

**Transgression and Subversion: the Treatment of Gender Hierarchies in
'Twelfth Night' and 'Paradise Lost'**

Simi Prasad

January 2022

“How easy is it then 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.”

(Shakespeare, II.2.28-31)

Within John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, themes of gender and sexuality can be ascribed into three discrete categories, the masculine, the feminine, and the androgynous, rather than just two presupposed binaries. Two gendered hierarchies become clear within the texts: Milton's later assertion of a highly defined and explicit gender dynamic that holds beyond contemporary belief into divine ontological status, and Shakespeare's earlier version, which offers more social fluidity as a result of gender ambiguity created by his metatheatrical convolution of gender dynamics onstage. Both views promote the steadfast notion of women's innate inferiority, ideals of male hegemony, and the human rejection of the androgynous, the unified intersection between such classifications which transgresses prerequisites and definitions. Throughout both narratives, intrinsically non-conforming individuals are 'othered' by heterosexuality, whilst gender norms are weaponised and wielded as oppressive instruments of control against characters, corralling them towards period-prescribed notions of identity. As we begin to dissect the nature of outlying characters - such as Sin and Satan in *Paradise Lost* and Viola's assumed identity as Cesario - in relation to these notions, we begin to further complicate the notions of gender and sexuality as set out in texts from the Renaissance and Restoration periods.

There are two major tenets to how masculinity interacts with both the landscape of *Paradise Lost* and its male characters, these being the abstraction of creation from the feminine space and the ideal of heteronormative unity within relationships. The parthenogenetic birth of Adam's flesh image, Eve - with whom he later procreates - is interesting given its masculine exclusion of the female form and reproductive system for God and Adam instead. The offspring later "formed and fashioned"(Milton, VIII.466) by God for the lonely Adam from his metonymic penis and male embryo, the rib, presents the initial danger of the female sex encroaching upon masculinity as it assumes "unity defective"(Milton, VIII.425). The definition of God's perfection is left incomplete with only Adam forged in God's image - an inherent lacking in the singular male (Stone). Rather, Eve, in "Her loveliness, so absolute"(Milton, VIII.546), surpasses her progenitor and partner, fulfilling Adam's deficiencies "as one intended first"(Milton, VIII.556). This repositioning of the

female temporal secondary as superior before and after the Fall creates some narrative tension in the epic given her later dismissal from Eden which vilifies the initially more virtuous creation. This reading presents a prelapsarian architecture to heteronormative relationships, reminiscent of Spenser's Hermaphrodite, from which Eve is narcissistically able to vouch her self-sufficiency and self-idolatry "with [her] answering looks/Of sympathy and love:" (Milton, IV.464-465) unlike the prototypic Adam who rescinded such claims earlier for dependency upon Eve. It can thus be supposed that sexuality is asymmetrical: an advantage to females that the gendered power hierarchy does not account for, succinctly put in the chiasmus of "most resembling unlikeness, and most unlike resemblance" (Milton, and Wolfe) as the locus of frictions between heterosexual difference – hence influencing the manner in which intrinsic male superiority according to scripture is subsequently utilised to validate Eve's subservient role.

Similarly, we can investigate within *Twelfth Night* how male characters' masculinity can appear suppressed by femininity, however this self-suppression is palatable only under certain conditions. Orsino opens the play with a monologue, lamenting "if music be the food of love, [...] sweet south, [...] violets" (Shakespeare, I.1.1-6), his focus drawn to love, foliage, and other conventionally feminine elements, with an overt fickleness associated with 'the weaker vessel'. Whilst wallowing in self-pity, Orsino fails to exhibit any traditionally masculine qualities and neglects his duties; however he retains his authority and description as a "noble Duke" (Shakespeare, I.2.25) an aspect of him smothered by his fruitless infatuation with Olivia. His elected self-feminisation, posturing a submissive pleading position, is inherently accepted as performative for courtship according to Petrarchan convention, a baseness from which men could lower and raise themselves but women could not. An interesting caveat to such suggestions of performatively suppressed masculinity is the absence of Olivia during Orsino's declaration that his "desires, like fell and cruel hounds, e'er since pursue me" (Shakespeare, I.1.23-24). This positioning of himself as hunted by desire is mimetic of the post-lapsarian dynamic between Adam and Eve, possibly representative of how, even whilst demasculinising himself, Orsino represents a male-dominated society compelled by urges but not

persecuted for satisfying them. This “mollifying effect of love-melancholy” (Claret, 8) directly places Orsino in an emasculated realm of contemplation over action, and highlights the capacity for the masculine to transfigure into the feminine. Yet, whilst this romantic masculinity is commodified for entertainment before finally returning to the heteronormative balance, we are made parlay to the notion that not all forms of masculinity are culturally compatible with temporarily defying convention. This is true of the separated melancholy homoerotic masculinity that is exemplified by Antonio - unlike other transgressive male figures in the play’s final scene he does not receive any fulfilling romantic treatment for his unconventional form of masculinity, which imbues this alternate social contravention with a sense of cultural inappropriateness.

Within *Paradise Lost*, the appropriate cultural and Christian ideologies manufacture individual identities, with women following the blasphemous Eve and bearing the burden of being saliently ascribed the station of Fallen women after succumbing to Satan and the apple’s “Taste so divine” (Milton, IX.985). This post-lapsarian view is interesting to examine; the incongruous nature with which the female narrative is regarded as a structural enforcement of the gender hierarchy. In *Paradise Lost*, the omission of Lilith (as seen in other texts) aims to silence women whose function is to subvert gender dominance in Christianity. By rejecting an alternative ideological role-model who embraces female sexuality and refuses submission to Adam, it villainises Eve and offers only a singular, inherently corrupted, and submissive figurehead for women, “Yielded with coy submission, modest pride” (Milton, IV.309). Meanwhile, the binaries that successfully dominate women - either the virgin or the whore - are still upheld; by adhering to a greater narrative, a woman who openly admits her sexuality challenges the shackles of the gender hierarchy like the fallen Eve “Carnal desire enflaming, hee on *Eve*/Began to cast lascivious Eyes” (Milton, IX.1014). Further complications arise in this rigid, forked structure when a character ambivalently fails to adhere to either prescribed identity – for those who observe the Christian faith, a dichotomy emerges between the need to vehemently deny sexuality or sexual desires, whilst also fulfilling the ultimate biological, procreative needs of said society.

The female characters in *Twelfth Night* are seen to be more heavily influenced by cultural ideas of femininity than theological, often following the ascribed path of the chaste virgin though indulging in romantic desires. It is, however, the way in which they utilise their femininity to reject societal convention within their individual power dynamics that is seen to be most enlightening. Whilst Olivia and Viola eventually subscribe to their gendered roles as subjects to their respective husbands in marriage, the implications of female empowerment are suggested by their challenging of traditional masculine authority and gender hierarchies with either their wealth, introspective desires, or initial opposition to marriage even when presented with eligible choices. “Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth, [...] but yet I cannot love him.” (Shakespeare, I.5.246– 50), Olivia’s listing of Orsino’s incomparable endowments elicits the image of the epitomised Renaissance nobleman and life partner. This would have made the agency of her choice to reject him in spite of her praises extremely powerful for audiences who would have understood the cultural losses experienced by a female rebuffing the masculine ideals of the era for a more effeminate individual, resisting the undermining cultural stereotypes associated with such. In Act III, Olivia further analyses her courtship’s social implications as she risks emasculating Cesario by wielding her femininity in a masculine manner to actively pursue him “Do not extort thy reasons for this clause, / For that I woo, thou therefore hast no cause” (Shakespeare, III, i, 153-4) to wooing. Furthermore this internalises a sense of female strength that we see Viola contend with in her traversal of genders, “How easy is it then 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.” (Shakespeare, II.2.28-31) in which she actively and performatively associates strength with her male persona, and, through her agency, provides the dichotomy of frailty to femininity – which she may also remove from femininity.

In addition to the transvestitism seen within *Twelfth Night*, the transgressive and homoerotic undercurrents of the play temporarily create a comic, almost carnivalesque disorder within the structure of real society rather than the fictionalised Heaven and Hell of *Paradise Lost*. The androgyny of Viola and Sebastian borders on unheimlich, “An apple cleft in two is not more

twin/Than these two creatures” (Shakespeare, IV.1.220-223). With their interchangeability based on merely the contents of their attire, their duality lends itself to the idea of a transgressive, singular self, split into two gendered factions.

Finally, when exploring the androgynous and transgressive within Milton’s epic poem, we see both a pejoratively and positively attributed set of ‘others’. First is Satan and his hellish daughter-wife equivalent of Eve, Sin – Sin is treated particularly interestingly in the narrative, as with her we discover punitively gender punishment and the difference between womanly transgressions. Whilst her birth itself is transgressive, an exercise in narcissism without God, she “pleased, and with attractive graces won/ The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft/ Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing/Becam’st enamoured” (Milton, II.760-765). Sin’s ability through her physical attractiveness to garner admiration displays the epic’s discussion of the treacherous nature of beauty as well as its distrust of aesthetically pleasing women who utilise their femininity for their own means. Satan’s visage may neither be trusted for his metamorphic capabilities to shift his appearance at will, “th’ infernal Serpent” (Milton, I.34) both corporeal and ephemeral. Satan’s refusal to adhere to a singular appearance – transgressing divine, human, and bestial – neglects the God-established binaries all other beings conform to. Finally, we have the Archangel Raphael who addresses the pure, androgynous sexuality of divine spirits that transcends the binaries man is held to. Sex amongst angels further transcends the homosexual and heterosexual capabilities of people, in its virtue and in how “Total they mix” (Milton, VIII.626) all parts colliding and assimilating into one being. Its genderless nature seems to transgress the supposed human binaries, but this transgression described to humans, if not felt, appears to incite some homoerotic desire on a base level for Adam as we’ve seen previously with Eve’s reflection.

To summarise, when reading *Paradise Lost* and *Twelfth Night* contextually, the simultaneously pre-existing and later theological beliefs of female inferiority and male superiority are seemingly gratified by the scientific zeitgeist surrounding their creation, in which eminent scientific

hypotheses of the time regarded females as imperfect males. However, through an analysis of the texts we begin to understand the nuance of these notions and the manner in which gendered hierarchies diverge following certain critical and ideological expectations and pressures. Furthermore, it could be seen to address the homoerotic gender issues displayed by Viola's deceit (though her transvestitism occurs out of necessity and is not used to intervene in the events of the plot, unlike Shakespeare's other heroines, Portia and Rosalind) and feminist readings of Eve's supplementary superiority unite to traverse the binaries set out for sexuality and gender, more strongly adhering to the androgynous ideal of the sexual wholeness personified by the Angels. This critical reading accounting for the othered and transgressive as more complete than absurd scrutinises the facets of heterosexual courtship and status quos, with male dominance subverted by unconstrained gender roles and a polarized idea of gender's existence to obfuscate "a decided anxiety about what is feared to be the actual fluidity of gender" (Charles, 124).

Works Cited

Charles, Casey. "Gender Trouble In Twelfth Night". *Theatre Journal*, vol 49, no. 2, 1997, pp. 121-141.

Claret, Jean-Louis. "“When the Bear Won’t Go Hunt’: Masculinity in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night.” *E-Rea :Revue D’études Anglophones*, vol. 10, no. 10.1, Laboratoire d’Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.2738>.

Milton, John, and Don M. Wolfe. *Complete Prose Works Of John Milton*. Vol. 2. Yale University Press, 1970, p.597

Milton, John. "Paradise Lost." Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 10. New York: Norton, 2018, p. 1495-1727

Shakespeare, William. "Twelfth Night." Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 10. New York: Norton, 2018, p.739-802

Smith, Bruce R. "Introduction". *Twelfth Night*. Boston: Bedford, 2001, p. VI.

Stanivukovic, Goran R. "Masculine Plots in Twelfth Night", *Twelfth Night : New Critical Essays*, edited by James Schiffer, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011, p.71

Stone, J. "Man's effeminate s(lack)ness:" Androgyny and the Divided Unity of Adam and Eve. *Milton Quarterly*, Vol. 3, 1997, p.33-42.

