The Edinburgh Student Literary Journal

The ways in which the casting of 'boy players' affects the representation of gender in Shakespearean drama

Eloise Quetglas-Peach

A/W 2025-26

'Feminine gender was inevitably a matter of costume' (Rackin 29)

In Shakespearean drama, the casting of 'boy players' affects the representation of gender through these young male actors' disruption of traditional Renaissance gender binaries. Through a close analysis of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1591), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598), and *Twelfth Night* (1601), I will illustrate how Shakespeare's use of cross-dressing suggests that the representation of gender was fluid on the Renaissance stage. The use of theatrical devices, such as costume and hair, allowed 'boy players' to further destabilise gender binaries. A New Historicist lens will allow me to argue that the 'boy players' subverted rigid gender binaries by constantly shifting between masculine and feminine identities. Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* (1671) will provide insight into the contemporary binary definitions of gender through its detailed descriptions of male and female anatomy, facilitating a New Historicist reading of the plays. Therefore, this essay will analyse how the casting of 'boy players' affected the representation of gender on the Shakespearean stage – through the themes of cross-dressing, dramatic irony, and theatrical devices – and for a Renaissance audience, who witnessed and reacted to this fluid representation of gender in real time.

In Shakespearean England, unlike the rest of Europe, it was forbidden for women to perform on stage because 'the idea of women putting their bodies on public display, even if fully clothed, was widely regarded as immoral and likened to prostitution' (Schott Syme 110). Consequently, female roles were portrayed by 'boy players', young boys between the ages of twelve and twenty-one, with unbroken voices and no facial hair (Mulcahy 87). It is interesting to note that Shakespeare's first Juliet – the globally recognised tragic heroine – was in fact first performed by a young boy. Despite the use of boy players being a contemporary theatrical convention, the presence of anti-theatrical Puritan pamphleteers proves that there was certainly an anxiety surrounding boy players performing publicly as women on stage. In the 17th century, there was a common 'belief in the homology between

male and female genitals – that human beings begin their biological existence as female and could thus turn back into female' (Mulcahy 100). This suggests that embodying the 'feminine gender was inevitably a matter of costume' (Rackin 29). Therefore, the decision to exclude women from the theatre highlights the boy players' volatility in terms of gender: they risked jeopardising their own masculinity by portraying women on the Shakespearean stage, for fear that once they removed their feminine disguise, they would no longer be truly male. Evidently, the casting of boy players was controversial as they, according to this belief, risked returning to their 'original form'and became female by wearing women's clothes – the ultimate threat to patriarchal masculinity.

In its simplest form, cross-dressing on a Shakespearean stage meant that all female characters were portrayed by boy players, blurring the traditional gender binaries, representing gender as fluid and in constant change. Taking into consideration the contemporary view that gender aligned with biological sex, the Renaissance audience could not disregard the boy players' male anatomy, despite their feminine exterior on stage. In this light, boy players existed, not as one or the other, but as both genders simultaneously because of their female presentation (through their voice, gestures, and costume) and male biological sex. Therefore, their mere existence on stage subverts the representation of gender because of their constant shifting identity, embodying both genders at once.

One way in which Shakespeare demonstrates this constant movement between masculine and feminine identities is through dramatic irony, where a female character deliberately references her masculinity as a boy player, often provoking humour in the audience. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice expresses her desire for revenge against the male characters, notably Claudio and Don Pedro, who publicly slander her cousin, Hero. Shakespeare's use of apostrophe and repetition reinforces Beatrice's intense desire to avenge Hero: 'Oh, that I were a man! […] Oh God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the

marketplace […] Oh, that I were a man for his sake!' (4.1.298-311). Renaissance audiences would have understood that Beatrice was performed by a young boy, therefore highlighting the irony of her language and possibly creating a moment of comedy for the spectators. This discourse emphasises the passivity often associated with women where Beatrice's revenge seems to only be possible if she was a man. However, the boy player, being neither a man (because of his youth), nor a woman (because of his male anatomy), subverts the contemporary belief which aligns gender with biological sex by showcasing the fluidity of gender representation. *Anthony and Cleopatra* similarly draws on dramatic irony, making the representation of gender especially troubling. In the play's final scene, Cleopatra is repulsed at the idea of a boy player badly impersonating her: 'I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'th' posture of a whore.' (5.2.18-20). Here, there is a direct and ironic awareness of the boy players' male-female identity both on and off stage, further destabilising the representation of gender in Renaissance society.

Jane Sharp's 1671 text, using the Galen's understanding of anatomy, claims that the differences between men and women are based on anatomy: 'women have all the parts of Generation that Men have, but Mens are outwardly, womens inwardly.' (Sharp 40). The book describes in detail the physical differences between 'a man's yard' (18) and 'the secrets of the Female sex' (41), making it clear that the two are distinctly separate and could not be confused or combined. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Proteus' clownish servant, Lance, supports this contemporary theory by using his shoes as props to represent members of his family and consequently highlights the stark differences between male and female anatomy. Lance justifies the reasoning behind his choices: 'this left shoe is my mother […] it hath the worser sole […] with the hole in it' (2.3.14-16). Punning on the medieval belief which questioned whether women had souls, and deciding that the holey shoe must represent his mother further supports Sharp's belief that gender is defined by anatomy where women's

parts are inward rather than outward. However, Shakespeare's decision to have Lance, who consistently makes stupid comments throughout the play, express such a crude and simple opinion on gender, perhaps signals that Shakespeare disagrees with the contemporary belief present in *The Midwives Book* that gender is purely anatomical.

Another way in which Shakespeare highlights the fluidity of gender is through his descriptions of gestures and physicality. For instance, Beatrice states that 'manhood is melted into curtsies' (4.1.312), criticising the injustice where men are able to tell lies and still be seen 'as valiant as Hercules' (4.1.314). In the 1620 pamphlet *Haec-Vir*, the Man-Woman states that 'there be a distinct and special difference betweene Man and Woman both in their habit and behaviours' (*Haec-Vir* C2), highlighting the importance of appearance and conduct in defining one's gender. Here, it is clear that gender is not only associated with anatomy, but with how one presents themselves, just like how Beatrice equates a curtsey with weakness and thus femininity. However, Beatrice's fiery passion and strong, unwavering discourse subverts the feminine stereotype of passivity and enables her to embody more typically masculine qualities. Therefore, the boy players are able to empower women '(or rather female characters) […] to adopt freedoms denied [to] them in a patriarchal culture' (Mulcahy 88). Although Renaissance women were denied access to the stage, they were not denied access to a seat in the theatre. It is possible that upon witnessing Beatrice's powerful speech in Act 4, Scene 1 and other strong 'women' on stage, female spectators would have left the theatre feeling more confident about expressing their own opinions in a male-dominated society. This gives the impression that the boy player became 'a vehicle for the woman character, who has a life of her own' (98), encompassing the fluidity of gender representation on stage.

Furthermore, Beatrice ironically expresses her confident and assertive character through the disdain for specific physical masculine characteristics: 'Lord, I could not endure

a husband with a beard on his face. I had rather lie in the woolen!' (2.1.25-6). The boy player delivering this line is evidently too young to grow a beard himself, which allows him to play the role of Beatrice in the first place, thus creating dramatic irony in the criticism of a man's scratchy beard. Leonato, Beatrice's uncle, a 'white-bearded fellow' (2.3.110) himself, suggests she marry a man without a beard. Her ironic response, 'What should I do with him? Dress him in my apparel and make him my waiting-gentlewoman?' (2.1.28-9), reveals the contemporary view that associated a beardless man with effeminacy. Beatrice's rapid, quick-witted response underscores the ease with which boy players, with their youthful and beardless appearance, could portray female characters on the Renaissance stage. Therefore, this challenges traditional gender binaries by implying that encompassing femininity is as simple and easy as expressing a feminine exterior.

The fear of being seen as effeminate was rife during the Renaissance and so sporting a beard, a natural male secondary sex characteristic, would have been an immediate signifier of one's masculinity. Critic Will Fisher notes that 'over ninety percent of men […] had facial hair' during Shakespeare's time, highlighting their widespread popularity: 'In England, starting in about 1540 and continuing for at least a century after that, males over the age of twenty-one are almost invariably represented with some sort of facial hair.' (Fisher 158). Arguing that secondary sex characteristics were as important as genitalia in defining one's gender, Fisher explains that in theatre 'sex was materialised through an array of features and prosthetic parts […] the beard and the genitals […] clothing, the hair' and so on (157). In Shakespeare's plays, all but four plays explicitly mention beards and the extensive orders for prosthetic beards highlights the ease of cross-dressing on stage (163). It is possible that these prosthetic beards enabled boy players (portraying female characters) to disguise themselves as men as part of a play's plot. In this case, boy players could not simply remove their feminine disguises as their transformation would be incomplete: they would look like young

boys and not grown men. Therefore, the use of prosthetic beards allowed boy players not only to alter their gender but also their age. These props meant that Renaissance audiences could follow the plot more easily, especially when boy players portraying female characters disguised themselves as men. Thus, the variety of prosthetic beards used in Renaissance theatres highlights the transformative power of costume and further emphasises the idea that the representation of gender is not fixed nor stable on the Shakespearean stage.

In both *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Twelfth Night*, a certain double layering effect occurs on stage when female characters (played by boy players) cross-dress as men as part of the plot. This cyclical transformation of gender, where the female character disguised as a man has the same sex as the boy player, further destabilises traditional gender binaries. This underscores the fluidity of gender where the 'interchangeability of the sexes is an essential assumption of this theater.' (Orgel 13). The ability of boy players to shift between genders on stage shows how the representation of gender is in constant flux. Their physical movement on stage, to and from different Italian cities (notably between Milan and Verona), further reinforces this fluidity. In *Haec-Vir*, the Man-Woman describes having no 'greater freedome', and asks the rhetorical question: 'For what is the world, but a very shop or ware-house of change?' (*Haec-Vir* B). By stating that in nature there is 'nothing but change' (Ibid.), the existence of an individual who constantly shifts between male and female identities is justified.

In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia decides to cross-dress as 'some well-reputed page' (2.7.43), a young male servant, to travel to Milan safely. In this scene, Julia and Lucetta, her waiting-woman, discuss the ways in which they can ensure the believability of Julia's disguise as Sebastian:

LUCETTA. Why, then, your ladyship must cut your hair.
JULIA. No, girl, I'll knit it up in silken strings

> With twenty odd-conceited true-love knots.
> (2.7.44-6)

With facial hair being a common signifier of masculine identity, long hair on women is historically symbolic of femininity and flirtation. In deciding to 'become a youth' (2.7.47), she wishes to retain her femininity by refusing to physically cut her hair. In the pamphlet *Haec Vir*, the Man-Woman criticises the superficiality of the Womanish-Man's efforts to appear feminine by focussing excessively on physical appearance: 'why doe you curle, frizell and powder your hayres, bestowing more hours and time in deviding locke from lock, and hayre from hayre, in giving every thread his posture' (*Haec Vir* C). This criticism highlights the artificiality of gender representation and underscores the idea that gender is not a fixed quality but rather a set of behaviours and appearances that can be adopted by anyone. Therefore, this links to how the boy players adopted not only a feminine costume, but feminine gestures and appearances to be believable as women on the Renaissance stage.

In contrast, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola's cross-dressing involves dressing '*in man's attire*' (1.4) and physically cutting her hair, making her transformation into the male page Cesario more permanent than Julia's disguise as Sebastian in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In the opening scene of the play, Viola asks the Captain of the ship to 'conceal [her] what [she is], and be [her] aid / For such disguise as haply shall become / The form of [her] intent.' (1.2.52-4). This request to hide her true identity is deeply ironic, as her 'true self' is a young boy. This layered disguise adds complexity to the representation of gender, emphasising its ambiguity and fluidity. In *Haec Vir*, the Womanish-Man warns the Man-Woman that 'upon any occasion a woman may put on mans attyre […would] confound the whole sexe by the evilnesse of so lewd an example.' (*Haec-Vir* B4). This warning reflects the contemporary fear that men, having originated from the female sex, possess the potential to revert to that female state, fearing that the act of wearing women's clothing could facilitate the transformation.

Casey Charles applies Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to elucidate the character of Viola/Cesario, highlighting the intricate interplay of gender dimensions that blur the rigid gender binaries of the time. Charles identifies that there is 'a parodic awareness of the three contingent dimensions of her corporeality: 1/ her anatomical sex as a boy actor, 2/ her gender identity in the play, 3/ her gender performance as the page Cesario' (Charles 130). Firstly, the boy player's male anatomy introduces a foundational layer of gender ambiguity. Then, Viola's character is female which, juxtaposed with her male disguise as Cesario, demonstrates the fluidity and adaptability of gender representation. The Renaissance audience would have been aware of this triple layering, further implying that the boy player exists as male and female, as well as a young boy and as a man simultaneously. Shakespeare's decision to include cross-dressing as a key theme throughout many of his plays, gives the impression that he enjoyed playing with gender expression, pushing spectators' boundaries regarding their opinions about gender. However, it is also possible that contemporary audiences would have simply accepted boy players as theatrical convention, seeing female characters on stage as women, making this layering arguably more simple for a Renaissance audience. The portrayal of the boy player firstly as a woman, then a man, onstage arguably appears to be more controversial than the role of a female actress portraying a female character, or so one would have thought.

Furthermore, moments of comedy arise when boy players, dressed as women but disguised as men on stage, are called youths by male characters, highlighting the believability of their disguises. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Proteus interacts with Julia, who is disguised as the male page Sebastian. Proteus refers to her as 'Sebastian' (4.4.58) and 'a youth' (4.4.59), never doubting her disguise. This scene is ironic and humorous because Proteus praises Julia on her appearance: 'for thy face and thy behaviour, / Which, if my augury deceive me not, / Witness good bringing-up, fortune, and truth.' (4.4.62-4).

Attributing her seemingly youthful and masculine features, Proteus is unaware that he is speaking directly to Julia, his former lover. In the following scene, Silvia also refers to Julia as a 'gentle youth' (5.1.168), further reinforcing the effectiveness of Julia's disguise. This repeated reference to Julia throughout the play, while she is dressed as a man, showcases the fluidity of gender representation in Shakespearean drama through comedic elements. The boy players can convincingly portray female characters, and, perhaps more easily, portray male characters and therefore adds layers to the exploration of gender on the Shakespearean stage.

Similarly, in *Twelfth Night*, Orsino repeatedly refers to Viola (disguised as Cesario) as a 'good youth' (1.4.14), a '[d]ear lad' (1.4.29), and remarks that his 'small pipe / Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman's part.' (1.4.31-3). The attention Orsino pays to Viola's feminine features, such as her high-pitched voice, serves as a reminder to the audience of her disguise, creating comedy through dramatic irony that the audience know Cesario is really Viola, and that Viola is really a boy player. In Act 2, Scene 3 of *Twelfth Night*, Viola's monologue heightens this dramatic irony when she states, 'I am the man' (2.3.24), upon realising Olivia's infatuation with Viola/Cesario's female-male character. Referring to herself as a 'poor monster' (2.3.33) links to the contemporary demonisation against individuals who embodied masculine and feminine characteristics. The pamphlet *Hic Mulier, or the Man-Woman*, repeatedly refers to 'Masculine-women' (*Hic Mulier* A3-4) as having a 'monstrous deformitie' (Ibid.), highlighting the fear and disgust of people with both masculine and feminine features, akin to the boy players.

The closing scenes of both *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Twelfth Night* involve the acknowledgement of Julia and Viola's respective disguises as male pages, revealing their character's feminine identity. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia's disguise is discovered because of the stage direction prompt: '[*She reveals herself.*]' (5.4). In response, Proteus exclaims 'How? Julia?' (5.4.98), immediately recognising her since the removal of her

masculine attire, or perhaps a prosthetic moustache. Interestingly, this poses the question of how a Renaissance performance might have revealed Julia's femininity in light of the fact that she would have been portrayed by a boy player. In the 2014 Royal Shakespeare Company production, Julia, played by a woman, reveals that she had been wearing a binder while she was disguised as Sebastian (*Two Gentlemen* 02:11:10-02:11:25). This moment of anagnorisis reveals Julia's true identity to the characters on stage, serving as a pivotal element of the play's denouement, resolving tangled romantic dynamics between Silvia, Valentine, Proteus and Julia. The decision to include a binder to reveal Julia's gender is significant, not only because it adds authenticity to her disguise as a male page, but equally reflects the 21st century awareness surrounding gender fluidity, transgender identity, and non-binary expression, that a modern audience would understand. Therefore, modern productions highlight Shakespeare's continuous relevance today in discussion of gender identity and reinforce how cultural norms can be challenged through theatrical expression.

Conversely, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola remains in her 'masculine usurped attire' (5.1.240) and is referred to as 'Boy' (5.1.257) and 'Cesario' (5.1.371) by Orsino, her future husband. Orsino says to Viola, 'let me see thee in thy woman's weeds' (5.1.264) which gives the impression that Cesario's transformation back into Viola can be achieved through the simplicity of wearing 'other habits' (5.1.373). This, along with the casting of boy players, yet again undermines contemporary gender binaries that were supposedly innate and biological. The idea that Viola, once she changes her clothes, will become Orsino's 'fancy's queen' (5.1.374) gives the impression that her existence as Viola is an illusion because Orsino is yet to see her as a woman. Phyllis Rackin notes that 'an androgynous heroine can put on her femininity with a theatrical costume', suggesting the ease with which the boy players were able to shift between masculine and feminine identities (Rackin 38).

In conclusion, the casting of boy players in Shakespearean drama profoundly disrupted traditional gender binaries in England, rendering the representation of gender fluid and in constant flux. The boy players' incessant shifting between masculine and feminine identities on stage allowed them to transcend conventional and rigid gender binaries of the time. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, with cross-dressing in its simplest form, female characters like Beatrice articulate the constraints of womanhood, creating dramatic irony as Renaissance audiences would have been aware that Beatrice was portrayed by a boy. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Twelfth Night*, the cyclical transformation of cross-dressing – from boy to woman back to boy – further complicates gender representation, reinforcing its fluidity. Thus, the casting of boy players in Shakespearean drama undeniably blurred traditional gender binaries that equated gender with biological sex, subverting the representation of gender through their shifting identities. A royal warrant issued by King Charles II in 1662, allowing women to perform female roles for the first time, transformed the representation of gender on the English stage, leaving the subversive convention of boy players uniquely in the Shakespearean era.

Works Cited

Primary sources

Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing. 1598*. The Norton Shakespeare, 3rd ed., vol. 1: *Early Plays and Poems*, 2016.

Shakespeare, William. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona. 1591*. The Norton Shakespeare, 3rd ed., vol. 1: *Early Plays and Poems*, 2016.

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night. 1601*. The Norton Shakespeare, 3rd ed., vol. 1: *Early Plays and Poems*, 2016.

Secondary sources

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

Fisher, Will. “The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England.” *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2001, pp. 155–87.

Hic Mulier, Or The Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of our Times. Exprest in a briefe Declaration. London, Printed for J.T. and are to be sold at Christ Church gate, Henry E. Huntington Library, 1620.

Haec-Vir, Or The Womanish Man. Being an Answere to a late Booke intituled Hic-Mulier. Exprest in a briefe Dialogue between Haec-Vir the Wamanish-Man, and Hic-Mulier the Man-Woman. London, Printed for J.T. and are to be sold at Christ Church gate, 1620.

Mulcahy, Sean. “Boy actors on the Shakespearean stage: subliminal or subversive?” *International Journal of English Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2017, pp. 87-111.

Orgel, Stephen. “Nobody’s Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 1, 1989, pp. 7-29.

Rackin, Phyllis. “Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance.” *PMLA*, vol. 102, no. 1, 1987, pp. 29-41.

Schott Syme, Holger. “The Theater of Shakespeare’s Time.” The Norton Shakespeare, 3rd ed., vol. 1: *Early Plays and Poems*, 2016, pp. 93-118.

Shakespeare, William. *Anthony and Cleopatra. 1607*. The Norton Shakespeare, 3rd ed., vol. 1: *Early Plays and Poems*, 2016.

Sharp, Jane. *The Midwives Book. Or the whole Art of Midwifery Discovered Directing Childbearing Women how to behave themselves. In their Conception, Breeding, Bearing, and Nursing of Children.* London, Printed for Simon Miller, at the Star at the West End of St. Pauls, 1671.

Stage Productions

The Two Gentlemen of Verona. Directed by Simon Godwin, performance by Pearl Chanda, et al., Royal Shakespeare Company, 1 Jan 2014. *Digital Theatre Plus.*