

# “You have a better needle, I know”. Boy Actors on the Early Modern Stage

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**Abstract** In this article I argue that an approach relying on metatheatrical analysis and on Bakhtin's Carnavalesque could account for the apparent subversivism of the boy actor's cross-dressing on the Renaissance stage: stage cross-dressing was rather part of a sanctioned, conservative transgression. Comedy – linked to the carnivalesque features of the Renaissance stage – shares with carnival its conservatively transgressive quality. The frequency of references to boy actors in disguise-plot comedies and their metatheatricality are analysed. Drawing on the Jacobean play *Love's Cure* I will try to show how comic conservatism and metatheatre combine with socially and theatrically conservative outcomes.

**Keywords** Renaissance drama. Boy actors. Cross-dressing. Cultural studies. Carnavalesque.

**Summary** 1 Reading Boy Actors. – 2 Bakhtinian Carnival and Renaissance Theatre. – 3 Comedy and Metatheatre. – 4 The Semiotization of the Boy Actor. – 5 Conclusions.



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## 1 Reading Boy Actors

In the early nineteenth century, Charles Lamb wondered at the "odd double confusion" of Renaissance<sup>1</sup> audiences in front of boy actors impersonating women (2008, 249). His remark, however, is a rare specimen in the period between the 1660s and the twentieth century. Before 1642, the main commentary on the subject was provided by anti-theatrical writers, who condemned the boy actors' cross-dressing as blasphemous and subversive – remarks later reprised in the *Interregnum* as a *monitus* against the practice. Criticism of the boy actors was one of the main arguments in the attack against the theatre in general as a place of corruption, and those rebuking such accusations would defend the theatre by stressing its apparent artificiality. Works such as Heywood's *An Apology for Actors* (1612) praised theatrical performance precisely because of the craft required to create such a complex illusion, whose main aim was entertainment. To Heywood, the clear artificiality of the theatre makes any ambiguities harmless, and the performance results formative and entertaining – rather than corruptive – for actors and audience alike. In this illusion, boy performers are clearly intended to only 'represent' ladies, which should merely entertain the audience rather than arouse its ungodly homosexual desires. Conversely, author and playwright Lady Mary Wroth defended the theatre but criticised its contemporary form, because the boys' performances made it too evidently artificial and thus unentertaining: only women could render femininity convincingly (Shapiro 1989). Nevertheless, all debates on cross-dressing actors were dismissed with the introduction of actresses in the Restoration. Although some still remembered pre-1642 productions, the novelty soon became the norm and was not questioned further.

Occasionally through the seventeenth and eighteenth century, cross-dressed actors would still interpret certain roles, mainly for grotesque or comic purposes, and child actors of both sexes briefly rose back to popularity in the nineteenth century. All-male or all-female performances became common practice in single-sex schools and colleges and are still quite common in such institutions today. However, all these instances of cross-dressed performance hardly ever raised critical reflections on the Renaissance. Even in the nineteenth century, when Shakespearean child performances attracted both the Romantics and the Victorians, the implications of Elizabethan theatrical cross-dressing were not subject to scholarly scrutiny. When confronted with child actors, the critical focus of these audiences was on contemporary ideas on childhood rather than on perfor-

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<sup>1</sup> Given the pertinence of the topic to both cultural and socio-political aspects, the terms 'Renaissance' and 'early modern' will be used interchangeably.

mance in early modern times (Davis 2006). Only in 1915 would Freeburg address the issue for the first time. In his study on disguise in Elizabethan drama, he identified the female page and the boy bride among the five most frequent disguise plots and briefly mentioned the theatrical effects that this practice allowed for. Yet, since his main aim was to investigate the functions of disguise in general, his treatment of cross-dressing is mostly limited to the play level (i.e., to the characters' disguises as members of the opposite sex). Also, while acknowledging how the audience's awareness of the play as such and of the boy actor underneath the female character could be used for theatrical ends, Freeburg did not develop this idea in relation to the boy actor specifically. After Freeburg's study, the analysis of stage cross-dressing was revived only in the second half of the twentieth century, initially through second-wave feminist studies, and later re-verberated mainly in cultural approaches to literature.

Specific interest for Renaissance cross-dressing arose in the 1980s-1990s, during the "feminist-historicist turn" (Chess 2016, 3). Studies of the time generally consider cross-dressing on the early modern stage to have "upset patriarchal values, assaulted cultural boundaries, and unravelled the sexual separations of ambivalence, androgyny, and eroticism" (Cressy 1996, 439). Today, this is still the most popular interpretation of the practice across disciplines and critical theories. Second-wave feminist scholars focus on the female characters' layered cross-dressing and interpret it as a bold representation of the real-life appropriation of male sexual and social prerogatives by women of different classes (Bunker 2005; Jardine 1983; Levine 1986; Hodgson-Wright 2000; Hotchkiss 2012; Howard 1988; Woodbridge 1984). New historicists show how the erotic ambiguity of the boys' performance mirrored the instability of gender described in contemporary medical theories, and they highlight the fluidity of identity thus represented (Greenblatt 1988; Shapiro 1996). Gender studies stress the implications of the practice in terms of gender performativity as defined by Butler (1999) and link this gender-blurring to modern cross-dressing and transgender issues (Chess 2016; Comensoli, Russell 1999; Garber 1992; Hamamra 2019; Goldberg 1994; Orvis 2014; Pérez Díez 2022). Most studies stress the (homo)erotic allure of these performances. This stage practice is often used as an example within broader discussions on theatrical disguise, gender and/or gender representation, cross-dressing through the ages, social transgression, discourses on *ante litteram* LGBTQ+ issues - i.e., in discussions centred around culture. The boy actor's cross-dressed performance does pertain to all these discourses, but the lack of comprehensive analyses of the subject, and especially of its theatrical implications, makes these studies slightly unbalanced towards modern interpretations of early modern texts and practices.

## 2 Bakhtinian Carnival and Renaissance Theatre

Most literature on Renaissance stage cross-dressing relies on limited primary sources. Shakespeare's plays and Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* (1611) are often the only dramatic sources cited, and they are presented as exceptional within the early modern context. In fact, many other plays relied both on cross-dressing plots and on metatheatrical references to boy actors, something already highlighted by Freeburg but rarely addressed in later studies. Such popularity suggests that Shakespeare's works were compliant with a convention, and that such practices neither shocked audiences away nor sparked social unrest. Also, many scholars tend to read the Renaissance criticism of cross-dressed figures quite literally. Thus, Woodbridge can go so far as to describe a full-on "female transvestite movement" taking over London between the 1570s and 1620s (1984, 157). However, comparisons with contemporary fashion and carnivalesque spaces allow to account for the androgynous monstrosities mentioned in these writings, and to separate these instances from stage cross-dressing. This suggests that female characters cross-dressing on stage were not a bolder version of real-life female cross-dressers appropriating men's clothing and social prerogatives.

The hyperbolic language of early modern polemical texts<sup>2</sup> can overshadow the actual descriptions of garments they provide. Compared with material evidence (e.g., contemporary clothes, portraits), these descriptions indicate that women and men were not cross-dressing at all. In fact, they attest to contemporary fashion trends towards more comfortable, wider clothing and similar hairstyles for both sexes: women's doublets, feathered hats and coiffeurs that made hair look shorter and men's softer doublets, jewellery and longer hair - all imported fashions from France, Italy, and sometimes the Netherlands (Corson 1971; Pendergast, Pendergast 2004). This general trend would culminate in the 1640s, when fashion could look almost unisex, but even in this case, originally male garments were adapted in order to flatter the ideal female figure of the time and vice versa (Jones, Stallybrass 2000). Rather than actual cross-dressers, as previously believed, what moralist and satirical writers feared were the implications of such new trends. To these authors, the increasingly faster changes in fashion symbolised a general moral decline for two main reasons: they altered the "hierarchy of analogies" believed to regulate the entire universe (Foucault 2002, 60) and they required

<sup>2</sup> E.g.: George Gascoigne, *The Steele Glas* (1576); Philip Stubbes, *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583); William Averell, *A Meruailous Combat of Contrarieties* (1588); Richard Niccols, *The Furies* (1614); John William, *Sermon of Apparell* (1619); *Hic Mulier and Haec-Vir* (1620), both published anonymously.

costly imported textiles and the imitation of foreign – mainly Catholic – countries, which made England somewhat dependent, subordinate and backward (Jones, Stallybrass 2000, 61-3).

Tudor monarchs in particular reinforced a neo-feudal view of the universe as a divinely ordered hierarchy, subdivided in minor ones (e.g., angels, humans, plants, animals) wherein each being held a fixed position; each position had an equivalent in all other hierarchies. This cosmos had ontological, gnoseological, representational and political functions: parallels with the natural world "made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them" (Foucault 2002, 19). Consequently, material fabric and social fabric had to resemble one another: sumptuary laws of the time regulated dress meticulously, differentiating by rank and gender (cf. Baldwin 1926). This legislation aimed to maintain an "immediacy of signification" in dress (Kuchta 1993, 236-7), a correspondence between one's appearance and status in the cosmos, although the lack of records and the frequent reiteration of these laws suggest that they attest "more to a social thought about dress than to any actual practice" (Kuchta 1993, 242; cf. Hyland 2011, 28). Nevertheless, misrepresentations of status and gender could be equally disturbing in a culture where such identities consisted of specific sets of cultural encodings and practices (Heise 1992, 371) rather than biological assumptions (cf. Laqueur 1990).

That fashion changes intertwined with social changes further blurred such dress-rank associations (Hazard 2000, 95). Significantly, the main target of those very pamphlets critics use to argue in favour of the cross-dressing fashion are the new rich from the rising trading classes, who subvert social order and set an unpatriotic example with their extravagance, as opposed to a mediaeval social ideal where common people modestly dressed in local sackcloth and wool. Furthermore, the moralists' critique primarily targets men, whose frivolity and effeminacy make them weak representatives of English worth and potentially bad soldiers. Female apparent mannishness is but a sign thereof in these *o tempora, o mores* lamentations. The androgynous hyperboles, then, should not be read too literally: the subordination of female action, speech and desire did not undergo significant changes in the 1570s-1620s period (Fletcher 1995; Hull 1982). It seems unlikely, then, that female cross-dressers on stage could represent proactive versions of real-life female cross-dressers claiming patriarchal power.

And yet, early modern England did sanction cross-dressing, provided it remained limited to prescribed spaces – namely, carnivalesque celebrations. People – men especially – would cross-dress during Shrovetide revels, feasts of Misrule, harvest festivals and summer games such as the May-tide ones or St Stephen's day celebrations, and the traditions of Bessy and the Boy Bishop involved

cross-dressing (Bristol 1983; Cressy 1996; Lucas 1988). Also the charivari often prescribed cross-dressing to ridicule disorderly neighbours publicly (Fletcher 1995; Minois 2000). These instances of travesty are inscribed in the carnivalesque dimension as described by Bakhtin, which allows to exit "the present order of life" by upsetting thegnoseological and political truth established by official ideology (1968, 272): carnivalesque celebrations offered a counterfactual dimension that parodied and subverted the established order. Cross-dressing was one of the forms of this subversion, which parodied conventional meaning and disrupted "the ordinary relationship between signifier and signified" (Bristol 1983, 641). However, the revolutionary charge of carnival is undone by the legitimised space where it occurs: the liberating, participatory transgression can be enjoyed only insofar as the system it parodies is recognised and respected (Eco 1984, 5-7). As a carnivalesque practice, cross-dressing was revolutionary only insofar as it was *not* the norm and remained limited to prescribed areas and times of the year. When cross-dressing was practised outside legitimate spaces, punishment ensued; it was rather mild, but its strictest form was public penance, thus a way to reinforce a clear separation between carnivalesque and ordinary spaces for the benefit of the entire community (Cressy 1996, 462).

There were two other main spaces where cross-dressing was sanctioned. There was prostitution, both male and female (Griffiths 1993), to which trials usually refer infractions of the kind above mentioned. There was also the playhouse, where cross-dressing was a consolidated device: not only female, but also male characters and boy actors would cross-dress on stage. Both realms shared many liminal features with carnivalesque celebrations. The legal and geographical marginality of London entertainment districts is well known, and even when theatres and brothels were located in central neighbourhoods, they still occupied liminal areas associated with crime, such as Whitefriars (cf. Shugg 1977; Salgãdo 1977). In these areas operated the notorious cross-dressing criminal Mary Frith, often mentioned in critical scholarship on early modern cross-dressing. That she would move from a marginal space (crime) to another (the Fortune playhouse) to perform a bawdy song for *The Roaring Girl* première suddenly seems less transgressive than previously believed (cf. Bunker 2005). Concurrently, both prostitution and the theatre occupied liminal times, since both replaced productive labour as forms of festive time, outside work and devotion. The ambiguity of the players' social status was similar to that of prostitutes, but despite these ambivalent positions, the professional competence of both groups was accessible to all social strata, which also intermingled in the entertainment districts. Unsurprisingly, both professions attracted the harsh criticism of moralist writers.

Theatre and prostitution also had in common liminal discourses that share the – eventually conservative – parodical overturn of official ideology of the carnival. As the ultimate sexualised woman, the prostitute represented “the anarchic potential the dominant discourse bears within itself” because it undermined the patriarchal dichotomy of male domination and female subordination (Fouassier-Tate 2014, 74). Likewise, male prostitution undermined the sexual dynamics of male potency and female passivity (cf. Fletcher 1995, 10-11). Cross-dressing in prostitution, then, could subvert the sexual binarism and power dynamics at the core of Renaissance society, but within the legitimate carnivalesque-like liminality of the trade: prostitution was *de facto* tolerated and regulated in early modern England (Griffiths 1993; Shugg 1977). Its anarchic potential was “far from threatening” because the condemnation of such forces was a tool to reinforce established social structures (Fouassier-Tate 2014, 74). Thus, cross-dressing in this environment would not seem as revolutionary as others have claimed (e.g., Kelly 1990).

Similarly, the English theatre has been described as “an institutionalized and professionalized form of Carnival” (Bristol 1983, 637). English playhouses were a liminal space also in terms of dress regulations: the players could wear precious garments otherwise forbidden to them as liveried servants, and disguise devices adopted on stage probably resulted in a visual mixture of different class elements (Hyland 2011; MacIntyre 1991). This did not happen in contemporary Spain, where costumes were regulated by sumptuary laws to prevent any class-blurring visuals (Heise 1992). Furthermore, English players could appropriate not only the clothes, but also the linguistic identity of others, so that theatrical language and visibility were dialogically high and popular (Bristol 1983, 649). Renaissance drama mixes kings and clowns (650): the embodiment of social order faces its parody, and the king himself is actually and only a player in the *theatrum mundi*. This heteroglossia derives from the popular and learned traditions that converged into the professional theatre of the Renaissance (e.g., Weimann 1978), so much so that the “mixed decorum of tragical mirth and solemn travesty” is one of the distinctive features of early modern English drama (Bristol 1983, 652). The playhouse also allowed carnival-like participatory moments, grounded in the collective integrity and rough equality of the participants (cf. Bakhtin 1968, 7): the groundling could influence the king’s self-representation, and both were invested by this production of meaning within a mixed social space. The players’ impersonations and the audience’s active interaction thus constituted a carnivalesque collective ritual. Theatre could comment on contemporary reality by radically subverting its fundamental principle of semantic immediacy, but this transgression was sanctioned because of its carnivalesque nature. In this legitimate transgressive space, boys in drag were

agreed to be less problematic than the public exposure of acting women (Heise 1992, 361).

All these elements suggest that the transgressiveness of the boy actor's travesty was not as disruptive as assumed thus far. Contrary to previous claims (e.g., Garber 1995; McLuskie 1983; Rackin 1987), moralist criticism of stage cross-dressing practices and of the theatre should not be read merely as the sign of a generalised cultural anxiety. Of course, the theatrical performance sanctions social subversion (e.g., female agency, mixtures of visual class-signifiers) and the material debasement of the ideal (e.g., eroticism, venality), but only as long as this process is limited to the carnivalesque-like space of the playhouse. The theatre as "the great Other" can be at once "a threat and a refuge" for society (Orgel 1996, 12) because it is a legitimate - and thus comforting - transgression that builds a counterfactual dimension, where women can be assertive and proactive, cross-dressing is allowed, class-blurring can occur. This legitimisation is inherent in the carnivalesque 'as-if' principle at the basis of theatrical representation (cf. Elam 1980).

### 3 Comedy and Metatheatre

These carnivalesque mechanisms find immediate correspondence in comedy, genre where cross-dressing plots were most common and popular in the Renaissance (Freeburg 1915; Hyland 2011). Comedy was originally part of life renewal rites and seasonal festivities, and from these it derived its hyperbolic and typified events and characters. Specifically, comedy shares with carnival the structure of conservative subversion. Whereas tragedy describes the violation of a rule and restates this rule, comedy relies on the assumption that "the broken frame must be *presupposed* but *never spelled out*" for the comic element to work (Eco 1984, 4; emphasis in the original). In other words, comedy subverts implicit norms, but it can work only as long as these norms are valid. For this reason, comedy is "an instrument of social control" and can hardly represent a form of revolutionary social criticism, which brings it particularly close to carnival (Eco 1984, 7). As does carnival, comedy creates a legitimised transgression, a *monde renversé* where parody allows a temporary form of social justice. Tragedy, on the contrary, unravels the inescapable pervasiveness of the norm (Eco 1984, 4). Also, Renaissance comedy maintained close ties with ancient comedy, whose explicit carnivalesque elements (disguise, animal-like characters, trenchant ridicule, romance plots) remain essential to the genre also in early modern works (Galbraith 2004). Further, the usually mundane subject-matter of comedy intensifies its carnivalesque parodic element, as it facilitates the audience's identification with characters and sit-

uations. While familiarity draws transgression closer to everyday experience, thus increasing the enjoyment, it also provides negative *ex-empla*: by presenting familiar behaviours or situations as ridiculous, comedy elicits the desire to distance oneself from them, and thus to return to the rule (Eco 1984, 2). Such ambivalent relief must have been quite popular in Renaissance England: comedy soon developed many specific subgenres.

Early modern comedy also features elements that frame metatheatrical references to boy actors in a broader awareness of the play as such, especially in disguise plots. These plots could heighten dramatic irony with both comic and tragic effects (Hyland 2011). Asides, soliloquies and similar devices explaining or anticipating disguises showed to the audience the gaps between assumed rule and stage action. In comedy, doing so in advance ensured the success of the following jokes (Lopez 2003, 64) and enabled theatregoers to enjoy the transgression on stage consciously. On the other hand, disguise plots can add pathos to tragic irony and further stress the characters' involuntary violation of the norm. In a context where generic boundaries were often blurred, these devices seem to invite the audience to interpret events by relying on its knowledge of each genre. This, of course, presupposes that early modern audiences were aware of the response expected from them within a certain generic framework (Lopez 2003; Weimann, Bruster 2008), which would provide the interpretive key for devices, situations and narratives, even if they originally belonged to an unrelated genre (Lopez 2003, 131). The use of these solutions indicates that audiences were attentive to nuances and that playwrights attempted to meet their expectations. For instance, audiences expected costumes to be readable to the point of transparency: costume had to convey social identity (e.g., rank, trade, age) and disguise, albeit simple or unlikely, had to be impenetrable in the play-world but transparent to the audience, duly informed in advance (Hyland 2011, 42). For this reason, surprise revelation plots were not welcomed at their first appearances in London (62-4).

Such shared awareness allowed for the kind of narrative freedom that marks Renaissance comedy in particular (Lopez 2003, 126) and stems from the knowledge of how the play will - must - end. This knowledge governs the audience's experience of the comic plot, however disjointed or episodic: the adherence to predictable generic prerequisites made a convincing ending possible even for improbable, hyperbolic plots (170). Such freedom enabled playwrights to comment on the audience's favourite devices and their improbability, even as they used these solutions to carry the plot forward. This meant that the audience too was at once inside and outside the performance: it participated in the action and made its representation possible, but was also aware of its artificiality and capable of appreci-

ating its craft. Such "dual awareness", as Bethell called it (1944, 47), produced a drama where convention and narratives move towards a "merely theatrical" state until they become, "rather than the subject of representation, sites for admiring the act of representation itself" (Lopez 2003, 128). This kind of metatheatrical play is rarely carried out in tragedy. Maintaining the dramatic illusion is essential for the structure and aims of the tragic genre to be effective, and even references to the *theatrum mundi* seem to reinforce the solemn validity of the tragic experience as mirror to life and vice versa. Conversely, comic metatheatrical stresses the improbability of dramatic solutions to highlight the game of art and craft in which both playwright and audience participate. Further, the same conventions that granted comedy its freedom could be parodied in a metatheatrical game of cross-references. Thus, carnivalesque subversion could include comic forms as well.

Even when this happened, however, the parodied trope and the conventional order were eventually restored. This mechanism could direct the audience's attention to theatre itself as a legitimised space of transgression outside ordinary life experience. Also, the pervasiveness of metatheatrical breaks in comedy (e.g., direct addresses to the audience, references to the actors' performance or the playhouse space) suggests that such a disruptive approach to the dramatic illusion could be a convention in itself. This is coherent with the idea of carnivalesque subversion inherent in the genre, and it works as a form of negation of the performance that eventually reaffirms its transgressive value. This implies that the unsettling potential of the boy actor's androgyny and the use of this potential are but conventional aspects of early modern comedy, rather than cultural subversions.

#### 4 The Semiotization of the Boy Actor

Carnavalesque mechanisms influence the metatheatrical significance of references to the boy actors. Renaissance comedies include more or less explicit commentary on social performativity, on how to publicly convey one's suitability to one's social role. To this aim, they mostly rely on negative examples, providing repertoires of transgressions related to material concerns (mainly sex and money/power). Double entendre, metatheatrical or otherwise, is particularly pervasive. A metatheatrical spotlight on the performance of gender, then, would seem the cornerstone of a broader critique: social conventions, like theatrical conventions, are contingent and artificial, merely a performance. Such highlights on performativity recall Butler's theory of gender, often associated with boy actors in critical studies.

Butler argues that bodily acts indicating a single gendered identity are performative because such identity is a fabrication, produced

and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means; this suggests that gendered identity itself is an illusion, built through the repetition of the acts that constitute its reality (Butler 1999, 173-8). References to the boy actor's sex, then, are subversive because they expose the contingency of such acts: the boy actor's performance questions the conventional associations between gestures, discursive practices and gender (Hamamra 2019). Also, the layering of cross-dressed performances in the boy actor underlines the performativity of gender identity and performativity itself, by referring to the ambivalent reality where the performance occurs. Carnival shows and subverts the contingency of established social norms, their aleatory nature and premises; in the same way, this form of theatrical subversion overturns assumptions on gender and gendered qualities before the community that sustains them (i.e. the Renaissance audience). Nevertheless, the context in which such overturn occurs affects its subversive potential: as carnival is sanctioned by the same order it questions, so does the boy player's performance subvert social constructs only within a conservative generic framework (comedy) and in a sanctioned carnivalesque space. That this practice was a convention on the early modern English stage further stresses this aspect.

This mechanism can be illustrated by relying on one of the many non-Shakespearean examples<sup>3</sup> of these dynamics: Beaumont and Fletcher's *Love's Cure* (1605).<sup>4</sup> Originally intended for a children's company,<sup>5</sup> the play tells the story of siblings Clara and Lucio, whose father has been exiled from Spain. Their parents decide to protect them from the enemies of their family by raising Clara as Lucio and vice versa. However, when their father is pardoned by the King, the family reunites in Seville, and the siblings must return to their prescribed gender roles. Although they initially refuse to change, falling in love will help them assume their expected roles: Clara will marry Vitelli, her father's enemy; Lucio, Vitelli's sister. In the play-world of this pièce, cross-dressing is perceived as transgressive: the siblings must abandon their monstrous ambiguity, as often stressed by other characters, and accept their legitimate roles in society. At the same time, cross-dressing becomes the primary instrument of metatheatrical transgression. Metatheatrical references to this stage practice disrupt the suspension of disbelief and show the play for what it is.

<sup>3</sup> Some studies apply carnivalesque notions to Shakespearean plays (cf. Knowles 1998), but they focus on specific aspects (e.g., language, life-renewal dynamics) of specific plays, at the expense of broader considerations on boy actors or early modern metatheatre and genre conventions.

<sup>4</sup> The play was extensively revised and reworked by Philip Massinger around 1625 (Williams 1976; cf. also Pérez Díez 2022).

<sup>5</sup> The original text was probably performed by the Children of St Paul's (Williams 1976, 11).

The two levels intertwine early in the play, when Lucio is introduced dressed and behaving like a woman (act 1, scene 2). His identity is revealed only after many references to the codpiece he should be wearing instead of a petticoat, so that the audience's double awareness is aroused first in connection with appearances (the petticoat/codpiece issue seems initially referred to the actor); it is also kept alert throughout the play through constant references to gendered clothing. Specifically, the siblings' experience with their uncomfortable new clothes (act 2, scene 2) ties the characters' difficulties to social gender performance and to the players' acting. The siblings' refusal to change is problematic because it resists the assumption that gender roles in society are natural. In the play, this is part of a broader commentary on social performativity, since the siblings' rejection of their gender roles coincides with that of their appropriate roles in society. Concerns with social performativity (how to be honourable lords and ladies) encompass all behaviours in the play, from public conduct to table manners. All characters voice their preoccupations with their own performances of gender and social roles, to the point they often need a play-world audience to approve of their performance and take great pains in justifying potential flaws. The play, then, provides a repertoire of behavioural transgressions, more or less intense, and reflects on how to perform correctly, both on stage and in life. It invites the audience to evaluate the characters' as well as its own performance, and this comic process contributes to the reinforcement of social norms also outside the play.

Indeed, as the title suggests, there is a 'cure'. The play frames transgressions by restoring order on two levels, within and without the play-world. At play-level, love restores order in the community: the siblings accept their new roles through love and consolidate them through marriage, which also resolves conflict. At the same time, metatheatre restores order in the real world. By pointing out its own theatricality, the play displays its own transgressive nature. While this underlines the playwright and players' valuable craft and ability, it also stresses the illusory nature of theatricality: the play's construction of an 'as-if' dimension is shown to be only a temporary transgression from ordinary time and space. This reinforces the idea that the play's licences are sanctioned because they are artificial and that the behaviours therein displayed are not part of ordinary life experience. Metatheatrical references to boy actors are especially effective because the boy actor's female performance was perhaps the most densely semiotized element in early modern theatre. His body, voice, gestures, clothing all came to signify not only age or foreignness or status, but also another gender - and this effect would have been reverberated in a children's company (cf. Foakes 2003). Pointing out the boy actor's identity, then, would be the most direct way of putting on show the very process of semiotization of the perfor-

mance: the actor is singled out as the "opaque vehicle" for the signified he stands for (Elam 1980, 7). In such comedies, where everything centres around performativity, the boy actor playing a female character summarises the meaning-making struggle of the whole performance. He is the primary blank canvas of theatrical illusion, whose own sex is redefined through the performance (Kimbrough 1982). Concurrently, these illusion breaks highlight the relationship between the stage and the social reality of the audience, where meanings are made. If comedy moves from the "unnatural and artificial" to the "natural" (Frye 1964, 7), these comedies realise this movement in two ways. They move towards the natural - towards renovated social order - within the play-world, but they also move from the artificiality of transgressive performance to ordered real life. The artifice is pointed out as such, but this further reinforces the regulative frame of comedy. In other words, the theatrical performance disrupts the ordinary relationship between appearance and reality, but plays such as *Love's Cure* expose this process primarily through the boy actor; by doing so, they reinforce the value of ordinary reality as a regulative background.

## 5 Conclusions

Although the boy actor's cross-dressing can still provide valid insight also in relation to our contemporaneity, the transgressive features identifiable in this figure could be, rather than a sign of cultural crisis, a form of cultural regulation in early modern England. Differentiating between the cross-dressing spaces in Renaissance England allows to identify carnival as an effective tool in this analysis of theatre. Also, the association between carnival and comedy, where most references to boy-actors occur, suggests that genre could further frame the transgressions represented on stage. Early modern comedy transgresses not only social norms, but theatricality itself: it shows its own artificiality and comments on it in the same way it shows the contingency of social norms and provides temporary escape from them. In this context, metatheatrical references to boy actors come to symbolise this very process. Stage cross-dressing disrupts the conventional associations between signifier and signified within the performance, and metatheatrical references to boy actors disrupt the audience's conventional acceptance of this transgression. These references highlight the semiotization process of theatre and transgress the conventional rules of performance, which underlines the carnivalesque quality of this space: the collective meaning-making ritual is reabsorbed into ordinary space and time, just as carnival is limited to sanctioned spaces and times of the year. The implications of this process seem to - partially - undermine interpretations relying on female assertive-

ness or homoerotic safety in the theatrical space. Whereas such instances are given representation in these plays, the breaking of the illusion also stresses their transgressive connotation. At the same time, the counterfactual connotation of the boy player's performance puts interpretations stressing female transgressive behaviour and homoerotic transgression into a different perspective. Similarly, the stress on social and gender/ed performativity, on the conventional nature of speech, gestures, behaviour is only as revolutionary as carnival is. Such elements can be represented and undermined on stage because they are *not* the rule, in the same way that the fool can become king only for as long as misrule is allowed. This kind of complex metatheatrical play undoubtedly deserves more consideration, especially in relation to the non-Shakespearean canon. The frequency of certain patterns among contemporary authors – rather than in Shakespeare alone – could show generalised tendencies in Renaissance drama that would give new insight into our understanding of the early modern theatrical experience.

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