

Consider the Significance of Anti-theatre in the Comedies of Shakespeare and Jonson

... my maine argument against you, is, that you are an abomination: for the Male, among you, putteth on the apparel of the Female, and the Female of the Male¹.
... so well he hath expressed in his plays all sorts of persons, as one would think he had been transformed into every one of those persons he hath described ... nay, one would think that he had been metamorphosed from a man to a woman².

- 1 The English Renaissance theatre was an arena of transgression: a place where the cultural, legal³, and theological⁴ laws and codes that prohibited men and women adopting the attire of the opposite sex were violated, provoking vociferous opposition. For costume was considered a sign of gender, thus cross-dressing an adulteration of truth. In a time when even the vestments of Catholic priests were the victims of polemical attacks, Renaissance anti-theatrical tracts reflected a prominent and growing⁵ contemporary concern that the theatre had the transformative power to emasculate both the male player and spectator. Stephen Gosson suggested that theatre could “effeminate” the mind and William Prynne that it caused men to “degenerate” into women⁶. In *As You Like It* (1599) and *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* (c. 1601)⁷, and *Epicoene* (1609)⁸, both William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson respectively rehearse such arguments to complex conclusion.
- 2 The roots of anti-theatre lie with Plato who derogatorily considered that, alongside the painter, “the poet is a sophist, a maker of counterfeits that look like the truth”⁹. This suggests that poetry is the art of mimicry, a debased version of reality, and therefore utterly worthless. Contemporary anti-theatrical thought considered plays not only worthless, but harmful. Indeed, the Greek word for over-acting was derived from ‘hypocrite’¹⁰, and the form of the cross-dressed boy actor was indeed considered a betrayal of his male identity¹¹. In 1583, Phillip Stubbes proclaimed “Our Apparell was given us as a signe distinctive to discerne betwixt sex and sex, & therefore one to weare the Apparell of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his own kinde”¹². Anti-theatrical argument was premised on the basis of upholding the fixed and dominant place of

¹ *Bartholomew Fair*, Puritan Rabbi Zeal-of-the-Land Busy to the puppet Dionysius, V.v.86-88. *The Alchemist and Other Plays*.

² Margaret Lucas Cavendish of Shakespeare. *The life of the Duke of Newcastle. Sociable Letters*: 257.

³ Sumptuary Laws in this period were essentially a costume policy intended to maintain social distinctions by defining the fabric and type of clothing legal for each rank to wear. They allowed an immediate visual identification of status, and transgression was punishable by confiscation of property or wealth. They were originally introduced by Henry VIII and continued under Elizabeth until 1600. In *As You Like It*, *Celia* proposes to “put myself in poor and mean attire” (I.3.109) and calls herself ‘Aliena’ in reference to her state. Similarly, Duke Senior and his party dress as foresters or outlaws.

⁴ “A man's item shall not be on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman's garment; whoever does such a thing is an abhorrence unto Adonai.” *Deuteronomy* 22:5. Profound antagonism existed between the theatre and Protestantism. The unruly behaviour engendered in, and materialist environment of, the playhouse confirmed the theatre as a source of evil. The preacher Philip Stubbes described plays as being ‘sucked out of the Devil’s teats, to nourish us in idolatry, heathenry and sin’. *The Anatomie of Abuses*. 14.

⁵ The “images of androgynous breakdown – of boys with breasts and man-woman monsters – multiply from 1579-1642.” *Men in Women’s Clothing*. 24.

⁶ Cited in: *Men in Women’s Clothing*. 10.

⁷ *The Norton Shakespeare*. Text referred to unless otherwise stated.

⁸ *Epicoene, or, the silent woman*. Text referred to unless otherwise stated.

⁹ Cited in *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*. 7.

¹⁰ “OF. *ypo-*, *ipocrite* (mod.F. *hypocrite*), ad. eccl. L. *hypocrita*, ad. Gr. an actor on the stage, pretender, dissembler, f”. *OED Online*.

¹¹ In *Twelfth Night*, Viola is described as a “dissembling cub” (V.i.160): a young hypocrite, a boy actor.

¹² *The Anatomie of Abuses*. 73.

man in the world, fearing the theatre as a site of both emasculation and homosexuality, of the loss of a stable, discrete self.

- 3 The cross-dressed male was an abomination because he lacked a distinctive, signalled gender. The contemporary critic Anthony Munday suggested that plays make men “like even those of themselves [they] abhor”¹³; that a loss of self is engendered (the man de-gendered) through the act of watching a performance. Such transformation of the male spectator was attributed to imitation; as Laura Levine usefully proposes, that watching not only leads to “doing”, but “being”¹⁴. The belief in the constitutive power of costume to alter gender appears to have been construed as an automated, compulsive (re-)action; the spectator is led to “being” without conscious volition, exposing a tenuous self, an unfixed masculinity. Anti-theatricalists not only suggested that the actor himself could be transformed, but that he could unmake the masculinity of his audience.
- 4 Both playwrights would certainly have been aware of the content of such prevalent tracts. Their contrasting dramatic approach is somewhat explained by Barish’s description of Jonson as Shakespeare’s “psychological antithesis”¹⁵, as his resistance to the theatrical is opposed to Shakespeare’s celebration of it. In the Prologue to *Epicoene*, the author recalls Plato as he acknowledges the innate artifice of the writing process, inextricably linking this to the theatre¹⁶, through the assertion that the “poet never credit gained / By writing truths, but things (like truths) well feigned” (*Another*). Unlike Shakespeare who happily revels in the deceit of the theatre, in the notion that “the truest poetry is the most feigning”¹⁷, Jonson invokes the mechanics of disguise (the premise of anti-theatrical argument) for didactic function, thus validating its use as a necessary evil.
- 5 For, *Epicoene* betrays both a formal adherence to anti-theatricalism and an unconscious observance of the codes of its enemy as it both theatricalises and repudiates those essential concerns: homophobia, emasculation, and androgyny¹⁸. Moreover, it revolves around that figure which most fuelled dissent against the theatre: the cross-dressed boy actor. In *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*, Jonas Barish famously refers to this as an “uneasy synthesis” between a “formal anti-theatricalism” and a “subversive” adherence to theatricality¹⁹. Laura Levine reconciles these two seemingly antithetic positions as a show of “anti-anti-theatricalism”²⁰.
- 6 Morose represents this formal stance as he bars his doors and insulates his private space against public noise²¹, insists that Cutbeard communicate with him through signs²², and, like Petruchio in *Taming of the Shrew*, desires control of the dressing of his wife²³. He adheres to the anti-theatrical belief in the necessity of the ‘truth’ of visual signifiers, especially clothing. In opposition to this, the climatic removal of Epicoene’s wig (V.iv.181) epitomises Jonson’s adherence to the notion of the instability of signs as indicative of gender. For, Morose is portrayed as a figure unable to read the unspoken language that he has himself created. Of Cutbeard, he asserts “the knave hath exceedingly

¹³ *A Second and Third Blast*. 101. Cited in: *Men in Women’s Clothing*. 12.

¹⁴ *Men in Women’s Clothing*. 13.

¹⁵ *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*. 132.

¹⁶ The theatrical is that which “‘plays a part’; ... that simulates, or is simulated; artificial, affected, assumed.” *OED Online*.

¹⁷ *As You Like It*: Touchstone, III.3.17-18.

¹⁸ Gosson responds to the notion of didactic plays with the assertion: “If people will be instructed (God bee thanked) wee have divines enough to discharge that.” *School of Abuse*. 20.

¹⁹ *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*. 154.

²⁰ *Men in Women’s Clothing*. 73.

²¹ In a room with “double walls and treble ceilings” (128), and a “thick quilt” on the door (134).

²² “... if an hour, hold up your whole hand; if half an hour, two fingers; if a quarter one” (134).

²³ “I do also love to see her whom I shall choose for my heifer to be the first and principal in all fashions; precede all the dames at court by a fortnight” (147). This is somewhat ironic, for Morose inadvertently betrays a desire that Epicoene transform herself into the most fashionable woman at court through dress, thus locating identity in attire.

well fitted me without. I will now try her within (II.v.19-21). Like Daw and La Foole who are gulled into professing they have had sexual relations with the silent woman²⁴, Morose finds himself “happy above mankind” (II.v.64) on the second count too: he is unable to distinguish her “without” from her “within”²⁵. However, through the dissolution of *Epicoene*, anti-theatricalism is shown as an unviable school of thought as there is no resolution of ambiguity in Morose’s world built on ‘definitive’ signs²⁶; clarity cannot be established through the “doctrine and impulsion” (I.i.29) with which he guides his servants. In this, the theatre staging *Epicoene* was as undignified a platform for the concept of anti-theatricalism as it was for Morose.

- 7 It would seem that Jonson thus presents the hermaphroditical qualities of *Epicoene* as an easily rectifiable predicament; that the falsity that Stubbes famously believed led to sodomy²⁷ can be revealed and righted with the removal of the costume; that Dauphine ultimately restores sexual difference²⁸. However, it has been argued that this conclusion rather presents androgyny as a more complex concept. Considering Levine’s notion of “anti-anti-theatricality”, the costume can perhaps be regarded as an escape from the lack of essential self that lurks beneath. For, the failure of Morose’s system of visual signs to replace language marks a failure of the abolition of uncertainty. When *Epicoene*’s wig is removed, the authority previously endowed in the visual signifier (in accordance with anti-theatrical demand) is exploded. For, if signs cannot reveal truth (if costume does not denote gender), ambiguity does not reside in external signs and is thus located within the self. In assuming the identity of the female, the cross-dressed boy actor assumes that stable, fixed, position of the ‘Other’. As himself, it is perhaps paradoxically the removal of the costume that reveals the true ‘epicene’, the unstable male identity²⁹. This second reading suggests that Jonson holds up anti-theatre as the false disguise; a front that deflects criticism from itself, re-directing it at the theatre. Like Bartholomew Cokes³⁰ who cannot distinguish people from puppets, through Morose, Jonson shows how banishing the theatre leads only to an inability to decipher reality from the theatrical, men from women.
- 8 In his *Description of England* (1577), William Harrison condemned the sinfulness of contemporary English fashions, stating that “it is now come to pass, that women are become men, and men transformed into monsters”³¹. In his prologues, Jonson typically pronounces both a comedic and

²⁴ (V.i) Like Morose, the two gulls lie because they cannot distinguish reality from falsity. In this, the homosexual impetus of the theatre is both revealed and extinguished in the final revelation.

²⁵ For this *Silent Woman* will later become “masculine and loud commanding” (IV.i.8), then indeed masculine. She can be likened to Clerimont who is paradoxically described by Mavis as “a very worthy gentleman in his exteriors” (IV.vi.21).

²⁶ For language can be ambiguous in the process of delivery and reception.

²⁷ That following a performance, “every one brings another homeward of their way verve friendly, and in their secret conclaves (covertly) they play the Sodomits”. Cited in *Men in Women’s Clothing*. 22. This was particularly relevant in this period considering the intrigue between James I and George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham.

²⁸ It is interesting to note that the other cross-dressed boy actors on stage, the Collegiates, remain in an ‘unnatural’ (cross-dressed) state.

²⁹ It can also be suggested that there is a differentiation between men and boys, and an affiliation between boys and women in both Shakespeare and Jonson. Recalling her cure for lovesickness, Rosalind describes to Orlando how “I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something, and for no passion truly anything, as boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour” (III.2.391-6). Malvolio describes Cesario as “Not old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy; as a squash is before ‘tis peascod, or a codling when ‘tis almost an apple ... between boy and man” (I.v.139-142). In *Epicoene*, the boy is “the most welcomest thing under a man” at the College - Clerimont notes, “I think above a man too” (I.i.8-9, 10). Cross-dressed boys are thus presented as the middle-ground in the spectrum of male and female sexuality allowing movement between this. They play a transitional role that ultimately facilitates heterosexual marriage, yet, in doing so, they undermine the notion of a stable sex.

³⁰ *Bartholomew Fair. The Alchemist and Other Plays*.

³¹ Chapter VII: “Of Their Apparel And Attire”. 147.

moralistic mission statement”³². His didactic function in *Epicoene* was to purge the excesses of “idle”³³ fashionable men and women. Jonson first establishes the boundaries of socially acceptable masculinity and femininity as a landmark by which to contrast ‘unnatural’ behaviour³⁴. The Collegiates exemplify this as they are scornfully identified as “an order of courtiers and country madams” that live apart from their husbands, call each other by their last names, and entertain themselves and others “with most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority” (125)³⁵.

- 9 In adherence with Harrison, Jonson’s ultimate ridicule of these mannish women can perhaps be seen as an address to those women in the audience who transgress social boundaries through the act of attending, even partaking in³⁶, the public theatre. In his address to the *Gentlewomen, Citizens of London*, Gosson wittily advises that it “is not a soft shoe that healeth goute ... nor your modesty at home that covereth your lightnesse, if you present yourselves in open Theatres.”³⁷ Indeed, the author’s voice echoes in Truewit’s question to Morose: “do you ever think to find a chaste wife in these times? Now? When there are so many masques, plays, Puritan preachings, mad folks, and other strange sights to be seen daily, private and public?” (135-6). *In these times*, vociferous females are characterised as both stereotypical and unnatural; as indicated by Lady *Centaur*: mannish and monstrous³⁸. In comparison, Jonson holds up Epicoene, the silent, chaste, obedient woman, as both the cultural norm (to whom these mannish women are opposed as ‘Other’) and yet an untenable model; in a time of masques and plays even “Penelope herself cannot hold out long” (IV.i.69-70).
- 10 *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* rather portray the indeterminacy of gender relations through such vociferous females. They question the stability of an essential gendered male identity through deconstructing the notion of sexual difference, yet locate this purely within the bounds of the theatre. This challenges the patriarchal systems that relied upon the inferior place of women in society³⁹; systems that Jonson affirms. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola informs the Captain that on acquiring male attire, she will become a “eunuch” (I.ii.51), thus adopting masculine appearance without male sexual capability. In this, she can perhaps be considered as the epitome of the mannish woman. However, in his comedies, Shakespeare inverts the notion that cross-dressing is the stimulus for

³² *Epicoene* intends to “profit and delight (‘Another’); *Volpone* to “mix profit with your pleasure” (Prologue), and *The Alchemist* that “gain and profit meet” (Prologue). *The Alchemist and Other Plays*.

³³ Truewit considers those who dedicate their time to fashion and attending races and hunts as “idle” (I.i.32).

³⁴ Epicoene’s silence is repeatedly identified as “her virtue” (Daw, II.iii.91); as Olivia is a “virtuous maid” (I.ii.32). Equally, silence is considered an illness in men, a sign of emasculation. Dauphine questions Truewit and Clerimont: “What ails you, sirs? Dumb?” (128), and Truewit asks Dauphine: “Why stand you mute? Are you stupid? (II.iv.16-17). Such gender traits are elucidated in Daw’s verse: “*Silence in woman is like speech in a man, / ... That female vice should be a virtue male, / Or masculine vice, a female virtue be: / ... I know to speak, and she to hold her peace*” (141). Yet, such normative gender behaviour is also held up as idealistic. Epicoene’s silence is a “rare virtue” (Emphasis added), prized above money for Morose who considers it “dowry enough” (I.ii.24). Truewit’s comment concerning Morose reveals actual expectations of woman: “Can he endure no noise, and will venture on a wife?” (I.ii.19-20), and his assertion that “We’ll make her talk” (I.ii.45) of Epicoene reveals a disbelief in the advent of a silent woman. As Morose is ironically aware, her “tongue” is “woman’s greatest pleasure” (II.v.40).

³⁵ Although not in its strict biological sense (“A human being, or one of the higher animals, in which parts characteristic of both sexes are to some extent, really or apparently, combined” *OED Online*), Jonson uses the hermaphroditical as a signifier of mannish women or womanish men.

³⁶ It is likely that privileged female spectators would have been seated in the galleries, perhaps even on the stage. In this sense, Jonson perhaps directed his ridicule not only to the cross-dressed ‘female’ players, but all women on stage.

³⁷ *School of Abuse*: “To the Gentlewomen, Citizens of London, flourishing dayes, with regarde of credite”. 48.

³⁸ Emphasis added. Their falsity is comically represented by Mrs. Otter whose “teeth were made I’ the Blackfriars, both her eyebrows I’ the Strand, and her hair in Silver Street” (IV.ii.82-4).

³⁹ The widely acknowledged Galenic model considered women as biologically inferior to men. The female reproductive system was seen as an inverted penis and testicles. This imperfection validated their inferiority, and subject status, to (perfect) masculine authority.

such behaviour. For, it is Viola, not Olivia, who adopts an admiring and subservient role (akin to that of a wife). She graciously obeys Orsino in matters concerning her rival, and moreover takes her command to both speak and act from this patriarchal figure⁴⁰. Thus, it is only male attire that she usurps. Unlike Harrison, Shakespeare does not present Viola as the “monster” (II.ii.32) she considers herself. Rather, he further consolidates her virtuous femininity as she berates her own inappropriate dress⁴¹.

- 11 Conversely, “madonna”⁴² Olivia is master of her property and person and dominates the freedom of her male relative Sir Toby (II.iii.85-9). Sebastian notes that she can “sway her house, command her followers, / Take and give back affairs and their dispatch” (IV.iii.17-18), and himself experiences such domination⁴³. Although reportedly a “cloistress”, “veiled” and in mourning (I.i.27), Olivia vigorously pursues Cesario⁴⁴. This is placed in stark comparison to Viola’s (self-referential) anecdote to Orsino concerning her father’s daughter who said nothing of her love for a man⁴⁵. Indeed, these women are figured as two versions of feminine chastity: the external disguise, and internal reality. As much as Epicoene is neither silent nor a woman, it is not the heroine of *Twelfth Night* that *viola*-tes gender roles, but her anagrammatical namesake. Like Titania and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* who quarrel for the love of the Indian boy, Olivia is figured as a rebellious queen⁴⁶ who must inevitably be tamed⁴⁷. Like Morose, she is “charmed” by Viola’s “outside” (II.ii.16); she cannot distinguish reality because her perspective is unnatural. In a type of theatrically appropriated chivari, in the same ilk as the Queen of the Fairies or Phebe in *As You Like It*, Olivia is both mocked and punished for her defiance of patriarchal will by her unsuitably chosen love-match⁴⁸. Paradoxically, Sebastian’s easy substitution into the heart of Olivia seems to suggest that identity is indeed invested purely in dress. Yet, through Viola and Olivia, Shakespeare razes the notion that identity is located in attire, rather presenting femininity as an internal trait that is untouched by external signs.
- 12 Indeed, his cross-dressed females consciously mimic masculinity, but remain aware of their feminine selves. Rosalind questions Celia “dost thou think, though I am caparison’d like a man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition?” (III.ii.188-9), and informs the audience in an aside that “I could find in my heart to disgrace my man’s apparel, and to cry like a woman, but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet-and-hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat” (II.iv.4-8). Later, to Celia’s entreaty “have the grace to consider / that tears do not become a man” (III.4.2-3), Rosalind replies: “Do you not know I am a woman? When I think I must speak” (III.2.242-3). When the clown mocks Viola’s lack of masculinity, teasing “send thee a beard!”, she replies aloud “I am almost sick for one”, then notes in an aside “though I would not have it grow on my chin” (III.i.39-42). Even Orsino realises that she “never shouldst love woman like to me” (V.i.266). It is perhaps ironically appropriate that Antonio (mistaking her for Sebastian) calls Viola an “ingrateful

⁴⁰ Orsino: “Be clamorous, and leap all civil bounds, / Rather than make unprofited return.” (I.v.20-1) / “act my woes” (I.v.25) / “let me hear you speak” (III.i.66). When Olivia commands Cesario to speak (mistaking her for Sebastian), Viola responds “My lord would speak, my duty hushes me” (V.1.101-2).

⁴¹ “Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness, / Wherin the pregnant enemy does much. / How easy it is for the proper-false / In women’s waxen hearts to set their forms! / Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we! / For such as we are made of, such we be” (II.ii.25-30).

⁴² Clown, repeatedly: I.v.

⁴³ Olivia to Sebastian: “I prithee, would thou’dst be ruled by me.” Sebastian: “Madam, I will” (IV.i.60-61).

⁴⁴ The practice of women dressing mannishly was linked to lax sexual morality, even prostitution in lower-class women.

⁴⁵ “My father had a daughter loved a man, / As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman, / I should your lordship... She never told her love... She sat like patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief. Was this not love indeed?” (II.iv.106-15).

⁴⁶ For she is not invested with divine authority like Queen Elizabeth, to whom she can also be compared.

⁴⁷ “Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind. / Fate, show thy force. Ourselves we do not owe” (I.v.279-80).

⁴⁸ Olivia and Phebe fall in love with women, and Titania an ass.

boy” (V.i.75).

- 13 Despite feigned protestations against the weaknesses of the more fragile sex⁴⁹, both characters also unconsciously betray their innate femininity. Admittedly “no fighter” (III.iv.216), Viola is petrified of partaking in the sword fight with Sir Andrew, admitting in an aside that “A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man” (III.iv.268-9). Similarly, on hearing the news of Orlando’s encounter with the lioness, Rosalind faints, and Oliver teases “You a man? You lack a man’s heart” (IV.3.164-5). Masculinity is thus presented as an acquired masque, yet it holds no transformative effect on essential femininity. In this sense, Shakespeare upholds the gender division as women are portrayed as naturally incapable of performing masculinity. The cross-dressed boy, however, is able to successfully ‘play’ femininity. Conversely, Barish suggests that “worth” for Jonson “is virtually defined as an inner and hence an invisible quality. Whatever can be too readily theatricalized lacks genuineness and substance”⁵⁰. Thus, for Jonson, the performance of Rosalind, Viola, and indeed Epicoene, is neither valuable nor viable for it reduces gender to a series of codes or prescribed actions, to mechanical play that is ultimately empty of reason and substance.
- 14 In *Troilus and Cressida*, Patroclus asserts that “A woman impudent and mannish grown / Is not more loathed than an effeminate man”⁵¹. Following anti-theatrical example⁵², such men are equally derided in *Epicoene*. Clerimont describes Sir La Foole as “a precious manikin” (I.iii.24). Like Daw, he is “a fellow so utterly nothing, as he knows not what he would be” (II.v.136-7): lacking in essential masculinity. Clerimont himself is equally scorned as he ridicules Plutarch’s *Morals* (the substantive), begging Truewit instead to “Talk me of pins and feathers and ladies and rushes and such things, and leave this stoicity alone” (I.i.61-3). Dauphine describes Mrs. Otter as “Captain Otter” (I.iv.27), for her husband is “his wife’s subject” and has “agreed to be my subject and obey me” (III.i.29-30). Gosson described plays as “the cuppes of Circes, that turn reasonable creatures into beastes”⁵³. Through this “*animal amphibium*” (I.iv.24)⁵⁴, and moreover the title of the play⁵⁵, Jonson reveals the conflict in anti-theatrical argument. He is both dominated and bestialised: monstrous in his lack of manliness. Yet, the self cannot logically be both emasculated (inherently nothing) – “his wife’s subject”, and bestialised⁵⁶ (inherently animal-like) – “animal amphibian”.

⁴⁹ Rosalind: “I thank God I am not a woman, to be touched with so many giddy offences as he hath generally taxed their whole sex withal” (III.2.335-7). Similarly, recognising Silvius’s hand in the letter he supposedly delivered from Phebe, she asserts that “women’s gentle brain / Could not drop forth such giant rude invention” (IV.3.32, 34-5). Orsino notes that “women are as roses, whose fair flower / Being once displayed doth fall that very hour”, and Viola replies “And so they are: alas, that they are so; / To die even when to perfection they grow” (II.iv.40-3).

⁵⁰ *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*. 148.

⁵¹ *Troilus and Cressida*. III.iii.217-18.

⁵² In 1616, of fashions at the turn of the century, William Perkins renounced “the common sinful practice of many men in the World” stating that “The greater sort of men are exceedingly careful, by all means and ways to follow the fashion, and to take up every newfangled attire, whensoever it comes abroad. A course flat contrary to Christ’s doctrine, which commandeth an honest care, only for necessary ornaments, and condemneth the contrary” because “It fills men’s heads, and hearts with vain and foolish thoughts: it makes them wastefully to abuse the blessings of God Given unto them.” *Cases of Conscience*: “On the Right, Lawful, and Holy Use of Apparel”.

⁵³ *School of Abuse*: “To the Reader”. 10.

⁵⁴ In reference to a man possessed of two natures: a man subservient to his woman, thus sexually ambivalent.

⁵⁵ Derived from Greek and Latin, Jonson uses *Epicoene* as a single grammatical form to denote either sex: “In Lat. and Gr. grammar, said of nouns which, without changing their grammatical gender, may denote either sex.” *OED Online*. An interesting comparison can here be made to the contemporary text *Hic Mulier* (1620), which denounces the turn of the century fashion for women wearing male attire. *Hic Mulier* combines the Latin male personal pronoun with the noun for woman. Its partner text *Haec Vir* conversely combines the Latin female personal pronoun with the noun for man. Both texts derive their titles from gender ambiguous, thus

‘unnatural’, Latinate origins, reflecting a similar repudiation of the confusion of sexes within the work: “Captain he-otter, your she-otter is coming” (IV.ii.42).

⁵⁶ Munday describes this in terms of a self as an “always eating and never satisfied” bestial figure. *A Second and Third Blast*, 69. Cited in: *Men in Women’s Clothing*. 16. Plays drive this insatiability for women that is inherent to the male nature, but pervert it

- 15 Shakespeare rather portrays contemporary male fashions as effeminate, but not emasculating; a propensity for cross-gender characteristics as arbitrary and harmless. The comic figure of Sir Andrew is also a “manikin”⁵⁷ who admires the fool’s “excellent breast”, and asserts “I would had rather than forty shillings I had such a leg” (II.iii.17-18). He is as unwilling a fighter as Viola; indeed, the couple mirror Daw and La Foole. Yet, Shakespeare’s womanish men are not the focus of any serious ridicule. For, even Orsino, who is throughout presented as the epitome of masculinity⁵⁸, acknowledges a certain feminine side: “Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm, / More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn, / Than women’s are” (II.iv.33-5). Similarly, Sebastian betrays a feminine tendency when he confesses to Antonio that “I am so near the manners of my mother, that upon the least occasion more mine eyes will tell tales of me” (II.i.34-6). Indeed, he directly refers to the instability of the masculine identity when he informs Olivia that “You are betroth’d to a maid and a man” (V.i.256). Here, effeminacy on the Shakespearean stage is not inevitably aligned with transvestitism. In criticising the fashion for cross-dress, Jonson upholds both social divisions of gender (often most misogynistically) and anti-theatrical argument, although simultaneously acknowledging its inherent contradictions.
- 16 In early modern England, heterosexuality and homosexuality were not recognised categories of identification, and sodomy was a differentiated, very specific and narrow legal transgression that was very rarely punished. Love between men is not portrayed as an unnatural phenomenon by either playwright. Considering his famous “Sonnet 20”, this is unsurprising of Shakespeare. In *Twelfth Night*, in the tradition of his namesake in *The Merchant of Venice* and Patroclus in *Troilus and Cressida*, Antonio’s “willing love” (III.iii.11) for Sebastian is presented as pure and undemanding⁵⁹. As Olivia, Portia, and Cressida form heterosexual unions, such male love is not seen as a challenge to normalised masculinity. Indeed, Rosalind assumes “no worse name than Jove’s own page” (I.3.122)⁶⁰. Jonson’s awareness of the associations of the theatre and homosexuality are revealed in *Poetaster* (1601)⁶¹. It is certainly true that Truewit is scornful that Clerimont spends his time “between his mistress abroad and ingle at home” (I.i.23-4), whereas Shakespeare portrays such catamites as Viola and Rosalind as attractive. However, Jonson does not dwell on the subject, and elsewhere in his plays pays the characterisation of such homosexuality little regard⁶². In Clerimont, Jonson reflects contemporary ambivalence towards sexual persuasion; in not recognising homosexuality as a category, it seems that neither was it exclusive of heterosexual relations. Both playwrights present it as less harmful than heterosexual love, and of no challenge to patriarchy.
- 17 According to the argument of Gosson, Stubbes and Prynne, cross-dressed boys not only have the power to emasculate those who look upon them with love⁶³, but indirectly, those who imitate them.

as it is cross-dressed boys that provide the titillation. Gosson’s *School of Abuse* (1579) suggests that men’s bestial sexuality is engaged when looking at ‘real’ women, but that they are effeminised when this sexuality is engaged looking at cross-dressed boys; that the masculinity that is animalised in the first instance is lost in the second. Cited in: *Men in Women’s Clothing*. 19.

⁵⁷ Fabian: III.iii.45.

⁵⁸ Olivia: “... I suppose him virtuous, know him noble, / Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth; / In voices well divulged, free, learn’d and valiant; / And in dimension and the shape of nature / A gracious person” (I.v.227-231).

⁵⁹ “Him life I gave him and did thereto add / My love, without retention or restraint, / All his in dedication; for his sake / Did I expose myself, pure for his love” (V.i.67-70)

⁶⁰ The only overt homosexual attraction that results from cross-dress is that of Olivia for Viola, and Phebe for Ganymede; both the less harmful female homoeroticism, and both linked to punishment of social transgression rather than sodomy.

⁶¹ Learning that his son has become a playwright and fearing that he will become an actor, Ovid’s father exclaims: “What, shall I have my son a stager now, an ingle for players?” Alan Bray: *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*. pp.54-55. Cited in *Impersonations: “The Eye of the Beholder”*. 37-8.

⁶² In *The Alchemist*, Face justifies the success of Subtle’s alchemy to Kestrel by the fact he would thereafter “Arrive at competent means, to keep himself, / His punk, and naked boy, in excellent fashion.” (III.iv.80-1).

⁶³ Rosalind’s feminine charms render Orlando speechless. He questions “Can I not say ‘I thank you’ ... What passion hangs these weights upon my tongue? (I.2.138, 246). He surmises “O poor Orlando, thou art overthrown!” as “something weaker” than

Epicoene addresses these concerns as it opens with an image of male emasculation at the hands of women as Clerimont's boy reports that "the gentlewomen play with me and throw me o' the bed and carry me in to my lady, and she kisses me with her oil'd face and puts a peruke o' my head and she asks me an' I will wear her gown, and I say, "No". And then she hits me a blow on the ear and calls me innocent and lets me go" (I.i.12-17). The boy is effeminised as he is dressed as a girl, and becomes the dominated, abused subject. The play instigated by Lady Haughty marks female homoeroticism between two cross-dressed players, what anti-theatrical criticism would consider homosexuality beneath the disguise.

- 18 In *Epicoene*, women also effeminise men through dismemberment of the whole man. Of Contemporary women, Truewit informs Morose: "If you had liv'd in King Ethelred's time, sir, or Edward the Confessor's you might perhaps have found ... a dull frosty wench would have been contented with one man: now they will as soon be pleased with one leg or one eye. I'll tell you, sir, the monstrous hazards you shall run with a wife" (II.ii.32-7). Later, Morose is prepared to escape his marriage "with the loss of an eye ... a hand, or any other member" (IV.iv.7-8). This implies that marriage, "the wedlock noose" (II.ii.26), is an institution that degrades the essential male self. As the clown in *Twelfth Night* aptly notes recalling Rosalind in *As You Like It*⁶⁴, Lady Olivia will "keep no fool ... till she be married; and fools are as like husbands as pilchards are to herrings; the husband's the bigger" (III.i.29-30). From their position of stable 'Other', women reduce men to a collection of parts⁶⁵. They dismember the cultural norm (emasculate man) to their exiled position. In his implication that chaste wives cannot be found in a time of masques and plays (135-6), Truewit links marriage to the theatre, upholding anti-theatrical notions of emasculation.
- 19 For, dismemberment is also portrayed as a result of theatricality. Dauphine determines to make Daw and La Foole "believe themselves to be just such men as we make 'em" (III.iii.88-9), and having orchestrated their argument, Truewit trades with Daw over the body parts necessary to placate his rival: either "a leg or an arm", or perhaps only "a thumb or a little finger" (IV.v.107, 110). Eventually, he agrees to forfeit "two butter teeth" (IV.v.246). In this exchange, Truewit represents the theatre; he engineers a false situation, professedly a "tragicomedy between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, Daw and La Foole" (IV.v.27-8), that gradually reduces the male, dissecting his masculinity into progressively smaller, irreconcilable pieces⁶⁶. However, Jonson consciously points up the theatricality of this process at the point at which it threatens to make the leap into reality – when Dauphine considers actually maiming Daw (IV.v.121-23). In refusing to allow play to result in physical mutilation, Jonson repudiates the anti-theatrical claim that theatre diminishes either actor or spectator (either those partaking, or those being played). He also realises this fear of emasculation more obliquely when Morose is led to willingly professes himself a "*manifeste frigidus*" (V.iii.205), declaring "I am no man" (V.iv.40) at the hands of the theatrical performance of Cutbeard and Otter⁶⁷. The associated threat of women and the theatre is again recognised as Mrs. Otter volunteers the ladies to undertake the customary "search" (V.iv.54). However, again this

Charles "masters" him (I.2.248-9). Orsino notes: "O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first / Methought she purged the air of pestilence" (I.1.20-1).

⁶⁴ Speaking of woman's wit to Orlando, Rosalind says: "You shall never take her without her answer, unless you take her without her tongue. O, that woman that cannot make her fault her husband's occasion, let her never nurse her child herself, for she will breed it like a fool" (IV.1.159-163).

⁶⁵ To take this one step further, women and disguise, thus the theatre, can also be linked to the death of men. Truewit informs Morose that once married, his wife will go "in disguise to that conjurer and this cunning woman, where the first question is how soon you shall die" (II.ii.118-19).

⁶⁶ Interestingly, like Face and Subtle in *The Alchemist*, Truewit, is not reproved. This perhaps indicates Jonson's "subversive" admiration of true wit in theatre.

⁶⁷ Who have been transformed into the "deepest divine and gravest lawyer" (IV.vii.79); "so exalted and alter'd" that they "do not know themselves" (V.iii.3-4).

engineered threat to masculinity is theatrical: unreal and unrealised.

- 20 Barish suggests that Jonson's anti-theatrical tendencies make his "plays critiques of the instability they incarnate". For, they "show us change as something to be shunned, by presenting us with foolish characters determined to embrace it". Indeed, the principles of anti-theatre are embodied in the "gulls" Daw and La Foole, who "disavow whatever is true in themselves" by imitating a superior intellect, and the "rascals" Truewit and Dauphine who are "engaged in various games of pretense, in plays-within-plays which have as object the gulling of the gulls"⁶⁸. In *Twelfth Night*, Maria is precisely this type of "gull-catcher"⁶⁹ in her manipulation of Malvolio, and Sir Andrew another "thin-faced knave, a gull"⁷⁰ as he imitates the superior intellect of Viola: "'Odours', 'pregnant', and 'vouchsafed' – I'll get 'em three all ready' " (III.i.83-4). Viola also reverses the power relationship of *Epicoe* as the Captain offers to act her mute (I.ii.58). Rosalind appropriates male speech as she determines to "speak to him [*Orlando*] like a saucy lackey, and under that habit play the knave with him" (III.2.287-8). Shakespeare thus inverts the natural order by positioning his women as those rascals that manipulate men. Here, it is interesting to recall that the focus of anti-theatrical argument concerning the effemination of males locates woman as the 'Other', an inferior state, into which men can be changed, "degenerate". It seems that men can only maintain their masculinity in its constant performance. Thus, the anti-theatrical obsession with the role of costume as signifier only seems relevant when men dress as women, for it is at this point when masculinity is at stake. In this light, much as Shakespeare's 'females' are empowered, the place of woman is ironically and by default solidified in *Epicoe* as the feminine gender is recognised as an essential trait.
- 21 Disguise enables and impedes marriage, that institution that affirms patriarchy, in the Shakespearean and Jonsonian texts respectively. *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* acknowledge both androgyny and marriage as valuable, whereas *Epicoe* renounces the two. In the former comedies, the result of cross-dressing is ultimately heterosexual marriage⁷¹. Here, Shakespeare's actors can be aligned to the androgynous puppet Dionysius of Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* due to the fluidity and naturalness with which they transfer between roles; their gender ambiguity. There is no moral differentiation between the female in transvestite disguise and the female revealed. As Ganymede, Rosalind facilitates the marriage of Silvius and Phebe; as Rosalind, she enables her own marriage to Orlando. Equally, Cesario (indirectly) effects the marriage of Olivia to Sebastian, and Viola of herself to Orsino. The actor is successful as both sexes in each case; the disguise or self-transformation that Jonson abhors is not punished. Even Orsino praises Viola for service done to her master "So much against the mettle of your sex, / So far beneath your soft and tender breeding" (V.i.311-12).
- 22 Indeed, "masculine usurp'd attire"⁷² is not presented as an appropriation of masculinity. Love (for her father and Orlando) is the stimulant that causes Rosalind to "walk not in the trodden paths". She likens it to burs that cannot be shaken from the coat for they lie in the heart (I.3.14, 16-17). A distinction is made between the internal and external – her later masculine disguise is posited as an exterior that facilitates the satisfaction of (internal) female desire. Her disguise is also presented as a necessity: "what danger will it be to us, / Maids as we are, to travel forth so far?" (I.3.106-7). In this sense, cross-dressing is presented as unnatural, yet harmless, and gender inextricably linked to sex:

⁶⁸ *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*. 145.

⁶⁹ Fabian: II.v.162

⁷⁰ Sir Toby: V.i.199

⁷¹ Viola and Orsino, and Olivia and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*; Rosalind and Orlando, Celia and Oliver, and Phebe and Silvius in *As You Like It*.

⁷² *Twelfth Night*: Viola, V.i.243.

performable, but not transformative. This is affirmed by the resolution of sexual difference and restoration of order enacted by the heterosexual marriages. Hence, the introduction of Sebastian can be understood as symbolic of the division of the androgyne (sexual ambiguity) into its ‘proper’, discrete male and female gender: the dizygotic twins⁷³.

- 23 Jonson’s adherence to reason and the value of the immutable, in opposition Shakespeare’s illusory theatre⁷⁴, rejects the notion of androgynous perfection and polarises gender definitions. Barish refers to his “distrust of theatricality, particularly as it manifests itself in acting, miming, or changing, and a corresponding bias in favor of the “real” – the undisguised, unacted and unchanging”⁷⁵. In his portrayal of Epicoene, Jonson indeed recognises the neoclassical idea of art imitating life. For, the boy actor is not only ultimately revealed, but the status of women in contemporary society is realistically reflected in the oppressive patriarchal treatment of the ‘silent woman’. This “dumb piece”⁷⁶ describes not only the suppression of the play in 1610, but its female protagonist. Equally, Epicoene revealed is presented as subordinate to his social superiors, carrying out the instruction of Dauphine as the apprentice actor or the member of the children’s company was directed by a senior figure. Indeed, much as Jonson confirms the social position of the boy actor, he does so of women. Where Rosalind and Viola are characters that are central to plot located within the art of performance, Epicoene is peripheral, located outside performance as woman’s existence in this sense is annihilated⁷⁷. In the prefatory letter of *The Alchemist*, Jonson warns that “to runne away from Nature, and be afraid of her, is the onely point of art that tickles the Spectators”⁷⁸. This perhaps refers to Shakespeare’s transgression of social conventions. For Jonson, theatrical impersonation that transformed male into female was as improbable as the concepts of turning base metal into gold, indeed, the notion of *the silent woman*.
- 24 Indeed, Shakespeare’s works ‘play’, both literally and metaphorically, with the notion of art as life. His disguised protagonists are revealed as women, not the boys that play them. As both theatrically ‘acting’ boys and literally boy actors, Ganymede and Cesario wield a power that would not otherwise have been available to them in their trade. Interestingly, during the Twelfth Night celebrations, “young boys were crowned for a day as bishops and carried through the streets in mock religious processions”⁷⁹. Essentially, Shakespeare’s stage mirrored that transgression of sobriety and obedience to strict hierarchical and patriarchal structures that occurred only during the midwinter festivity after which he coins the title of his most subversive comedy. He seems to treat anti-theatre as the same “kind of puritan”⁸⁰ as Malvolio: literally an *ill will* that is best insulted by ignoring it⁸¹. Like Sir Toby, Shakespeare does not “confine” himself “within the modest limits of order”⁸².
- 25 Jonson’s stage is that sterner world of stoic moralists that reigned on all but feast days. He admits no question of *as you like* or *what you will*, no ambiguity; the boy actor is not allowed to ‘become’

⁷³ Both “born in an hour”(II.i.38), they are derived from two separate ova and so biologically and aesthetically different: “One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not!” (V.i.208-9).

⁷⁴ Barish suggested that “Jonson belongs to a Christian-Platonic-Stoic tradition that finds value embodied in what is immutable and unchanging ... what endures for him has substance. What changes reveals itself thereby as illusory.” *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*. 143.

⁷⁵ *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*. 152.

⁷⁶ *To the Truly Noble, by All Titles, Sir Francis Stuart*.

⁷⁷ For the cross-dressed boy actor first appropriates the role of woman, then destroys her.

⁷⁸ *The Alchemist. The Alchemist and Other Plays*.

⁷⁹ *Norton Shakespeare*. 1762.

⁸⁰ Maria: II.ii.125.

⁸¹ Malvolio’s angry declaration “I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you” (V.i.365) is eerily prophetic considering the closure of the theatres in 1642.

⁸² Maria to Sir Toby: I.iii.6-7.

(maintain) the female form of Epicoene as this would suggest that gender is purely a matter of performance. Recalling the Prologue to *Volpone*, Truewit describes the actions of the Collegiates as “governed by crude opinion without reason or cause” (IV.vi.57)⁸³. Effectively, Jonson disguises (his) reason – to uphold sexual difference and refute contemporary fashions that contradict this (including anti-theatre) - beneath a double-edged hermaphroditical costume. For, affected language, artificial fashion, excess noise, and pompous lineage are revealed as cloaks with nothing beneath: an androgynous body.

- 26 It has been shown that Shakespeare presents gender-identity as an inherent trait. Yet, the epilogue to *As You Like It* acts as a stark reminder of the power of the theatre to alter conceptions of gender during performance; of the essential theatricality of theatre. Having convinced the audience that the constructed ‘Rosalind’ remains faithful to her femininity beneath the male attire, Shakespeare then explodes the illusion with the famous assertion “If I were a woman”. Through his cross-dressed heroines, Shakespeare constantly acknowledges the concept of meta-theatricality. This is especially prevalent in the refrains of Viola and Rosalind that respectively re-iterate “And I for no woman” (V.ii) and “I am not what I am” (III.i). Indeed, in the courtship of Phebe by Silvius, Rosalind quite clearly asserts: “I’ll prove a busy actor in their play” (III.4.55). Shakespeare’s evident enjoyment of ‘play’ is perhaps best surmised by Jacques’ assertion that “one man in his time plays many parts” (II.7.143), or in the words of Fabian: “if this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction” (III.iv.120-1).
- 27 Interestingly, in the folio text of *As You Like It*, Hymen refers to Rosalind in masculine terms as she is presented to her father at the close of the play⁸⁴:

Good Duke receive thy daughter,
Hymen from Heaven brought her,
Yes brought her hither.
That thou might join *his* hand with his,
Whose heart within his bosom is.⁸⁵

- 28 Modern editors prefer to amend the first “his” to “hers” in reference to Rosalind. However, still in male attire, moreover, still a man in reality, this is perhaps unnecessary. Similarly, Orsino addresses Viola as the man she feigns (moreover, is), despite full awareness of the disguise:

Cesario, come –
For so you shall be while you are a man;
But when in other habits you are seen,
Orsino’s mistress, and his fancy’s queen. (V.i.372-75)

- 29 Not until clothed in her “maiden weeds” (V.i.248) will this figure of patriarchy, recognise Viola’s femininity and make their “solemn combination” (V.i.370). This notion that identity resides in dress is earlier affirmed as Viola begs her twin: “Do not embrace me till, each circumstance / Of place, time, fortune do cohere and jump / That I am Viola” (II. 249-51). At this, the end of the carnival period (the end of the play), order is somewhat restored. For, as in *Epicoene*, the true gender of the boy actor in both *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* is maintained at their conclusion. Thus, clothing

⁸³ Which introduces “rhyme, not empty of reason”. *The Alchemist and Other Plays*.

⁸⁴ Cited in *Impersonations*: “The Eye of the Beholder”. 32-33.

⁸⁵ V.iv.105-9. Emphasis added.

is either presented as constitutive in its ability to transform females into males, or as ultimately indicative of gender⁸⁶. Considering Rosalind's epilogue, the second reading seems more viable.

- 30 Yet, where Jonson disallows the homosexual marriage, Shakespeare does not. This is indicative of Jonson's need to restore sexual order amid theatrical chaos. Through performing the consequences of their transgression, gender-roles are enforced in *Epicoene*. This legitimates the 'play' with transvestite costume, which, from different angles, simultaneously mounts an attack on both the theatrical and its critics. In contrast, Shakespeare toys with the notion of imitating and being, presenting identity as both fluid and fixed, refusing to overtly privilege either gender, or indeed the division of gender. This perhaps mocks anti-theatrical concerns, perhaps exposes the meta-dramatic nature of identity as a constant charade, but moreover celebrates the theatre, theatricality⁸⁷ - the "license of ink"⁸⁸.

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⁸⁶ Rosalind into Ganymede and Viola Cesario, or to maintain the true gender of the boy actor.

⁸⁷ The main action of Shakespeare's plays occurs in the 'other-worldly' settings of the Forest of Arden, and fantastic Illyria, not in the court or city in which the audience lived. Shakespeare presents a world in which men can be mistaken for women, even by those closest to them (for example, Sebastian, Duke Senior, and Orlando). *Twelfth night* recalls the final night of the saturnalian holiday, establishing the magic of Illyria from the onset. This is a world in which improbable sea rescues and irrational love presides. Shakespeare's adoption of the carnival and carnivalesque culture locates his comedies as popular and democratic, and operated in opposition to a formal and hierarchical culture portrayed by Jonson. Indeed, Based in the heart of the city, *Epicoene* clearly reveals the stakes of the gender game: money, property, and reproduction.

⁸⁸ *Twelfth Night*: Sir Toby, III.ii.37.

The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 Apr. 2000