

PRIDE IN PROGRESS: AN EXAMINATION OF QUEER SHAME IN SHAKESPEARE'S A

*MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM AND TWELFTH NIGHT*

by

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submitted by Eva Vanderloop Jacobson in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how Shakespeare incorporated early modern social policing and public shaming practices into his plays as a means of demonstrating and critiquing the unique role shame played in the deterrence of socially transgressive, and especially queer, behavior in Elizabethan England. It examines how the apparent disintegration of formerly immutable boundaries in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries ignited fears of widespread disorder, leading to an increase in public shaming rituals like charivaris, rough ridings, cartings, and skimingtons. These punishments were carried out by one's neighbors as a means of instilling order and shaming people who failed to conform to community norms. While, the Introduction will explore the historical context in which Shakespeare produced his plays (briefly outlined above), the ensuing chapters will focus on how shame features in two of Shakespeare's comedies: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*. Chapter One examines the methods used by *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* authoritarian male characters—Theseus and Oberon—to control the queer women who resist their rule. It argues that the men's disastrous attempts to assert their dominance not only fail to effectively shame Hippolyta and Titania but result in potentially catastrophic consequences for the realms the duke and fairy king are supposed to protect. Chapter Two explores the centrality of shame in *Twelfth Night* and its role in punishing the disorderly behavior of queer characters who allow their transgressive desires to interfere with their obligatory roles in the gender and class hierarchies. It also examines how the Malvolio subplot exposes the myriad flaws in Elizabethan social policing and public shaming practices, as well as the hypocrisy of those who employ such methods to punish their peers. As a whole, this thesis attempts to throw into question the stability and intrinsic value of a social order which relies on the habitual and widespread application of shame for its survival.

## Lay Summary

This thesis examines Shakespeare's incorporation of Elizabethan social policing and public shaming practices in two of his most famous comedies: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*. The Introduction will focus on the historical context in which Shakespeare wrote his plays, specifically the 'crisis of order' plaguing early modern England in the sixty years prior to the English Civil War. It will examine the various shaming rituals popular in the early modern era and their role in maintaining order. Chapter One examines Theseus's and Oberon's failed attempts to control the unruly behavior of powerful, queer women in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Chapter Two examines the role shame plays in the punishment of queer characters who fail to fulfill their social obligation to uphold the status quo in *Twelfth Night*. It also unpacks the Malvolio subplot to reveal the inadequacies and injustice of Elizabethan social policing and public shaming rituals.

## **Preface**

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Eva Vanderloop Jacobson.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 National Anxiety and Public Shaming Rituals in Shakespeare's England

One of the first things that leaps to mind when considering the modern LGBTQIA+ movement is Pride. The reason pride—generally colorful, eye-catching pride—holds such a prominent place in the LGBTQIA+ community is because of the essential role shame has played in the centuries-long oppression of queers. Margaret Morrison writes that “at least since Emperor Constantine in fourth-century Rome, dominant (heteronormative) culture in the West has condemned same-sex love in a way that arouses or induces shame in same-sex lovers” (17-18). The pride movement—which became central to the gay rights movement in 1970 when the first ever Pride Parade was held on the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall Riots—arose as a counteragent to gay shame. However, despite the modern emphasis on pride, shame is still intricately linked to queerness, so much so that the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) has an entire page dedicated to queer “Trauma and Internalized Shame.” In the page’s introduction, NAMI defines Pride as a protest and “an act of community love in defiance of social and cultural standards that diminish the value of LGBTQI lives and contribute to stigma and shame.”

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines shame as “The painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one's own conduct or circumstances (or in those of others whose honour or disgrace one regards as one's own), or of being in a situation which offends one's sense of modesty or decency.” What is and is not considered shameful varies from culture to culture and is often determined by those in positions of privilege and/or power. In her book, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, Sally Munt discusses how dominant and/or ruling groups (sometimes political, other

times religious or economic) often purposefully use shame to stigmatize certain types of people. In her research, Munt found that “patterns of shame were disturbingly long-lived, and that cultures retain far-reaching memories for continued and renewed use upon stigmatized groups” (28). Shame, then, is both a social construction and an effective mode of social control.

The implementation of shame as a social control was common long before Shakespeare’s time and remains in use today. However, the ritualization and communal engagement involved in early modern shaming practices—as well as their popularity—make the era uniquely suited for a study of social policing and shaming practices. According to Ewan Fernie, Elizabethan plays often featured depictions of early modern shaming rituals and Shakespeare’s own works suggested a “constant preoccupation, even an obsession with shame” (1). Theater—especially comic theater—was (and is) an ideal medium for the demonstration and dissemination of social norms as they can demonstrate what kinds of people and behaviors are laughable.

The remainder of this introduction will focus on the reasons behind the increased popularity of shaming rituals in the Elizabethan era and examine why social transgression—especially queer social transgression—was so demonized in the period. It will also include a brief overview of the chapters included in this thesis, the first of which will examine the role shame plays in the punishment of powerful queer women in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the second on the carefully orchestrated public shaming of the class-climbing queer, Malvolio (and, to a lesser degree, Olivia), in *Twelfth Night*.

## **1.2 A Place for Everything and Everything in its Place**

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English ideas regarding social status and social mobility were heavily influenced by prevailing old-world beliefs in a ‘Great Chain of Being’ and a ‘body politic.’ The Great Chain of Being refers to the popular understanding that



the universe is organized along a rigid hierarchy, within which different types of matter are ranked based on their proximity to the divine. Naturally, God occupies the top position in this cosmic chain; directly beneath Him (occupying the next link in the chain) were His angels, followed by humans, then by animals, then plant/vegetable life, all the way down to the basest form of matter—the mineral or inanimate.<sup>1</sup> Each of these ‘links’ was further stratified based on various individual qualities. For humans, the most important factors in determining an individual’s rank relative to the rest of humanity were gender and class. Women, like children and animals, were believed to lack the capacity to reason on the same level as men and, thus, were ranked beneath them on the Great Chain of Being. The belief that men were closer to God than were women was used to justify the patriarchal organization of medieval and early modern society. A similar mindset was applied to the lower classes. Kings and Queens were believed to be the divinely chosen representatives of God on Earth and, thus, ranked at the top of the human link. Directly beneath the monarchy lay the nobility, next came the clergy, then the gentry, and finally, at the lowest level, the common people, a category which included merchants, yeomen, servants, and vagrants. An individual’s gender and class status were believed to be assigned—by God and/or nature—at birth and were supposed to be immutable.

The body politic was a popular political metaphor during the medieval and early modern eras that imagined the state as a living organism made up of various parts, all of which needed to successfully perform their divergent roles in order for the whole to function properly.<sup>2</sup> Political

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<sup>1</sup> This is a vastly truncated summary of the theory; for a more thorough examination consult Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* by Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz for an in-depth look at the medieval political theories that shaped traditional early modern thinking. For examples of Shakespeare’s incorporation of the body politic metaphor in various plays, see Dobski and Gish’s *Shakespeare and the Body Politic*.

and popular literature often described declining empires, countries, governments, and so on as diseased or wounded, calling to mind an image of an ailing physical body. Naturally, within this metaphorical representation of the state, the monarch was envisioned as the head of the body, the site of reason located at the physical peak of the nation. In the early modern era, the home was seen as a microcosm of the state; each individual household was supposed to be organized in the same manner as the nation with a (generally male) ‘head’ of the house reigning over their spouse, children, and servants just as the king/queen commanded the country. According to David Underdown, “patriarchal authority within the family was the cornerstone of Elizabethan and Jacobean political theory, the ultimate, ‘natural’, justification for obedience to the state” (117). Questioning the organization of the nation and/or the authority of the monarch could lead to questions about the legitimacy of the gender hierarchy which ordered the home, an arrangement from which men of all ranks benefited. To Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the persistence of the traditional, patriarchal family unit was directly correlated to the survival and stability of both the social and political order (and vice versa).

Both theories outlined above—that of a Great Chain of Being and a body politic—propagate a worldview in which every individual has a specific role to play within a greater whole, a role that is determined by God and/or nature at birth. So long as everyone remained in their ‘proper’ place, the system (or body) functioned harmoniously. Disorder and rebellion, even on a small scale, was not only unnatural, but risked the upheaval of the social, political and, even, cosmological order. However, despite the prevalence of these ideas, the realities of early modern life often contradicted the supposed naturalness and immutability of Elizabethan society.

According to early modern historians like Lawrence Stone, David Underdown, and Jean E. Howard, England underwent a variety of economic and cultural changes in the late-sixteenth

and early-seventeenth centuries which significantly increased the ease with which individuals could (and did) move between and across traditional social boundaries.<sup>3</sup> As often happens in periods of social change, tensions between disparate groups (primarily the haves and the have-nots) led to widespread feelings of dissatisfaction and resentment. While the upper classes begrudged what they saw as the infringement of their natural social ‘inferiors’ into their economic bracket, the newly wealthy begrudged the scorn with which they were treated by those born into the upper classes, feeling that they were being denied the “social prestige” that should have accompanied their rise in economic status. Those who were able to improve their standing in society were often resented by their former friends and neighbors whose social status remained the same, leaving these newly enriched common-born individuals in a sort of social limbo wherein they were not fully accepted by either their original or newfound ‘peers.’ The period’s rising tensions were reflected in corresponding spikes in civil litigations, riots, mob violence and, even, witch trials. The growing unrest and discontent among the populace stoked fears of widespread disorder and societal collapse, especially amongst those in traditional positions of privilege and/or power. As a result, many early modern historians describe England as undergoing a ‘crisis of order’ during the fifty to sixty years leading up to the onset of the English Civil War in 1642. According to Underdown, “Fears of an impending breakdown of the social order have been common in many periods of history,” but “at no time were they more widespread, or more intense, than in early modern England” (116).

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the changes occurring in this era, consult Fletcher and Stevenson’s *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, Lawrence Stone’s article “Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700,” and Jean E. Howard’s “Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England.”

Although “official social ideologies” were reluctant to acknowledge the cultural and economic changes occurring in early modern society, “enormous energy was devoted to revealing the ‘monstrous’ nature of those who moved out of their places” (Howard 341). Popular, legal, and political literature of the period increasingly portrayed nonconformists as threats to the stability of the nation and the family, and as callous, overweening defiers of nature and God’s will. Lawrence Stone notes that this period saw a “flood of laments about the decay of ancient families... [as well as] widespread and embittered comment on the ostentatious upward mobility of the merchant class, and ... a good deal of complaint that consumption standards and patterns of life no longer conformed to the ideal status hierarchy” (39). Underdown uses the same metaphor of a flood to describe the spike in misogynistic and anti-feminist literature in the era and the “public obsession with scolding women, domineering and unfaithful wives” (116-17). This negative rhetoric fueled existing anxieties created by the recent societal changes and identified nonconformist individuals/behaviors as responsible for the mounting discord. As a result, the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries saw an increase in the frequency and severity of both official and unofficial punishments for unruly women, class climbers, cross-dressers, suspected sodomites, and other nonconformists.

In this extremely (dis)order conscious period, transgression, even on a small-scale, was seen as emblematic of a widespread and growing threat to the security and tranquility of the entire nation. Any individual engaged in behavior which threatened the gender or class hierarchies that ordered early modern society was vulnerable to castigation and ‘correction’ either by the official courts or unofficially by their neighbors. Official punishments—or those determined by courts of law—included verbal atonements, imprisonment, corporal punishment, fines, terms in the stocks, and, even, execution. Many of these punishments were doled out in

public. Ecclesiastical courts would often step in to punish individuals believed to be guilty of religious or moral offenses. Such cases generally concluded with the ‘guilty’ individual’s performance of a public act of penance. Unofficial punishments—or those carried out by ones’ neighbors/peers—included a wide range of faux-festive activities whose purpose was to publicly shame those deemed guilty of violating their community’s norms. Early modern shaming rituals—variously referred to as charivaris, rough ridings, cartings, and skimingtons—typically involved a parade and/or performance in which the individual(s) being shamed was dragged before their peers (often in some sort of cart) to be publicly and raucously mocked by their neighbors. The primary aim of these shaming rites was to punish individuals regarded guilty of perverting the natural order by means of an ostentatious display of *disorder* that highlighted the supposed absurdity of the transgressor’s offence. According to Martin Ingram, the practice of public shaming rituals “rested on a folkloric tradition that the populace had the right to supplement the legal system” (93) and neighbors were expected to step in to punish transgressors who could not be punished in (or were overlooked by) official courts. This tradition was sometimes validated by those in positions of authority, as community-led punishments were often sanctioned by the courts and/or prominent members of the community. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson take Ingram’s claim a step further, arguing that “the system of local government [in early modern England] did not merely allow participation: it was dependent for its smooth working on the active involvement of men of all ranks” (16). While those in the upper echelons of power were entrusted by citizens to maintain national order, the common populace was relied upon by all to maintain order in their neighborhood, parish, and household.

I contend that the visibility of both official and unofficial punishments was intended not only to deter others from engaging in unlawful or transgressive behavior, but also to emphasize

the community's complicity in the 'guilty' party's misfortune. Community participation in individual punishments served as a reminder that just as one's neighbors offered opportunities for human connection and acceptance, they also posed a constant threat as potential vehicles for or witnesses to one's shame. Nearly every aspect of early modern life was impacted by the gender and class hierarchies established by long-standing belief in a Great Chain of Being and a body politic. Thus, the range of activities which could potentially put one at risk of punishment was vast and uncertain. Since most transgressions punished by unofficial Elizabethan shaming rituals were not officially illegal, no case needed to be made to prove one guilty of committing them; all that was needed was an accuser popular enough to be sure of the support of their neighbors, or an offender unpopular enough to insure the same. Gossip and public opinion were essential factors in determining who was and was not punished for what behavior. As such, the punishment of transgressive behavior was highly inconsistent and depended largely on the supposed transgressor's social position, reputation, and popularity. Further complicating matters was the fact that the era's recent social changes (and the consequent, newly rampant fear of disorder) meant that behaviors which would once have gone ignored were no longer being granted the same leniency as in previous, less turbulent decades.

Philip Mirabelli claims that the wave of paranoia regarding the supposed dissolution of early modern England's long-standing social hierarchies led to a sexual re-formation in which "the boundaries between the acceptable and the illicit" were redrawn (23). As a result, activities once common among the lower classes—such as premarital sex, bastardy, loose/broken engagements, and adultery—were no longer tolerated. According to Mirabelli the sexual re-formation of the early 1600s led to the rise of a "regime of shame," which was implemented to discourage and punish any engagement in sexual relationships or acts that did not fall within the

newly “precise borders” that delineated post-reformation marriage (23). It should come as no surprise, then, that the most frequent victims of unofficial and semi-official shaming rituals (judging by court and/or parish records, newspapers, diaries, letters, etc.) were men and women accused of transgressing their community’s sexual and/or gender norms. These unfortunate individuals were generally labelled scolds, shrews, adulterers, and/or cuckolds. The term “scold” was used in the early modern era to describe women who dominated or defied their husbands, often via physical and/or verbal abuse. Women accused of being scolds were also frequently accused of being adulterers because, according to Underdown, “the dominated husband, it was generally assumed, was almost certainly being cuckolded” (127). In many cases where a woman was found ‘guilty’ of scolding behavior, both the husband and wife were punished for the ‘improper’ power balance in the relationship; while the wife was punished for being scolding and/or unfaithful, the husband was punished for allowing (or, at least, for failing to prevent) the unruly behavior of his spouse. The term ‘shrew’ had similar connotations to that of ‘scold,’ but was applied more broadly. Any woman who failed to live up to the supposedly ideal image of the meek, obedient, soft-spoken wife or daughter was vulnerable to accusations of shrewishness by her neighbors. This ideal, however, was becoming increasingly unrealistic given the economic changes occurring in the era.

The primary roles women were expected to play in the early modern era were those of housewife and mother. However, the burgeoning capitalist economy of Elizabethan England facilitated the greater participation of women in the public work/marketplace.<sup>4</sup> However, women

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<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Rackin’s *Shakespeare and Women* provides a closer look at the various ways women contributed to the Elizabethan economy.

who embraced their public roles with too much enthusiasm, competency, or authority were often regarded with suspicion and/or disapproval. Underdown argues that the perceived threat to the gender and class hierarchies caused by these economic changes led to a shift in Elizabethan shaming rituals. According to Underdown, public shaming practices (such as the cucking-stool) which had once been used to punish both men and women guilty of violating their community's sexual norms became, beginning in the late-fifteenth century, punishments employed almost exclusively against women who committed gender-related offenses (123). Unlike European countries, the most common victims of England's charivari were couples in which the wife was accused of having "beaten or otherwise abused the husband" (121). This pattern persisted until the eighteenth century, at which point the more frequently punished couples became those in which the husband abused the wife. As Underdown writes, "The 'woman on top', like the scold and the witch, seems to be primarily a phenomenon of the century between 1560 and 1660" (121), a period coinciding with the 'crisis of order' detected by early modern historians.

The 'crisis of order' not only spurred a reconfiguration of cross-gender relationships and heterosexual marriage, it also drastically altered the traditional format of homosocial male friendship. Alan Bray argues in his foundational work, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, that, prior to the mid-sixteenth century, homosexual<sup>5</sup> relationships were "tacitly tolerated" and ignored, so long as they did not challenge or disrupt the social order (53). Bray's book describes in detail how various medieval and early modern institutions—such as the household, apprenticeship, and the education system—were organized in such a way that homosexual

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<sup>5</sup> Though Elizabethans did not conceive of sexuality in terms of identity, nor have terms to differentiate between same-sex and male-female relationships (the term "homosexual" was not coined until the 1890s), I will be using such modern terms as homosexual and heterosexual throughout this paper to describe various relationships and behaviors.



relationships could easily exist within them without drawing attention or censor. He demonstrates how the various changes occurring in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries altered the traditional structure of these institutions and, in so doing, erased many of the traditional signs that were once relied on to distinguish between acceptable male friendship and sodomy. According to Bray, in medieval and early modern England sodomy was closely associated with monstrosity, sacrilege, treason, social disorder, and defiance of the ‘natural’ and/or divine (19-21). Individuals accused of sodomy were typically accused of committing other crimes; most commonly, heresy and sedition. The frequent inclusion of these specific charges—both of which imply defiance of traditional authorities (i.e. the Church and the State)—alongside charges of sodomy suggests that the behavior for which the accused were being punished was not the act of sodomy itself, but the ways in which the relationship and/or perpetrators defied other social boundaries, such as those related to the class and gender hierarchies.

Acceptable homosocial friendships in the medieval and early modern eras occurred primarily between men of the same or similar class status and often involved (or was suspected of involving) the exchange and/or sharing of gifts, money, and social prestige. When such exchanges occurred between individuals of similar rank no social barriers were crossed. However, when one individual was of a higher rank than the other, it was easy for outsiders to assume that the friendship was motivated (at least on one side) not by affection, but by mercenary and/or class-climbing desires. These mixed-rank relationships were much more likely to be interpreted as sodomitical because they posed a threat to the traditional social order by granting low-class individuals access to upper-class privileges as well as opportunities for social advancement. Bray writes in his article, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in

Elizabethan England,” an earlier piece exploring the same themes his book would later expand upon, that:

If someone had acquired a place in society to which he was not entitled by nature and could then perhaps even lord it over those who were naturally his betters, the specter likely to be conjured up in the mind of an Elizabethan was not the orderly friendship between men but rather the profoundly disturbing image of the sodomite, that enemy not only of nature but of the order of society and the proper kinds and divisions within it (51).

The increased fear of class mobility and social collapse during the so-called ‘crisis of order’ meant that the ‘specter’ of the sodomite was never far from peoples’ minds.<sup>6</sup>

Order and hierarchy depend on the ability to clearly decipher between kinds, to easily determine one’s proper place in relation to those around them. Since queerness—at its most fundamental level—represents otherness, blurred lines, changeability/fluidity, and the endless potentialities of ‘kinds,’ queer individuals posed a unique threat to the increasingly fragile social order of early modern England. Valerie Traub writes that “Given the principled undefinability of ‘queer,’ its infinite mobility and mutability, one notion has provided ballast for its centrifugal expansion: the idea that it is always posed against the ‘normal’” (17). For the purposes of this thesis, I will define as ‘queer’ any person, relationship, desire, or activity which defies, disrupts and/or unsettles the supposedly fixed categories and hierarchies that ordered ‘normal’ Elizabethan society and the patriarchal, heteronormative power structures at its center.

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<sup>6</sup> Legal and moral texts regarding sodomy and the perils of inappropriate homosocial friendship largely ignore same-sex relationships between women. However, the omission of lesbian relationships from medieval and early modern discourse does not indicate that such relationships were less common or more accepted than male-male relationships. See Valerie Traub’s chapter, “The (In)significance of ‘Lesbian’ Desire in Early Modern England,” in *Queering the Renaissance*.

### 1.3 A Breakdown of the Chapters to Come

The following chapters examine how Shakespeare's depictions of community policing and public shaming practices in two of his most famous comedies—*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*—critique the atmosphere of shame and fear that permeated early modern England, an atmosphere which was perpetuated by those in traditional positions of power to punish and deter transgressive behavior and to bolster the *supposedly* natural order whose *actual* artificiality was becoming more and more apparent due to the economic and social changes occurring in the period.

In Chapter One I explore how *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* depiction of a supposedly once orderly world (and its otherworldly counterpart) thrown into unnatural chaos by the transgressive behavior of multiple unruly and, I argue, queer, women reflects Elizabethan fears of disorder and social transgression. I examine how the play's representatives of patriarchal authority—Theseus and Oberon—attempt to punish the women who resist their rule with violence and shame yet manage only to imperil their respective realms with worse disorder. The results of Theseus's and Oberon's failed endeavors to shame Hippolyta and Titania suggest that the true agents of chaos in *Dream* are the authoritarian men intent on asserting their power and maintaining the traditional status quo.

Chapter Two focuses on how the Malvolio subplot in *Twelfth Night* exposes the flaws in social policing and public shaming practices, as well as the hypocrisy and immorality of those who employ such methods to punish their peers. I suggest that Shakespeare uses the pervasive themes of shame, surveillance, and public exposure to highlight the uncomfortable reality that everyone is vulnerable to and affected by the culture of shame fostered by those in power to maintain their place at the top of the social hierarchy. I argue that Shakespeare's final marriage

comedy throws into question both the rationality and morality of a world order whose survival appears to rely on nothing more than the “propaganda of order” (Fletcher and Stevenson, 39) and the implementation of blatantly imperfect and immoral social policing and shaming practices.

## ***Chapter 2: Fool Me Once: Resisting Queer Shame in *A Midsummer Night's Dream****

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* opens with the apparent resolution of conflict—between militant men and equally militant women—and with a promise, by the victorious Duke Theseus, that the injuries inflicted prior to the play are to be healed with a celebration in “another key” (1.1.19). However, this gesture toward closure near-at-hand and violence ended is undercut almost immediately by the arrival of Hermia, her tyrannical father, and the two men vying for her affection. Demanding the “ancient privilege of Athens” (1.1.42) to choose his daughter’s spouse, Egeus insists Hermia either marry Demetrius—the husband (and son-in-law) he has chosen for her—or be executed. Acknowledging Egeus’ right, Theseus presents Hermia with an ultimatum: that she choose among marriage to Demetrius, a “barren” life as a cloistered nun, and death (1.1.74). He names his wedding day as the deadline for her decision, an odd choice for a man who, moments earlier, claimed he wished to wed his bride without violence. It seems that the “key” of the upcoming acts is to be the same as that which characterized events prior to the play, suggesting that, even in so-called peace times, relations between men and women within the world of Shakespeare’s play are characterized by violence and discord.

The theme of men and women in conflict, of a world haunted by the threat of impending violence (primarily against women), is continued in Act 2 with the introduction of the warring king and queen of fairyland: Oberon and Titania. According to Titania, the conflict between the royal couple has caused nature to revolt both in fairyland and the mortal world of Athens. She claims: “the winds, piping to us in vain, / As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea / Contagious fogs,” leading to flooding, the death of farm animals and crops, a rise in rheumatic

illness, and myriad other evils (2.1.89-118). This disruption of the natural world suggests that the conflict between husband and wife is not merely unpleasant, but a perversion of the natural order. Such an idea, according to historians of the early modern era like Lawrence Stone, Anthony Fletcher, John Stevenson, David Underdown, and Susan Amussen, would be in keeping with traditional views of social order in the Elizabethan era, which cautioned that it was a wife's natural (and divinely ordained) duty to obey her husband just as it was a daughter's duty to obey her father and a subject's duty to obey their king.

On the surface and, certainly, in the minds of the play's authoritarian male characters, the disorder and discontent evident in both Athens and fairyland appears to result from the misbehavior of several unruly and, I argue, queer women. However, as the play progresses it becomes more and more apparent that (upper-class) men, and the actions they take to maintain the status quo, are responsible for nearly all the play's disorder. Indeed, given the mythological and folkloric background of many of *Dream's* characters, I suggest that their actions lead to even greater chaos and misfortune after the close of the play, suggesting that the greatest threat to society comes from self-serving men intent on asserting their power and authority.

## **2.1 Warriors, Rebels, and Queers, Oh My!**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* introduces the theme of unruly, queer women in its opening line with Theseus's address to "fair Hippolyta" (1.1.1). The name Hippolyta would have been easily recognized by most in Shakespeare's audiences as a name frequently used to identify a particular Amazon who appeared in various Greek myths and in the popular Amazonian narratives of the Elizabethan era. Broadly speaking, Amazons were formidable women warriors who rejected the patriarchal world order, opting instead to live in a separatist, all-female society. Literary depictions of the Amazons were abundant and frequently contradictory. However, most

authors agree that the Amazons avoided and/or hated men, that they preferred warfare, hunting, and horse-back riding to ‘proper’ feminine tasks, and that their sexual activity (or inactivity) was, at least, atypical, and, at worst, dangerous.<sup>7</sup> According to Celeste Wright, the (possibly) originary Amazons were once married women who overthrew their husbands after most of their village’s men died in battle with an outside enemy. Wright claims that the women, “having tasted freedom... decided matrimony had been slavery” (450). Descriptions of the Amazons’ sexual practices were of particular interest to the mostly male writers of Amazonian narratives. While some accounts depicted Amazons as “militant virgin[s]” whose hatred of men extended to the bedroom, others painted them as sexually promiscuous viragos who engaged in a variety of lewd behavior, including extramarital sex, anonymous sex, lethal sex (in which they sexually exhausted their lovers), rape (generally of men who were their prisoners-of-war) and sex with one another.<sup>8</sup> While Amazons did occasionally marry men, the majority were believed to scorn marriage. However, some texts describe the Amazons as being ruled by “joint queens,” suggesting that they were open to forming partnerships with one another which may have resembled marriage absent a gender hierarchy (Wright 435).

According to Wright, “Amazons were the foremost ancient examples of feminism” (433). Since ancient times, the Amazons have served as the archetypal female warriors, figures troubling not merely for their decision to reject patriarchal society but for the skill they demonstrate when performing typically male-coded activities (like combat). As a prominent, sometimes royal, member of this alternative society, Hippolyta represents all that the Amazons

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<sup>7</sup> Celeste Wright’s article, “The Amazons in Elizabethan Literature,” contains an excellent overview of the various, often disparate, depictions of these warrior women in the writings of Shakespeare’s contemporaries.

<sup>8</sup> See Kathryn Schwarz’s article for an excellent overview of Elizabethan depictions of Amazonian sexuality.

as a people signified to the Elizabethan populace: women's denunciation of traditional gender roles and their usurpation of male roles and prerogatives; illicit sexuality; gender confusion and disruption of the gender hierarchy; and the martial rejection of patriarchal authority.

Many early critics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* argue that Hippolyta's framing presence at the beginning and end of the play foreshadows the inevitable domestication of the play's other unruly women—namely, Hermia and Titania.<sup>9</sup> However, according to myth, the Amazons wage war on Athens following the wedding between the duke and their Queen, a conflict in which Hippolyta—who in some cases takes up arms against her husband alongside the invading Amazons—dies. Thus, the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, and Hippolyta's supposed domestication, are destined to be short-lived. According to Kathryn Schwarz, when reading the play in the context of the existing Theseus-Hippolyta mythology, “the conclusion of male conquest and female submission,” presented in the opening act of *Dream*, “proves less final, becoming instead the beginning of an invasion, a revenge plot, [and] a play” (220; addition mine). Like Schwarz, I do not believe Hippolyta's presence at the beginning of *Dream* should be read as foreshadowing the eventual submission of the play's other unruly women. Instead, I argue that her presence serves to remind viewers/readers—and Hermia—of just how powerful and unruly women can be.

Unlike the play's other unruly women at the start of the play, Titania is already married. However, her behavior does not fall in line with that of a ‘proper’ Elizabethan wife as she openly disobeys, disrespects, and shuns her husband. Worse yet, Titania consistently prioritizes her extramarital and, I argue, homosexual, relationship with her votaress (and her votaress's child)

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<sup>9</sup> See Louis Adrian Montrose, Paul Olson, and James Kavanaugh.



over her marriage. Though her votaress dies prior to the start of the play, Titania honors their bond by adopting her young son. According to Puck, Titania spoils her changeling “and makes him all her joy” (2.1.27), implying that the boy has monopolized Titania’s love and attention, leaving none left over for “jealous Oberon” (2.1.24 and 62). We are not told, specifically, why Titania has “forsover [Oberon’s] bed and company” or for how long (2.1.63). It is frequently assumed that she has done so in response to Oberon’s stubborn insistence that she give him the changeling boy. However, I think it is possible that the fairy queen’s denial of her king predates the boy’s birth. In her description of her relationship with her votaress, Titania implies that the pair spent at least the last few months of the latter’s pregnancy together, enough time for the votaress to “grow big-bellied” (2.1.131) like the sails of the nearby merchant ships (at which point she would not be fetching trifles for her mistress with a “pretty and swimming gait” (2.1.132) as in the earlier stages of her pregnancy). It seems, then, that before she doted on the changeling child, Titania was already ignoring Oberon, spending her nights in India lounging “on Neptune’s yellow sands” (2.1.128) with her votaress instead of at home with her husband.

The image of two people lounging side-by-side on a beach at night is almost stereotypically romantic. The use of sensual, erotically charged adjectives like “spiced” and “wanton,” as well as the fact that the women are said to be in India, moves the scene from merely romantic to sexually suggestive. In the early modern era, the East and Eastern countries (primarily India and China) were associated with exoticism, the supernatural, sensuality, and (often dangerous and alluring) sexuality, primarily female sexuality.<sup>10</sup> James W. Stone points out

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<sup>10</sup> See Margo Hendricks’ article “‘Obscured by Dreams’: Race, Empire, and Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*” for a more in-depth look at Elizabethan ideas regarding Asia and the so-called Far East.

that, shortly before describing the time she spent with her votaress in India, Titania accuses Oberon of committing adultery in the same country (2.1.66-70). Stone claims that Titania and Oberon's accusations imply that "the Asian lands of India and the Amazons... are places of exotic license where one goes to cheat on one's partner" (98) and that the couples' "free association of India with sexual license is a predilection that many of Shakespeare's countrymen would have shared" (97). Given the location of their rendezvous and the sensuality of Titania's description, Shakespeare's audiences would likely have concluded or, at least, suspected that the women were having an affair. I suggest that the relationship between the two women was more serious than a simple affair, that Titania essentially divorced Oberon (minus any irksome mortal paperwork) and replaced him with a wife.

While we know Titania is a married woman, we are not told the martial status of her votaress. Puck briefly mentions an "Indian king" (2.1.22), but he does not specify what this king's relationship to the votaress was, only that the changeling boy, supposedly, was sired by him. According to travel narratives of the Elizabethan era, it was not uncommon for Indian women to be married to several husbands or for Indian men to have more than one wife (Hendricks 50). Thus, even if she were married to the Indian king Puck mentions, the prospect of forming an intimate relationship or, even, a marriage, with another would not seem outlandish to the votaress (or her husband) given the supposed norms of Indian society. In order to become a votaress, the woman would have had to swear certain vows to Titania, much as betrothed men and women exchanged vows during a marriage ceremony. Indeed, nuns and other female members of religious orders were often referred to (sometimes seriously, sometimes snidely) as "brides of God" (Jankowski 62-3). Perhaps, in swearing herself to the fairy queen, the votaress becomes a 'bride of Titania.'

Both Oberon and Titania are depicted as being guilty of infidelity but, while Oberon has a string of lovers, Titania has only one. After Titania accuses Oberon of having affairs with Hippolyta and any number of indistinguishable mortal Phillidas (2.1.67-72), Oberon counters by accusing her of loving Theseus. Oberon asks “Didst not thou lead him through glimmering night / From Perigenia whom he ravished? / And make him with fair Aegles break his faith, / With Ariadne and Antiopa?” (2.1.78-81). It is unclear if Oberon is accusing her of helping Theseus seduce (or rape) and then abandon a series of other women, or of seducing Theseus away from said women. Either way, Oberon appears to believe that Titania has undue affection for the mortal Theseus. Unlike Oberon, Titania denies her spouse’s accusation, insisting his claims are nothing but “the forgeries of jealousy” (2.1.82). I suggest that Titania is being truthful, that Oberon’s accusation regarding Theseus is a ‘forgery,’ one he has engaged in because he cannot bring himself to say aloud that the person his wife has actually cheated on him with is a woman.

While Oberon is apparently able to abandon his various mortal lovers with ease (much like Theseus abandons women again and again in Greek myth), Titania is unable and/or unwilling to leave behind her mistress, even after her death. When the fairy queen eventually returns to fairyland, following her votaress’s death, it is with her lover’s child in tow. Despite her husband’s jealousy and displeasure, Titania is determined to raise and love the boy as her own. The child is, in one sense, a way of keeping Titania’s relationship with her votaress alive; he is a surrogate for and a reminder of his mother. Thus, although her votaress is dead, Titania’s love for her mistress continues to prevent her from focusing her love and attention on her husband. The changeling boy’s presence in fairyland represents the potential future upheaval of the status quo caused by the fairy queen’s ‘marriage’ to her votaress. In Act 2 scene 1 Puck claims that Titania “crowns [the changeling] with flowers” (2.1.27). The image of the crowned child

suggests that Titania is treating him like royalty, as a crown prince and future king. Thus, the conspicuously childless Titania appears to have named her changeling as her heir, the ruler destined to replace Oberon if he fails to sire a son. Titania denies Oberon his right to ‘father’ the future ruler of fairyland by preventing him to assume a paternal role in her adopted child’s life. I suggest that Titania’s refusal to allow Oberon a parental role in her son’s upbringing is due in large part to her belief that the boy already has two parents and that Oberon’s presence in his life would unfairly erase the existence of the mother who birthed him.

Puck and Oberon never refer directly to the votaress and omit her from their account of the changeling boy’s birth (presumably to help Oberon ‘save face’). Titania, on the other hand, never mentions the Indian king or, indeed, any man taking part in the conception of her votaress’s child. In her version of the boy’s birth the biological father is, at most, an unnamed sperm donor and, possibly, entirely non-existent. When describing her votaress’s impregnation and pregnancy, Titania depicts the pair as being alone on a beach (possibly an island) while the world of men—represented by the merchant ships—passes them by. Titania likens her votaress’s womb to the sails of said merchant ships, which “conceive / And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind” (2.1.130-31). Her description calls to mind an Amazonian myth of pregnancy wherein the warrior women, isolated on their island-nation, were impregnated and made “mothers by the wind” (Schwarz 228). Such miraculous births can be found in mythic and religious texts around the world. Ruth Vanita claims that premodern Indian texts not only contained tales of virgin births, but stories of children with more than one mother and, even, lesbian procreation. Titania makes no effort to erase the votaress from the narrative of the boy’s birth, thus I do not believe she intends to replace the votaress as the boy’s mother; instead, I argue that she views the boy as a child of two mothers. According to a travel narrative by

Vertomannus, when Indian women with multiple husbands became pregnant, the mother got to choose which of her husbands she wanted to be the child's father (Hendricks 50). If the votaress considered Titania as one of her husbands and chose her to raise her son, it would explain why Titania believes so strongly that her mistress wanted her to raise the boy and why she never refers to him as a "changeling" or "stol'n"; in Titania's mind (and, while living, the votaress's), the boy is rightfully hers. Thus, it seems that while Oberon was off sowing his wild oats, Titania was building herself a family, one which had (and has) no place for Oberon and in which she is granted the privileges usually reserved for husbands and fathers.

I suggest that Oberon's displeasure and jealousy are not merely a result of his having been cuckolded, but a reaction to his realization that Titania has 'overthrown' his role as 'king' of their household and is intent on preventing him from exercising his patriarchal right to raise fairyland's future king. In the early modern era, the rearing of boys was a responsibility and privilege reserved for fathers. Since sons were the inheritors of their family's wealth, land, and station, they were, largely speaking, the future holders of power in society. Raising sons gave men the power to influence the course of the future, even if just the future of their family line. In the case of royalty, children were brought up to be not only men and/or women, but kings and/or queens with the power to influence the future on a national and, potentially, global scale. The threat posed by the changeling's potential rule isn't just political, but cultural. Valerie Traub claims that "what is at issue in feminine homoeroticism is less eroticism or even gender per se than the upholding of marital alliance, with social and biological reproduction at its core" or, more specifically, "the reproduction of patriarchal authority" (258). Michael Warner makes a similar argument when introducing the term "reprosexuality," which he defines as "the interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal

identity.” According to Warner, resexuality “involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality; it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission” (9). Warner argues that social conservatives oppose non-normative sexual activity and non-traditional family units because they interfere both with the heterosexual reproduction of children and (through said children) the reproduction of long-held cultural norms. Titania’s choice to adopt a mortal, foreign child—one who does not resemble her in any way—suggests that she has rejected the aim of resexuality and, instead, chosen to embrace change and ‘otherness’ over self-replication and cultural reproduction. The fairy queen also denies Oberon his chance at generational self-replication by choosing her own successor (without any input from her spouse) and by refusing her husband access to the child. In so doing, Titania robs Oberon of his ‘paternal’ right to shape the future of fairyland and places herself in a position to rewrite the patriarchal structure of her kingdom, through the values she imparts to its future king.

Shakespeare could have made the conflict between Oberon and Titania about anything, so his decision to use the changeling boy as the crux of the royal couple’s dispute suggests that the child is more than a mere plot point. I argue that the changeling is intended to represent, as his name suggests, change. As discussed at length in the introduction, from the late-sixteenth to the early-seventeenth centuries, England was undergoing a variety of economic and cultural changes which appeared to threaten the stability of both the gender and class hierarchies. Queen Elizabeth I was only the second woman to rule England outright (the first being her half-sister who only ruled for five short years) and many Elizabethans were unsettled by the fact that a woman was the head of the country. As the so-called Virgin Queen steadfastly refused to marry or name a successor, her people became more and more anxious the older she became.

Additionally, increased travel and trade between the Far East, the Americas, and England, meant that historically divergent worlds—the East and the West, the Old and the New—were converging and mixing to a degree never seen before. There was no doubt that things were changing, but what they were changing into was not yet clear. If events in the forest represent, as the play's title hints, a 'dream,' then I suggest that Titania's changeling symbolizes Elizabethan anxieties over their uncertain future. As a son with no father but two mothers, a mortal raised by fairies, a foreign (non-white) child in a strange land, and a boy born to a servant risen to royal status—the changeling is a boundary-crossing, definition-defying figure whose identity cannot be clearly categorized due to the unusual circumstances of his birth and upbringing. The possibility that such a child could gain power in a society long dependent on distinguishable kinds, difference, and order not only reflects the reality of a changing world but suggests that even more radical change may be yet to come.

## **2.2 Shaming and Taming Society's Unruly Members**

When a society undergoes a significant period of change (what some would call progress), as England did in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, transgressive behavior tends to be more frequently and severely punished than in less uncertain times. This trend reflects the natural reaction of those in power to the prospect of losing their place at the top. As discussed in the introduction, public shaming was a common means of punishing non-normative behavior in the Elizabethan era, especially non-normative behavior which could not be addressed and corrected by state or religious authorities because it was not, technically, illegal nor heretical. Such practices not only discouraged the guilty party from continuing and/or repeating their behavior but reminded all those who bore witness to their shaming that such behavior was

unacceptable. Thus, shame acted as a punishment, a social corrective, and a deterrent to transgressive activity.

In *Dream* both Hippolyta and Titania blatantly oppose patriarchal authority, successfully usurp male prerogatives, and, worst of all, endeavor to reorder the centuries old status quo that positioned/s straight, white, upper-class men at the top of the social hierarchy. If the changeling child represents change, then Titania and Hippolyta represent those responsible for enacting that change—the transgressive figures who took advantage of early modern England’s increasingly malleable society to challenge the long-standing hierarchies on which the Elizabethan social order relied. Theseus and Oberon—attempt to punish their wives’ (or, in Theseus’s case, his wife-to-be) transgressive behavior with violence and shame. In so doing, they hope to both prove their rightful place at the top of the social ladder and deter others from following their wives’ unruly example.

Of all the versions of the meeting and marriage between Hippolyta and Theseus—Hippolyta and her sister being defeated in battle by Theseus and Hercules (Schwarz 217); Hippolyta defeating Theseus and making him her husband (Schwarz 217; Wright 437); Hippolyta fighting and losing to Hercules, who then presents her as a gift to Theseus (Schwarz 214); Hippolyta being lured aboard Theseus’s ship (while the Athenian was staying as a guest in the Amazons’ city), where she is either seduced and/or raped before being spirited away to Athens (Schwarz 218-219; Wright 437)—Shakespeare chooses to use the variation in which Hippolyta is a trophy of war, defeated by her husband-to-be in battle. Indeed, many modern productions of *Dream* depict Hippolyta as caged or chained in the play’s opening scene, clearing indicating her status as a prisoner-of-war and unwilling (or, at least, highly unenthusiastic)



bride.<sup>11</sup> Theseus, addressing his bride-to-be, says: “I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries. / But I will wed thee in another key, / With pomp, with triumph and with reveling” (1.1.17-20). In the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) the term “pomp” is defined as a “splendid display or celebration... frequently with negative connotation of ostentatious, specious or boastful show” while the word “triumph” is defined as: “victory, conquest, or the glory of this;” “a public festivity or joyful celebration, a spectacle or pageant;” or, from Roman history, “the entrance of a victorious commander with his army and spoils in solemn process into Rome.” Theseus’s description of the other ‘key’ in which he wishes to wed Hippolyta is more in keeping with a depiction of a victory parade or celebration than of a wedding. According to Martin Ingram, the early modern charivari often included “a parade of armed men, sometimes elaborately accoutered with armour and real weapons... or arms improvised from household or workshop tools” (86). I suggest that the picture Theseus paints of a victorious military procession bears a striking similarity to this popular early modern shaming ritual.

Shortly after describing the manner in which he means to marry Hippolyta, Theseus instructs his Master of Revels to “stir up the Athenian youth to merriments” (1.1.13-15). He wants his people to celebrate in the streets, rather than in private, so they can take part in and bear witness to his ‘triumph.’ An infamous womanizer, Theseus could marry any number of women, yet he chooses to marry an Amazon. I suggest that, by marrying Hippolyta, Theseus is attempting to publicly show that the Amazonian Queen’s has been defeated by a man and tamed into accepting her ‘proper’ place in patriarchal society. His targeting of “Athenian youth” is

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, in the London Theatre Company’s 2019 production, Hippolyta is brought onstage in a glass case/cage (presumably, the cage is glass so that audience members can clearly see the facial expressions of actress, Gwendolyn Christie). The Globe Theatre’s 2015 production actually shows the battle between Hippolyta and Theseus (and a few other Amazons/Athenians) in which Hippolyta was captured.

intentional as the young are, typically, the faction of society most likely to rebel against tradition. The duke wants those most likely to question the traditional law and order of Athens—young, headstrong people like Hermia—to bear witness to Hippolyta’s shaming and learn from her example. In other words, by publicly celebrating his wedding (and, simultaneously, his military victory), Theseus is reinforcing the idea that men are superior to women by flaunting the result of an actual battle of the sexes between himself and his bride-to-be. In so doing, Theseus is trying to demonstrate to the up-and-coming generation the natural inferiority of women and the inevitability of marriage.

Unfortunately for Theseus, his attempt to demonstrate man’s natural superiority to and dominion over woman by taming—through marriage—the quintessential Amazon is undercut by the inevitable invasion of a literal army of women who have rejected heterosexual marriage and patriarchal rule. While there are several different versions describing how Hippolyta and Theseus met and married, the result of the Amazon queen’s departure for Athens is less ambiguous. By kidnapping (or, in some versions, seducing) Hippolyta and making her his bride, Theseus brings the wrath of her loyal Amazons to his doorstep. Theseus’ initial victory over Hippolyta, then, proves to be only the first battle of an all-out war between the Amazons and the Athenians. What side Hippolyta takes in the war between the Amazons and the Athenians varies based on which version of the myth you read. While some variations describe her as joining forces with the invading Amazons, others suggest she chooses to side with her husband. Since Shakespeare depicts Hippolyta as a prisoner-of-war, I contend that the Amazon queen of *Dream* would choose to join her loyal Amazons. If Hippolyta does indeed decide to take up arms against her husband, her decision would prove marriage an ineffective ‘cure’ for unruly women.

The Amazons are generally depicted as living in hidden and/or hard to reach cities, far away from the world of men. This isolation protects the Amazons from outside (i.e. male) interference, but it also protects patriarchal society from the militant and ideological threat posed by the warrior women's existence. Theseus's actions draw the Amazons out of hiding and force his people to come face-to-face with undeniable, flesh-and-blood proof that Hippolyta is not an anomaly, but a queen with an army of loyal subjects who have chosen, like her, to live outside of patriarchal society. Thus, in confronting Hippolyta's followers, Theseus and his people must also confront the uncomfortable truth that creating and maintaining an all-female society is both possible and, to many women, desirable.

While Theseus attempts to assert patriarchal authority by marrying and 'domesticating' the archetypical powerful woman, Oberon seeks to reclaim his power as a husband by shaming and taming his disobedient wife. Unfolding his plan to Puck, Oberon describes how he will use the juice of a magic flower to entrance Titania so that whatever she next lays eyes on, "Be it on lion, bear, or wolf or bull, / On meddling monkey or on busy ape, / She shall pursue it with the soul of love." (2.1.184-86). Oberon could have used the flower's magic to make Titania love him and give him the changeling boy he desires, instead he chooses to make Titania fall in love with "some vile thing" (2.2.34). This decision suggests that Oberon's intention was not merely to gain possession of the changeling boy and prove his dominion over his wife, but to humiliate Titania. In painting his wife as a sexual deviant interested in bestiality, Oberon attempts to denigrate his wife's relationship with her votaress and the votaress's child. According to Alan Bray, social conservatives of the early modern era considered bestiality and sodomy to be equivalent transgressions (14). Even today, certain individuals argue (absurdly) that allowing gays to marry is a 'slippery slope' that will inevitably lead to men and women marrying animals. By forcing

Titania to dote on a beast, Oberon is encouraging those who witness her humiliation to equate the votaress with Titania's latest love interest. The fairy king wants the denizens of fairyland to question their queen's judgement, especially when it comes to choosing love objects. In so doing, Oberon seeks to sow uncertainty regarding the changeling boy whom Titania appears to have chosen as her heir, a child resulting from the fairy queen's 'ridiculous' and 'unnatural' relationship with his mother.

At first, Oberon's plan seems to go better than he imagined. Reporting back to the fairy king, Puck announces that Titania "with a monster is in love" (3.2.6), referring to the magically altered weaver, aptly named Bottom, whose head has been transformed into that of an ass. Initially delighted by this turn of events, Oberon's enthusiasm for the predicament wanes after observing the two bespelled lovers together. In Act 4 scene 1, he tells Puck "her dotage, now, I do begin to pity" (45) and recounts how he recently met and fought with Titania in the woods, an argument which ended with the fairy queen surrendering her changeling to Oberon without protestation. Having seemingly achieved his goal, Oberon decides to release Titania from the flowers' spell. However, I suggest his decision was not motivated by pity for his wife, but by the realization that his plan to humiliate Titania has backfired and brought shame on himself.

Oberon's intention was for Titania to "love and languish" (2.2.29). In other words, he wanted her to pursue an uninterested love interest, chasing 'it' through the forest in the same desperate manner that Helena pursues Demetrius. While Bottom does initially attempt to flee the strange woman he meets in the forest, Titania is easily able to overpower and entrap him. Thus, rather than pining for a love she cannot have, Titania is able to happily dote on her new love in much the same manner she did the changeling boy, even crowning him in the same way (4.1.50). Whether the fairy queen and Bottom have sex or not, Titania clearly succeeds in her 'suit.'

Oberon's situation in Act 4, then, is much the same as at the start of the play. Although the fairy king succeeds in convincing an enchanted Titania to surrender her changeling, the victory is a hollow one because the bespelled Titania has already replaced the boy with Bottom. Despite all his efforts (and what should be an unfair advantage due to his chance finding of a magic flower), Oberon has failed both to hurt Titania and to assert his dominance over her. Worse yet, in attempting to punish his wife for her transgressive relationship with her votaress, Oberon inadvertently causes himself to be cuckolded yet again, by a love object even more taboo.

When one considers the various symbolic connotations attached to donkeys, Titania's infatuation with the transfigured Bottom becomes even more humiliating... for Oberon. Donkeys, or asses, are associated with stupidity, stubbornness, labor and the laboring classes, crassness, lechery, and virility. While Bottom can accurately be described by any or all of these traits, his position as Titania's love interest and presence in her bed means that the traits most likely to come to mind when observing the 'lovers' in *Dream* are those related to donkeys' sexual qualities and behavior. According to Jan Kott, "From antiquity up to the Renaissance the ass was credited with the strongest sexual potency and among all quadrupeds was supposed to have the longest and hardest phallus" (118). Titania, then, appears to have replaced her husband with a lover whose (albeit unique) exterior suggests excessive masculinity, lustiness, and virility. Consequently, outsiders may draw the conclusion that Oberon is lacking in those same qualities and, unlike Bottom, is incapable of sexually satisfying and/or impregnating his wife.

In addition to being seen as lusty, virile, and well-endowed, donkeys were/are related to various forms of sexual deviancy including rape, sexual violence, and crossbreeding. Bruce Boehrer claims that accounts by early natural historians regarding the breeding of mules suggest that mares were, supposedly, too proud to mate with any animal besides a steed. According to

Boehrer, one method used to convince a mare to accept an ass for a mate involved humiliating the mare by cutting its mane in haphazard fashion, a procedure which led to a sort of ‘attitude adjustment’ that culminated in the mare’s acceptance of a less noble partner (112). Perhaps, upon hearing what sort of ‘monster’ Titania had fallen in love with, Oberon envisioned his wife being humiliated in a manner similar to that experienced by the mares Boehrer describes. However, instead of finding Titania abashed and lately brutalized by a lusty monster, Oberon witnesses his wife happily dotting on a docile and infantilized Bottom. Titania’s dalliance with Bottom, then, paints Oberon as less manly than an outrageously transfigured mortal weaver, while simultaneously depicting Titania as powerful enough to easily tame and dominate a figure emblematic of male sexual potency and predation.

After freeing his wife from the flower’s enchantment Oberon announces that he and Titania are “new in amity” (4.1.86). Titania neither agrees with nor contests his claim. However, her apparent acquiescence to Oberon’s commands for silence and, moments later, sleep-inducing music may lead some to assume the fairy queen has indeed been tamed into amicable domesticity by her ordeal. I suggest that, rather than indicating her transformation into a ‘proper’ wife, Titania’s compliance in this scene is merely a (temporary) result of her confusion and divided attention. In other words, Titania appeases Oberon because she is busy contemplating the night’s strange events and does not want to expend the mental effort necessary to argue with him. It does not take the fairy queen long to suspect that her husband had a hand in her humiliation. As the couple makes to flee the coming dawn, she instructs Oberon to “Tell me how it came this night / That I sleeping here was found / With these mortals on the ground” (4.1.99-

101), a line often delivered sternly by the actress playing Titania in modern productions.<sup>12</sup> I suggest that, in claiming he and Titania are “new in amity,” Oberon is making a last-ditch effort to salvage his imperiled masculinity by controlling the narrative of the night’s events. However, after being pressed into giving Titania a recital of their activities in the forest (even if what he provides is a watered-down version to make him seem less culpable), I consider it highly unlikely that Titania will simply accept the loss of her beloved changeling boy.

Although the fairy couple’s appearance together at the end of Act 5 may seem to indicate reconciliation, I suggest the pair are merely putting aside their personal conflict long enough to perform their duty to Theseus and Hippolyta. We know from her plea in Act 2 scene 1 that Titania, more than Oberon, has been troubled by the ill effect their marital dispute has had on the natural world. While I find it highly improbable that Titania will be content to let Oberon keep her changeling, I would not be surprised to learn that the fairy queen decided on a brief truce—just long enough for the royal couple to visit Athens and bless the marital bed of Theseus and Hippolyta—before resuming hostilities. Such a temporary ‘cease-fire’ would be in keeping with the pattern of Theseus’s and Hippolyta’s relationship, wherein their brief betrothal and marriage constitute a temporary peace bookended by violent conflict between the Amazons and the Athenians. Indeed, the fate of Theseus’ and Hippolyta’s son, Hippolytus, suggests that the fairy couple were not at the best when bestowing their blessing. While Hippolytus is born without physical blemish as the fairies’ blessing promises, he is doomed to die in a particularly gruesome manner. According to Greek myth, Theseus remarries after Hippolyta’s death and his new wife, Phaedra, falls in love with her stepson. After being rejected by Hippolytus, Phaedra accuses him

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<sup>12</sup> Examples include the London Theatre Company’s 2019 production and the Globe Theatre’s production in 2015.

of rape. In a rage, Theseus prays to Poseidon to punish his son and the sea god delivers, conjuring a monster out of waves to startle Hippolytus's horses as he rode along the shore in his chariot. Hippolytus dies after being thrown from the chariot and dragged for miles behind his terrified horses.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the image that generally comes to mind when Hippolytus is mentioned is not that of a beautiful and athletic youth, but of a mutilated corpse. Shakespeare's decision to use the name Hippolyta for his Amazonian queen, rather than one of the other names attributed to Theseus' wife and/or the queen of the Amazons (usually Antiope), suggests that he wanted his audiences to connect the Amazon bride of *Dream* with the mother whose son was doomed to die a famously grisly death.

I suggest that the real status of the fairy king and queens' relationship at the end of the play is either the same as at the beginning (only with Oberon and Titania's positions reversed) or far worse. While, prior to the changeling boy's abduction, Titania was content to merely ignore and avoid Oberon, now, in the boy's absence, she may be incited to use her magic and power to get him back. Indeed, if Titania and Oberon are supernatural mirrors of Hippolyta and Theseus (as is often suggested in the doubling of these roles), then it is possible that their dispute will devolve into a full-fledged fairy war akin to the conflict destined to break out between the Amazons and the Athenians following the abduction and marriage of the Amazon Queen. Oberon's scheme, then, may only have managed to exaggerate the divide between husband and wife, leading to an escalation in hostilities.

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<sup>13</sup> The most famous account of Hippolytus's demise is Euripides play, named for the doomed hero. Seneca's play, *Phaedra*, tells the same story with minor alterations, while Ovid's *Metamorphoses* relates the story as told from the deceased Hippolytus's point of view.



In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both Theseus and Oberon attempt to shame their wives (or, in Theseus' case, his wife-to-be) into subservience. However, their efforts only manage to exacerbate existing tensions, leading to potentially catastrophic consequences (i.e. war) not only for the 'misguided' women, but for the men they defy and the societies they inhabit. Approached in this light, it appears that the greatest threat to society is posed not by *Dream's* unruly women, but by the authoritarian men who seek to punish them for defying the traditional gender and heterosexist norms of patriarchal society.

### **2.3 Heroes or Villains?**

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play haunted by the specter of past and future violence. Throughout *Dream* we see male characters threaten women with violence, rape, and death: Egeus demands his daughter either marry Demetrius or die (1.1.40-45); Theseus orders Hermia to choose among unwanted marriage, confinement in a nunnery and death (1.1.88-92); Demetrius threatens to rape and abandon Helena in the woods (2.1.218-23; 2.1.231-32); and Oberon uses magic to force Titania to fall in love with a "vile thing," the sort of creature likely to respond to her attentions with violence if she managed to catch it (2.2.30-34). The play is also peppered with allusions to mythical women famous for having been mistreated by more famous men. For instance, Helena references Apollo's pursuit of Daphne when chasing Demetrius through the woods (2.1.235), a tale which ends with the nymph being transformed into a laurel tree because, apparently, such transformation is the only way to escape the lust of a god (Leeming). In Act 2 scene 2, Titania's fairies use the name Philomel as a synonym for 'nightingale' (13) because of the mythical story in which a woman named Philomela was raped

by her brother-in-law and, ultimately, turned into a nightingale (Leeming).<sup>14</sup> Oberon reminds viewers of Theseus's troubling romantic history, listing various women—including Perigenia, Aegles, Ariadne, and Antiopa—who the Athenian is said to have seduced or raped and then abandoned (2.1.78-81).<sup>15</sup> When agreeing to elope with Lysander, Hermia swears by “that fire which burned the Carthage queen, / When the false Trojan under sail was seen” (1.1.176-177), using the tragic suicide of a spurned lover to illustrate her commitment to Lysander. Hermia's choice in imagery suggests that, on some level, she is anticipating being abandoned by Lysander just as Dido was abandoned by Aeneas, and Theseus's many conquests by the duke, and Helena by Demetrius. It seems that, in the world of *Dream*, the mistreatment of women by men is so common as to be almost a forgone conclusion, and one which neither men nor women appear to question.

The *Pyramus and Thisbe* play in Act 5 brings the violence threatened and hinted at throughout *Dream* ‘center stage,’ forcing audiences to acknowledge just how fine the line between romance and tragedy is in the play. I suggest that the unintentionally humorous rendering of a tragic love story, as well as the callous behavior of the new husbands throughout the performance, encourages audiences to question who in *Dream* is truly deserving of viewers' disdain, the men and women who dare step outside the constraints of patriarchal society or the

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<sup>14</sup> In some versions of the story the woman's tongue was cut out to keep her from telling her sister about her rape. Ovid's variation in *The Metamorphosis* depicts the mute Philomela weaving a tapestry that reveals the truth to her sister, Procne. The women retaliate by killing the son of Procne and her husband (Philomena's rapist) and tricking him into eating his own son. Before the father can punish the two women, the gods turn them into birds—one a nightingale and the other a swallow.

<sup>15</sup> There is some confusion between Antiope and Hippolyta. Both names have been used to describe the Amazonian queen, a sister of the queen, and the wife of Theseus (Leeming, Schwarz).

authoritarian men who seek to punish their transgressions with violence and/or unnecessarily elaborate public shaming spectacles?

The play-within-a-play depicts two young lovers who cannot marry because they lack parental (i.e. paternal) approval. The lovers decide to run away, planning to meet that night outside the walls of their childhood home. Thisbe, arriving at the rendezvous point first, encounters a lion and in her flight leaves behind her bloodied shawl. When Pyramus comes to meet his bride-to-be, he finds the shawl and assumes his love is dead, devoured by a beast. In his grief, he kills himself. Predictably, Thisbe finds her lover's corpse and follows his example. Thus, the play ends with the violent, needless death of two young lovers. The series of events played out by Bottom and Flute reflect an alternative and far more gruesome conclusion to Hermia and Lysander's love story (as well as to Helena's pursuit of Demetrius). Indeed, the real possibility of such a tragedy occurring in the forest outside Athens is implied by Demetrius's threat, in Act 2 scene 1, to leave Helena to "the mercy of wild beasts" (232). Like most renderings of Pyramus's and Thisbe's story, the mechanicals' play paints the young lovers in a sympathetic light. If Hermia and Lysander are viewed similarly—as tragically star-crossed lovers—then Egeus, Demetrius, and Theseus become the 'villains' of their story, responsible for causing Hermia and Lysanders' (theoretical) deaths with their pride and unreasonable demands.

Throughout the mechanicals' performance, the newly wed husbands—Theseus, Demetrius, and Lysander—are so busy mocking the actors' lack of skill that they appear to miss the disturbing familiarity of the story being told. Or, perhaps, they notice and simply do not care. Either way, their laughter in the final act depicts the new-made husbands as callously unconcerned with the struggles and feelings of both their wives and their social inferiors (who, while untalented, appear to be trying their very best to please Theseus and his guests). I suggest

that, in forcing viewers to confront the potential for tragedy underlying *Dream*'s love stories and the upper-class men's indifference to the possible or actual suffering of others, Shakespeare encourages audiences to grapple with the uncomfortable fact that the status quo is only beneficial to those in power, many of whom are undeserving of the privileges they are born with.

Although Shakespeare depicts the women of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as unruly social transgressors, the authoritarian men's attempts to punish and correct their misbehavior manage only to unintentionally magnify the women's original sins, in the one case by incurring the wrath of an army of 'Hippolytas,' in the other by recasting an extramarital same-sex relationship as an even more emasculating cross-species affair. I suggest that, while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at first appears to allay Elizabethan fears of change by publicly shaming those who 'overstep' their supposedly natural roles in the gender and class hierarchies, the clumsy attempts of the play's authoritarian male characters to shame their inferior's transgressive behavior, as well as the suggestion of future conflict, forces audiences to question whose behavior poses the greatest threat to society. By including the mechanicals' disastrous performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *Dream*'s final act, Shakespeare compels his audience to confront the implicit (and often actual) violence underpinning patriarchal society, as well as the questionable moral character of those who so easily adopt violence and shame to 'correct' transgressive behavior.

### **Chapter 3: Shame on Who?: Social Policing and Public Punishment in**

#### ***Twelfth Night***

In *Twelfth Night*'s opening act, Maria tells Sir Toby that he “must confine [him]self within the / modest limits of order” (1.3.7-8). Taken at face value, this statement is simple common sense (it's hard to dispute that coming home drunk in the early hours of the morning is unwise when taking advantage of a relative's hospitality); however, read within the larger context of the play, Maria's caution reflects two, closely connected themes woven throughout Shakespeare's final comedy: the perceived threat of disorder and the social policing of disorderly—i.e. socially transgressive—behavior. Throughout the play, shame is the primary means by which socially disruptive characters are punished, be it in the form of malicious jests and laughter or—as in Malvolio's more extreme case—a public humiliation reminiscent of the Elizabethan shaming rituals outlined in this paper's introduction. Indeed, first time readers and viewers of *Twelfth Night* may well be surprised at the number of times shame is referenced or alluded to in a play that is generally presented as a festive comedy in the same vein as Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Many of the plays characters express a fear of shame. For instance, when Viola, dressed as Cesario, first meets Olivia (s)he requests that (s)he “sustain no scorn,” claiming they are “very comptible (i.e. sensitive), even to the least sinister / usage” (1.5.167-169). Sir Andrew expresses a similar anxiety when he accuses his ‘friends,’ Sir Toby and Fabian, of trying to “make an ass o' me” (3.2.12).<sup>16</sup> Maria, Sir Toby, and Feste team up to publicly humiliate Malvolio after the steward shames and/or threatens to shame the trio in Act 1 scene 5

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<sup>16</sup> Viola/Cesario and Sir Andrew's anxiety proves well-founded when, in Act 3 scene 4, the pair are very nearly manipulated into a duel via the machinations of Sir Toby, who hopes to trick the pair into a fight for his personal amusement.

(Feste) and Act 2 scene 3 (Sir Toby and Maria). While the play contains enough humor to deserve its classification as a comedy, the tone of that humor is very unlike the light-hearted banter on display in the Forest of Arden. Excepting the bedlam caused by Viola's cross-dressing, the play's most notable moments of 'humor'—the Malvolio subplot and the faux duel between Sir Andrew and Cesario—involve mean-spirited pranks intended to humiliate one or more characters.

Francois Laroque identifies two main types of comic strategy—"derisive laughter" and "festive mirth." According to Laroque, the former is meant to "expose, cleanse, or correct vices and follies" by encouraging audiences to laugh *at* someone else, while the latter encourages audiences to laugh *with* the players (38). The comic strategy most prevalent in *Twelfth Night* is that of "derisive laughter." Laroque further delineates the two comic modes, claiming "If one subtext of comedy is indeed carnival, festivity, rejoicing, and liberation, another is containment, exclusion, and regulation. One is Dionysiac and celebratory, the other normative and corrective" (40). So-called "corrective comedies" (38), like *Twelfth Night*, demonstrate how humor and shame can be used to police social behavior, creating an environment of fear in which neighbors are continually suspicious of and on guard against one another. While the pervasiveness of shame in the play suggests that it is an experience to which everyone is vulnerable, the characters' varied fates—that is the degree to which they are punished (or not punished) in the play—suggests that queer characters who threaten the social order by moving outside their 'proper' social sphere are the most vulnerable to public punishment and shame.

While all of the lovers depicted in *Twelfth Night* are involved in one or more homoerotic relationship, the most frequently discussed by critics are the love triangle comprised of Orsino,

Viola/Cesario, and Olivia, and the bond between Sebastian and Antonio.<sup>17</sup> In the following pages I will examine the queer elements present in two of the play's more peripheral relationships: the friendship between Olivia and Maria, and the feud between Malvolio and Sir Toby. I suggest that, while Orsino, Viola/Cesario, Antonio, and Sebastian all manage to find ways in which they can discreetly satisfy their queer desires without endangering the patriarchal social order, Olivia and Malvolio publicly attempt to circumvent and/or upset the status quo. As a result, both Olivia and Malvolio must undergo public punishment and correction as an example to others—in the play and watching it—of what happens to individuals who defy social norms and foster disorder. I will further argue that the results of the Malvolio subplot not only reveals the hypocrisy, arbitrariness, and immorality of social policing and shaming practices, but throws into question both the stability and desirability of the supposedly 'natural,' divinely ordained world order which these practices reinforce.

### **3.1 Penthesilea and the Cruell'st She Alive**

In my reading of *Twelfth Night* Olivia is a queer character who, like Orsino, is more interested in pursuing a relationship with her same-sex attendant than in heterosexual marriage. However, while the duke, Cesario/Viola, Antonio, and Sebastian are careful not to let their transgressive desires interfere with their social duties and patriarchal norms, Olivia attempts to extricate herself from patriarchal society altogether. Her rejection of the patriarchal world order and refusal to fulfill her socially mandated roles by becoming a dutiful wife and mother make Olivia a target for punishment and correction via public shame.

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<sup>17</sup> See Michael Shapiro, Janet Adelman, Stephen Orgel, and Lisa Jardine.

Unlike Viola, who, after her brother's apparent death, quickly subordinates herself to an available male, Olivia steps into her brother's vacated position as the head of household and proceeds to act as the primary authority figure in her home. Once in charge, one of her first acts is to close off her estate, preventing outside influences from disrupting her privacy or interfering with her authority. Under the guise of grief, Olivia swears to "abjure the company / And sight of men" (1.2.37-8) for seven years. I suggest that Olivia's self-exile is not indicative of excessive grief over the loss of her father and brother, but a clever façade that allows her to remove herself from the patriarchal marriage market during her most marriageable (and fertile) years. Seven years is a long time in the early modern era, when lifespans tended to be much shorter than today. It is very likely that, after seven years have passed, Olivia will be too old to be considered a 'good catch.' Thus, Olivia may be able to retain her role as the unmarried head of her household for much longer than seven years, possibly, even, for her entire lifetime. In feigning extreme grief for the loss of her father and brother—men who would have been responsible for negotiating her marriage, had they survived—Olivia attempts to prevent her reintegration into male-dominated society and maintain the power and authority she was granted by the deaths of her father and brother.

Rather than saying she will abjure all company, Olivia specifies that she intends to shun men, implying that her doors will remain open to women. Attempting to exploit her willingness to allow female companionship, Orsino selects his most feminine looking servant to be his envoy. When explaining why he believes Cesario will be granted access to Olivia's house, Orsino compares his newest servant to the Greco-Roman goddess Diana, a figure consistently linked to female homoeroticism and lesbianism in the Elizabethan era. In Act 1 scene 1 Valentine claims (quoting and/or paraphrasing Maria) that the countess intends to live "like a



cloisteress” (1.1.27). Indeed, the image of Olivia retiring behind the walls of her estate does remind one of an enclosed nunnery. According to Theodora Jankowski, there was/is a common myth (begun in the thirteenth century) that “all nuns were/are unchaste,” despite their vows of chastity (69). Most female religious orders in the medieval and early modern eras explicitly forbade women from forming “particular friendships” with one another, because they were believed to be a “prelude to Lesbian relationships” (177). Thus, nunneries and cloisteresses were linked in the Elizabethan mind to female homoeroticism. In Act 2 scene 3 Sir Toby references another popular early modern signifier of exclusively female societies and lesbianism when he calls Maria “Penthesilea” (172). Like Hippolyta, Penthesilea was another common name associated with the Queen of the Amazons (Leeming). In including references to these specific female figures and communities, Shakespeare encourages audiences to associate Olivia’s household with female homoeroticism, suggesting that she intends her household to be a sort of lesbian commune akin to the all-female societies led by Diana and Penthesilea.

If we read Olivia’s household as a haven for lesbians and female homoeroticism, then the relationship between Olivia and Maria quickly takes on an erotic tone. Jessica Tvordi expands on Lisa Jardine’s observation that *Twelfth Night* is centered around various “eroticized relationship[s] of 'service,'" claiming that, in the context of a world where both a duke and a countess display erotic and/or marital interest in a cross-dressed servant and two men—Antonio and Sebastian—engage in a passionate, service-oriented, homoerotic relationship, the “female alliance of service” between Olivia and Maria can’t but be read as erotic (122). According to Tvordi, “Within the context of household rule, Maria and Olivia are mimicking the homoerotics of male same-sex service typified by Antonio's relationship with Sebastian and Viola/Cesario's relationship with Orsino” (125-26). Like Cesario, Maria is depicted as being a close confidant

and trusted servant of Olivia's. She frequently speaks on Olivia's behalf, issuing orders and rendering replies with a confidence that leaves recipients in no doubt that her words come directly from the countess. As Olivia's representative, Maria guards against outside intrusions by warding off unwelcome suitors and enforces Olivia's rule within the household by monitoring and attempting to curb the unruly behavior of male servants and guests who appear to question her mistress's authority. For instance, when Sir Toby complains about his niece Olivia's unconventionally lengthy mourning period, Maria deftly shifts the topic of conversation from Olivia's behavior to that of her denigrator. She chides Sir Toby, telling him "you must come in earlier / o' nights. Your cousin, my lady, takes great exceptions / to your ill hours" (1.3.3-5). Maria's substitution of the word "cousin" for Sir Toby's earlier use of "niece" (1.3.1) lessens the sense of Sir Toby's seniority, placing Olivia and Sir Toby in equivocal positions on their recently diminished family tree while simultaneously reminding Sir Toby of his place in Olivia's household (i.e. as her free-loading guest).

In addition to acting as an extension of Olivia and her authority, Maria is depicted as being intimately involved in her mistress's love life, frequently rejecting undesirable suitors on her behalf and serving as chaperone when a suitor finally manages to squeak through the countess's screening process. When meeting with Cesario/Viola in Act 1 scene 5, Olivia insists that Maria remain by her side and, during the encounter, repeatedly uses the pronoun "we" (1.5.160; 1.5.211; 1.5.223), suggesting that she and Maria are one body and that Cesario (on Orsino's behalf) is wooing them both. Laurie Shannon claims there was "an almost philosophical preference for likeness" (191) in the early modern era (especially in discussions of friendship and attraction), as well as a "natural prejudice or bias against gender mixing" (187), which together served to normalize homoerotic relationships and throw into question the supposed naturalness

of heterosexual pairings. Many critics, Shannon included, use the early moderns' belief in the principle that 'like seeks like' to explain Olivia's attraction to Cesario. The same principle can be applied to Olivia and Maria, who are depicted as being so alike as to be practically interchangeable. Twice in the play, others have difficulty distinguishing between Olivia and Maria. First, in Act 1 scene 5, Cesario is unsure which of the veiled women before him is the "lady of the house" (1.5.163). Then, in Act 2 scene 5, Maria purposely assumes Olivia's identity by counterfeiting her mistress's handwriting, a forgery which successfully gulls Malvolio into believing his mistress has left a love letter for him to find. According to Maria, she "can write very like my lady... On a forgotten matter we can hardly make / distinction of our hands" (2.3.154-56). The similarity between the women's handwriting implies likeness, as handwriting—especially signatures—is traditionally seen as being unique to a person. Even today, signatures are closely linked to identity and are used on a variety of official documents as indicators of an individual's authority and/or consent. Maria also uses Olivia's signet ring, another marker of individual identity.

Despite Olivia's and Maria's early efforts to protect the countess's bachelorette-hood and position as the head of her household, Olivia appears to have a change of heart following the meeting with Cesario at the end of Act 1. I suggest that Olivia sees in Cesario an opportunity to assuage the anxieties of the increasingly apprehensive men that surround her—via their marriage—without having to surrender her autonomy, her authority over her household, or her lesbian relationship with Maria. At the start of the play, Olivia is already under pressure from her male relatives and suitors—one of whom "governs" Illyria (1.2.22)—to marry and abandon her scheme of prolonged separation from men and patriarchal society. It is clear from the duke's persistently dogged pursuit and the unruliness of the male members of Olivia's household that

the countess's independence and social isolation will not be tolerated for much longer, and certainly not for seven years. Orsino sends Cesario to Olivia's home with instructions to "stand at her doors ... Till thou have audience" (1.4.16-18), granting him permission to "Be clamorous and leap all civil bounds" (1.4.21). In relating the conduct of Orsino's latest emissary, Malvolio tells Olivia "he'll speak with you, will / you or no" (1.5.149-50), making clear that Olivia no longer has the option of dodging the duke's suit. According to Jessica Tvordi, "the attacks on Olivia's and Maria's joint authority and heterosexual indifference reveal a male revolt against a female attachment that is dangerous in terms of its political and, quite possibly, erotic implications" (126). In other words, to allow Olivia to continue her rule over her household (with Maria as trusted co-conspirator) would threaten the social structure of Illyria at large by throwing into question the necessity of heterosexual marriage and gender roles.

Although Olivia is likely attracted to Cesario/Viola in a way she is not attracted to Orsino, I do not see either love or lust as the primary motivation for the countess desiring marriage with the youth. In Act 1 scene 3, prior to Olivia's first meeting with Cesario, we learned—through Sir Toby—that Olivia has sworn "She'll not match above / her degree, neither in estate, years nor wit" (1.3.105-06). Cesario checks all these boxes; he is of lower station (but still "a gentleman" (1.5.271)), fewer years, and—though "saucy" (1.5.192) and well-spoken—he does not outwit or outshine Olivia in conversation. The specific attributes which appear to appeal to the countess suggest that Olivia's attraction to the youth is based on her belief that he is someone whom she could easily dominate. After her first meeting with Cesario, Olivia lists his "perfections," claiming "Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions and spirit / Do give thee fivefold blazon" (1.5.284-5). The physical characteristics Olivia mentions imply not only femininity, but youth: "thy tongue" refers to what Orsino earlier described as Cesario's

“maiden’s organ” (1.4.33); “thy face” to ‘his’ lack of facial hair (also previously mentioned by Orsino); and “thy limbs” to a lack of manly musculature. Though Olivia is likely attracted to Cesario’s femininity, I believe it is his youth that is the real draw, as it suggests he is of an impressionable age and, thus, can be more easily influenced and/or molded by Olivia than a grown man. The “actions and spirit” that conclude Olivia’s list may be a reference not only to Cesario’s sauciness,<sup>18</sup> but to his role as Orsino’s loyal servant. Cesario’s ‘action’ in his first encounter with the countess is focused on convincing Olivia to reconsider her rejection of Orsino’s suit. Since Olivia has repeatedly shown disinterest in the duke’s suit, it is unlikely that the content of Cesario’s argument is what impresses her, but, rather, what his delivery of Orsino’s suit represents: Cesario’s familiarity with submission and service, and his willingness to put the needs of another before his own. Marriage to someone like Cesario—someone whom Olivia could easily dominate—would allow the countess to maintain her autonomy and power, while appeasing those made anxious by her attempts to avoid patriarchal control by appearing to abide by societal norms.

After determining that Cesario is the perfect mate for her purposes, Olivia sends Malvolio to present the youth with a ring (1.5.293), an act that not only indicates her interest in Cesario but can be read as an informal marriage proposal. The only other ring mentioned in the play is Olivia’s purloined signet ring used to mark Maria’s counterfeit letter to Malvolio with the “impressure” of Lucrece (2.5.92). In her speech following Malvolio’s ‘return’ of Olivia’s ring, Cesario/Viola invokes the wax-signet trope (popular in medieval and early modern literature) by bemoaning “women’s waxen hearts” (2.2.30). According to Lynn Maxwell the signet-wax

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<sup>18</sup> A term which suggests a certain playfulness and flippancy frequently associated with youth.

metaphor is one commonly used in early modern writing to reflect the differences between the sexes. In most cases, women are compared to wax because they are, supposedly, the more impressionable, vulnerable sex while men are associated with the metal signet because of their more steadfast nature and their ability to 'impress' their imprint (i.e. their genetic code) on women in the procreative process. Olivia's reversal of the wax-signet trope suggests that she wants to play the more dominant role in her relationship with Cesario. Shakespeare's invocation of the wax-signet trope in this scene also implies that Olivia believes Cesario to be impressionable and easy to manipulate, because of his youth and inferior social station, making him her ideal match.

While Shakespeare's cross-dressing comedies often depict a reversal of traditional courtship roles, it is generally the cross-dressed woman who assumes the masculine role of romantic pursuer, presumably because her adoption of a male persona has provided her with the necessary 'cover' for her forwardness. The threat posed by the cross-dressed woman's assumption of male prerogatives is mitigated by her presumed willingness to adopt a 'properly' subservient role once relinquishing her disguise. Olivia's assumption of male courtship prerogatives is not linking to her clothing, and she displays no sign that she is interested in surrendering her power, even after marriage. In fact I suggest that Olivia reveals her marital aspiration for dominance in Act 3 scene 1, when she tells Cesario "I would you were as I would have you be" (140), and in Act 4 scene 1, when she asks Sebastian (whom she has mistaken for Cesario) to come with her into the house, saying "I prithee, would thou'dst be ruled by me" (63). Her statements in both cases suggest that she wishes to be the 'guiding force' in their relationship, with Cesario/Sebastian following her lead. Olivia's inversion of traditional gender roles in her pursuit of Cesario suggests that the countess is only interested in a marriage which

does not require her subordination to another or erase the political and economic independence she has enjoyed in the wake of her father and brother's' deaths.

According to Jean E. Howard, Olivia is comically punished for attempting to remain economically, politically, and sexually independent from men “by being made to fall in love with the crossdressed Viola.” Howard describes Viola as “the vehicle for humiliating the unruly woman in the eyes of the audience, much as Titania is humiliated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by her union with an ass” (432). However, shame is only part of Olivia's punishment; she is also punished via her corrective, heterosexual marriage to Sebastian. Though he is Viola's twin, and of the same age and station as Viola/Cesario, Sebastian is a man. Based on Sebastian's and Cesario's respective displays (or non-displays) of violence when confronted with the antics of Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, the former is of a less passive and more traditionally masculine character than his sister. Still, despite Sebastian's unwillingness to be bullied by Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, there is a possibility—based on the dynamic between him and Antonio—that Sebastian may be willing (or even prefer) to take on a submissive role in a romantic relationship.

Though the time Antonio and Sebastian spend together onstage is brief, it is enough to determine that Antonio is the dominant partner in their relationship, cast as the protector and provider of his younger companion. When they first arrive in Illyria Antonio urges Sebastian to explore the country and “beguile the time” (3.3.41) while he gets them rooms and arranges for meals at a local inn. He even gives Sebastian his purse in case he should see “some toy / You have desire to purchase” (3.3.44-5). Thus, the sea captain appears to be in charge of the couple's accommodations, meals, and, money. Olivia, as a wealthy woman and Sebastian's social superior, may be in a similar position to provide for Sebastian (just as she already provides for her uncle). In Act 3 scene 4 Antonio comes to Sebastian's rescue when he finds him about to

engage in a duel with Sir Andrew (though it is really Sebastian's twin sister whom Antonio saves). The sea captain intervenes even though Sebastian—as we learn in Act 5—is perfectly capable of defending himself against the likes of Sir Andrew and Sir Toby. Antonio's impulse to defend Sebastian, then, appears to be driven by his role as the more dominant partner in their relationship rather than by any real fear for Sebastian's safety. Though unarmed, Olivia similarly intervenes on Cesario's behalf (really Sebastian's) when she sees him being confronted by her uncle and Sir Andrew in Act 4 scene 1, suggesting that she is prepared to take on a similarly protective role. Sebastian's agreement to marry a woman he has never met can be read as opportunistic or as evidence that he is exceptionally pliable. I suggest that the fact that he remains silent for the last 145 lines of the play, just as many of Shakespeare's rebellious young women fall silent following their marriages<sup>19</sup>, implies that Sebastian has adopted the more passive role generally allotted to Elizabethan wives. It is possible, then, that Olivia has gotten what she wanted—socially acceptable marriage to a submissive mate who does not threaten her authority within her household or her autonomy.

Though both Maria and Olivia are married to men at the end of the play, I do not see their attachments to their new husbands as necessarily prohibiting the continuation of their lesbian relationship. Indeed, Jessica Tvordi argues that Maria and Olivia's alliance is “ultimately secured through their marriages to men who are ineffectual and show more interest in male homosocial and homoerotic bonds than they do in heterosexual love” (127). In other words, the main characters' marriages at the end of the play are mutually beneficial, allowing husbands and wives to fulfill their obligations to patriarchal society via their heterosexual bond, whilst also providing

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<sup>19</sup> Such as Hermia and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It*.



them the security to continue their transgressive behaviors<sup>20</sup> which, absent of marriage, would have drawn attention, criticism, and punishment/correction. The fact that Maria has married a man who is related to Olivia and lives under the same roof, suggests that the bond between the two women at the end of the play is stronger than ever. They are, now, technically, family and, as such, tied together for life. However, Maria's absence in the final scene and the fact that she and Sir Toby have left without warning (and under a bit of a cloud) leaves readers/viewers with less grounds to hope for the continuation of Maria and Olivia's relationship than for the continuation of the relationship between Sebastian and the still-present Antonio. Still, the very fact that Sebastian and Antonio are joyfully reunited *after* Sebastian's marriage does suggest that a similar reunion is possible between Olivia and Maria.

### **3.2 To be Count Malvolio**

Malvolio's ending is less ambiguous than Olivia's as the revelation, in Act 5, that the countess is not in love with him (as he has been led to believe) and has, in fact, married someone else means there is no chance of him ever becoming "Count Malvolio" (2.5.32). The greater severity of Malvolio's punishment suggests that the steward is a more serious threat to the social order than Olivia, despite the fact that his attempt at transgression is so clearly doomed to fail. In my reading of *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio is presented as the character posing the greatest threat to Illyrian society because his attempted transgression has the greatest potential of encouraging further disorder.

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<sup>20</sup> Be they homoerotic/homosexual as in the case of Maria, Olivia, and Orsino, or the vices preferred by Sir Toby of frequent insobriety and late-night carousing.

From the start of the play Olivia attempts to contain her unruly behavior by walling herself off inside her estate, limiting the scope of her transgressive influence to her household. Her aim is not to disrupt the social order of Illyria at large, but, rather, to find a way in which she can live outside of that order. Olivia's ultimate decision to marry Cesario (really Sebastian) is a concession to the social power players of Illyria; one that would give her situation the outward appearance of conformity whilst allowing her to maintain her 'unnatural' authority over her household. Olivia, then, is willing to foster an outward appearance of adherence to marital and gender norms—thereby minimizing her impact on the status quo of Illyrian society at large—so long as she is allowed to maintain her power and autonomy within the privacy of her own home. Based on Malvolio's activity in the play, it seems unlikely he would be willing to make a similar compromise. From his first introduction on stage, Malvolio is depicted as taking pleasure in asserting what little authority he has as Olivia's steward over as many people as he possibly can—usually via the delivery of verbal reprimands, accompanied by personal insults. The very first time we see Malvolio, in 1.5, he shames Feste in front of Olivia by critiquing the jester's ability and value as a fool, and recounting a time when he saw Feste “put down” by an “ordinary fool that has no more brain than a stone” (1.5.80-1). Not long after this incident, Malvolio attempts to shame Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste for their late-night revelry: “My masters, are you mad or what are you? / Have you no wit, manners nor honesty but to gabble like / tinkers at this time of night?” (2.3.85-7). His words appear to have little effect on the—apparently shameless—men, leading Malvolio to turn his attention on Maria. He accuses the chambermaid of allowing the trio's misconduct, claiming: “... if you prized my lady's favour / at anything more than contempt, you would not give / means for this uncivil rule. She shall know of it, / by this hand” (2.3.118-21). The steward's threat is not an idle one, as we learn in 2.5 that Malvolio acted

in a similar manner toward Fabian, bringing him “out / o’favour with [his] lady about a bear-baiting” (2.5.6-7). Malvolio’s fondness for policing the behavior of others suggests that, were his attempt to marry into a higher class successful, he would flaunt his power by exerting his authority over as many people as possible.

The greater upset to the class system involved in Malvolio’s attempted transgression is another reason why the steward’s behavior poses a more serious threat to society than Olivia’s. Although determined never to marry a man of equivalent “degree,” Olivia is careful to ensure that her love object is, at least, a gentleman before pursuing him. Unlike Malvolio, Cesario’s ‘natural’ social status is high enough that his marriage to Olivia would not drastically unsettle the social order and give the lower classes dangerous ideas of disorderly social advancement via marriage, as the marriage between “the Lady of the / Starchy” and “the yeoman of the wardrobe” (2.5.36-7)—mentioned by Malvolio in Act 2—clearly gives the steward ideas. Alan Bray claims that homosexuality was only punished in the early modern era if it “disturb[ed] the peace or the social order” (74). If a person of a lower class formed a same-sex relationship with someone of a higher rank and “acquired a place in society to which he was not entitled by nature and could then perhaps even lord it over those who were naturally his betters,” that relationship was more likely to be interpreted as sodomitical than was a similarly homoerotic/homosexual relationship which did not include any class advancement (51). In Act 2 scene 5 Malvolio reveals that, if he were to become Count Malvolio, he would most certainly lord the fact over his ‘natural,’ albeit ill-mannered, social superior—Sir Toby Belch. Indeed, his desire to alter the balance of power between himself and Sir Toby appears to be Malvolio’s primary motivation for desiring marriage to Olivia.

While Malvolio's desire to socially transgress in terms of class is obvious to any viewer/reader of the play, the queer aspects of his character are more subtle and, thus, often ignored. However, the steward's preoccupation with Sir Toby and desire for a more intimate relationship suggests there is a homoerotic element to Malvolio's marital ambitions. In Act 2 scene 5 Maria, Sir Toby, Fabian, and Sir Andrew overhear Malvolio fantasizing about what it would be like "To be Count Malvolio—" (2.5.32). The scene which Malvolio imagines takes place after he has been "three months married" (2.5.41)—in other words, after the 'honeymoon period' is over—with Malvolio "having come from a day-bed<sup>21</sup> where I have / left Olivia sleeping" (2.5.45-6). Thus, Malvolio skips over any romantic and/or sexual activity between himself and Olivia skipping ahead to what he apparently considers 'the good stuff': his improved social station and its impact on his relationships with other men. That Olivia barely appears in Malvolio's fantasy suggests that the steward is not strongly attracted to the countess, only to her station. The only explicit reference he makes regarding Olivia is done accidentally in Act 2 scene 5 when he first discovers Maria's letter. Malvolio exclaims "this is my / lady's hand. These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, / and thus she makes her great P's" (85-87). Apparently oblivious, Malvolio spells out the word 'cut,' an early modern euphemism for 'vagina,' according to the Oxford English Dictionary. His reference to her "great P's" implies urination, suggesting that Malvolio subconsciously considers Olivia's sexual organ to primarily be a vehicle through which she sheds bodily waste rather than as an object for sexual enjoyment and desire.

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<sup>21</sup> A 'day-bed' was "a couch for resting in the day time" and thus not a reference to lewd activities (Elam 240).

While Malvolio glosses over Olivia in his daydream, he affords Sir Toby a starring role. The main body of his reverie involves a meeting between the ‘former’ steward and his “kinsman Toby” (2.5.52). Malvolio imagines himself ordering his new servants to summon Sir Toby, killing time, waiting for their return, by winding up a watch or “play[ing] with my [touching his chain] / – some rich jewel” (2.5.57-8). In a footnote to the Shakespeare Arden edition of *Twelfth Night*, Keir Elam cites the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2001 production, in which the actor portraying Malvolio positioned his hand “uncertainly in front of his pelvis, as if he were about to play with himself” (241). The National Theater Live’s 2017 production of *Twelfth Night* includes a similar motion toward the genitals by Malvoli(a). After possibly gesturing to his ‘family jewels,’ Malvolio envisions the following scene upon the return of his fictional servants: “Toby approaches, curtsies there to / me... I extend my hand to him thus, quenching my / familiar smile with an austere regard of control” (2.5.58-9; 63-4). Next, the would-be Count imagines himself telling “Cousin Toby” (2.5.67) that he “must amend [his] drunkenness” (2.5.71) and stop “wast[ing] the treasure of [his] time / with a foolish knight” (2.5.75-6)—Sir Andrew. The dynamic between Malvolio and (Sir) Toby in this imagined encounter is surprisingly friendly. Though pompous, Malvolio’s behavior towards Toby is neither superior (except, perhaps, in the moral sense) nor spiteful. Although he drops Sir Toby’s former title and refers to him as “kinsman” and “cousin,” these more casual forms of address do not appear motivated by a desire to demean or demote Sir Toby, but, rather, serve to suggest a newfound intimacy between the two men, characterized by equivalence and, possibly, even affection. This idea is supported by Malvolio’s description of his “familiar smile,” which he must struggle to quell before speaking sternly to his new kinsman.

Following marriage to Olivia, the newly minted count could easily cast out his free-loading, rabbleroising in-law; the fact that Toby is allowed to remain under Malvolio's imagined roof, reliant on the former steward for lodging, food, and (in the likely event of Sir Andrew's departure) money, suggests that Malvolio wishes to form a relationship with Sir Toby akin to that which exists between Antonio and Sebastian or between Duke Orsino and Cesario, with Malvolio assuming the position of the more dominant partner on whom Toby relies for support and guidance. The steward-turned-count's recommendation that Toby cut ties with Sir Andrew is reminiscent of Orsino's romantic advice to Cesario in Act 2 scene 4, wherein the jealous duke attempts to dissuade his newest courtier from pursuing the (non-existent) older mistress with whom Cesario is supposedly in love. Given the homoerotic undercurrents evident in the relationships between Antonio and Sebastian and Orsino and Cesario, it is not a stretch to read an erotic/sexual component in Malvolio's desire for benevolent dominance over Olivia's uncle/cousin. Thus, Malvolio's aspiration for class advancement appears to be motivated, primarily, by a desire to develop a more equivocal (at least in terms of their social status), intimate, and, quite possibly, sexual relationship with Sir Toby.

The specific manner in which Malvolio is shamed supports the idea that his attempt to marry Countess Olivia constitutes both a sexual and a class transgression. In her counterfeit letter, Maria directs Malvolio to 'prove' his love for his mistress by dressing in yellow, cross-gartered stockings (2.5.149-50). Loreen Giese claims that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yellow stockings were used "as a signal of jealous and illicit sexuality" (238). According to Giese, in the early modern era, wives who discovered their husbands were unfaithful would often don yellow stockings in order to expose their husband's infidelity to their neighbors, turning him into an object of "public scrutiny and ridicule" (238). By dressing

Malvolio in yellow stockings, Maria casts the steward in the role of a cuckolded wife. If Malvolio is a cuckold, as his wardrobe suggests, then one must naturally consider by whom he is being cuckolded. The easy answer is Olivia, whom—from Malvolio’s point of view (or what would likely be his point of view, if he were aware of any activity beyond his own)—is betraying the love she (supposedly) declared to him in her letter by pursuing Cesario. A more fitting answer, however, is Sir Toby. If Malvolio is interested in forming a homoerotic and/or homosexual relationship with Sir Toby, then the latter’s abrupt marriage to Maria puts him in a position akin to that of a cuckolded lover. The revelation of Sir Toby and Maria’s marriage at the highpoint of Malvolio’s humiliation in Act 5, as well as the fact that Maria was the primary architect behind the steward’s humiliation (and responsible for including the detail of the yellow stockings in the prank), further supports the idea that Maria, not Cesario or Olivia, is responsible for turning Malvolio into a cuckold.

The yellow stockings only constitute the first step of Maria’s plan to shame Malvolio. After manipulating the steward into dressing in a ridiculous ensemble that includes his adoption of an inappropriate, clownish smile, Maria and her accomplices pretend to believe that Malvolio’s odd behavior is evidence of possession or insanity and lock him away, bound, in a “dark room” (3.4.131). While imprisoned, the conspirators take turns taunting Malvolio and “do all they / can to face [him] out of [his] wits” (4.2.92-3) or, according to the OED, they do all they can to “bully” him into insanity. The grand finale of Maria’s scheme is Malvolio’s exposure as an upstart fool, witnessed by his mistress and other social superiors. Dragged out of the darkness in which he had been confined, his ridiculous outfit made even more outlandish by its dishevelment, Malvolio raves about his mistreatment and vows to expose Olivia’s cruelty. Despite everything he has endured, Malvolio still believes that Olivia wrote the letter Maria

planted and that its contents indicate his mistress is in love with him. His self-delusion is so extreme that viewers' contempt for the officious steward transforms into pity as Malvolio comes to realize his mistake. Although the Malvolio subplot is initially presented as comedic, by the time the prank is concluded in Act 5, no one on stage is laughing. The principal players in the caper—Maria and Sir Toby—are not even around to bear witness to the culmination of their scheming. Worried that they had gone too far, the couple fled before their actions could be uncovered (4.2.66-70). The noblemen and women who are present to witness the steward's shame—Olivia, Orsino, Viola, and Sebastian—all appear sympathetic to the steward's plight. Olivia even offers to help Malvolio get justice, agreeing that he has been “most notoriously abused” (5.1.372). Malvolio responds to Olivia's pity with anger, crying “I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!” (5.1.371). His parting words—the last he speaks in the play—suggest that the steward is not willing to return to the way things were at the beginning of the play. After having seen his dreams for social advancement nearly realized (at least, in his mind) only to be abruptly and publicly dashed, returning to his former position would only remind the steward of what he has lost and can never have. Is it any wonder that Malvolio directs his anger not at those responsible for engineering his humiliation, but at the aristocrats whose ranks he longs to join? Once an agent of order in Olivia's household, Malvolio's public shaming transforms him into a potential instrument of disorder and rebellion.

The suggestion of cuckoldry and the carnivalesque nature of the steward's public humiliation connects the prank to which Malvolio falls victim to the shaming rituals used to police social behavior in the early modern era. While Olivia's embarrassment and corrective marriage are depicted as the results of fate or “nature's bias” (5.1.256), Malvolio's public shaming is purposefully designed and carried out by a handful of his peers. In Act 2 scene 5



Maria claims that the goal of her prank is not merely to convince Malvolio that his mistress Olivia is in love with him but, rather, to “turn him into a notable contempt” (2.5.197). Thus, the public nature of Malvolio’s humiliation is integral to Maria’s plan. Malvolio’s identification as a “kind of Puritan” (2.3.136) bolsters his association to Elizabethan social shaming practices as Puritans were frequent victims of such activities due to their refusal “to take part in holiday festivities” and general disapproval of revelry (Kamps 90-92).

Despite their popularity, public shaming rituals were not universally accepted as appropriate punishments for social transgressions and were even regarded by some as threats to the very order they purported to uphold. According to Martin Ingram, there were five main reasons—“apart from fears of sedition”—why shaming rituals were deemed a threat to public order: the danger posed to property; the possibility of physical assault; the potential for charivaris to be used as a “cloak for malicious motives;” the suggestion that “the shame experienced by the victims was disproportionate, and . . . this could lead to tensions and bitterness within the community;” and, finally, the suspicion that charivaris were merely “an excuse for disorder on the part of base and troublesome members of the community, ill-qualified to mock the follies of their neighbours” (103). The circumstances of Malvolio’s shaming in *Twelfth Night* give credence to all five of these arguments against the use of charivaris.

The devolution of the Malvolio subplot from comedy to tragedy to possible revenge play suggests that public shaming rituals are not only an ineffective means of correcting transgressive behavior, but an incitement to further disorder. Furthermore, the revelation, in the midst of Malvolio’s humiliation, that Maria has succeeded in doing the very thing she shames Malvolio for attempting (i.e. marrying above her station), suggests that Elizabethan public shaming practices are inconsistently applied and frequently hypocritical. The changing boundaries

between behaviors which were and were not acceptable in the Elizabethan era, especially in regard to sexual behaviors and relationships, would have made determining ‘punishable’ behavior all the more challenging. I suggest that the inconsistent interpretation and punishment of transgressive behavior created a widespread atmosphere of uncertainty, suspicion, and fear, which made individuals—regardless of their gender or class status—constantly vulnerable to and afraid of the observation, judgement, and whims of their neighbors. This preoccupation with shame and exposure is reflected in *Twelfth Night* as its various characters strive throughout the play to avoid and, sometimes, cause shame.

In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* all of the major characters are guilty of harboring transgressive desires and/or engaging in transgressive behavior; thus, every one of them is vulnerable—to varying degrees—to the same sort of punishment and shame that Malvolio suffers at the close of the play. The steward’s extreme public shaming—and, to a lesser extent, Olivia’s—serves as a warning and reminder to the play’s less obviously (or, rather, less recklessly) transgressive characters—as well as to Shakespeare’s audiences—of the risks which accompany the pursuit of non-normative, potentially disruptive, and, especially, queer relationships. The Malvolio subplot, Maria’s hypocrisy, and the unsettling tone of the play’s conclusion caused by Malvolio’s call for whole-scale revenge reveal the many drawbacks of Elizabethan public shaming practices and, ultimately, prompt audiences to question whether a social order which relies on social policing practices and carnivalesque punishments of transgressive behavior is worth preserving.

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