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# “All this is but forgery” Gender and Performative Concerns in Fletcher and Massinger’s *Love’s Cure* (1615)

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## Abstract

The instability of the medical definition of human sex and gender in early modern times was such that “male” and “female” became a matter of performance rather than pure biology. This paper aims to show that the Jacobean play *Love’s Cure* (1615) exposes how not only gender, but also society and its codified behaviours (e.g., honour) are artificial, conventional constructions. The analysis of the text will rely on metatheatrical references and dynamics in the play, but also on early modern medical theories and cultural phenomena such as clothing and the carnivalesque-like exceptionality of theatre.

**Keywords:** Cross-Dressing, John Fletcher, Metatheatre, Performativity, Renaissance Drama

The Jacobean play *Love’s Cure* (1615)<sup>1</sup> has been read to be “explor[ing] the difficulties that two essentially transgender characters encounter when forced to conform to the gender-normative expectations of a fiercely patriarchal society” (Pérez Díez 2022, 1). Yet, in the economy of the play, gender is shown to be such a constructed social notion that it can be taught, and this intertwines with the dramatic performance *strictu sensu*: in the theatres of early modern England (until the theatre closure of 1642) both young and older female roles were performed by boy actors. In this paper, I aim to show that this connection is due to the instability of the medical definition of human sex and gender in early modern times, so that “male” and “female” were a matter of performance rather than pure biology, and that *Love’s Cure* takes the matter further: not only gender, but also early modern society and its codified behaviours (honour above all) were artificial, conventional constructions. Similar issues have been identified also in other cross-dressing plots of the

<sup>1</sup> See also §2, n. 5.

time, but *Love's Cure* is peculiar in addressing them directly. As we will see, physical sex-change was deemed possible in early modern medical theory and was a matter of concern also in the anti-theatrical debate of the time, especially with respect to boy players.

To analyse the text, I will rely on the pervasiveness of metatheatrical references and dynamics in the play, but also on early modern medical theories and cultural phenomena such as clothing and the carnivalesque-like exceptionality of theatre. I argue that the play shows the artificiality of the theatrical spectacle starting from the boy actors' performance, but that the reflection on the performativity of (female) theatre roles is soon expanded outside the performance to include social performativity as well. To a modern-day audience, the topicality of transgender issues may dim the fact that the play is far more disruptive in laying bare the constructedness and contingency of the very society that imposes gendered behaviour, while also showing how this construction is in constant danger of collapsing.

### 1. Reading *Love's Cure* in 2023

The Jacobean play *Love's Cure* has been essentially ignored for centuries. It was published in the Beaumont and Fletcher's *First* and *Second Folio* in 1647 and 1679 respectively, but it was not revived during the Restoration, unlike many other plays in the so-called "Beaumont and Fletcher canon",<sup>2</sup> extremely popular at the time. *Love's Cure* was given "an afterpiece" by the comic actor and singer Richard Suett in 1793 (*The Female Duellist: An Afterpiece*), and the alleged performance of this work seems to have been the last professional performance of the play (see Pérez Díez 2022, 47-50). The text of *Love's Cure* was of course included in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century editions of the plays of the canon,<sup>3</sup> and was considered by critics mainly as an element thereof in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well. It has received new individual attention mostly in the last few decades, although somewhat sporadically, and Pérez Díez's new edition for the *Revels Plays series* represents the peak of this new interest. The vast majority of recent critical literature considers the play from a presentist perspective, reading the siblings as possibly transgender, non-binary, or "genderqueer" (Chess 2016, 171), or at least revisitations of the concepts of femininity or masculinity forced into heteronormativity in a patriarchal society (e.g. Berek 2004; Matthews 2010; Griffiths 2019). This reprises the few mentions of *Love's Cure* during the feminist-historicist turn of the 1980s and '90s, which focused on the (homo)eroticism and possible feminist readings of the text, although the play never features prominently in these discussions. Recently, *Love's Cure* also features in more general studies on Fletcherian drama, mostly focusing on gender and sexuality in his production (e.g. Varnado 2016; Caputi 2017; Johnson 2017; Graham 2018; Griffiths 2019; Serrano González 2022).

Yet, the effect is somewhat flat. Although gender, transgender and queer studies are undoubtedly giving new impulse to research on the production of Fletcher and his collaborators, the uniformity of approach in these studies could seem discouraging. It may give the impression that there isn't much else to consider in the works of some of the finest dramatists of their time. Reconsidering the early modern context and its perspectives may contribute to new, compelling readings of *Love's Cure*, a play that is still full of potential because it is almost uncharted territory. Shakespeare's production and the extremely varied readings thereof have

<sup>2</sup> From here onwards, "Beaumont and Fletcher canon" or simply "canon".

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Langbaine (10 vols, 1711); Theobald, Seward and Symson (10 vols, 1750); George Colman (10 vols, 1778); Henry Weber (14 vols, 1812); George Darley (2 vols, 1839); Alexander Dyce (11 vols, 1843-46). There also survives a quarto version of *Love's Cure* dated 1718.

proven Calvino's definition of a "classic": a text that, although distant in time, never ceases to dialogue with us and that gives rise to new meanings depending on the context in which it is read; a communication process enriched by current events and progress (2002). The same process could apply to Fletcherian drama and to other early modern gems neglected for a long time; modern-day critics have centuries of studies, methodologies, approaches at their disposal.

In an early modern context and to an early modern audience, a play such as *Love's Cure* could not sanction what Pérez Díez identifies as *transgenderism* and *fluid gender identity*, mainly because such terms were not part of the early modern English "encyclopaedia" as defined by Eco (1984a) – namely, the shared body of knowledge of a cultural group which regulates the group's understanding and production of meaning.<sup>4</sup> In a culture desperate to maintain an ordered and functioning society, as we will see, gender had to be discernible: even hermaphrodites were required to make a choice (see Greenblatt 1988; Fletcher 1995). It is thus quite preposterous to critique – as Robinson does (2006, 212-19), for instance – early modern texts because they do not consider certain themes from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective. Conversely, a modern-day audience may be less likely than an early modern one to accept the finale of a play as a conclusive moment that puts an end to the issues raised in the course of the action. Instead, they may appreciate the problematisation of social and gender performance, the questioning of respectable – if not honourable – behaviour, the issue of the legitimacy of violence that *Love's Cure* puts forward. In an image-obsessed culture, where one's image can be a matter of life and death, the concerns of the play resonate loudly.

In Jacobean times, heteronormative endings such as that in *Love's Cure* (although we will see that heteronormative relationships in the play are not as linear as one might expect) were still closely related to the conservative nature of both carnival and comedy, celebrating the renewal of life and nature (see Eco 1984b), and to the formal constraints of genre. Both Fletcher and Shakespeare, among others, tested the flexibility of drama and the audience's involvement in plays that push towards the tragic only to revert to the comic at the very last moment. This interrogation on the nature and potential of drama (think of *Measure for Measure*, c. 1604, or *Philaster*, 1609) could work because early modern audiences were as knowledgeable as playwrights were in terms of genre and character conventions, so that the latter could establish a reflection on and apply tension to these conventions while employing them (Myhill and Low, 2011; Low 2014). The audience's expectations about a play and its genre (ending included) were essential to this game.

## 2. Fletcher's Production: Metatheatre, Transgression, Gender and Social Performativity

*Love's Cure* was first performed at the Globe playhouse in 1615.<sup>5</sup> The plot revolves around siblings Lucio and Clara, whose father, Álvarez, has been exiled by the King of Spain due to his violent hostility with Vitelli. To protect them from the enemies of the family, the children have been raised in disguise. Lucio, as Posthumia, has learnt to manage a house, to sew and embroider, to wear make-up and perfume, while Clara, as Lucio, has followed her father to war and has become a valiant soldier and *swordsmen*, whose heroic behaviour in battle prompts her father's forgiveness by the Infanta and the King. Returned from the exile, Álvarez, his wife

<sup>4</sup> For detailed discussions, see Eco 1984a; Desogus 2012.

<sup>5</sup> I am here adopting Pérez Díez's dating; for a discussion of the issue and of whether the play was performed by an adult or children's company (which does not impact on the argument in this paper) see Bentley 1956, 363-66; Hoy 1961; Williams 1976; Low 2015.

and his household (lead by Bobadilla, the steward) expect the siblings to revert to the socially appropriate behaviour for their birth-sex, but the two are reluctant. Despite the family's attempts to teach them how a man and a woman should behave in an unexceptional social environment, it is sudden romantic attraction that does the trick: Clara falls for Vitelli, her father's enemy, while Lucio falls for Genevora (Vitelli's sister). Love (the "cure" in the title) leads the siblings to accept the roles everybody expects of them in society. This is made clear in the final scene, in which Lucio follows his father in his violent pursuits for honour's sake, whereas Clara joins the other women in a passionate plea for peace between the two families.

Previous research (see Bentley 1956, 363-66; Hoy 1961; Williams 1976) established *Love's Cure* as a play for a children's company rather than for adult players, as John Fletcher's playwrighting included many plays meant for children's companies – such as the Children of the Queen's Revels and the Children of Paul's – often written in collaboration with Francis Beaumont. The plays performed by these companies<sup>6</sup> heavily relied on metatheatre and often required the audience "to be impressed by the complex parts the boy actor c[ould] perform" (Crow 2014, 181); these included not only fantastical or supernatural creatures (e.g., nymphs or fairies), but also characters of different age and gender from that of the actors, all further layered and made more titillating by plots that often featured cross-dressing male and female characters and by an extensive use of sexual jokes and (homo)erotic material (see Zimmerman 2005; Bly 2009; Hyland 2011). The obvious artificiality of such performances involved the audiences in a metatheatrical play that constantly required a detached and critical attitude, more so than was the case for adult companies (Foakes 2003, 27). This metatheatricity was not subtle, but overt: the boy actors would discuss and mock their own performances and the mannerisms of acting, but also popular and conventional tropes and devices used in contemporary drama (Foakes 2003; Bloom 2007; Crow 2014; Shapiro 2017). Additionally, when the children of the company were highly trained musicians and choristers (e.g., the Children of Paul's) their plays showcased much more music than those of the adult companies (Austern 1992; Munro 2009; Shapiro 2017), with interludes frequently breaking the theatrical illusion. Boy companies would perform at court or in more exclusive private theatres, where candle lighting and costumes allowed to produce more evocative dramatic effects; their spectacles were catered to a socially ambitious and privileged audience, "seeking to create the consciousness of an in-group that would appreciate their railing" against other social groups and popular dramatic conventions (Foakes 2003, 28; see also Shapiro 2017). Boy companies were known to have quite an "unruly spirit" (Crow 2014, 183): the metatheatricity of their performances allowed for a blurring of the *locus-plata*-audience distinction, encouraging the ridicule of social groups, individuals, contemporary issues and the court (see Munro 2005; Shapiro 2017). The city comedy genre was undoubtedly the most fertile ground for such satire, and soon became a popular asset in children companies' repertoires (*ibidem*). Such parody of contemporary society gave these companies a "notoriety [...] as provocateurs" (Crow 2014, 187) and legal troubles (Munro 2005; Shapiro 2017).

The new edition argues that *Love's Cure* was written for and performed by the King's Men, i.e., an adult playing company (Pérez Díez 2022, 6-14), yet most of the elements typical of children's performances are characteristic of Fletcher's production in general. Most of his plays – either written solo or together with his collaborators, such as Beaumont, Massinger and Shakespeare – show metatheatrical features, such as:

<sup>6</sup> Recent criticism has also highlighted that repertoires of individual companies varied according to various factors (e.g., performance space, age of the actors) as was the case for the adult companies. For an overview of relevant studies and findings, see Munro 2005; Bly 2009; Shapiro 2017.

- comments on theatre practice, i.e. on performance conditions (e.g. *The Island Princess*, c. 1620) and dramatic conventions such as the boy actors' cross-dressing (e.g. *The Honest Man's Fortune*, c. 1613; *Love's Pilgrimage*, c. 1615-16; *The Maid in the Mill*, c. 1623), other forms of disguise and characters' self-representation, often under the direction of other characters (e.g. *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, licensed 1624; *The Elder Brother*, c. 1625; *The Wild Goose-Chase*, c. 1621);
- intertextual references to and parodies of other plays (e.g. *The Tamer Tamed*, c. 1611);
- self-reflexive commentary on the plot more or less consciously expressed by the characters (e.g. *The Island Princess*);
- the use of the play-within-the-play, of masques or spectacle-like moments in the play-text (e.g. *The Maid's Tragedy*, c. 1610; *Four Plays, or Moral Representations, in One*, c. 1608-13, which also notably includes much music, song and dance);
- the use of frame-play inductions (e.g. *Four Plays, or Moral Representations, in One*).

Even tragicomedy, whose introduction to and popularity on the English stage has been attributed to Fletcher and his collaborators (see Foster 2016), is coherent with this metatheatrical preoccupation. The tragicomedy in Fletcher's production is often a test of the audience's expectations and puts under pressure the flexibility of the theatrical *textum* itself. Rather than being a mere dramatic translation of Guarini's seminal *Il Pastor Fido* (1590),<sup>7</sup> these plays test the transformative potential of drama, soon separating the pastoral from the tragicomic, crossing generic boundaries and even turning one genre into another: tragedy is introduced and developed, but it is either signalled to be changing at a certain point in the text, or it is kept on the verge between possibilities until the very end.<sup>8</sup> *Love's Cure* itself, as Pérez Díez notices, has all the ingredients of a revenge tragedy, but they are mixed with farcical, satirical and comic-romantic elements, to the point that the "abrupt" comic ending turns into "a playful questioning of the instability of such definitions [those of generic constrictions]" (2022, 36-37). Recently, some of the plays in the Beaumont and Fletcher canon have been re-attributed to Fletcher alone or in collaboration with playwrights other than Beaumont (e.g., Massinger, Rowley, Shakespeare); the pervasiveness of such metadramatic concerns in the plays of the canon despite the variety of authors with whom Fletcher collaborated indicates that metatheatricality is rather "distinctive [...] of Fletcherian drama" (Hardman 2016, 23). Following the demise of children playing companies, roughly in the 1610s, adult companies could access the dramatic resources of children's performances and translate them into their own repertoire; one of the main effects was a "metatheatricalisation" of adult drama (see Crow 2014), which gave continuity to Fletcher's production.

Among Fletcherian metatheatrical features, Pérez Díez singles out "a playful handling of the theme of cross-dressing, an insightful exploration of the performativity of gender, and a meditation on the transformative power of love and (hetero)sexual desire" (2022, 1), but such preoccupations are part of a broader reflection on theatrical performativity, as we have just seen, and on social performativity. Munro, for instance, shows that after being hired by the King's

<sup>7</sup> Guarino Guarini's pastoral play (pub. 1590) can be considered the first play to introduce tragicomedy on the European stage, despite previous critical and dramatic experiments (such as Giraldo Cinzio's or Tasso's). Guarini's work was extremely influential in the European popularisation of tragicomedy and inspired several musical adaptations. For an overview, see e.g. Niccoli 1987; Mosele 1993. The translation into English of *Il Pastor Fido* by Sir Edward Dymock was published in 1602.

<sup>8</sup> For more detailed discussions of examples of such processes, see Suzanne Gossett's introduction to *Philaster* (2009) and Clare McManus's introduction to *The Island Princess* (2012).

Men, Beaumont and Fletcher used tragicomedies to “reinterpret many of the preoccupations of the Queen’s Revels’ version of the form, such as the concern with the relationships between sexuality and political structures” (2005, 133). This combines with a general concern with “the nature of honor and dishonor” attested in many plays in the canon (Green 1982, 305). We could generalise that the self-reflexivity of the plays – and especially the characters’ own awareness of performing certain roles, not only through literal or metaphorical disguise – points to the interrelation of good (honour) or bad (dishonour) performance and the matters of life: sex, social status, politics. Metatheatre, after all, is not limited to the theatrical experience itself. It shows the artificial nature of conventional gestures, behaviours, looks and the contingent nature of the meanings they signify; this draws attention to the artificial nature of the performance and its apparatus, but also to the conventionality of social behaviours and the expectations surrounding them. Such process is similar to the carnivalesque transgressive subversion of the relationship between signifier and signified (see Bakhtin 1968):<sup>9</sup> the arbitrary and impermanent nature of fixed social orders and identities is made explicit and parodied (Bristol 1983).

The association between the carnivalesque and early modern theatre has already been highlighted, and Bristol even defines early modern theatre as “an institutionalized and professionalized form of Carnival” (1983, 637).<sup>10</sup> Early modern theatres enjoyed a liminality that was juridical and geographical (playhouses and theatres stood in the liberties or in the legally grey areas of the city, coexisting with brothels and criminals), temporal (the time of performance was subtracted from prayer and work), discursive and identity-related (actors could appropriate the language and identity of others, kings included), just as the liminality of carnival (see Bristol 1983, 1985; Bassan 2022). This made early modern theatre a space of transgression, where an “as if” dimension could be created that subverted the established gnoseological and political order. Costumes are a clear example of this transgressiveness, because they disrupt the early modern principle of a necessary “correspondence between one’s appearance and status in the cosmos” (Bassan 2022, 27; see also Jones and Stallybrass 2000). Just as is the case with carnival, however, this transgression is legitimised and eventually conservative: the parodied order must be respected for the carnivalesque transgression to work (Eco 1984b, 5-7), and by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century English theatrical activities were controlled firmly and directly by the Crown and the Privy Council (Bly 2009, 139).

Metatheatre operates its carnivalesque-like transgression primarily at performance-level. Many early modern plays display some degree of metatheatricality, mainly because performance conditions were such that the audience had to make up with their imagination for what was impossible on stage<sup>11</sup> and thus was seemingly always aware of the play as such. Also, the audience was so theatrically prepared that playwrights always knew for whom they were writing (Bly 2009, 139; see also Myhill and Low 2011), and this allowed them to play with the audience’s knowledge of theatrical conventions (Lopez 2003). Concurrently, metatheatrical moments could emphasise the idea of a *theatrum mundi*, i.e. the similarities between the actors’ perfor-

<sup>9</sup> This article draws from previous research (Bassan 2022) on the connection between early modern English theatre and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque; ideally, it is complementary to and expands previous research. For a thorough overview of the subject, see Bristol 1983, 1985; Eco 1984b.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the well-established connection between popular festive rituals and early modern theatre (see e.g. Barber 1972; Weimann 1978), the Bakhtinian carnivalesque has hardly ever been used as a lens through which to analyse how theatre can parody its own rules, conventions, audiences, out-of-the-norm features. Bristol (e.g. 1983, 1985) represents a notable exception. The subject is too broad to be addressed here; for a problematisation and discussion of the matter, see the essays in Bristol 1983, 1985; Knowles 1998; Bassan 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Many inductions or prologues of early modern plays explicitly invite the audience to do so.

mances and the audience's performance of social roles in God's great design, with either tragic or comic effects. Still, the metatheatrical subversion of generic conventions is most apparent in comedy, which shares much of the "transgressive conservatism" of carnival (see Eco 1984b; Bristol 1985; Laroque 1991) and enjoys a freedom virtually unknown to tragedy: comedy can parody contemporary reality, but also subvert the comic and theatrical forms themselves (see Bristol 1983, 1985; Lopez 2003). Incidentally, most cross-dressing plots of the Renaissance occurred in comedies (see Shapiro 1996; Hyland 2011). Metatheatrical references to the boy actors have been linked to Butler's notion of gender performativity (1999), as they pointed out the arbitrariness of the corporeal and discursive acts that constituted the reality of gender (Hamamra 2019). However, in early modern English society such performativity included also social identity (e.g., marital status, profession, rank), institutions (e.g., marriage, religion) and norms (e.g., table manners, honourable and gendered behaviour). In highly performative early modern England, power, punishment, and religion relied on spectacular means of conveyance (see e.g. Anglo 1997; Hill 2011; Smith M. 2017) and dress could signify rank, wealth, marital status, religious or political affiliation (see e.g. Jones and Stallybrass 2000; Hyland 2011 and, for a more general overview, Breward 1995).

Particularly in comedy, despite the expected heteronormative conclusion, there is a conscious use of sexual innuendo targeting the androgynous or male body, which often relied on cross-dressing situations (Bly 2000). Fletcher's use of cross-dressing plots is undoubtedly extensive even in his production for the adult companies, "exploiting the dramatic potential of the cross-dressed male actor as a female impersonator" (Pérez Díez 2022, 1). Yet, many other contemporary playwrights frequently resorted to this very same device, and the (homo) erotic potential of the boy actor was employed for comic, tragic and titillating effects also on the adult stage. The gender-blurring, possibly proto-feminist, (homo)erotic charge of the boy actor's female performance and the often metatheatrical cross-dressing plots on the early modern English stage have been extensively studied, mainly in Shakespeare, but also in Lily, Jonson, Middleton, Marston and in collaborative works such as *The Roaring Girl* (c. 1611), to mention a few.<sup>12</sup> In Fletcher as in others, the use of cross-dressing is often linked to reflections on femininity, metatheatricality, gendered power dynamics and sexuality (see Clark 2013; Foster 2016).

The combination of all these elements – the carnivalesque, metatheatre, tragi/comedy, the frequency of cross-dressing plots – tones down the peculiarity of a cross-dressing plot in *Love's Cure*. Rather, I believe that the distinctiveness of *Love's Cure* lies in two main aspects. Firstly, this play seems constantly concerned with what "good performance" is, to the point that virtually all characters are preoccupied with their own performances – both social and gendered. Pérez Díez identifies an "anomaly" in the siblings being raised cross-dressing rather than using cross-dressing as a disguise (2022, 39), but their awareness of the discrepancy between their gender performance and the gender identity they express in the text (respectively, Lucio as a man and Clara as a woman) indicates that they know they have been in disguise all their lives (Clara will also re-use her male disguise in IV.ii), and makes the point about social performance even more compelling. At the same time, metatheatre is closely associated with clothing, gender and behaviour at the very beginning of the play, which stresses the contingent associations between the three. It isn't really a matter of "male" or "female", but rather of using the right performance for the right roles in the right context.

<sup>12</sup> The topic is too broad to be discussed here. For an overview of the main studies on the matter, see Bly 2009; Crow 2014, 186, n. 12; Shapiro 2017.

Secondly, the comedy is perhaps the only early modern play to address the changeability of biological sex, as outlined in contemporary medical theory. The concern expressed by the play's society about the influence of one's behaviour on the body echoes early modern preoccupations with the "maintenance" of a masculine or feminine condition. This concern was also voiced in early modern anti-theatrical writings, which counted alterations of gendered and sexual characters among the many dangers of going to the theatre or acting. Thus, the play's metatheatrical reflection is as much about performativity (theatrical and social) as it is about contemporary medical and theatrical debates. *Love's Cure* is exceptional in dealing with such topical issues so explicitly.

### 3. *Performativity in the Play*

In his introduction, Pérez Díez highlights one of the main connections between the play and its Spanish source, *La fuerza de la costumbre*.<sup>13</sup> he notes that the repetition of *custom* in the English text (echoing *costumbre* in the Spanish title) summarises the central theme of the play, namely "the exploration of the power of nurture over nature, and of gender as a social construct over the predetermination of physiological sex" (2022, 19; see Berek 2004). However, this insight is hardly ever developed in metatheatrical terms. For instance, Pérez Díez continues by analysing the siblings' situation from a presentist perspective that considers them transgender, though without any form of gender dysphoria (2022, 39). Instead, I would like to use the idea of nurture over nature as a starting point for my discussion of metatheatricality in *Love's Cure*.<sup>14</sup> this matter is relevant to the play both in metatheatrical terms and in what we could call, in today's terms, its social commentary.

Some clarification, however, is due. The notions of sex and gender that an early modern audience would refer to differ considerably from our own. Studies in anatomy were at their earliest stages at the time, and male and female genitalia were considered different expressions of the same basic structure – the so-called "one-sex model" – with the female genitalia being a lesser version of male ones (Laqueur 1990).<sup>15</sup> The expression of the genitalia in male or female form was the result, according to the galenic medical system, of different degrees of heat in men and women, with maleness being due to abundant heat and femaleness to insufficient heat (Laqueur 1990 40, 100). However, even after birth certain behaviours or attitudes were considered expressions of imbalance in one's own bodily fluids and heat (humoral medicine), so that, for instance, excessive heat brought women to express more masculine traits and even become sterile (101). In this system, the expression of what we would call gender was the result of a healthy medical condition keeping the balance of one's birth-sex, and gender and sex were inextricably related and mutually affecting each other. Laqueur posits that the only way to comprehend pre-modern theories about sex and gender is to think of the body as "the epiphenomenon", and of gender as "primary [and] *real*" rather than a cultural category (8,

<sup>13</sup> Literally, "The force of custom"; Jeffs translates *The Force of Habit* (de Castro 2019). It is a *siglo de oro* comedy by Spanish playwright Guillén de Castro (1569-1631). Stiefel (1897) and Loftis (1984) first identified this text as the main source for *Love's Cure* and noted the frequent reworking of Spanish sources in the Beaumont and Fletcher canon.

<sup>14</sup> All quotes from the text refer to the 2022 edition.

<sup>15</sup> I am here summarising complex notions. See Laqueur 1990; Fletcher 1995; Phillips and Reay 2011. Laqueur's model has been challenged (King 2013), but even studies aiming to refute Laqueur, listing historical approaches to the issue over delimited periods of time, ultimately imply that predominant attitudes follow the general trends outlined by him and his basic assertion that the very idea of "nature" in terms of sex and gender is socially and culturally determined, a well-established concept in anthropology (see bibliography in Upton 2012).



original emphasis). Allowing men and women certain behaviours or foods was thought to influence one's "sex-gender" system: excessive leniency in regulating more masculine or feminine behaviours could make one fall ill and even "turn" (Laqueur 1990, 7; Fletcher 1995, 40-41). Such a blurred demarcation between "male" and "female" made it problematic to establish a gender order, necessary for "successful reproductive mating" (Fletcher 1995, 83); "gender [...] seemed dangerously fluid and indeterminate" (33), so it was essential

to ensure that gender provided a respected foundational structure which could make sense of each person's identity and enable society to function without disorder. Out of sexual confusion, friction, the competition of male and female seeds, much was required, much that was necessarily artificial and the subject of social construction. [...] This meant two things. Firstly that male control had to be seen to rest upon a firm and decisive identification of sexual identity, even where that identification was not actually decisive. [...] Secondly heterosexual mating must remain normative. (83)

This contributed to justify the necessity of female subordination: if certain behaviours could influence the body, then children-bearing women, generally deemed less perfect than men – the "weaker vessel" – had to be controlled for their own sake (see Maclean 1980; Clark 1994). There was room for legitimate exception (think of Elizabeth I), but such exceptions were coherent with a cosmological vision where men's need to maintain God's social order opened the body to manipulation (see Fletcher 1995, 82). This is why in *Love's Cure* there is no clear-cut distinction between what *today* would be termed "sex" and "gender". This is also why everyone in *Love's Cure* believes that there should be a *cure* for the siblings' condition, and why that cure is shown to be love: sex was thought to regulate the corporeal economy of fluids (Laqueur 1990; Fletcher 1995). Furthermore, sexuality as an expression of identity did not exist until the 19<sup>th</sup> century – heterosexuality itself is a notion that necessitates a clear distinction between the sexes to work, and thus had to wait until the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be articulable (see Laqueur 1990, 52; Phillips and Reay 2011). While discussing early modern times, then, we should remember that today's sexual nomenclature is far from appropriate, although sometimes practical: an early modern comic ending, celebrating the renewal of nature, cannot but show what today is a heterosexual marriage, since at the time same-sex relationships were quite unlikely to produce offspring.

In *Love's Cure*, this slippery conception of sex-gender is the reason why the characters are constantly preoccupied that the siblings' bodies become monstrous, unnatural, such as that of the fasting woman Lazarillo describes to Pacheco (II.i), who lived for three years on "the smell of a rose" only: her "guts shrunk all into lute strings" and her "nether parts clinged together like a serpent's tail, so that, though she continued a woman still above the girdle, beneath yet she was a monster" (32-38). This description foreshadows and linguistically anticipates Álvarez's preoccupation that Clara has "turned a man indeed / Beneath the girdle" and that the opposite has happened to Lucio, to the point he wants to have them physically searched (II.ii.157-159). Álvarez's concern becomes almost paroxysmal, but the *monstrum* quality of the siblings was indeed believed to be a physical and social danger. Clara herself admits that she began to doubt her body because "Custom [had] wrought so cunningly on nature" (V.iii.93-95). Nurture (taught or habitual behaviour) could influence nature (one's sex-gender and the proper balances therewith associated), even to the point of physical metamorphosis (see also Greenblatt 1988). This medical way of thinking about the body returns when the fencing master, Piorato, claims to Bobadilla that he could cure Lucio if there were "but one spark / Of fire remaining in him unextinct" (III.ii.8-9). Piorato then illustrates how he managed to cure a youth like Lucio by relying on galenic medicine and specific activities. The boy under his care was fed "Only with burnt pork [...] and gammons of bacon; / A pill of caviary now and then, / Which breeds cholera adust"

(III.ii.23-25), and he was allowed to drink only “acquafortis” (acid) instead of aqua vitae to be purged of his “phlegmatic humour and cold crudities” (27-28); for “three drilling days” the boy was forced to shoot in the artillery (34), and his “cold stomach” was eventually “fired” (32-33). The scene is clearly meant to be comic, presenting exaggerated remedies, and it escalates when the (cowardly) Bobadilla asks to be cured of his too daring nature. Yet, it undoubtedly draws on contemporary medical notions and practices on humours and (sexual) health. In both cases, the danger is the hybridity symbolised by the hermaphrodite as an “image of [...] social and physical abnormality” (Rackin 1987, 29).

Similar implications were made in early modern anti-theatrical writings.<sup>16</sup> These works, authored by moralists of various kinds (e.g., Puritans, satirists), attacked the theatre mainly on religious grounds, by listing the many corruptions it offered to English society (see Connors 2015). Among the most nefarious features of performances was the eroticism surrounding the boy actor. Firstly, female impersonation on stage disregarded divine prescription against cross-dressing (*Deuteronomy*, 22:5). Secondly, it stirred male perverted desires for something that only looked and behaved like – but was thus as desirable as – a woman.<sup>17</sup> Also, writers such as Stephen Gosson (*The School of Abuse*, 1597) or Philip Stubbes (*The Anatomy of Abuses*, 1583) accused boy actors of whore-like behaviour. If entertaining homosexual desires or relationships in general was counted among the factors threatening one’s patriarchal masculinity (Fletcher 1995, 96; see Borris and Rousseau 2008), the situation of the boy actor was even more precarious.

A boy’s biological sex “was not decisive” in a system where the body was deemed vulnerable to external influences and taught behaviours (Fletcher 1995, 86-87); breeching was the first introduction to the world of “secure manhood” (87), and the “mastery of a woman”, rather than a man, “guaranteed one’s sexual status” (89). To moralist writers, the effeminacy of boy actors (96), their posing as women, and their alleged sexual passivity all blurred gendered distinctions and thus social structure (Schochet 1974); also, homosexual practices posed a threat because they could prevent social regeneration. Needless to say, a corrupt society transgressing divine dispositions awaits doom. From another angle, the ambiguity of the boy players’ learned behaviours made their situation as biologically precarious as that of the siblings in *Love’s Cure*, which makes the siblings’ predicament in the play rather topical to the audience. The references to their androgyny or bodily changes are part of a discourse that engaged audience and players from medical, religious and social perspectives. The concerns of the play’s society are thus intertwined with those of the audience’s society and its censors – a set of cross-references that enhances the play’s metatheatrical game.

Unsurprisingly, then, nobody in the play is interested in what today we’d call the siblings’ gender identity: what matters is the performance of the new – gendered – social roles<sup>18</sup> they carry out, as in the real-life early modern world (see Greenblatt 1988; Laqueur 1990; Fletcher 1995). Incidentally, the siblings are very aware of the discrepancy between their nature (i.e., the sex-gender we have mentioned above), their performance of gendered roles and their society’s ideas about what the right performance is – all the more so because they seem to identify with their birth-sex. Clara speaks of herself in the feminine, even when acknowledging her own courage (“Would I were none [woman]. / But nature’s privy seal assures me one” (II.ii.143-144); “the lioness hath met a tamer here”, II.ii.239), and other characters’ comments about her exceptional femininity do not seem to upset her (see III.iv.93ff.). The same goes for Lucio,

<sup>16</sup> For a selection, see Pollard 2004.

<sup>17</sup> See the overview in Jardine 1989, 9-36.

<sup>18</sup> Similar to what today we may call “gender expression”.

whom Bobadilla significantly addresses as “master” in front of Eugenia, Álvarez’s wife, to signal respect (I.ii.50-51).<sup>19</sup> Clara wishes she were a man only to continue being a soldier (I.iii.37-38), whereas Lucio counts on his father’s inheritance, and thus sees no need to learn another way of behaving – one that requires physical exertion, violence, danger, curt if not rude manners, nonetheless (III.iv). Furthermore, the play suggests that the siblings have always been aware of the discrepancies in their life-long disguises, but that their exceptionality has never been an issue before – in fact, the exceptional conditions brought forth by Álvarez’s exile made it necessary. Having returned to conventional life, Álvarez, Eugenia and their household think they only need to teach the siblings how to dress and behave in the new environment as they did when they were children. To them, it is obvious that a certain script calls for certain performances.

I have already mentioned (§2) the ambiguous use of genre introduced at the beginning of the play (I.i seems to introduce a revenge tragedy rather than a comedy; see also Pérez Díez 2022, 36-37), but the metatheatrical bursts on stage directly in I.ii. If a female character appeared on stage for the first time, an early modern audience would expect to read her costume immediately and learn about her age, rank, marital status and so on just by looking at her, as they could with any other character (Hyland 2011, 42). When male or female characters disguised themselves by cross-dressing, the audience was duly informed in advance to avoid confusion,<sup>20</sup> so when Posthumia first appears in I.ii, Bobadilla’s reaction and comments about an “hermaphrodite”, about “the best of man l[ying] under th[at] petticoat”, or about “a cod-piece” being “far fitter” in her case than an apron (I.ii.5-10) would have first pointed the audience to the boy actor, rather than to a male character. Had the play been performed by a children’s company, the effect would have been amplified by Bobadilla himself being played by a boy. The ambiguous dialogue between Posthumia and Bobadilla continues for a few lines, establishing the problematic connection between clothing, behaviour (Posthumia is worried about the house poultry rather than interested in sexual activities) and sex-gender. Only then do we learn that Posthumia is not a male actor interpreting a female character in the play (see Griffiths 2019, 212-13), but a male actor interpreting a male character, Lucio, who has been disguising like a woman for twenty years (I.ii.21-28).

This scene establishes two main associations for the early modern audience. Firstly, from this moment onward they would have very likely had ambiguous expectations every time a woman or a youth appears on stage. The scene alerts the audience’s awareness of the play as such (§2), and establishes a connection that will constantly remind them that the theatrical spectacle is an artifice built on conventions. To help the audience disambiguate, characters often comment immediately after someone’s first entrance to identify them, but the association would linger. For instance, I.iii reiterates the surprise pattern in I.ii, although in abbreviated form, to introduce Clara, thus consolidating the mechanism. Early modern audiences, after all, are generally deemed to have had good memory and known what reactions playwrights expected from them (Lopez 2003; Myhill and Low 2011; Low 2014). To summarise, I am arguing that the visual association between clothing and sex-gender is disrupted both in the play-world and in the audience’s experience of the theatrical performance. Secondly, the exchange between Posthumia and Bobadilla would have reminded the audience of the process of training that boy actors would undergo supervised by an older actor, further emphasising the constructed nature of the theatrical performance. Why the anti-theatrical writers should be against such gender-blurring exposures, we have already explained.

<sup>19</sup> A few lines earlier, he had made fun of Lucio by addressing him as “my young master, or mistress, madam, Don, or what you will” (I.ii.15-16).

<sup>20</sup> See Hyland 2011, 62-64 for surprise revelation plots and their reception by early modern audiences.

Throughout the play, what every character is clearly aware of is that a certain performance in the play-world signifies sex-gender, but also – and more importantly – aristocratic station, public office, married status, a courtesan position. The association between clothing and identity introduced in I.ii is often reprised in the play. For instance, Pacheco ensures he has the “cloak and rapier” appropriate for “a gentleman of [his] rank” (i.e., a cobbler) before leaving the house (II.i.1-2). The courtesan Malroda is given clothes by her patron, Vitelli, which she will not wear because their colour is “too sad” (III.ii.155-156); she also owns as many jewels as “the firmament [is full] of stars”, and her appearance is rich enough to make her “vice” unmistakable (IV.ii.56-64). The Alguazir, who is paid to keep Malroda at his house and leads a band of thieves despite being a government official in town, is said to have exchanged a “red bonnet and [...] blue jacket” with a Spanish hat and a coarse velvet coat, to indicate that he is probably a converted Jew or a “Morisco” and that his new status is undeserved (II.i.181-184, see also 170-171n. and 179-180n.). Bobadilla’s “chain” in pure gold identifies him as an upper servant, steward to Álvarez – something he is proud of (III.ii.39-42). An early modern audience would have been familiar with the association of clothing and social status (§4), and the transparency expected of the siblings was the same bemoaned by moralist writers, who criticised costumes because they could blur both gender and status (see Bassan 2022). The play’s constant reminders would not have been missed, then.

The siblings become uncomfortably aware of the close association between clothing and correct social performance in II.ii, when they are forced to abandon their life-long disguise and complain about how uncomfortable their new clothes are. Lucio finds his “masculine attire [...] most uneasy”, because his sword hits his thigh, his hat gives him a headache and he moves “as if [his] legs were frozen” in his new boots, among other things (13-21). Clara finds that women’s “haunches” are “limited, confined, hooped in [...] with [...] scurvy farthingales” (69-72). The description of their painful experience well symbolises their recalcitrance to abandon the social roles they have played all their life (from valiant soldier to proper lady and from proper lady to honourable lord, respectively). The comfort they find in their old clothes also implies they have learnt how to move in those clothes with ease, i.e. they have learnt the part so well that those borrowed robes have become like a second skin. Learning to wear new clothes means renegotiating a social position they seem to enjoy, and neither can see the necessity of such a change. As Álvarez remarks, however, clothing is not enough: their performance is still so bad that Clara seems to have “[her] breeches on still”, and Lucio to have “not yet” taken off his petticoat (II.ii.152-154).

II.ii is heavily charged from a metatheatrical point of view. The siblings’ discomfort in their new clothes and Bobadilla’s efforts to direct their movements in such clothes would have reprised the reference to the boy players’ training (introduced in I.ii). If the character of Clara was played by the apprentice of the actor playing Bobadilla (Thomas Pollard and John Shank respectively),<sup>21</sup> the irony would not have been lost on the audience. Concurrently, the scene would have been a display of skill, by contrast as well: the actors’ rigid movements in supposedly constricting clothing would have stressed their ability to portray the characters convincingly in the rest of the play. The scene would have also reminded the audience<sup>22</sup> that the actor probably playing Lucio, Richard Robinson, had just graduated from playing female characters – and thus would have been funny in his show of clumsiness and need for guidance in performance.

<sup>21</sup> For the possible cast of the 1615 performance, see Astington 2010; Pérez Díez 2022, 6-9.

<sup>22</sup> Early modern audiences would often have favourite companies, whose plays they attended regularly and whose repertoire and members they knew well (Myhill and Low 2011; Ingram 2013; Low 2015).

Such metatheatrical dynamics are emphasised when Bobadilla attempts to prompt Lucio to react violently, and asks him to “suppose [Bobadilla] . . . Vitelli” attacking Lucio in the street (II. ii.28). Echoes of the training of boy actors and their graduation into male roles can be found in most of the farcical moments when the siblings undergo “gender performance training”. The metatheatrical quality of these scenes is quite obvious, and plays on the same dynamics of II.ii. For instance, Lucio’s refined table manners (after three days of practice, he still “sips like to a waiting woman”, III.iv.28-29) and bearing (“he walks as if he had beppised himself, and fleers”, II.ii.24-25) and his fencing attempts (his posture is too “open-breasted”, making him easy to hit and wound, III.iv.81-82) elicit the comments and directions of his father, Bobadilla and Piorato – again, recalling the players’ training and the inappropriate gestures of someone used to a female role in the process of switching repertoire.

However, the siblings are not the only ones in the play aware that specific roles require specific performances. Characters in the play “voice their preoccupations with their own performances” and often feel the need to justify their behaviour to “a play-world audience” (Bassan 2022, 34), making metatheatrical commentary on performativity pervasive in the play. For instance, Eugenia knows that as a matron she should not foretaste the joys of love and sex, and tries to justify herself to the people around her for deviating from the standards of her role (I.ii; I.iii). The Alguazir is always extremely cautious in differentiating his performances as a public officer, as a criminal leader and as Melroda’s keeper, servile to Vitelli; he plans little shows of justice for the sake of silencing the victims of his band of criminals (III.v; IV.iii), and he fashions his role as criminal leader as if he were a preacher teaching “doctrine” (III.v.4). Vitelli wants to stay true to his manly code of revenge to the point of out-king-ing the King by ignoring his pardon of Álvarez (I.i), so he will “wear an everlasting blush / Upon [his] cheek” after learning that *Clara* rescued his life (II.ii.180-181). Genevora does not fulfil her role of obedient sister to Vitelli when she refuses to be escorted home by Lamoral, but is chastised by her brother and corrects herself (IV.i).

At the same time, characters often comment on the performance of others. Leaving aside the conduct of the siblings, which naturally predominates in the text, we can point out that even that of the Infanta of Spain (only mentioned in the text) is subjected to the judgement of Vitelli and his friends and considered “excellent” (I.i.95), whereas Piorato is judged “a proper man, / Of good discourse, fine conversation, / Valiant, and a great carrier of the business” by the Alguazir, who also praises his singing abilities (III.i.29-32). The final refusal of Vitelli, Álvarez and their companions to accept the women’s pleas for peace is commented by the gentlemanly bystanders as “Most barbarous”, “Savage” and “Irreligious” (V.iii.12-13), a “Strange obstinacy!” (57). Most metatheatrical of all are Lazarillo’s *aside* comments about the behaviour of his master and his accolades. The hungry servant, in the tradition of the picaresque genre inaugurated with his eponymous, *Lazarillo de Tormes* (c. 1554), provides “a running satirical commentary on Pacheco’s grandiloquent aspirations and those of his associates” (Pérez Díez 2022, 29), mainly by stressing the clash between their linguistic expression and their behaviour. Another metatheatrical example is the encounter between Malroda and Vitelli, witnessed by Clara and staged by Malroda and Piorato (IV.ii): Malroda, although for her own purposes, exposes Vitelli’s contradictory and disgraceful behaviour towards women, enlightening Clara about her beloved.

Most characters comment on someone else’s performance, but hardly anyone is as satisfied as the Alguazir is with Piorato. In the great majority of situations, the characters’ comment how unsatisfactory the others’ performance is compared to their role and status. Giving nothing to eat to a servant or failing to compensate someone for their services, for instance, is shown to be inappropriate of good masters and mistresses. The character of the Alguazir and his multiple –

and eventually failed – performances well summarises that every performance is at least a little lacking, and the impossibility for Malroda and Piorato to believe each other's love declarations and promises (III.ii) is telling: how can you trust someone's vows and promises when hardly anyone lives up to the standard they set? That so many performances can be exposed thus seems to indicate that “right” performances do not exist in the play-world.

In the play, honour plays a fundamental role in such concerns. This is a common theme in Fletcher's production (§2), but I argue that in *Love's Cure* the bond between honour and performance problematises social conventions much further. Sooner or later, most male characters are worried about their honour because their social performance has not been up to standard. Vitelli owns his life to a woman, Álvarez risks losing his face because his children may become monstrosities and because he cannot suffer Vitelli's affronts without retaliating, Sayavedra could not manage his wilful fiancé, Lamoral is defeated by womanish Lucio in a duel. Duels were the main way to settle matters of honour, and the play is full of either formal combats or sudden skirmishes, while violence or danger thereof pervades the whole play. Álvarez's words to his own children are particularly brutal. As he is in charge of Lucio's education, whereas his wife is in charge of Clara's, much of his abuse is directed at Lucio alone, whom he even threatens to “break [...] bone by bone, and bake” (III.iv.89-90) or to “beat [...] dead, / Then bray [...] in a mortar, and new mould” (III.iv.25-26). Yet, Clara too is in danger of being “bray[ed] [...] in a mortar, and new mould[ed]” (II.ii.150). Violence is also expected of Lucio as a well-performing man: to prove his manhood, he should beat men he has no reason to beat and rape women just because they happen to pass by (IV.iii.37-41). Violent encounters pervade the play, but never bring about resolution, even when it is a woman to instigate one, as does Genevora with Lucio and Lamoral.

Yet, in contrast with this insistence on violence, the general concern for honour is the most evident element to suggest that the others' performances may not be so much better than the siblings'. In a play in which the word *honour* and its derivatives alone recur 26 times,<sup>23</sup> it is significant that the siblings' conduct often exposes someone else's mere claim to honourable behaviour. “Are you men, rather?” asks an outraged Clara when her father and Sayavedra attack the outnumbered Vitelli at the door of the Álvarez house, going against codes of honour, sacred hospitality and national spirit (I.iii.114-140). She is also ready to defend her brother fiercely from the abuses of anyone in Spain (III.iv.93-100), and after witnessing Vitelli's undignified behaviour with Malroda she calls out his whining when he is attacked on his way out: “Show your old valour and learn from a woman” (IV.ii.146). Clara is problematic in this patriarchal world because she performs the most coherent honourable and valorous behaviour in the play while being a woman, to the point she is “the only ‘real man’ in the play” (Duncan 2000, 398). However, when she adopts a woman's social role, she is just as credible (*ibidem*): her new behaviour is a matter of “duty” (III.iv.178), the same that directed her military obedience to her father in II.iii (34-38), which stresses that “gender (and not just masculinity) is only a performance” (Duncan 2000 398), both in her society and for the boy actor on stage.

Similarly, despite Álvarez's educational approach, when he is attacked by thieves Lucio saves him out of filial piety and “compassion of [his] father's danger” overcoming his own lack of courage (IV.iii.59-61), rather than for motives such as Vitelli's determination to see Álvarez dead, and his wife and daughter mourning him for the following seven years (V.iii.61-67). When he meets Genevora, whom he is supposed to rape, he behaves respectfully and chastely

<sup>23</sup> Words such as *valour*, *valiant*, *worthy* also recur very frequently.

despite the awakening of his sexual desires, and later stresses that his love for her is the kind inspired by “heavenly love (the opposite to base lust)” (V.ii.46), thus distancing himself from the sexual aggressiveness of other male characters. Also, he challenges a surprised Lamoral to a duel, but he does not claim the rival’s life, only Genevora’s love tokens: his “new courage [...] was not bestowed on [him] / To bloody purposes” (V.i.61-70), and condemns others’ customary behaviour of making public the opponent’s shame, as “ ‘Tis a bastard courage / That seeks a name out that way, no true born one” (V.i.83-84). Instead, he shares Lamoral’s sorrow (V.i.70-74). Berek argues that Lucio’s cross-dressing turns “into a resource for both acknowledging and curing male anxiety about masculinity” (2004, 365), but his behaviour stays true to the rejection of violence and principles of (Christian) compassion that he had expressed at the beginning of the play, and singles him out from other male characters. The siblings are thus the only characters whose performance of themselves – either in male or female guise – shows consistency. Paradoxically, this behaviour risks to dismantle the order that other characters try so desperately to maintain.

Moralist writers placed a similar emphasis on social order, railing against new fashions, elaborate food, gaming and the theatre. In fact, their criticism of the theatre was based on social concerns, as it taught “to waste time, substitute play for work, fixate on showy spectacles and fine clothes, and scheme to arrange illicit seductions” (Pollard 2004, xxi). Their criticism against the class-blurring threat posed by costumes intertwined with that against the new rich – e.g., merchants – climbing the social scale. Since early modern English society thought about dress as a signifier of social hierarchy (§2, 4), the class-blurring of theatre costumes was equated with the rich, fashionable clothing wore by those making their way into environments and privileges previously reserved to certain élites. At the same time, the behaviours and indulgences promoted by and through certain entertainments were thought to weaken English society, by softening masculinity and liberating women from male control (§3). In other words, a threat to the social order imposed by God, and almost concretised in *Love’s Cure*.

I am not arguing that the play comments on such writings directly, but rather that the points it puts forward must have dialogued in the audience’s mind with such criticism, at least to some degree – after all, Stubbes’ *Anatomy* alone was reprinted many times and made him immediately famous (Pollard 2004, 115). The variety of moralist pamphlets, treatises and satires published in those years further popularised such discourses (see Jardine 1989; Fletcher 1995), so we can safely assume that playing companies were aware of such criticism – some plays even address the issue quite directly (e.g., Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*, 1614). *Love’s Cure*, instead, seems to question social stability itself (see §4). If most social performances in the play are lacking, and the only consistent ones are given by the problem characters’, then perhaps the order promoted is not so solid. The moralists wished to enforce a fundamentally medieval social order (see Bassan 2022, 27) while England became increasingly richer and opened to foreign influences in fashion, literature, ways of living. This seems to reverberate in the play’s society desperation to maintain clear-cut distinctions and roles, despite their obvious precariousness.

Indeed, in the final scene, the siblings demonstrate they have assumed new roles by taking sides, he with the men ready to kill each other in an official duel granted by the King, she with the women pleading for peace. Yet, the situation again calls out the savagery (as termed by the play-world audience) of Álvarez and Vitelli’s determination for bloodshed as a matter of honour, which forces Lucio and Lamoral to follow them for filial and friendly duty. Eugenia, Clara and Genevora’s pleas concern some key elements of honourable behaviour – namely, mercy towards the weak, duty towards the family and vows made – but the men are deaf to them. Yet, when the women threaten to enact the same kind of violence and murder each

other as soon as the men strike (a much more honourable display of courage?), the duel stops. “Love, in the end, trumps honor”, as Berek puts it: “honor is less real, and more a costume, than sexual desire” (2004, 365), a behavioural convention whose contradictions are exposed throughout the text.

Much has been said about heteronormative love representing the plays’ conservative, patriarchal conclusion, but I believe the love pattern of the siblings and their partners is not so clear-cut. Clara falls for Vitelli because he represents “the best of virtue, fortitude” (I.iii.103), something her upbringing has taught her to admire (he also seems to be a handsome man, as “In the wars [...] valour and true resolution / Never appeared so lovely”, I.iii.98-101), but this resembles Genevora’s reaction to Lucio. She believes him to be “valiant” (IV.iv.42) and finds him the first “lovely man” she has ever seen because of his innocent, respectful behaviour towards her and because of his comparing her to a deity (IV.iv.17-18). Similarly, Vitelli’s eloquence makes Clara fear that “The lioness hath met a tamer” (II.ii.239). Clara’s performance and behaviour seems to follow a female-coded pattern, but in her own way – tellingly, the love-token she gives Vitelli is her own sword,<sup>24</sup> rather than the ribbon, glove, feather, ring she is asked for (II.ii.213-236). Lucio and Genevora’s attraction, on the other hand, is more explicitly sexual, which would make him closer to other male characters: Bobadilla had accused him of being incapable of sex, but Genevora’s kisses awaken Lucio’s senses. In a similarly manly-coded fashion, he asks for a love token just as Vitelli does from Clara, but his behaviour afterwards, as we have seen, sets him apart from other men in the play. Also, Genevora’s “incomparable beauty” (V.i.40) inspires in him adoration (IV.iv.32) and devotion usually reserved to saints (V.ii.40-43). Accordingly, he keeps his “Sweet innocence” (IV.iv.11) and does not act upon his desires as he could easily do – and as Vitelli considers doing with virgin Clara (IV.iii). Love to Clara is “a softer, sweeter battle than with swords” (II.ii.258), and to Lucio a “heavenly” feeling rather than a base motion of the flesh (V.ii.46), a language that is consistent with the characters’ male and female performances, respectively. Clara can perform the new role social conventions require of her, but only at the side of a man whose military qualities she admires, whereas Lucio can embrace conventions for a lady noble enough to be waited upon (IV.iv.33-37), something he had refused to do for other male characters while in female attire.

At the same time, Vitelli and Genevora are somewhat complementary to the siblings. Vitelli is clearly strong and enduring, judging by the many combats he is forced to face outnumbered, but he is not as honourable as Clara, as she herself points out. Whereas she is resolute with other men, he easily gives in to Malroda’s many demands, and is very aware of how easily he is brought into submission by her ways (III.iii). Whereas Clara has stayed a virgin despite the years spent among men (II.ii.245-246), he seems to have a difficult time overcoming the “strong desires / That triumph o’er [him], even to actual sin” (64-65). His passivity to desire recalls early modern ideas about female sexual incontinence (Fletcher 1995): he justly fears that by marrying Clara, he would be wearing the petticoat in the house (IV.ii.179-184). Significantly, Vitelli acknowledges Clara’s soldierly qualities even after she has professed her will to adopt a woman’s social performance (IV.ii.184-193). On the other hand, Genevora knows what sex and desire are, and knows when she feels arousal (IV.iv.27-29), but just as Eugenia did, she values her correct performance of maidenhood too much to speak. She orders gentlemen about in

<sup>24</sup> The phallic imagery of needles and swords is pervasive in the play, to the point that in the 2001 production (directed by Martha Crossley as part of the conference *Early Modern Kinship: Sexualities, Materialities, Localities*) the stage was “dominated by a huge needle, emblematic of both phallic power and the cultural constraints placed on women’s behaviour by a patriarchal society” (Munro 2002, 76).



the way Posthumia directed her servants, and her relationship with Lucio requires him to be her “slave”, rather than her lord and master (IV.iv.37). Even the siblings’ choices in terms of partners, then, dismantle the patriarchal order that other characters attempt to maintain. As Berek argues, “codified conduct shapes the conditions within which natural propensities can do their work, much as clothing alters roles for the flesh it covers” (2004, 365), but the play uses the siblings’ cross-dressing to problematise this further, highlighting how both codified conduct and clothing relate to the same kind of artificial and fallible performance.

#### 4. *Metatheatre and Social Performance*

*Love's Cure* is clearly a light play, despite its misleading outset. Typically for Renaissance comedy, the ending is a celebration of peace and long-sought harmony: the marriages foreshadowed in the ending sanction this stability and look to the future. It is a celebration, just as carnival is, of the power of nature to find ways to renew itself. Life continues, despite violence and death. And yet, the reassurance that this is the final comic aim grants the genre the freedom radically to subvert a reassuring vision of society.

I argue that the metatheatrical in the play underlines the performativity of society; everyone in the play performs a certain role, and his/her performance is judged by others. At the same time, these judgments and comments function like those of an audience during a performance, and this combines with the reality of the players’ performance. Once introduced in II.ii, the idea of the play as such keeps returning in mentions of clothing, of gestures, ways of speaking, conduct. The link with clothing would have been particularly significant to an early modern audience, since the sumptuary legislation of the Tudors, albeit rarely applied, regulated dress among other things, and Elizabeth I’s laws were particularly articulate in distinguishing ranks and genders and limiting the materials and fabrics accessible to each category (see Baldwin 1926). James I abolished such laws in 1604, but that even during his reign dress was often subject to scrutiny and other forms of regulation attests to a shared attitude about dress and rank (Hyland 2011, 28). The moralist writers’ criticism against the class-blurring threat posed by costumes followed this line of thought. By constantly remarking on clothing, the play would have reminded the audience that wearing certain clothes meant having a certain role in society, just like the actors’ costumes identified them in their roles and provided accurate information on the characters’ identity.

What the play metatheatrically suggests, however, is that clothes – and thus, roles – are interchangeable just as the actors’ costumes. The characters’ constant preoccupation with their own performance and that of others remarks how easy it is to perform wrongly – and thus perform someone else: Vitelli rightly fears having to change his own lordly “costume” for a petticoat. All this indicates that the perfect performance is impossible, and that changing into one thing or the other is not that difficult. The siblings, just like the actors playing them, switch easily and naturally to other roles, once given the right motivation, and both the characters’ and the actors’ are specialized performances for specialized audiences. Within this metatheatrical framework, the “training scenes” are significant because they remind the audience of the performance as such – i.e., a craft requiring practice and skill – more explicitly. By doing so, the play undermines the audience’s complete absorption in the action; we have seen how the audience’s double awareness was unlikely to be “off”, so this insistence sustains the association between the play-world, the stage world and the world of the audience. Just as an actor knows when he or others are performing well, so the audience seems invited to ponder the quality of the actors’ performances and their own performances in real life.

If changing, however, is as easy as trading costumes, then the characters' preoccupations with good performances assume a bleaker implication: the social order they want to keep is contingent and arbitrary. Social roles – aristocrat, servant, official – are contingent and arbitrary. Gender roles – man, woman, hermaphrodite – are contingent and arbitrary. And so are the gestures and speech *conventions* associated with each. The play destabilises social order at all levels, in the play-world and in the real world: if a boy can put on a lady's costume (and actual dress) and be believed to be a lady, what fixes other boys into page or apprentice roles? Just as in carnivalesque transgression, the order of things is shown to be arbitrary and artificial. If no one can perform well, or if anyone can perform any role, the cosmos is constantly on the verge of chaos: as Eco stressed, "the existence of the rule [...] produces anxiety" (1984b, 2). Such preoccupations would have been familiar to the audience in a kingdom that was undergoing major social, political and economic changes in relatively few decades.

What saves comedy from annihilation is that its transgression eventually reinforces the established order (§2), and *Love's Cure* does it both in the play-world and in the real world. The carnivalesque "can act as a revolution [...] when it appears unexpectedly, frustrating social expectations" (Eco 1984b, 6), as in the play do the siblings' rule-breaking cross-dressing and behaviour. However, this revolution is soon reabsorbed by the play's society (the siblings keep certain defining traits but eventually comply with others' requests) and, in the audience's world, the rule-breaking occurs within a legitimised space of transgression, which undoes the revolutionary charge of the carnivalesque (*ibidem*). Cross-dressing, to reprise the feature of the play most focus upon, is a transgression that "interrogates issues of masculinity and authority" (Berek 2004, 366), but the play can address the issue and charge it with homoerotic allure (e.g., Bobadilla promises that Lucio will be "A pretty piece of flesh [...] / He does already handle his weapon finely", II.iv.13-15) because the established social norm did not sanction it outside transgressive spaces. Despite what has been previously claimed, the very few women accused of cross-dressing in early modern England were probably not cross-dressing at all, but simply mixing foreign imported fashions (see Bassan 2022). In fact, cross-dressing in the play is associated with the boy actor from the beginning, and thus with a "theatrical agent defined by change" (Crow 2014, 191), "the most densely semiotized element" in early modern theatre (Bassan 2022, 34), which alone could embody "the meaning-making struggle of the whole performance" (35). To an early modern audience, this contributed to reinforce the metatheatrical transgression of the play. Duels, conversely, had just been the subject of a royal legal campaign and had been forbidden by James I in 1614 (see Pérez 2022, 12), as they infringed the monarch's divine right to the administration of justice; they would have been a juicy transgression in a 1615 performance. Significantly, the only formalised duel in the play - legitimised by royal decree – is the final one, which never really takes place and turns into a celebration of peace. Metatheatre reinforces this mechanism by pointing out its own artificiality, thus reinforcing the play's licenses as artificial, outside ordinary life (§2).

The effects of the play's metatheatrical process can be summarised in the character of the Alguazir. A virtuoso of performance at the beginning of the play, the Alguazir has "been of thirty callings, yet ne'er a one lawful" (II.i.185-186): he has changed many identities (from perjurer to constable) and adapted to varied social contexts. We could say he is an agent of social chaos, embodying the social anxieties about class-blurring that pervaded early modern satirical pamphlets and moralistic writings. His performance is changeable and unfixed, and he subverts the idea that social order is fixed and immutable. Yet, the Alguazir will eventually perform the wrong role (leader of a criminal group instead of high officer of justice) for the wrong audience (the governor of Seville), and this will sentence him to repay all his victims

or face imprisonment for life. The play emphasises that the siblings' acceptance of their fixed, appropriate roles in society is commendable – it brings harmony to the play-world society and anticipates its renewal – but the Alguazir's refusal to maintain a single, unambiguous identity is punished with his removal from that same society.

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