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GENDER AND IRONY IN THE EARLY MODERN ENGLISH ROMANCE

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Abstract: *The paper discusses the ironic manner in which gender relations are often tackled in the early modern English romance, from Shakespeare's comedies to Sidney's pastorals or Lady Mary Wroth's poetry. Strong female characters, effeminate males and the subversive, often ambiguous, manner in which the theme of love is approached in 16th- and 17th – century English literature are some of the aspects to be discussed.*

Keywords: *agency gender, genre, irony, romance.*

1. Introduction

Early romance has much more in common with the popular genre in the 20th century than it may seem. Firstly, it was disregarded, for several centuries, as a minor genre. Plato's influence, dominating early Christian thought, triggered a thorough exclusion of this literary mode from the mainstream (Green 2003:16). Aristotle's views, more in favour of fiction, had a belated reception in Western Europe (mainly from the 13th century onwards). Platonism, with its distinction between poetry and philosophy, adapted by the Church as a distinction between vernacular culture and theology, put the narratives of the secular world in the shade. Secondly, the very name of the genre of romance, deriving from the old French *romanz*, meaning "a vernacular language distinct from Latin", suggested a clear

separation between academic and theological discourse, as well as from the rhetoric of official institutions (Cooper 2004:25). Unlike Latin, available only to a limited scholarly – almost exclusively male – elite, the vernacular idioms were accessible to both male and female, lay and clerical, upper and lower classes, and, because they circulated in oral form, to both the literate and the illiterate. These were the languages of communal entertainment, secular practices, and families. When vernacular is used in story telling, the dissemination of the plot and its teachings is immediate and continuous. Vernacular narratives were the stories everybody grew up with, “which they did not need to learn, because they were so deep a part of their culture.” (Cooper 2004:25) Being written in vernacular meant that stories, thus separated from academic discourse, did not tax the intellect, even if their accessibility did not make them appealing only to a public with a lower level of intelligence. Moreover, their appeal was not limited to the primitive attraction of a sensational story; besides the subject matter, every romance had to carry an inner meaning and/or to invite an engaged reception, in the form of debates or other types of active feedback. The vogue of the so-called *demandes d’amour*, love questions, dominated the centuries in which the habit of writing and reading romances was at a premium among the courtly elites of Western Europe (Cooper 2004:29). Such debates were ignited by an adventure story, or a tale of *amour courtois*, providing lay, non-intellectual communities and private individuals with a secular forum that imitated the working mechanisms of public institutions, including law courts, the Church, the king’s councils, or universities.

In the Middle Ages, romance was crucial in the development of a culture that headed towards secularization, as well as in securing a continuity into the early modernity of literature and philosophy. Early

romance writers always made a point of giving social, national, ideological, or at least didactic relevance. Romance records the secular ideals of an age and a community, passes on the group's need for self-representation, and encrypts civil role models. It accomplishes its mission successfully because it is accessible, due to its narrative form, and stable, due to the employment of invariables. A medieval romance is always anchored in a recognizable society, even if it is set in exotic locations and makes extensive use of supernatural elements. It is predictable in that it focuses on general themes, such as the battle between good and evil, heroic and gallant protagonists, mysteries, love, the quest for an ideal, ethic values, etc. More or less dramatic departures from these guidelines cannot estrange a story completely from the genre of romance: the happy ending, very frequent, can sometimes be absent, the story may take the form of allegory or ballad and still remain a romance, while even the narrative modality can be given up, in favour of poetry or drama, without impeding on the original genre. As Helen Cooper (2004:26) argues, this happens because the principle of selective resemblance is acknowledged in the Middle Ages:

A family changes over time as its individual members change, but equally, those individuals can be recognized through their 'family resemblance': [...] even though no one of those [features] is essential for the resemblance to register, and even though individual features may contradict the model.

These characteristics make the medieval romance survive into the 16th and the 17th centuries. And because the English romance of the Middle Ages also included the national dimension, being deeply embedded in the native cultural traditions, the genre is much better preserved here than in other European countries because of the specific history of Englishness

during the early modernity, under the Tudors and the Stuarts (Cooper 2004:22). In an age of strong nationalism, of political and religious separation from the Continent, of economic competition with the important European powers of the day, “the writing of England” is achievable by means of continuing and adapting the native romance (and the romance naturalized from the continental lore), such as the Arthurian cycle or the *Tristan* narratives. Invested with vitality, authenticity, and national pride, old legends and narrative traditions come to be regarded as precious heritage, to be used as a model for future development and change. Consequently, even if it found its best expression in the narrative form, early modern English romance is adopted by the fashionable literary genres – poetry and drama – and permeates political thought when a female monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, is repeatedly represented as a typical romance heroine (Yates 1985).

In Shakespeare’s age, “romance” was the name given not only to prose fiction, but a much greater variety of texts (Lamb and Wayne 2009:2). Prose romance consisted of the popular retellings of local medieval heroic tales (such as *Guy of Warwick*), translations of newer Italian novellas (Bandello’s collection) or Spanish *pasos honrosos* of the Reconquista, adaptations of classical Greek tales, sophisticated or mannerist texts of the University Wits, such as John Lyly’s *Euphues* (1580), pastorals of Hellenistic inspiration, like Philip Sidney’s *Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (1590), etc. In poetry, the features of romance are most famously illustrated in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596), an allegory of the English State in the form of narratives of knights, ladies in distress, and supernatural creatures. Dramatic romance, not entirely distinct from prose and verse, manifests itself in nostalgic recoveries of native myths, as it

happens in Shakespeare's early comedies (Bevington 2007), such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1590-1596) or *As You Like It* (1599), and in redemptive plots sprinkled with magic and pagan lore, like Shakespeare's late romances.

2. Gender and Agency in Early Modern English Romance

Shakespeare's romantic comedies display a constant pattern in presenting the effeminacy of male heroes. In *Twelfth Night*, men and women challenge one another for the use (and misuse) of gender roles. Viola (as Sebastian) is rescued in her duel by Antonio, who treats Sebastian as a younger, attractive male in need of protection, whom he rescued from the waves and accompanied through the dangerous streets of Illyria after three months spent together "both day and night" (V, i). Antonio is ironically presented as more male than heterosexual males in the play: Sir Andrew, void of erotic desire, is a vessel in which the others' (Toby's) desires are poured, while Orsino's languid action and hyper-courtly language, narcissistic and homophobic (he is anxious to see Viola' back in maiden weeds before he is ready to acknowledge his love for her) is the epitome of feminization. Orsino, the effeminate lover as Bruce Smith (2000:124) sees him, when switching his affections from Olivia to Viola, has also changed his erotic discourse. While at the beginning, love is something concrete ("food", "surfeiting", "the appetite may sicken", "odour", "hunt"), in the end, it enters the prototypical erotic discourse of medieval romances.

Malvolio's subplot capitalizes both on Viola's carnivalesque game and on the effeminate males in the play. Thinking that Olivia wants him, Malvolio puts on yellow stockings and crosses his garters. His cross-gartering (Callaghan 2000) comes as a collateral comment on Viola's

transvestism. Whereas Viola's carnival implies gender inversion, Malvolio's carnival implies social inversion. Wanting to become Olivia's husband, he is actually after a superior social position ("There is example for it; the lady of the Strachy married the yeoman of the wardrobe", II, v), thus flouting the rules of class and hierarchy. He is punished for this by Maria, but his anger in the end, directed at everybody ("I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you", V, i), may be interpreted as a sign that class travesty is even more threatening than gender transvestism. Malvolio's body is no less grotesque, therefore. Callaghan (2000) notes that the pun occurring in the letter Malvolio believes to have been written by Olivia is not only a mockery directed at Olivia as a woman but also at Malvolio as an effeminate man. The ill-wishing Puritan, as his name suggests and as criticism has identified him comments on the letter: "By my life, this is my lady's hand: these be her very C's, her U's, and her T's; and thus makes she her great P's. It is, in contempt of question, her hand." (II, v)

If "her great P's" is a derogatory comment on the most common type of feminine symbolism, which associates femininity with humidity, moist humours, water in general, "her very C's, her U's, and her T's" are, at the same time, a pun for CU/n/T and one for C/o/U/n/T. In the vicinity of a vocabulary for female genitalia, Malvolio's wish to become a count can be regarded as a degeneration into femininity. Like Sebastian who, being taken for Cesario, unwillingly degenerates into womanhood, Malvolio does so more willingly. They both start in a direction opposite to Viola's. What she is trying to do (to become or, at least, pass for a man) is, in theory, considered possible in the Renaissance on the grounds that, nature striving for perfection, the imperfect human is striving to become as perfect as possible. Malvolio's effemination detected in his desire to marry Olivia can

also be accounted for by the countess's status and behaviour. From the point of view of class, she is superior to anybody else in the play, except Orsino. She has privileges and makes decisions like no one else in the play. With her independence in decision making, with her erotic initiative both towards Viola and towards Sebastian, Olivia acquires virile qualities that make Malvolio's dream of marriage for an aristocratic name and financial security look more like those of a female upstart, a sort of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela avant la lettre*.

Effeminacy in *As You Like It* is also embodied by Oliver, asleep, threatened by a snake wreathed around his neck and by a lioness "with udders all drawn dry" (IV, iii). Orlando banishes the snake and battles with the lioness while his emasculated brother, unconscious as his position as maiden in distress, sleeps on. Their sibling rivalry is displaced onto and mediated by gender conflict (Traub 1992:129). Oliver is both the feminized object of male aggression (the snake threatening to penetrate the vulnerable opening of his mouth is an apparent phallic threat) and the effeminized object of female desire, embodied by the aging lioness.

The heroine in this comedy is even more masculine than her counterparts in *Twelfth Night*. Rosalind decides to run away from the constraints of an aristocratic household where she has to obey the rules of a tyrannical uncle ("Now we go in content,/ To liberty, and not to banishment." I, iii). When choosing a Bohemian lifestyle, rising against the social rules of her class, Rosalind becomes a Robin Hood, corresponding to the same pattern of defiance as the legendary outlaw. (Traditional representations of Rosalind, both on the stage and in paintings, actually show her wearing essentially the same costume as in the visual tradition of Robin Hood). In terms of the well-known dichotomy between classic and

romantic, Rosalind can be argued to adopt the latter style in her clothes and disguise. Aware of one's smallness in comparison with the greatness of nature, the romantic individual adopts a vestimentary style that displays natural forms impossible to control by the human being: the wave, the flame, the growing branch (Nanu 2001:28).

In comparison with Viola, who remains stuck in between genders, Rosalind adopts an entirely masculine new identity:

Alas, what danger will it be to us,
Maids as we are, to travel forth so far!
Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold.
[...] Were it not better,
Because that I am more than common tall,
That I did suit me all points like a man?
A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
A boar-spear in my hand; and – in my heart
Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will –
We'll have a swashing and a martial outside; (I, iii)

Being favoured by anatomy (she is taller than a woman usually was at that time), she is encouraged to take over insignia of masculinity (trousers and weapons) and to adopt a male occupation (a shepherd but also a protector of a maiden, Celia, who is going to preserve a feminine attire). Weaker and more submissive, Celia chooses to remain a woman; however, she has some power to defy rules as she goes for a social disguise, allowing herself more freedom in clothing, behaviour and mobility as a shepherdess. It is not far fetched to think of the two princesses' disguise in terms of giving up the corset. The heavy dresses, complicated hairstyles and the

corset imposed by the fashion of upper classes are as many physical constraints, limiting their bearers' movements, ultimately their freedom.

A Midsummer Night's Dream continues the story of gender relations, complicating it even further, in a mythological key. As it begins with Duke Theseus' declaration of love for Hippolyta made in martial terms ("Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,/ And won thy love doing thee injuries" (I, i), it reminds its readers of the Amazon narratives from the Greek Antiquity through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance epic poems.

The men involved in love affairs with the Amazons are presented, in most such literary productions, as slightly effeminate heroes, boys who have been raised far away from their fathers only by their mothers or among girls, like Theseus or Achilles. Even in Shakespeare's play about the Trojan War, *Troilus and Cressida*, Achilles is presented as a 'soft' character, with whims and weak points. In Ulysses' description, the man to whom others attribute martial values lets himself prey to ignoble inclinations such as vanity and laziness. Symbolically masculine body parts (forehead, sinew) are opposed by actions traditionally associated with women (talking, saying jokes, listening to other people's words, praises, gossips) and with an indoor décor (the tent). At the same time, his close relationship with Patroclus is indirectly labelled as gay: "With him, Patroclus, Upon a lazy bed, the livelong day/ Breaks scurril jests" (I, iii).

Shakespeare's mythological characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* follow the same pattern. For the first play, the Bard had probably found a source of inspiration in the story of the Amazon taken prisoner by king Theseus from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. Here, Theseus is presented as the typical conqueror, who, together with

Hercules, makes an expedition to the Euxine Sea to defeat the Amazons. The female warriors are presented as easily conquerable because of a feminine weakness, that of being ‘naturally’ attracted to Theseus, who was a handsome man. *Two Noble Kinsmen* shows an affiliation with Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*, acknowledged from the play’s *Prologue*, which insists on privileging the idealistic modes of thought and behaviour claiming a Chaucerian paternity: by endlessly aspiring and failing to measure up to the inherited images of romance perfection, the Jacobean imitations deconstruct the very business of image-making (Hillman 1992:140). They are Renaissance constructs trapped by their own appropriation of a fantasized medieval past. Shakespeare enters into a dialogue with Chaucer by presuming a satirical reading of the precursor’s romance. Shakespeare’s later Theseus, in contrast with Chaucer’s figure of moral authority, is indecided, struggling comically to keep on top of unfolding circumstances. Torn between duty and sexual temptation (in Chaucer, he is already married, while in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* he is impatient to consummate his marriage), he is hypocritical in rejecting the validity of Hermia’s desire when threatening to sentence her to death or send her to the nunnery. His authority is, consequently, undermined when he condemns Palamon and Arcite, but he cannot stick to his decision under the women’s pressure (Emilia calls his decisions rashly made and he starts wavering). The subversion of the Duke’s status as a model of authority and stability is clear, with the male leader contaminated by effeminized qualities.

Shakespeare summarizes all legends about amorous duels and love affairs between heroes and Amazons, as well as historical data about the female warriors’ violent defeat in Theseus’s promise, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, to make amends, turning sexual and military aggression and

cruelty into “pomp, [...] triumph, and [...] revelling”. Hippolyta’s reaction is ambiguous. When Theseus complains that the four days left before their wedding seem too long, she repeats his lament in almost the same words, but what is not clear is whether she wants this time to go faster or slower. Furthermore, at the end of the play, when the court is attending the interlude about Pyramus and Thisbe, she interrupts the players who are arguing with Theseus about the way in which Moonshine should present itself (as a lantern with horns or as the man in the moon): “I am a-weary of this moon; would he would change” (V, i). The Amazon cannot stand this trivial discussion about the moon transformed into a plaything or an ordinary, every-day domestic instrument. Later during the performance, when each spectator praises one aspect of the acting (“DEMETRIUS: Well roar’d lion. THESEUS: Well run, Thisbe. [...] Well moused, lion”, V,i), Hyppolita chooses to emphasize the part of Moonshine in the tragedy: “Well shone, moon. – Truly, the moon shines with a good grace” (V, i).

3. Desire, Politics, and Irony

16th and 17th century romance is reminiscent of medieval chivalric romance, with knights, heroic and erotic quests, as it imitates older models in its formal technique. Although it features themes from the past, the genre is divested of real content, since the aristocratic ideology was already obsolete during the early modernity. It continues the old tradition of self-deprecation, from the ancient tradition of distrusting fiction, from the stigma against print in elite literary culture, as low material for uneducated masses, especially women, whose tastes were believed to slide towards the fantastic realm. At the same time, authors use the genre to address early modern anxieties about the ethics of political agency (Zurcher 2007:13). To read

romance in that period, therefore, is to understand early modern political thought, to see the relation between genre and political, ethical philosophy, with the typical tension between divine providence and human agency. This is favoured by the emergence, from Italian and French courts, of a political ideology of self-interest (Renaissance egoism, skepticism and reason of state theory), which permeated discourses from history, philosophical essays and romance). Romance thus contains an element of ironic critique: irony justifies romance's suitability for embracing political ideas. While epic has the hero harmonize his will with his nation's providential destiny, romance has the hero surrender his desire to the accidental.

Philip Sidney's *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (*The Old Arcadia*, 1570s, *The New Arcadia*, unfinished, towards the 1580s) reworks continental romance traditions for a new English context. It contains coded political rhetoric and outlines the usefulness of romance's ironic treatment of agency for negotiating the gap between virtue and self-interest. At the same time, it revisits the role of Providence, in a Protestant context (providence and love that cemented social alliances at the end of romances were only last-minute rationalizations for desire – a synonym of self-interest). Love and Providence are pictured as ideological fictions. The early modern romance in the spirit of Sidney presents self-interest as a primary passion: not single-minded brutishness, but not reason, either. It is, rather, *cupiditas*, acquisitive desire, seen as *eros* (Zurcher 2007:20). It also sets the terms in which romance presents love, virtue, and social life. In the romance of this type, political ambition is similar with the impulse to lay sexual claim (elope, abduct, seduce, consummate love, rape). Seizing the prize – a beautiful woman – has both sexual and political overtones. The seducer/rapist is like a tyrant, appropriating rather than negotiating as

required by the social system with mutual obligations and responsibilities. The result of acquisitive desire is the devaluing of the object (the raped maiden loses her price as a potential wife). At the same time, acquisitive desire, like miserliness, is self-destructive, just like the tyrant's power over people, whose inability to govern himself and others always surfaces eventually. Self-interest and acquisitive desire are degrading in the men pursuing them: the effeminate males mentioned in the previous section are an ideal illustration. In Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (2011), the noble princes follow a pattern which brings them close to Shakespearean heroes like Orsino or Duke Theseus. Pyrocles and Musidorus, falling in love, take on a disguise in order to gain access to the beautiful daughters of Arcadia. The disguise forces them to transform themselves into lesser beings – Pyrocles takes the disguise of a woman, while Musidorus pretends he is a shepherd. Their desires and transgressions make them vulnerable: Pyrocles, as a woman, becomes the object of another man's desire, when Basilius falls in love with him and tries to pursue him, while Musidorus, like Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*, accepts marriage to the woman of high rank, here the heiress to the throne of Arcadia, thus marrying into the royal family and taking over, woman-like, all the courtesy titles and attributes of his new position.

William Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* (1594) also displays a political dimension of acquisitive desire on the model of Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. The ravished body of Lucrece is aristocratic property, Tarquin's lust for it being ignited by the husband's boasting about the assets of his distinguished possession. Tarquin's desire is targeted less at the beautiful body of a woman, but at the connotations of power embodied by Lucrece's social position in Rome. After the rape, Lucrece's body is paraded in the Roman forum, as a symbol of Tarquin's power and tyranny. The gesture

ignites the crowd's dissatisfaction with Tarquin's political regime, the ultimate result being the installation of the Roman Republic. Besides this direct manifestation of his failure, the self-destructive character of acquisitive desire is manifest in Tarquin's realization that the victim of the assault is his own soul, inflicted with a wound that won't heal. Ironically, in a play that evokes the brutality of the male assault on the female body, the ultimate weak link in the chain is the male aggressor himself.

Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621) tackles even more complex gender issues with a touch of irony. Agency in the fictional world is extended to authorship. In fact, Lady Mary Wroth was considered radical, in her lifetime, merely for writing a work intended for public consumption, thus violating the ideals of female virtue (silence, obedience, as evidence of her chastity). In doing this, she acted against the accepted ideals of patriarchy, by writing a text intended for a public audience. In Mary Wroth's poem (Roberts 1995), Pamphilia, the author's alter ego, is herself a creator struggling for the protection of her creation and, indirectly, for the survival of her work. She carries her secret compositions in a cabinet and is finally rewarded for her creation by becoming queen, despite – the poem implies – the fact that her preoccupations make this woman unworthy of society's appreciation: as a female poet, she embodies one of the aberrations of the age. The poem further discusses, in an ironic, subversive key, the virtue of erotic constancy (although virtue is a male attribute, constancy is expected of women). *Cupiditas* (gendered masculine) is set here in opposition to self-sufficiency. The constant Pamphilia is encouraged to govern her passions like a self-sufficient queen. Because the poem implies that the preservation of Pamphilia's beauty and powers of judgment are more important than a lover, *Urania* operates a revision of feminine constancy – a fake passivity.

(In women, self-interest is regarded as morally inadmissible because it destroys the humility and self-abnegation on which women's characters are supposed to be founded.)

Urania echoes prevailing ideas about the weakness of women by diagnosing inconstancy as a fundamental feminine drawback. The heroine must defend herself against the implicit charge of inconstancy: by magic (Providence) she gets over her inappropriate love and falls again for a more suitable man, who is her future husband. She confesses she has received her change by means of Providence (here suggesting a passive attitude of acceptance), but also mentions resolution and choice. Thus, human will and agency are at odds with the power of providence. Inconstancy is not gendered feminine, though, like in many other early modern authors. It is extended to men (Amphilanthus, with his superficial treatment of women, is the best example). Lady Mary Wroth is, thus, progressive in arguing inconstancy is a human, genderless, rather than feminine failing. In political ideology, inconstancy is represented not as an absence of self, but as too much self; in love, inconstancy is metaphorized as political – it is a primary political sin: “Uncertain tyrant love”, sighs *Urania* (Roberts 1995). The response to inconstancy (in female and male characters like *Urania* and *Amphilanthus*) is resistance (embodied by *Pamphilia*). To match her lover's inconstancy with her own would be to accept her love/desire as self-interest, therefore *Pamphilia* chooses loyalty. The implication intended by Lady Mary Wroth is that vulnerable categories (women, mostly, in this poem, but other categories, like the poor, the children, etc. could also be envisaged) had every right to their self-interest as a minimal compensation for their oppression. If the allegorical realm of romance deprives the underprivileged group's self-interest of legitimacy, it is unethical (Cavanagh 2001).

In romance, the irony extends to the manner in which the unruliness of women is punished. In Shakespeare's romantic comedies, the women who transgress the norms of obedience, constancy and moderation are subjected to derision. Olivia, who rejects the man with the highest rank, falls in love with a cross-dresser, while Titania, who tires of her husband's royal attentions, falls in love with an ass. Same-gender love between women is also comic and results from the same logic. In *Twelfth Night* (Traub 1992:92), the play displaces the anti-theatricalists' concern with the potential of male sodomy onto women (to note the homoerotic exchanges entailed by the phenomenon of the boy actor). The object of desire in Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines is the potentially rapeable boy, who, in his submissiveness, passivity and beauty echoes feminine attractions. The boy actor's role is so evidently a role, a representation of woman conceived, interpreted and acted by males (Jardine in Traub 1992:93). The boy actor works as the basis upon which homoeroticism can be safely explored, working for both actors and audiences as an expression of non-hegemonic desire within the confines of conventional, comedic restraints (Traub 1992:118).

The homoerotic significations of *As You Like It* are first intimated by Rosalind's adoption of the name Ganymede, with mythological connotations of sodomy. By means of her male improvisation, Rosalind leads the play into a mode of desire neither heterosexual, nor homoerotic, but both homosexual and homoerotic (Traub 1992:124). As much as she displays her desire for Orlando, she also enjoys her position as male object of Phoebe's desire and of Orlando's. She thus instigates a deconstruction of the binary system by which desire is organized, regulated and disciplined. She encourages Phoebe's desire and rejoices in Silvius' jealousy (she puts

Silvius through the torment of hearing Phoebe's love letter in order to magnify her own victorious position as a male rival). Her sense of power over her male counterpart is so complete that she commands Silvius' and Phoebe's love: "If she love me, I charge her to love thee." (IV, iii)

Orlando also displays a willingness to engage in love-play with a young shepherd, his ability to hold in suspension a dual sexuality that feels no compulsion to make arbitrary distinctions between kinds of objects. Rosalind takes the lead in their courtship with a degree of homoerotic irony: through the magic of if (reduplicated in *Twelfth Night*: "If I did love you in my master's flame [...] / In your denial I would find no sense", I, v); "I will marry you, if ever I marry a woman [...] / I will satisfy you, if ever I satisfied man" (V, ii). The boy actor can offer and elicit erotic attraction to and from each gender in the audience. Similarly, Viola uses the language of conditionals toward male and female objects. Viola's erotic predicament threatens her with destruction when she is challenged to pull out the sword and she laments "the little thing [that] would make me tell them how much I lack of a man" (III, iv).

4. Conclusions

Romance provided a useful space for negotiation with the culturally pressing problem of self-interest, desire, Renaissance egoism. Resistant to the ethical hypothesis challenging the culture's dominant acceptance of the political ideology of the day and of assigned gender roles, romance opened a venue for moral exploration that history and philosophy could not.

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