetermined by an obdurate but adept Elizabeth, and James VI a very real claimant for the position, Greene's history play is both looking back to the historical moment that occasioned James's possible ascent, and critiquing the Scottish candidate. In his text, Greene manipulates cultural, gendered, and sexual identities in the service of satirical political discourse. The story concerns Dorothea, the English born Queen of Scotland, who affects male disguise to avoid being assassinated by her husband, who she continues to love throughout the play in a Griselda-like manner. She agrees to cross-dress but is distinctly uncomfortable in male apparel, her qualms being a sign of her feminine virtue. Severely wounded, she is taken to the house of a Scottish knight and healed by his wife, Lady Anderson.

In this play, as in the previous one, homoerotic desire is only possible when intertwined with female transvestism. At the opening of act 5 Dorothea and Lady Anderson exchange flirtatious dialogue and when her servant Nano cautions Dorothea she responds, "Peace, wanton son: this lady did amend / My wounds; mine eyes her hidden grief shall end" (5.1.17–24).⁴⁵ The image of these two characters affectionately or erotically gazing at each other is undercut by Nano's presence, which curtails the potential of physical developments. This scene is curious since it does not appear in the source for Greene's play, Cinthio's novella *Hecatommithi*. Cinthio makes it clear that the knight's wife likes the Dorothea character "not lasciviously," but rather "as a brother."⁴⁶ Also in the source, the cross-dressed character leaves when she perceives the knight's jealousy; here Dorothea stays. When finally forced to reveal her sexual identity, Lady Anderson is appalled at having desired a woman:

- L. Anderson: Beauty bred love, and love hath bred my shame . . .
Blush, grieve, and die in thine insatiate lust
Dorothea: Nay, live, and joy that thou hast won a friend,
That loves thee as her life by good desert.
L. Anderson: I joy, my lord, more than my tongue can tell:
Although not as I desired, I love you well.

[5.5.46–57]

In the text the desire Lady Anderson directs at Dorothea is fostered by that character's perception of Dorothea's sex, which she has read through the sartorial codes of gender signification. Dorothea's body must be male since she displays masculine gendered clothing on that body. The body itself, healed by Lady Anderson, apparently afforded no signifiers to discredit the gendered signs of the clothing, which raises intriguing questions, especially since textual techniques, identified by Henk Gras, maintain Dorothea's female identity before the audience.⁴⁷ For the spectator, the

⁴⁴ Robert Greene, *The Scottish History of James the Fourth*, ed. Norman Sanders, *The Revels Plays* (London: Methuen, 1970), xxv–xxix.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 93. All quotations from the play are from this edition.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁷ See Henk Gras, *Studies in Elizabethan Audience Response to the Theatre: Part 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993), 54–55.

possibility of discerning homoerotic desire is present in the awareness of Dorothea's female sex and her countenance of Lady Anderson's flirtation. The play locates female homoeroticism in the liminal space between gender and sex, which creates ambiguities between desire, attraction, love, and friendship.

The text can appear to support a project ridiculing the Scots if we perceive Lady Anderson as the naive Scot whose ignorance makes her incapable of comprehension beyond the signs of sartorial signification.⁴⁸ Dorothea is then the good Tudor princess who suffers even this indignity with grace. Although the reunion of Dorothea and James IV signals the triumph of heterosexuality over homoerotic passion, Dorothea's flirtation denies this reading. Nano must restrain Dorothea's playfully provocative actions from jeopardizing her disguise. The homoeroticism of her brief dalliance mitigates her intensely conventional femininity as she actively plays the man of Lady Anderson's desire.

The most striking example of textual female homoeroticism to emerge before the end of the sixteenth century, of course, is found in John Lyly's romantic comedy *Gallathea*, adapted, in part, from the story of Iphis and Ianthe in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.⁴⁹ Designed by Lyly as a court entertainment to be performed by the chorister company associated with St. Paul's Cathedral, *Gallathea* also belonged to the boy company's repertoire at the Blackfriars theatre.⁵⁰ In the play, Gallathea and Phyllida are beautiful young virgins who, as the convention so often dictates, dress as boys, here to avoid a virgin tribute, and are sent to the nearby forest by their respective fathers.⁵¹ A significant element of the play is that unlike early modern literature that employs disguise and exploits same-sex attraction as a comedic device, the love between the female characters is mutual and is not rejected when their identities are revealed.⁵²

In the play, male disguise is such a thinly veiled deception that the women quickly suspect the other is female and exchange provocative dialogue, desperately hinting at the anatomy existing under their masculine attire. Gender coding through dress becomes a poor performative substitute for gendered behavior and attributes. Although Phyllida finds Gallathea's voice masculine, and Gallathea thinks Phyllida

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁹ According to Jeff Shulman, "Ovidian Myth in Lyly's Courtship Comedies," *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985): 250, 261. Violet M. Jeffrey believes Italian drama inspired Lyly with the idea of two girls falling in love. Jeffrey, *John Lyly and the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), 83.

⁵⁰ Although not performed after the demise of boy companies, George K. Hunter has shown that critical interest in *Gallathea* has sparked a number of academic productions. Hunter and David Bevington, ed., *Galatea and Midas* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 21.

⁵¹ This work is an Elizabethan "three-level" play with a fairly well coordinated subplot, and a third plot involving typically clownish character types. Robert J. Meyer, "'Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue': The Mystery of Love in Lyly's *Gallathea*," *Studies in English Literature* 21.2 (1981): 193–208. See also Leah Scragg, "Shakespeare, Lyly and Ovid: The Influence of *Gallathea* on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Survey* 30 (1977): 127–30.

⁵² Theodora Jankowski, "'Where There Can Be No Cause of Affection': Redefining Virgins, Their Desires, and Their Pleasures in John Lyly's *Gallathea*," in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, ed. Dymna Callaghan, M. Lindsay Kaplan, and Valerie Traub (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 261. Reading the play through a trope of virginity, Jankowski argues that it permits female-female desire because virginity excludes a heterosexual paradigm.

should have blushed as they talked if she was a woman, both read past the sartorial imaging to the dialogic performances which mark their sex.⁵³ In *Gallathea* both the title character and Phyllida perform gender badly, which allows them to view each others' biological sex over gender codes and opens the opportunity for the audience to see same-sex attraction unencumbered by heterosexual posturing. The male disguise does not preclude a homoerotic reading of the text since the heterosexual intrigue is so sharply undermined. The question of male apparel is significant on another level since cross-dressed women who were sexually active with other women were more likely to be legally prosecuted for their behavior than non-transvestite women. If Gallathea or Phyllida had been comfortable dressed as men, they might become sexually transgressive figures and be viewed unsympathetically. Accordingly, both display their dislike for the clothing, Gallathea remarking that the disguise is "hateful" (1.1.87) and Phyllida telling her father that man's apparel will "neither become my body nor my mind" (1.3.16).⁵⁴ The text foregrounds the femininity of both characters over the biological reality of the actor playing them.

The homoerotic attraction between Gallathea and Phyllida begins early, as the text reveals they are not drawn to stereotypically masculine attributes but to each other's feminine qualities. Phyllida declares, "It is a pity nature framed you not a woman, having a face so fair, so lovely a countenance, so modest a behavior" (3.2.1–2). Gallathea is equally drawn to Phyllida's femininity and questions, "Why did nature to him, a boy, give a face so fair" (2.4.8–9). Ellen Caldwell and Joseph Houppert have commented on the physical similarities between Gallathea and Phyllida.⁵⁵ Both Bruster and Laurie Shannon discuss this quality of their relationship as well; Shannon posits a theory of homonormativity, while Bruster examines how a utopian femme-femme erotic is constructed in this and several other early modern dramas.⁵⁶ If the gender attributes that occupied their attention were traditionally masculine, the play would allow a heterosexual reading. Scripting the women's mutual appeal toward feminine qualities in each other firmly establishes the homoerotic nature of their desire.⁵⁷ Each woman is attracted to female attributes, to the woman beneath the disguise, rather than to male characteristics the disguise might represent.

At the play's conclusion, when their sexual identities are revealed, Gallathea and Phyllida remain steadfast in their love, despite voiced objections. In other dramas of this period, when the male disguise becomes superfluous, a suitable male partner is

⁵³ Robert Y. Turner, "Some Dialogues of Love in Lyly's Comedies," *English Literary History* 29 (1962): 276–88. Discussing the dialogic qualities of several Lyly plays, Turner explains that "unfavorable circumstances" prevent the women from revealing their love and make their flirtations tentative and indirect.

⁵⁴ John Lyly, *Gallathea and Midas*, ed. Anne Begor Lancashire (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 37–38. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

⁵⁵ Ellen M. Caldwell, "John Lyly's *Gallathea*: A New Rhetoric of Love for the Virgin Queen," *English Literary Renaissance* 17.1 (1987): 33 and Joseph W. Houppert, *John Lyly*, Twayne's English Authors Series 177 (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1975), 86.

⁵⁶ Bruster, "Female-Female Eroticism," 7–13. Laurie Shannon, "Nature's Bias: Renaissance Homonormativity and Elizabethan Comic Likeness," *Modern Philology* 98 (2000): 183–210. For theories on the implications of reading lesbian narratives through gender likeness see Marilyn R. Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 20.

⁵⁷ Traub makes a similar statement regarding Phebe's attraction to Rosalind. See Traub, *Desire & Anxiety*, 125.

found for the female character, whether she has shown interest in one or not. Here, although Gallathea calls herself “unfortunate” and Phyllida believes herself “accursed,” they maintain:

Gallathea: I will never love any but Phyllida. Her love is engraven in my heart with her eyes.
 Phyllida: Nor I any but Gallathea, whose faith is imprinted in my thoughts by her words.

[5.3.127–30]

This affirmation is unique in early modern drama. The persevering nature of their relationship is foreshadowed in Cupid’s subplot when he explains that: “Love knots are tied with eyes and cannot be undone with hands, made fast with thoughts and cannot be unloosed with fingers” (5.2.23–28). Gallathea and Phyllida echo Cupid’s remarks in their declarations above. Cupid controls only base, physical passion, which is transitory, and he becomes a foil to substantiate the union of Gallathea and Phyllida. However, Neptune invokes heteropatriarchal authority by calling the women’s love an “idle choice” and says it is “strange and foolish, for one virgin to dote on another.” (5.3.155–57). The debate structure of Lyly’s writing argues between the validity of dominant sexual conventions and non-normative female desire.

In order to end the debate and contrive a conventional play ending, Lyly has Venus promise to change one of the women into a man so that they might marry and “enjoy” each other. However, neither is revealed after the metamorphosis nor is marked for the transformation. In the end, Lyly does not dramatize the sex change, suggesting its insignificance. Scholars are torn in their assessment of the play’s conclusion. Both Joel B. Altman and Susan C. Kemper assert that Gallathea is the character meant to be transformed. However, Caldwell, Houppert, and Phyllis Rackin agree that the audience has no investment in the change. R. S. White has written that the emotional progress of the lovers takes precedence over any physical metamorphosis. And, Theodora Jankowski finds that the arbitrary nature of the proposed sex change “trivializes the whole notion of” marriage.⁵⁸ In fact, the play eschews heterosexual unions. Indeed, throughout the play male characters remain marginal to the erotic attractions and attractiveness of female characters for each other.⁵⁹

The plays discussed above represent Elizabethan drama, having been written between 1584 and 1602; however, looking at two later plays suggests that the same narrative strategies for presenting female homoerotic desire existed through the Cavalier period as well. Abraham Cowley’s pastoral comedy, *Love’s Riddle*, written while he was attending Westminster school and published in 1638, allows the

⁵⁸ Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 207–9; Susan C. Kemper, “Dramaturgical Design in Lyly’s *Gallathea*,” *THOTH* Fall (1976): 29–30; Caldwell, “Lyly’s *Gallathea*,” 39n; Houppert, *John Lyly*, 93; Phyllis Rackin, “Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage,” *PMLA* 102 (1987): 37; R. S. White, “Metamorphosis by Love in Elizabethan Romance, Romantic Comedy, and Shakespeare’s Early Comedies,” *The Review of English Studies* 35 (1984): 26; Theodora A. Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 26.

⁵⁹ The script does touch on the fact that Melebeus is incestuously attracted to his daughter, Phyllida (4.1.37–39).

cross-dressed heroine great latitude in her relationships with female characters.⁶⁰ The action concerns Callidora, who, to avoid the violently amorous attentions of a suitor, has adopted male disguise and gone to the nearby countryside. Calling herself, unimaginatively, Callidorus, she immediately relishes her status as an object of female desire, saying to one shepherdess after kissing her, “The honour of your lip is entertainment / Princes might wish for” (sig. B2v).⁶¹ The women, in turn, discuss Callidora’s physical attributes and the “honey” of her mouth in extensive detail. The full exchange illustrates two essential points. First, Callidora’s feminine qualities attract the women, much like the characters in *Gallathea*, heightening the scene’s homoerotic appeal. Second, as Callidora kisses the women, even the old and unpleasant Truga, and sweeps up the shepherdess Bellula in a dance to end the scene, we are treated to a heroine neither afraid of nor uncomfortable about physical contact with her own sex.

Later in the play, both Hylace and Bellula approach Callidora and vie for her affection, which she again enjoys, until they become too aggressive toward each other. Upon leaving, Callidora says: “I pittie both of you, for you have sow’d / Upon unthankfull sand, whose dry’d up wombe / Nature denyes to blesse with fruitfulnessse, / You are both fayre, and more then common graces / In habite in you both, *Bellula’s* eyes / Shine like the lampe of Heaven, and so doth *Hylaces*, / *Hylaces* cheekes are deeper dy’d in scarlet / Then the chast mornings blushes, so are *Bellula’s*, / And I protest I love you both. Yet cannot, / Yet must not enjoy either” (sig. B8v–C1). The full scene presents an extraordinary exchange between female characters as Cowley constructs a surprisingly long dialogue in which Callidora openly flirts with both women. What is more, she seems willing, at first, to fulfill their sexual desires—“Truly I would faine satisfie them both” (sig. B8v)—but cannot conceive of the physical action and talks instead of the “impossibilitie which Nature / Hath set betwixt us, yet entangles us, / And laughs to see us struggle” (sig. C1). She ends the scene with the statement that she “must not enjoy either,” which suggests not the impossibility of female homosexual activity, but external constraints against such action, whether cultural, religious, or legal. For the remainder of the play, Bellula follows Callidora, trying to win her love, while Hylace continues to spurn her male lover.

In act 3, Callidora’s long absent brother Florellus comes into the woods, meets, and instantly falls in love with Bellula. Neither sibling recognizes the other, and a delightful triangle forms with Callidora pursued by Bellula and Bellula by Florellus. Their dialogue echoes that of scene 5.2 in *As You Like It*; however, Cowley’s scene goes farther than Shakespeare’s in displaying the complications of the three lovers, as they sit together, join hands, gaze upon each other, kiss, and sing of unrequited love. They spend much of the rest of the play together, each lover not willing to leave the other.

⁶⁰ The play was originally printed separately in 1638, but in 1681 it was collected with Cowley’s other works and appeared in numerous editions through the eighteenth century. Harbage believes the play was unacted, but as Cowley was a scholar in Westminster School when he wrote it, the play could have been performed there. Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama*, revised S. Schoenbaum (London: Methuen, 1964), 128–29. The title page of the play declares, “Written, At the time of his being Kings Scholler in Westminster Schoole, by A. Cowley.”

⁶¹ Abraham Cowley, *Love’s Riddle. A Pastorall Comædie* (London, 1638). Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

Although a school play, Cowley's text has wonderfully evocative scenes and great visual potential, as this scene presents both the comedy of misdirected affection and the pathos of unrequited love.

When Callidora's female identity is discovered and she is betrothed to her true love, Bellula sadly turns back to the forest, but Callidora stops her: "What, are you going *Bellula*? pray stay; / Though Nature contradicts our love, I hope / That I may have your friendship." Bellula replies, "My father calls; farewell; your name, and memory / In spite of Fate, I'll love, farewell" (sig. F4). In the end, both Bellula and Hylace marry men their parents choose, not so much out of their own pleasure at the prospect but out of duty to their fathers. Neither Bellula nor Hylace appears happy with their intended husbands, seeming to prefer the affection they enjoyed and the desire they felt for Callidora.

Like *The Three Ladies of London*, *The Spanish Bawd* contrasts with Cowley's idyllic pastoral green world. Translated by James Mabbe from Rojas's play *Celestina*, the closet drama *The Spanish Bawd* tells the story of Calisto and Melibea. Celestina is the bawd who brings the lovers together. Early in the play she is also instrumental in arranging a liaison for one of Calisto's servants, which allows her to engage in overt sexual contact with the reluctant woman she has chosen as his whore. Celestina has come to Areusa's room late at night and after encouraging her to get in bed begins to compliment her: "O how like a Syren doest thou looke? How faire, how beautifull? O how sweetely every thing smells about you . . . My Pearle, my Jewell of gold, see whether I love you or no, that I come to visit you at this time of night? Let my eye take its fill in beholding of thee; it does me much good to touch thee, and to looke upon thee" (88).⁶² Celestina does, in fact, begin to touch Areusa, who asks her to stop because she has been troubled with "the Mother" all day. However, Celestina continues, saying she can help, and Areusa tells her to "Lay your hand higher up towards my stomacke" (88). The stage image would be patently sexual—Areusa lying in bed while Celestina rubs below her stomach, ostensibly touching her mons or clitoris. Celestina then raves about Areusa's beauty in language not unlike that of *The Three Ladies of London*. Celestina also meets a similar fate to Lucar, for she is eventually murdered in the play, her death providing the "profitable instruction" promised on the title page.

IV

The above examples all demonstrate the subtextual nature of female homoerotic desire in early modern English drama. Appearing out of the space where character and disguise merge, its construction rests primarily on the cross-dressed female role. However, *The Three Ladies of London* and *The Spanish Bawd* present an interesting dichotomy between female homoerotic expressions in plays that employ cross-dressed characters and those that do not. On one hand, only when dressed as men are Neronis, Dorothea, Phyllida, and Gallathea allowed to flirt openly with other women without

⁶² *The Spanish Bawd Represented in Celestina: or The Tragicke-Comedy of Calisto and Melibea. Wherein is contained, besides the pleasantnesse and sweetenesse of the stile, many Philosophicall Sentences, and profitable Instructions necessary for the younger sort: Shewing the deceits and subtilties housed in the bosomes of false servants, and Cunny-catching Bawds* (London, 1631). Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text. Harbage attributes the play to James Mabbe. See Harbage, *Annals*, 126–27.

sustaining negative significations for their actions. Phyllis Rackin notes how fantastic and magical the events of *Gallathea* are and has compared Lyly's play to Shakespeare's cross-dressed plays in that respect.⁶³ Shakespeare is even more circumspect about his female characters, relegating the homoerotic subtext exclusively to a desire directed at the cross-dressed female figure, but not specifically issuing from that character. (Rosalind and Viola might enjoy their positions as objects of women's desires, but neither acts on that position with as much gusto as Neronis promises, or the flirtation of Dorothea, or the reciprocal passion of Phyllida and Gallathea.)⁶⁴ The ambiguity of the cross-dressed character in the imaginative plane of drama gives her the freedom to engage in female homoerotic tensions and still remain the sympathetic heroine of these plays. On the other hand, Lucar's overt seduction of Conscience, like Celestina's handling of Areusa, presents them as the "real lesbians," figures of ridicule and reproof fully befitting their villainous characterizations in the scripts. When finally brought to judgement for her crimes, Lucar pleads not guilty, expecting corroboration from the devoted Conscience, who, instead, lives up to her name and condemns them both. Lucar is then sentenced to "the place of darkness," and Conscience is sent to prison. The predatory sexual transgressor is morally condemned and suffers a spiritual, although apparently not a lasting, punishment. The characters of Lucar and Conscience re-emerge eight years later, due to the popularity of the original play, in Wilson's sequel, *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London*.

I do not mean to suggest that without cross-dressing all female-female erotic situations in dramatic literature must represent a villainous figure. Bruster contrasted his discussion of erotically manipulative female characters with utopian pairings of traditionally feminine women in early modern drama, such as Celia and Rosalind, Helena and Hermia, and Emilia and Flavina. However, as he writes, "the erotic content" of these scenes "exceeds the relations they describe, and even escapes the speakers themselves."⁶⁵ Traub would argue that the erotic bond is consciously constructed between these characters and sanctioned as long as it eventually gives way to the reproductive demands of marriage and patriarchal authority.⁶⁶ Constructing an erotic tension for the audience, but not within the characters themselves, or fashioning it as an element of adolescence are other narrative devices, like the cross-dressed heroine, that allows female homoerotics to emerge without negative recriminations. Unlike conventional female characters unconscious of or emerging from the erotics in their female relationships, Lucar is a mature woman, well aware of the sexual implications in her speech, who erotically manipulates Conscience.⁶⁷

⁶³ Rackin, "Androgyny," 31.

⁶⁴ Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, 124, 131.

⁶⁵ Bruster, "Female-Female Eroticism," 11; see also Jessica Tvordi, "Female Alliance and the Construction of Homoeroticism in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*," in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, ed. Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 114–30.

⁶⁶ Valerie Traub, "The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7.2 (2001): 257–58, and Traub, "The (In)Significance of 'Lesbian' Desire in Early Modern England," in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 157–59.

⁶⁷ Lucar and Celestina have much in common with the characters Bruster discusses who coerce female characters into heterosexual sex. See Bruster, "Female-Female Eroticism," 16–25.

Since cross-dressing does not itself constitute a female homoerotics, other textual signs are compounded with the cross-dressing to achieve the effect. As Susan Bennett has explained, connotative possibilities make up part of a sign's interpretation, and the chronology of a sign shapes its hermeneutical reception.⁶⁸ Therefore, to construct a female homoerotic desire in these plays at least one female character is shown to find the cross-dressed figure attractive, as Phebe does in *As You Like It*. The erotic context can be heightened by an extended verbal exchange between the cross-dressed heroine and the desiring subject, especially, as is true in *Twelfth Night*, during intimate scenes of attempted seduction such as scene 3.1. *Love's Riddle*, even with its physicality and lengthy dialogues, maintains its playfulness because Callidora, like Rosalind or Dorothea, encounters her desiring subjects in the company of others. A degree of sexual apprehension breaks into act 2 only when Bellula and Hylace are together with the disguised Callidora in a secluded setting, and Callidora exits that scene in some emotional discomfort. *Twelfth Night* is the most anxious of the cross-dressed plays in that Viola is the most vulnerable of the cross-dressed figures during her intimate dialogue with Olivia.

However, the clustering of signs also shifts its specific connotations, and the cross-dressed heroine herself works against significations of transgressive sexuality.⁶⁹ Cross-dressed heroines are not represented as prostitutes or tribades, but as feminine, ultimately heterosexual women stuck in awkward situations. Many display their discomfort with masculine attire—even Rosalind ultimately despairs of her doublet and hose—which allows the audience to laugh at the sexual complications brought about by the misunderstanding of the desiring woman without the anxiety that might otherwise accrue to the homoerotic constructions. Only *Gallathea* allows its heroines to desire one another mutually; however, its erotic construction is more emotional than sexual and is driven by the eventual sex change promised at the play's conclusion. Careful manipulation of textual significations elicited female homoerotic desires without engaging negative connotations.

In the world of early modern England, though no specific law condemned the practice, texts, like Aretino's *Ragionamenti*, represented the desire of one woman for another and illustrated the comprehension that women engaged in sexual activity with each other. The network of relationships between a play text and the cultural discourse on female homoerotics existing in the theatrical space of representation afforded strategies for constructing scenarios of female homoerotic desire. A homoerotic tension framed that space when female characters were erotically placed together. The cross-dressed heroine pursued by a prospective female lover in romantic comedy embodies one possible scenario. The transvestite disguise, by placing homoerotic desire in an ambiguous context, operates as a narrative strategy to evoke the pleasure of female homoeroticism without engaging the moral censure applied to non-normative sexual practices. When positioned between two knowing women gendered as female, as in Wilson's *Three Ladies of London*, homoerotic passion is more overtly presented, but also implicitly condemned. What other homoerotic constructions exist

⁶⁸ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 69–71.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

in early modern drama? Are there multiple constructions in the same play? The relationship between Rosalind and Celia along with Phebe's desire for the disguised Rosalind suggests so. Do they emerge in tragedy as well as romantic comedy, and how might the shift in genre affect their presentation? What, in fact, is the range of female homoerotic relationships presented in early modern dramatic literature? Understanding the variety of constructions provides a broader interpretive base from which to encounter and enjoy these plays.