“In Standing Water Between Boy and Man”: Shakespeare’s Boys, Gender Ambiguity, and the Early Modern Stage

A Senior Honors Thesis Proposal

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Research Aims and Significance

In Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night*, a young boy waits outside the court to deliver a message to a noblewoman, Olivia. When she asks her steward to describe the appearance of the young boy waiting at her door, he delivers the following lines: "Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy …'Tis with him in standing water, between boy and man" (1.5.155).[1] As audiences watching this play knew, the young messenger is not actually a boy at all, but rather an adult woman named Viola who cross-dresses as a young man. When Olivia accepts the young messenger and meets the boy, she finds herself falling in love with them[2] almost instantly, infatuated with the elusiveness of their identity. As Olivia expresses her deep romantic affection and attraction toward the young boy just moments after meeting them—mirrored by the other characters in the story who, too, become enthralled by the boy's ambiguous identity—there seems to be something interesting theatrically and culturally going on here. The Steward's inability to seamlessly categorize the boy, describing him as in between two categories and metaphorically hovering between two elements, between 'boy' and 'man', suggests a complication of the boy's identity. The gender instability that emerges from the young boy raises several questions: What is going on here? What do we call this figure? What does it mean to be somewhere between boy and man, and why is this in-between state so enticing?

For my project, I plan to evaluate Shakespeare's representation of gender on the early modern stage, and—more specifically—how Shakespeare's depiction of 'boys' collapses the gender binary in three different plays: *Cymbeline*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. When I say boys, I don't mean so in a way that fits our contemporary understanding as defined by a young or

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[1] William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. Keir Elam (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 1.5.152–155.

[2] Because I make the argument that *boys* represent a separate, ambiguous identity, I will be using they/them pronouns when referring to them.

premature man. Rather, I contend that boys represent a separate identity, a point that previous scholars in early modern studies raised, but with advances in trans theory and its understanding of gender ambiguity and nonbinary identities, the status of 'boys' deserves a revisit. I argue that both the boy characters and boy actors blend femininity and masculinity on stage simultaneously (notably through the act of male-to-female crossdressing), shuttling between the binary of adult man and woman, and, in the process, expresses identities beyond the gender binary. Considering the polarized dichotomy between men and women in early modern English society and culture, I contend that Shakespeare's boys pose a challenge to that binary, one that similarly resonates with contemporary understandings of gender identity and sexuality. From the infamous crossdressing heroines to the not-so-subtle indications of homoeroticism, Shakespeare undoubtedly used boys in his plays to express some form of gender ambiguity: the antithesis of the rigid patriarchal expectations and polarized dichotomy of man and women at the time.

Although debates and conversations regarding the status of queer individuals have improved generally over time, the current efforts to diminish the status of sexual and gender minorities—especially the worry over the dissolution of the normative gender binary—echo similar anxieties in the past. As contemporary legal scrutiny over trans rights substantially heats up and heteronormative culture continues to structure our modern notion of love and desire, I argue that, in many ways, the anxiety over the collapse of the gender binary remains the same. In the past year alone, state lawmakers have proposed over 230 anti-LGBTQ+ bills, most of which target trans youth and gender-affirming healthcare.[3] Anti-trans legislation—specifically those that target trans youth—have been amongst the most successful in recent years, both barring and criminalizing basic access for gender and sexual minorities. As I plan to examine the sexist

[3] See American Civil Liberties Union, *Legislation Affecting LGBTQ Rights across the Country 2021* for list of anti-LGBTQ+ bills and *Congress.gov* for individual bill description.

culture of early modern England and its relationship to boys on stage, I argue that this research speaks to the same sexist values and systems that remain present in our modern world. I argue that deep reevaluations of gender and its complexities are not only politically charged in our contemporary culture, but more so, I contend that the past offers its own view on gender plurality that proves productive in seeking to expand freedom for sexual and gender minorities.

Background

Historians and literary critics agree that early modern England was a fiercely patriarchal society where gender was fixed, hierarchical, and polarized: "women were subject to men, whose authority was sustained informally through culture, custom, and differences in education, and more formally through the law." [4] The traditional patriarchal system—where women were inherently subordinate to men—was not only the fundamental economic unit of society but provided the basis for social and political order. Although the gendered hierarchy never went uncontested, it was generally assumed by many as not only necessary but divinely ordained.[5] As a result, men controlled society and the economic, social and political systems that defined it. In the case of the early modern theater, this same male-dominated control carried onto the stage as every early modern actor who performed these plays were, to our knowledge, cis-gendered males. Or, in other words: women's parts were played by boys.

Boy actors were, for the most part, middle-class adolescents who spent several years in apprenticeships before launching into their acting careers. Boy actors were often around eleven or twelve, some as young as ten and some as old as eighteen; they were "mostly prepubescent

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[4] Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (United Kingdom: Columbia University Press, 1993), 3.

[5] See chapter 1 of Jessica Munns' and Penny Richards' *Gender, Power and Privilege in Early Modern Europe* for more on gender hierarchies in early modern England.

youths with unbroken voices who trained as players and played female roles until their encroaching manhood unsuited them for such roles." [6] After outgrowing their respective (mostly female) parts, boy actors either graduated to playing young male roles or pursued alternative careers. These actors' adolescence was obvious—their prepubescent identities were not hidden on stage, but inevitably transparent in their roles.[7] As the theater used boy actors for the roles of adult women, the reinforcement of the rigid sexism of Elizabethan England becomes increasingly clear since audiences took boys for women more seriously than they would women themselves. The characteristics and background of the boy actor in understanding boyness is not only significant, but interesting: the early modern theater was successful, and audiences kept coming back—so why were boy actors' representation of gender so alluring, and why did it work?

There's a specific scene in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* that I believe speaks to these moments of gender fluidity and the infatuation surrounding it. At one point in the play, the cross-dressed protagonist Fidele is given hospitality by two brothers when they seek shelter as a means of safety and concealment when traveling through the forest. Although Fidele is perceived to be a man—and is wholeheartedly accepted as one by those around them—their overt femininity reveals that they are far from bearing the typical qualities of one: they are kind, gentle, and skilled in the domestic sphere. Rather than criticizing the boy's femininity, the brothers become infatuated with it; they refer to Fidele as their housewife/"huswife" (4.2.43–44), praise their "neat cookery" and ability to operate domestically (5.2.51), and expresses deep love for the boy:

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[6] Robert Barrie, *Elizabethan Play-Boys in the Adult London Companies* (Houston: Rice University, 2008) 237.

[7] See chapter 4 of Phyllis Rackin's *Shakespeare and Women* for more on the appearance of the boy actor on stage.

"I love thee; I have spoke it…As I do love my father" (5.2.17).[8] This infatuation demonstrated by the brothers in *Cymbeline*—and other moments like this throughout Shakespeare's plays—I contend, reinforce *why* Shakespeare's boys are so interesting. The gender instability and fluidity presented both in the actor and their respective character is not only well received but provokes a certain fascination from both the surrounding characters within the stories and audiences offstage.

Scholars have examined the early modern period's interest in gender and sexuality and why these societies were so interested—and anxious—about gender fluidity. Historian Thomas Laqueur posits that the once widely adopted one–sex model may provide one explanation as to why Elizabethan culture was so invested in thinking about sex.[9] The one-sex model proposed that men were the only essential sex; women possessed the same fundamental physical reproductive structure as men, except the female form was inverted appearing inside the body rather than outside of it, marking women as incomplete and flawed versions of men.[10] While this model provided one rationale for women's subordination, it also suggested that men and women were more alike than different. As Thomas Laqueur contends, the one–sex model encourages gender fluidity as the biological line between male and female is incredibly thin, as opposed to the two–sex model that emerges in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, [11] a model that

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[8] William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. Valerie Wayne (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[9] See Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[10] Additionally, this model proposed that by heating up women's bodies, their interior structure could 'fall out', transforming a 'biological' woman into a 'biological' male.

[11] The two-sex model is represented by our contemporary understanding of gender that views men and women as biologically different.

defines women and men as radically different biologically, making the line dividing men and women rigid.

Laqueur's work provides just one example of early modern societies' interest in gender fluidity that reinforces the idea that sex may not have been as stable as we think. While work by scholars like Lacquer provide insight into various gender ideas in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, queer and trans theory has given us a deeper, richer understanding of gender fluidity, thus allowing a better examination and development of the boy actor and boy characters on the early modern stage—which is what I ultimately plan to do throughout my project.

Literature Review

Boy actors are at the forefront of debate in early modern studies and continue to trouble critics. Scholars like Phyllis Rackin have studied Shakespeare's boys and the impact their ambiguous representation posed on audiences. In her book *Shakespeare and Women*, Rackin examines the success of boy actors' performances and the effect of cross-dressing on the early modern stage: "cross-dressed performance was regarded by early modern players as an attraction to be emphasized rather than a deficiency to be concealed."[12] Rackin explores the different explanations posed by various critics for early modern audiences' infatuation with boys and why their roles were regarded as "convincing and taken seriously" and why they were so successful.[13] As she explains, though, studies by scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and Lisa Jardine have yielded very little consensus to their popularity or exactly what their implications were.[14] Rackin

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[12] Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2005), 80.

[13] Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 74.

[14] See Stephen Greenblat's *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (United Kingdom, University of California Press, 1988), 93; and Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (United Kingdom: Harvester Press, 1983), 31.

explores different theories from critics who consider the women in the audience, something that others neglected to do, and why women, too, were enticed by boys on stage: "the premise underlying these infatuations is that what women naturally desire is not mature, virile men, but effeminate boys whose bodies are more like their own."[15] While I acknowledge that the consensus for the allure of boys on stage is ambiguous and debatable, I argue that the gender fluidity that 'boys' represent challenges the traditional binary, and that challenge in and of itself was something that was inherently intriguing and appealing to audiences.

Critic Stephen Orgel further examines audience's reaction to boys on stage by posing the question: "Why did the English take stage boys for women?"[16] In his book, *Impersonations*, Orgel explores the complex nature of boy actors on the early modern stage, their careers, and how Elizabethan society reacted to the presence of gender fluidity on stage. Rather than boys being antithetical to women—as a contemporary understanding may assume—Orgel argues that rather, they are likened to the other. He posits that boys and women were culturally analogous as both were objects of desire for adult men and filled similar roles within the patriarchy. He further examines Shakespeare's boys in relation to gender construction and how one's identity was, in a lot of ways, dependent on clothing: "What allows boys to be substituted for women in the theater ... is not anything about the genital nature of boys and women, but precisely the costume, and more particularly, cultural assumptions about costume."[17] He suggests that by studying the audiences' reaction to the ambiguous roles that boys represented, we may reconsider the rigidity

[15] Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, 81.

[16] Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

[17] Ibid., 103.

of gender in early modern England: that rather, the supposed fixed gender binary was, in certain circumstances, a lot more fluid than we think.

Other critics have questioned the implications of the boy actor and the effect cross–dressing on stage would've imposed on the individual actor offstage. Queer theorists such as Simone Chess address this by examining the ways in which queerness carried beyond the stage and throughout the actors' lives. Chess explores the lives and careers of three celebrity early modern actors and argues that archival details reveal that "something about them was understood to be inherently queer."[18] Playwrights were known to create and designate parts suited to the range and talents—and in a lot of ways, the personality—of the individual actors. Chess argues that based on the parts these boy actors would move on to play throughout their careers, it's possible that a queer residue prevented them from making a full transition from "a woman to a typical leading man. Chess argues that the afterlife of the boy actor implies that queerness was not merely isolated in theatrics or existed in fleeting moments on stage but carried beyond the stage and into social life. The afterlife of the boy actor, I argue, will help me examine how gender instability on the stage might have translated into offstage practice.

Furthermore, trans theorists and historians like Leah Devun have examined what nonbinary meant in early modern culture and the influence nonbinary sex posed to premodern thinkers. Devun examines not only the presence of gender complexity and nonbinary identities, but how these figures were used as a recurring and much debated means for thinking about aspects of premodern society and spirituality.[19] Although bodies that didn't fit into a traditional

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[18] Chess, Simone. "Queer Residue: Boy Actors' Adult Careers in Early Modern England," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 259.

[19] See Leah Devun's, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (United States: Columbia University Press, 2021).

binary were considered "unnatural and unacceptable",[20] Devun notes that, ironically, early modern theorists envisioned human perfection in the form of a nonbinary figure: "angels, and even Christ himself were all depicted in some sources as nonbinary-sexed figures."[21] Critics like Devun examine the "the continuing attractiveness of nonbinary sex"[22] and contend that although nonbinary identities were viewed as illegitimate, there was still a certain appeal to them. Despite the influence of nonbinary identities in spirituality and early modern thinking, rigid sexism and anxiety over the collapse of the gender binary animated early modern culture. I argue that the work of critics like Leah Devun not only provide a framework for examining the infatuation and anxiety over figures that didn't fit the typical binary but also echoes our own sexist society's dilemmas as it grapple with the meanings and implications of nonbinary identities.

Other critics have focused specifically on the representations of boys on stage and the significance of their characterizations. Jeffery Masten, for instance, examines the categorical instability of boys and how the inability to classify these individuals as occupying either adulthood or boyhood—as he refers to the quote from Twelfth Night, "in standing water between boy and man" [23]—signifies their gender instability as they, too, cannot be aligned with one, specific category. In his interpretation of *Twelfth Night*, Masten picks up on the "procession of the conflicting, overlapping terms the play uses to refer to this figure in its male gender" [24] as Cesario—the young girl who cross-dresses as into a male identity—is referred to by different

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[20] Devun, *The Shape of Sex*, 39.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 1.5.155.

[24] Jeffrey Masten, *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time* (Germany: University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated, 2016), 111.

terms: they are called “gentleman” (1.5.113–15), “paltry boy” (3.4.376), “a fair young man” (1.5.97), “dear lad” (1.4.29–31), not yet a “proper man” (3.1.131), “good youth” (3.1.98), “the lamb that I do love” (5.1.127). [25] Masten notes that these terms used to identify Cesario further complicate “any attempt to firmly distinguish or categorize" the young boy [26]; Cesario is not yet a man, but no longer a boy—they are both a “youth” and a “proper man” simultaneously, categorically instable and indistinguishable. Masten’s work, along with the work of other critics like Jean E Howard, David Cressy, and Simone Chess,[27] demonstrate that an understanding of boys on the early modern stage necessitates historically appropriate ideas of masculinity, femininity, what might be a conflation of these categories, and both the ages and modes that defined them.

In order to critically examine boys using insights from critics, I have purposely selected three of Shakespeare’s plays to analyze: *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Cymbeline*, three plays that represent the arc of his career. *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*—two of Shakespeare’s more popular comedies—were performed around the same time, with performances of *As You Like It* dating from around 1598–1600 and *Twelfth Night* around 1602. Shakespeare’s tragicomedy *Cymbeline* has troubled critics with its genre instability but is often referred to as a tragicomedy, and its first performances occurred around 1610, late in Shakespeare’s career. I chose these three plays not because they seemingly fall into similar genres, but because of the similar storylines: a young girl cross–dresses into a supposed male identity as a means of safety and/or economic advancement as each finds themselves in

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[25] Ibid., 110.

[26] Ibid., 111

[27] See Jean E Howard’s *Crossdressing, the Theater, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England*, David Cressy’s “Gender Trouble and Crossdressing in Early Modern England”, and Simone *Chess’ Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature* for more on boys and gender instability.

situations and relationships they otherwise wouldn't. I also plan to focus on the theme of male–to–female cross–dressing (both within the story and on stage) as I argue that the conversion of identity can help us to understand the social and political significance of 'boyness' as a marker of gender fluidity and erotic power.

While my project rests on this body of research, I ultimately plan to demonstrate boyness as a more complicated concept in the three Shakespeare plays I've specifically chosen since it anticipates and echoes notions of nonbinary identity that we have only now begun to theorize. I'm particularly interested in the plays themselves and how the boys' relationships on stage, their characterizations, and mobility within the stories fuel the eroticism and gender fluidity of 'boys' as a category offstage. I am driven by a curiosity to examine why other characters in these plays seem to be consistently falling in love with these boys, and why boyness in this sense is so enticing. I will also make the argument that these plays reveal the limited validity upon which the patriarchal notions of the gender binary have been constructed, something that speaks to both the past and present.

Methodology

My methodology consists of two parts: close readings of literary texts and the insights of queer and trans theory. In order to accomplish a critical understanding of the literary texts I've chosen, I will perform close readings and situate them within a historical context. This process involves examining the work of historians like Leah Devun and Susan Amussen as well as the work of literary historians like Phyllis Rackin and Stephen Orgel. I argue that it is essential to possess an extensive understanding of the historical context, specifically historical beliefs on gender and sexuality, in order to accurately research representations of boys on the early modern stage. I also propose that much of the earlier research on these figures was created when queer

and trans theories weren't as developed as they are now. Thus, I contend that using insights of queer and trans theories will enhance past research in a way that provides richer and analytically sharper sense of gender fluidity in the past as well as the present—which, I argue, is why now is a suitable time to return to these depictions.

Since its inception, queer theory has aimed to evaluate and produce new understandings of gender and sexual identity that don't organize into, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick once wrote, a "seamless and univocal whole";[28] similarly, as Mel Y. Chen posits, "queerness might well describe an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of the heteronormative."[29] Queer theory thus aims to not only reevaluate the social conventions of gender and sexuality but to challenge the rigid gendered systems that continue to define our modern world. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick poses the question: what if "normative, uninterrogated 'regular' heterosexuality may not function as a sexuality at all?"[30] Questions like these, I argue, represent why queer theory is such an important body of thought in my research; they enable and energize a complete reconsideration of our gender and sexual systems, starting at the beginning. Other theorists such as David Halperin and Michael Foucault[31] have furthered this analysis, arguing that sexuality is not a "biological or physiological reality, but an unprecedented, historically specific device."[32] The work of queer theorists—such as those aforementioned along with Judith Butler, Michael Warner, and Gayle Rubin—provide new ways

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[28] Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 7.

[29] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (United Kingdom: Duke University Press, 2012), 104.

[30] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 9.

[31] See David Halperin's *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* and Michael Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*.

[32] David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 88.

of thinking about gender and sexuality and demonstrate that gender fluidity and complex gender identities have been longstanding. I argue that Shakespeare's representation of boys aligns with queer theory's investment in gender plurality, thus utilizing this theoretical method will enhance my research.

Trans theory is another body of thought that will strengthen my research and understanding of notions of boyness on the early modern stage. I argue that Shakespeare's boys––both the actor and their respective character—capture gender's fluidity and instability in ways that trans theory directly aims to evaluate and explore. Trans historians like Jules-Gill Peterson have examined the history, complications, and innermost desires of trans youth and have refuted the widely-held belief that trans children (specifically, gender affirming procedures) are a contemporary phenomenon: "The bleached and medicalized image of the trans child circulating as unprecedented in the twenty–first century is actually prefaced by an entire century of trans children."[33] The work from trans theorists like Jack Halberstam, Susan Stryker, Richard Eckins, Lori Girshick[34] provide insight into the importance of figures who don't fit the traditional gender binary and how these figures have served as a means of thinking about gender and sexuality throughout history. As I plan to demonstrate that gender ambiguity, categorical fluidity, and queer identities possess a long and varied history, insights from trans theory will prove vital to my work.

Conclusion

My ultimate purpose in this project is to demonstrate that gender plurality is not historically specific to our contemporary culture or time, but a recurring and long-standing

[33] Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 3.

[34] See Richard *Ekins Male Femaling*, Lori Girshick's *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men*, Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, and Susan Stryker's *The Transgender Issue*.

feature of different societies, past and present. More specifically, I will contend that the category of 'boy' in early modern English culture captures an early form of gender plurality that appears to echo contemporary visions of nonbinary and genderqueer figures. While our progressive culture often creates the facade of gender equality, the reality is that that queer youth are still two to three times likelier to attempt suicide than others,[35] and sexual minorities face an array of barriers to freedom and inclusion in contemporary US culture. I contend that by exploring boys on the early modern stage, my research will not only demonstrate that there is a long history to gender plurality—rebutting contemporary conservative critics who argue that the array of emergent gender identities is an aberration of the present—but will also illustrate the ways in which the early modern era speaks to the present, helping us to imagine new meanings of gender and sexuality.

[35] See Eve Sedgwick's *Queer and Now*.

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Project Timeline

Activity	Completed By
Conduct Research	9/5/2022
Outline Thesis	9/26/2022
Introduction	10/10/2022
Chapter 1 Draft	10/31/2022
Chapter 2 Draft	11/15/2022
Chapter 3 Draft	12/6/2022
Conclusion/First Draft	12/15/2023
Second Draft	1/31/2023
Submit Final Draft to Committee	3/15/2023
Upload Personal Statement and Resume	4/1/2023
Submit Complete Thesis to Honors	4/15/2023
Graduation	5/13/2023