

Shakespeare's "Boys"

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Shakespeare was keenly affected by the lives of the boys who played the parts of women in his plays. Evidence for his understanding and compassion is found in the speeches of those characters who cross-dress female to male. By a double negation of his gender, the boy actor is given an opportunity to speak for himself as well for the female character he is portraying. The examples are Julia as Sebastian in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Portia as Balthazar and Nerissa as both the young lawyer's clerk and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, Viola as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, Imogen as Fidele in *Cymbeline*, and especially Rosalind as Ganymede in *As You Like It*. I argue that what they were given to say by Shakespeare reveals the experience of being a boy, not only in early modern England or ancient Greece (where all parts were also played by males), but also in our time. I suggest the treatment of boys in the theatre is mirrored by the treatment of boys today. In those instances where doubled impersonation was written into Shakespeare's plays, we have a unique opportunity to hear boys tell us about themselves. As with so much else that is timeless insight, the bard understood and articulated the experience of being a boy. Taken together, the utterances of his "boys" tell us how it is to be a boy.

Keywords: boys, Shakespeare's plays, double impersonation

. . . boys, with women's voices,
Strive to speak big . . .
— *Richard II*, III ii, 113-114.

Here sate alone a slender boy;
And with a thrill of fearful joy
The Sculptor recognized the form
Of Juliet! . . .
At last with an impatient air,
Half-vexed, half-scornful, wistful too

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The boy broke silence. "Doubtless you,
 Like many others here, have met
 My actress sister, 'Juliet'?
 Am I not like her? Though her hair
 Is raven black, and mine is fair,
 A wig might make the difference.
 I'm rough, she sweet? Tut! All pretence:
 Once off the stage she is no saint!
 I'm sallow? Ay, but rouge and paint
 Could set that right: she's just as pale.
 Look at my form: you find it frail?
 But hers is padded. 'Juliet,'
 Whose beauty all confess, is yet
 In sober fact no whit more fair
 Than I, could you but see her bare,
 Unpainted, unbewigged, undressed.

This 'Juliet' and I are one.
 The truth of course is known to none
 Outside the theatre...."

– E.E. Bradford, "The Sculptor"¹

Shakespeare's female characters were written to be played by boys.² This is explained by the times, which thought it disgraceful for a woman to appear on stage.³ Shakespeare was also fond of the theme of girls cross-dressing as boys (and *vice versa*), but this does not seem to be explained by custom or convenience. The transformation

¹ E.E. Bradford, *Passing the Love of Women* (London: Kegan Paul, 1913), pp. 109-113.

² It is known, moreover, that Shakespeare wrote each female part with a certain boy actor in mind. In *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1895), Oscar Wilde has his character Cyril Graham suggest that one boy actor in particular was Shakespeare's muse as a playwright and that this boy is the subject of the sonnets. "Who was he whose physical beauty was such that it became the very corner-stone of Shakespeare's art; the very source of Shakespeare's inspiration; the very incarnation of Shakespeare's dreams? To look upon him as simply the object of certain love poems is to miss the meaning of the poems; for the art of which Shakespeare talks in the Sonnets is . . . the art of the dramatist to which he is always alluding; and he to whom Shakespeare said – 'Thou art all my heart, and dost advance / As high learning my rude ignorance,' – he to whom he promised immortality – 'Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men,' – was surely none other than the boy-actor for whom he created Viola and Imogen, Juliet and Rosalind, Portia and Desdemona, and Cleopatra herself." Quoted in Chris White (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality. A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 194-195.

³ The first appearance of females in women's roles on the English stage has recently been treated in the film *Stage Beauty* (Eyre, 2004).

from girl to boy in Shakespeare's plays is especially fascinating, since in that case we have a young male actor playing a female character pretending to be what he in fact is, a boy or teenage youth.

If the negative of a negative is a positive, female characters playing youths are boy actors speaking as themselves, as boys. A young male character dressing as a female might be an instance of mere disguise, but a young female character who is in reality a boy dressing as a young male may also be an occasion for self-revelation. It occurs to me that what these boys playing female parts impersonating young men have to say may reveal something about the psychological life of boys. That is what I want to explore in what follows.

The examples are Julia as Sebastian in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Portia as Balthazar and Nerissa as both the young lawyer's clerk and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, Viola as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, Imogen as Fidele in *Cymbeline*, and especially Rosalind as Ganymede in *As You Like It*.⁴ I will argue that what they were given to say by Shakespeare reveals the experience of being a boy, not only in early modern England or ancient Greece (where all parts were also played by males), but also in our time. I will also suggest the treatment of boys in the theatre is mirrored by the treatment of boys today. In those instances where doubled impersonation was written into Shakespeare's plays, we have a unique opportunity to hear boys tell us about themselves. As with so much else that is timeless insight, the bard understood and articulated the experience of being a boy. Taken together, the utterances of his "boys" tell us how it is to be a boy.

⁴ Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), discusses the social and dramaturgical contexts of "play-boys," as the 10 to 19-year-old apprentices in all-male theatrical companies were called. All-boy companies were also part of the scene, but Shakespeare's company was all-male of all ages. Shapiro sees the charm of boys, when revealed on stage by simultaneous cross-gender casting and cross-gender disguise, in the extremes of their "pert audacity or winsome shyness" (p. 50). "The phenomenological reality . . . enabled [the boy heroine] to achieve an effect I term *theatrical vibrancy*" (p. 52), that is, "a layering of gender identity and the rapid oscillation between layers" (p. 59). Rosalind is the most complex example of this layering: {boy [Rosalind (Ganymede <female>)]}. Stephen Orgel, in "Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?," in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88(1), 1989, pp. 7-29, reminds us that, in the epilogue of the play, Rosalind explicitly reminds the audience that she is a boy (p. 27). A number of other studies have been helpful to me as background. None of them, however, take up the topic I focus on. They include Robertson Davies, *Shakespeare's Boy Actors* (London: Russell and Russell, 1939), Robert Micklewright, *The Story of the Elizabethan Boy-Actors* (London: Oxford, 1971), Peter Hyland, "'A Kind of Woman': The Elizabethan Boy-Actor and the Kabuki *Onnagata*," in *Theatre Research Journal* 12(1), 1987, pp. 1-8, Juliet Dusinberre, "Boys Becoming Women in Shakespeare's Plays," in *Shakespeare Studies* 36, 1998, pp. 1-28, Joy Leslie Gibson, *Squeaking Cleopatras. The Elizabethan Boy Player* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2000), and Richard Madelaine, "Material Boys. Apprenticeships and the Boy Actors' Shakespearean Roles," in Lloyd Davis (ed.), *Shakespeare Matters. History, Teaching, Performance* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), pp. 25-38.

The Characters

*Julia*⁵

To allow for the “loose encounters of lascivious men” (II vii) with other men, Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* dresses as page to get close to her man, Proteus. She disguises herself as “a youth,” Sebastian. At Lucetta’s urging, although at first reluctantly, as befits a man she outfits herself with a codpiece, making it clear that she is to be perceived as a post-pubescent male. Julia worries: “How will the world repute me / For undertaking so unstaied a journey?” (59-60), that is, cross-dressing as a young man. “I fear me, it will make me scandaliz’d” (61). No matter. In IV ii, she arrives as Sebastian, where “the pretty youth” (58) hears the famous song “Who Is Silvia?” and realizes that Proteus now loves another woman, who is herself engaged to be married to someone else. Standing in the shadows listening to Proteus and Silvia talk, the boy refers to himself as something unreal, a shadow (128). He stalks Proteus. They finally meet in IV iv, where Proteus takes a liking to the boy “chiefly for thy face and thy behaviour, / Which, if my augery deceive me not, / Witness good bringing up, fortune, and truth” (72-74).

Proteus asks Sebastian to turn over to Silvia the ring Julia had given to him. The boy soon tells Proteus about Julia’s love for him, but Proteus makes light of it and sends a frustrated and unhappy Sebastian off with the ring. The boy’s next speech is a pivotal moment in the play. I imagine it spoken by one of Shakespeare’s boy actors about himself and all the other young ones working in Shakespeare’s company and in the many all-boy acting troupes then in vogue:

And now am I, unhappy messenger,
 To plead for that which I would not obtain,
 To carry that which I would have refus’d,
 To praise his faith which I would have disprais’d. (104-107)

As a young male, he knows he will not get what he wants, a young female. His company will be entirely other men, who some authorities say “kept” the young actors, both caring for them and sometimes using them as sexual partners.

⁵ The names of the boys who are disguised women are themselves revealing. “What’s in a name?” someone once asked. Consider the pairs of women and their counterparts when disguised as young men or boys. In each case, the boy’s name indicates a human quality to be admired. Julia’s *Sebastian* means revered one; Portia’s *Balthazar* (or *Baldassarre*), one of the three *magi* referred to in the nativity story, means protector; Viola’s *Cesario*, a variant of Caesar, would nicely translate as a little prince; Rosalind’s *Ganymede* was antiquity’s epitome of mortal beauty; and, finally, Imogen’s *Fidele* means one who is loyal.

Describing Julia to Silvia, Sebastian recounts how once "Our youth got me to play the woman's part, / And I was trimm'd in Madam Julia's gown" (165-166), which, he says, fit him perfectly and deceived "all men's judgements" so that he passed for a she. The boy he played, Sebastian recalls, was the same height as the mistress of the house, Julia, and took the part of Ariadne to another lad's Theseus in a "pageant." Sebastian tells Silvia that his impersonation of Ariadne was so convincing that Julia herself "wept bitterly." As Sebastian tells the story of Ariadne and Theseus, he moves Silvia so much that she gives Sebastian some money and a picture of her to take to Julia. "I give thee this / For thy sweet mistress' sake, because thou lovs't her" (181-182).

With Silvia's likeness in hand, Sebastian compares it to her shadowy presence earlier in the act and sets out to recover Proteus' changing love for himself. In the final scene of the play (V iv), Julia reveals her identity and defends her having played at being a boy as something to be ashamed of only "if shame live / In a disguise of love" (106-107).

Surely there is never reason to be ashamed of any behavior enacted in the name of love, especially when it comes from someone whose name is Sebastian, which means from Sebaste, that is, one who is venerable. The disguise is defended. But what Julia says at the end of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* holds only for women (and on stage, that means boys), since men's protean affections disqualify them from the disclaimer: "It is the lesser blot, modesty finds, / Women to change their shapes than men their minds" (108-109).

Thus boys can dissemble in the name of love, but since men cannot for long keep a straight face in matters of the heart, they will likely not be able to pull off an effective disguise, for example, as a woman.

A second message relayed by the boy playing Julia playing Sebastian seems to be that boys know what love is, but somewhere along the way to manhood forget or come to ignore what they once knew.

Portia

A boy once removed, speaking as a boy, speaks Shakespeare's great speech on tolerance or *mercy*. Bathazar's speech in *The Merchant of Venice* (IV i) plays on the original sense of the word *mercy*, namely, its reference to the payment of what is due, but the focus of the speech falls on its sense of *pity* and *compassion*, in this case for Antonio:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd.
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
 'Tis the mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown.
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 But mercy is above the sceptred sway;
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice.... (184-197)

Balthazar, who as Portia has chosen Bassanio as her man (after rejecting two other suitors), is in court to argue for a loophole in Venetian law that would free Antonio from his bondage to Shylock, but his speech could as easily have been addressed to the boys who played the parts of Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica. It is easy to show mercy, a sentiment that only the most powerful—kings, the godlike, God on earth, and even “God himself” —have.

In this text, I would argue, mercy might also be thought of as an emblem of boyhood. In that case, speaking through Balthazar, Shakespeare seems to be asking us to consider, not only Antonio's financial problems, but whether there might be a way to show some compassion for the many young Ned Fields of this world—and for boys even now.⁶

In the play, playing at being a man gives Portia the opportunity to exploit the power of law, something that reigned above even the Doge, who presided over Venice, and Catholicism in that city of travel and trade where Hebrews and Christians lived together, but where for the first time in Europe, thanks to the contrivance by the Venetians of the first ghetto (named after the foundry area in the *Serenissima*) where Jews were sequestered and locked away after sundown.

The purpose of Shakespeare's giving a boy, playing a woman disguised as a young man, perhaps his most powerful pronouncement on mercy should also be considered against the backdrop of the undisguised, heartbreakingly deep love of Antonio for Bassanio. Here, I think, Shakespeare was as direct as any post-classical writer had been (with the possible exception of Montaigne) in showing to what lengths of devotion a man's love might be extended to another man, if not also to boys.

Rosalind

Here, in *As You Like It*, we have a boy acting the character of a young woman (Rosalind), who disguised as a boy (Ganymede) is to be *treated* as a woman. In III iii, Ganymede speaks to Orlando about love, a topic he has learned about earlier from “an old religious uncle of mine” (362):⁷

⁶ Ned Field was one of the best known Elizabethan boy (and later adult) actors. Three hundred years had to pass before the appearance of the next great literary advocate for boys, Charles Dickens. Since then, until recently there have been few of them.

⁷ Ganymede is a central figure in the history of boyhood studies. See, for example, Dominique Fernandez, *Der Raub des Ganymed* (Freiburg: Beck and Glückler, 1992). Since first

Love is merely a madness, and, I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do; and the reason why they are not so punish'ed and cured is, that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love too. (420-424)

Shakespeare has given his boy actor something to say that surely only a very precocious boy would have realized. He has the boy as Ganymede be a kind of psychotherapist to Orlando for his madsickness called love: "I profess curing it by counsel" (424-425). The cure is for Orlando "to imagine me [Ganymede] his love, his mistress" (427-428). In other words, Orlando is supposed to fantasize that Ganymede is Rosalind and let Ganymede act the part.

. . . I set him every day to woo me; at which time would I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears; for every passion something and for no passion truly any thing, as boys and women are for the most part cattle of this color; would now like him, now loathe him; then entertain him, then forswear him; now weep for him, then spit at him; that I drave my suitor from his mad humour of love to a living humour of madness; which was, to forswear the full stream of world and to live in a nook, merely monastic. And thus I cur'ed him; and this way will I take upon me to wash your liver as clean as sound sheep's heart, that there shall not be one spot of love in't. (427-445)

Shakespeare might seem to be firmly in the timeworn tradition of thinking of women and children in the same breath, but there is no mention of children because, as Lloyd deMause has convincingly shown, there was no concept of childhood in the late Middle Ages.⁸ Yet while there were no children, there were boys, who form a special category of human being, not yet men and equivalent to women in temperament, demeanor, and even looks and use. Unlike little girls (who were also sexually misused by men at that time as now), boys had to divest themselves of their boyhood, including being treated as women sexually (at least in the world of Elizabethan theatre). Girls, who became the prototype of children, "merely" moved on to being women and all that entailed, especially for the innumerable impoverished. As women, they had to put up with more of the same from men, but boys had to become something entirely different. That was and still is a more difficult social and psychological maneuver.

After initially turning down his young would-be therapist's offer, Orlando takes him up on it. He is called upon by Ganymede to "come every day to my cote and woo

appearing in Greek mythology he has been studied extensively. Shakespeare's invocation here of the only Olympian to have had two mortal parents is perhaps central to his presentations of boys speaking as boys. Is his "old religious uncle" perhaps Plato?

⁸ Lloyd deMause, *The History of Childhood* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1995).

me” (447-449). Orlando is to practice his love-making on Ganymede, who if he were in fact a woman (Rosalind) in disguise (which he is), would have been a convenient source of gratification for a woman until the denouement, but since “she” (playing Ganymede) is in reality a boy, Shakespeare’s compassion for his boys was given voice by pointing to what was the inevitable fate of young Elizabethan male actors.

Orlando is almost an hour late for his first appointment, suggesting that he may have been a bit anxious about playing at love with a boy, even though it was all in the service of curing him of his love-sickness for Rosalind. The pretense is even more remarkable since Ganymede, a young male, was being courted by an only somewhat younger male. And so, in IV i, Ganymede, who in classical mythology is the beloved of Jupiter (Zeus), expects to talk love with Orlando. Orlando says he will not start off “wooing” by talking, but by kissing. He wants to get on with making out. Ganymede briefly holds back but soon enough allows himself to “be your Rosalind in a more coming-on disposition; an ask me what you will, I will grant it” (112-113). “Then love me . . .,” he says, proposing that Celia (aka Aliena), Rosalind’s girl-friend, even officially bind them in wedlock. The way would then be paved for sanctioned, full-blown sex. At first, Celia “cannot say the words” (128), but soon enough begins the marriage ceremony of Ganymede and Orlando, which is pronounced to last “for ever and a day” (145), even though Ganymede cautions everyone how changeable *both* men and women are, and reminds Orlando that *it is always the woman who chooses the man* (175).

It is noon. “Married,” the couple must separate for awhile. Ganymede says how much he will miss Orlando: “Alas, dear love, I cannot lack thee two hours!” (182-183). He is bitter, in effect saying: All right, go on, go have dinner with your *other* guy friend, the Duke! I half expected you would be like all the rest! My friends told me as much about the way men are! But Orlando reassures Ganymede: “Ay, sweet” (191). He’ll be back at 1400 hours.

Celia now complains to Rosalind that you “have simply misus’d our sex in your love-prate” (205-206). Not at all, Rosalind counters: “that thou didst not know how many fathoms deep I am in love!” (209-210). That Rosalind *is* still Ganymede, that the woman is meant to be seen as a boy, is betrayed when Ganymede refers to Celia as Aliena, Celia’s rustic persona (221).

By means of the transformations effected, Shakespeare has the boy Ganymede in love with the young man Orlando, in effect, reversing the classic *erastes/eromenos* relationship of Athenian Greek pederasty, in which the only somewhat older male loves the younger lad. This seems confirmed by Ganymede’s last speech in the scene with his reference to the boy Cupid: “No, that same wicked bastard of Venus that was begot of thought, conceiv’d of spleen, and born of madness, that blind rascally boy that abuses every one’s eyes because his own are out, let him be judge how deep I am in love (216-219).”⁹

⁹ Recall that Cupid (also known as Amor) is the Roman counterpart of Eros, the god of passionate, Dionysian love. Ganymede’s unflattering Roman lineage of this other boy, Cupid, may

The notable feature of love described in this text is its irrationality, madness, and meanness, all of which add up to its (this is Shakespeare's word) abusiveness, but while he had in mind what men wantonly did to women, I would suggest he is also talking through his twice-removed boys about what men did to boys, again, at least in world of the theatre.

Later, in IV iii, Orlando's brother, Oliver, arrives on the scene to convey a message to Ganymede (understood to be Orlando's surrogate Rosalind), whom Oliver recognizes from Orlando's earlier description of him: "The boy is fair, / Of female favour, and bestows himself / Like a ripe sister" (86-88). The boy would be recognized by his fair complexion. He will look like a *girl*, carry himself and act like a pubescent female. When told of Orlando's injuries, Ganymede feigns a faint, which a young woman would be expected to produce. Oliver taunts Ganymede, however, for the display: "You a man! / You lack a man's heart" (164-165). He has to agree: "I do so, I confess it. Ah, sirrah, a body would think this was well counterfeited! I pray you, tell your brother how well I counterfeited" (166-168). But, after all, he isn't a man. He is a boy in his mid-teens and may well have reacted that way in "real life." The macho Oliver suggests that Ganymede "take a good heart and counterfeit to be a man" (174-175). At least try to act like a man! To which the boy replies: "So I do. But, i' faith, I should have been a woman by right" (176-177). Given the way they were treated, this might have been every boy actor's complaint.

In V ii, Orlando begins to weary of practicing on Ganymede what he wants to do with Rosalind: "I can live no longer by thinking" (55); that is, he can no longer fantasize about a female while looking at a young male. Then comes the key speech, spoken by Ganymede, that speaks for all of Shakespeare's boys playing women: "Believe then, if you please, that I can do strange things. I have since I was three year old, convers'd with a magician, most profound in his art and yet not damnable" (64-67). Like all boys in the theatre, Ganymede says, "I am a magician" (78). Whether taken in off the streets or as a foundling, as early as age three the boy actor was groomed to play at being a girl or a woman. Now, playing Ganymede, his magical power to incarnate himself as Rosalind is not really the point; rather, it is both the dark magic of boy actors (and the magic of boys themselves) that they are really neither male nor female, man nor woman, or perhaps both in both the biological and social realms. They are presexual and pregender, and in this sense have the uncanny qualities of changelings and other intermediate creatures.

The exchange that follows when Silvius and Phebe arrive makes the point. Recall that in IV Ganymede had shown Silvius a love letter that Phebe, Silvius's girlfriend, wrote to Ganymede. Phebe is more than annoyed at Ganymede's indiscretion. Now follows the moment in the play of a series of transformative exchanges, beginning with Ganymede's exhortation to Phebe (herself played by a boy, we should not forget) re-

be interpreted as coming from Rosalind, who characterizes Cupid as the illegitimate son of complete opposites: strife (Mars/Ares) and love (Venus/Aphrodite).

garding Sylvius and spiraling into what Ganymede will eventually characterize as an onstage cacophony sounding like dogs in heat:

Ros. Look upon him, love him. He worships you.

Phe. Good shepherd, tell this youth what 'tis to love.

Sil. It is to be all made of sighs and tears;

And so am I for Phebe.

Phe. And I for Ganymede.

Orl. And I for Rosalind.

Ros. And I for no woman.

Sil. It is to be all made of faith and service;

And so am I for Phebe.

Phe. And I for Ganymede.

Orl. And I for Rosalind.

Ros. And I for no woman.

Sil. It is to be all made of fantasy.

All made of passion, and all made of wishes;

All adoration, duty, and observance;

All humbleness, all patience, and impatience;

All purity, all trial, all obeisance;

And so am I for Phebe.

Phe. And so am I for Ganymede.

Orl. And so am I for Rosalind.

Ros. And so am I for no woman.

Phe. [*To Ros.*] If this be so, why blame you me to love you?

Sil. [*To Phe.*] If this be so, why blame you me to love you?

Orl. If this be so, why blame you me to love you?

Ros. Who do you speak to, 'Why blame you me to love you?'

Orl. To her that is not here, nor doth not hear.

Ros. Pray you, no more of this; 'tis like the howling of Irish wolves against the moon. [*To Sil.*] I will help you, if I can. [*To Phe.*] I would love you, if I could. To-morrow meet me all together. [*To Phe.*] I will marry you, if ever I marry woman, and I'll be married to-morrow. [*To Orl.*] I will satisfy you, if ever I satisfied man, and you shall be married to-morrow. [*To Sil.*] I will content you, if what pleases you contents you, and you shall be married to-morrow. [*To Orl.*] As you love Rosalind, meet. [*To Sil.*] As you love Phebe, meet. And as I love no woman, I'll meet. So fare you well: I have left you commands.

Sil. I'll not fail, if I live.

Phe. Nor I.

Orl. Nor I. (88-134)

All of the exchanges are about boys and one can discern in the ensemble Shakespeare's message about his boys. I translate:

"You, boy, (playing Phebe)," says Ganymede, "Don't fall in love with me! Look at Silvius over there. He loves you, he worships the very pastures you two shepherds walk on!" The boy playing Phebe responds: "Yes, Silvius, explain to Ganymede that you really love me." Silvius replies: "But I love you, young boy (Phebe)," who pipes up protesting: "Yes, but I love Ganymede!" "Yes, I know," says Orlando, "it's like my love for Rosalind," who (as Ganymede) reacts with the crucial words: 'And I for no woman.' That is to say, "but I do not love women."

Here, I would suggest, is Shakespeare speaking of himself as a boy in the voice of the boy of boys, Zeus's (that is to say, God's boy), Ganymede.

The character Rosalind is there on stage, though not known to be a woman by anyone except Aliena. When Orlando chimes in, it is about his vision of Rosalind and not at all about Ganymede. At the moment and in the reality of the play, however, he speaks to and about a boy. The theme is varied as the features of love are enumerated. Continuing with my translation:

"Love," say Silvius, "is all about fantasy, passion, desire, idealization, fidelity, caring for the other, self-sacrifice, patience, restlessness, chastity, working at it, and deference for the beloved. I'm in for all of the above with Phebe (my boy)." "But," says the boy, "that's what I feel for Ganymede." And that is, of course, what Orlando feels for Rosalind but demonstrates and tells to Ganymede, who repeats that he feels none of that for women. "But," Phebe protests to Ganymede, "if that's the case, why are you rejecting my love? *I*, after all, am a female (character)." Silvius is by now also completely puzzled and asks Phebe: "But if all this is so, why won't you let me love you?"

Orlando has the same question to ask of Ganymede, but this is surprising, since he *knows* Ganymede is only a "practice" Rosalind, not a woman but a boy, an effeminate boy perhaps, but a boy nonetheless. He has slipped up here, but the goal of the confusion has been reached: everyone is a boy! In quick succession, Ganymede gasps: "Why do you speak too, 'Why blame you me to love you?'" In other words: Why do you ask the shepherds' *rhetorical* question, the question: "Why do you reject my love?" And, he seems to be asking: You, Orlando, why are you worried about being rejected by Ganymede, a mere *boy*? Orlando's explanation is that he is thinking about Rosalind while rehearsing his love for her with Ganymede. The question, says Orlando, is addressed "to her that is not here, nor doth not hear." Ah, yes! If only Rosalind were here to hear this!

Perhaps Shakespeare wants the audience to feel hope for Orlando by reminding us that Ganymede is Rosalind in disguise, or perhaps he wants to suggest that, after all, it is a real boy whom Orlando is playing against on stage as a “boy.” The line between verisimilitude and reality, acting and being, has been nearly erased. The curtain (if there had been one) has gone up on what goes on backstage. Superficially, the double negative “nor doth not hear” suggests that, for Orlando, Rosalind somehow does know how he loves her. No matter, Rosalind was in any case a boy.

The confusion is resolved by Ganymede, who effectively closes the scene even though Orlando has the last word (significantly enough: “I”). The solution to the mix of feelings and identities is the boy, both the character Ganymede and the concept. The character offers to help Silvius by admitting to Phebe that he wishes he could love her but cannot, adding ironically, that “if ever I marry woman,” it would be she. Moreover, he will satisfy Orlando, “if ever I satisfied man.” This is perhaps Shakespeare’s most transparent message spoken through Ganymede the quintessential boy. He knew, as we do, that Ganymede did satisfy men, most notably Zeus, the most potent of the gods.

For Orlando, what matters is that when Ganymede returns as Rosalind (while remaining a boy) she will satisfy him sexually. As for Silvius, Ganymede promises to “content” him, assuming that what satisfies him and brings him pleasure will also put his anxieties to rest. Ganymede thus assures all of them that they will be joined, Orlando and Rosalind, Silvius and Phebe. But what of Ganymede himself: “And as I love no woman, I’ll meet.” For him, to *meet* means, literally, to come together at last, to be who he is: Rosalind again as Rosalind and the boy who played her as the boy himself. It is a poignant moment, since at the end of the scene the boy Ganymede disappears and with him goes any further opportunity in the play for the boy actor to speak for himself about himself.

Viola

Asked to be presented as a “eunuch” (I ii, 56) to Orsino in *Twelfth Night or What You Will*, Viola shows up as Cesario “in man’s attire” (I iv) and is readily accepted by the duke, who sends the youth to get close to Olivia and tell her how much he (Orsino) loves her: “It shall become thee well to act my woes. / She will attend it better in thy youth” (26-27).

Orsino is convinced that Olivia will tell a young man about her feelings for the duke. The lad is dubious, however, but Orsino reassures him and points out to him just how physically attractive Cesario is:

Dear lad, believe it;
 For they shall yet belie thy happy years,
 That say thou are a man. Diana’s lip
 Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe
 Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound;
 And all is semblative a woman’s part.

I know thy constellation is right apt
For this affair. (29-36)

The "pipe" may refer to the boy's penis as well as to his voice, but it is the overall "constellation" of parts or, as some commentators have noted, his "nature" that matters.¹⁰ Viola is herself attracted to Orsino but reluctantly goes off to carry out the assignment given her in order to stay in the duke's good graces. She leaves with great ambivalence, expecting "a barful strife" (41), an encounter that will have to contend with many barriers.

Indirectly giving himself away in his initial encounter with Olivia, Cesario admits, "I am not that I play" (I v, 196); that is, speaking as a mere boy on behalf of a man, Orsino, he dutifully delivers his message: "My lord and master loves you" (271). Olivia resists. She asks about Cesario's origins. "I am a gentleman," he says (298). But then something odd happens. Olivia begins to find Cesario attractive: "Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit / Do give thee five-fold blazon" (311-312). Everything about him attracts her. Here is a boy playing a woman (Viola) disguised as a boy (Cesario) who is found attractive by a woman (Olivia), also played by a boy: "Methinks I feel this youth's perfections / With an invisible and subtle stealth / To creep in at mine eyes" (315-317).

Trying to find a way to get Cesario to return in the following act, Olivia pretends that Cesario has left behind a ring and sends Malvolio to catch up with the lad and give it back to him. Cesario realizes what has happened and that the ring is a ruse. "Fortune forbid my outside have not charm'ed her!" (II ii, 19). Shakespeare then points out the difficulties of having someone (a boy actor, for example) dress up as someone he is not (Viola, for example), whom he has say:

Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
How easy is it for the proper-false
In women's hearts to set their forms!
Alas, [our] frailty is the cause, not we!
For such as we are made [of], such we be .
How will this fadge? My master loves her dearly;
And I, poor monster, fond as much on him;
And she, mistaken, seems to dote on me. (28-36)

Once again Shakespeare may be talking as much about his boy actors as about women, so feminists need not take offence.

¹⁰ William Allan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill (eds.), *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942), p. 245 (note to I iv, 35).

We see that the consequences for a boy actor dressed as woman are as dangerous as they are for female character who cross-dresses as a young man. Assume that, dressed as a boy, Viola is speaking for the boy (“the false-proper” in her heart) who plays her. How easy it is for a boy to look the part! “Alas, [our]¹¹ frailty is the cause, not we!” Boy actors had no power and underneath the make-up, costuming, and the playing of their parts, “such as we are made [of], such we be”—mere boys.¹²

This rich speech needs further interpreting, since it raises some of the questions about what boys were then and still are. Hidden behind it all—the boy-disguise and the woman-disguise—there was a boy, who because of his poverty had no choice but to play along in order to survive. We have some idea of how he might have felt and what he may have thought if we read through the characters we are examining in which female->male cross-dressing occurs.

And so, in *Twelfth Night*, at the core of Viola’s predicament of impersonation and given her success at playacting being male, Cesario perceives what he himself, the boy who played this counterfeit boy, is: “And I, poor monster” (35). What about the boy?

What will become of this? As I am man
My state is desperate for my master’s love;
As I am woman,—now alas the day!— (37-39)

Indeed. For the Cesario or any one of Shakespeare’s boy thespians, “[i]t is too hard a knot for me t’ untie!” (42). As a male, the boy’s situation was entirely dependent on his skill and usefulness as an actor, at least until his voice broke. If he did not do well, he would have been out in the streets. In effect, he needed to be liked, but only for his voice and body.

In II iv, the Duke detects the signs of love in the “boy” (26) and assumes it is Cesario’s love for a girl. But: “What kind of woman is’t?” “Of your complexion,” answers Cesario (29). Conveniently, the “woman” is also the Duke’s age. Orsino opines that the “woman” is too old for the boy and should go for older men, like himself:

For, boy, however we do praise ourselves,
Our fancies are more giddy and unfirm,
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,
Than women’s are. (33-36)

So much for the presumed fickleness of women! This makes sense, however, since a man had to accept a woman who would have him. He might have his

¹¹ The 1623 folio indicates ‘O’ in place of ‘our’.

¹² Thomas Trywhitt’s (1765) alternate reading (“For such as we are made, if such we be”) leads to the same interpretation: because boys were so beautiful but also so weak, they were exploitable.

preference—hence the emphasis on flattering a beautiful woman—but in the end, then as always, she made *the lover's* choice, and if she were someone less comely than he had in mind, too bad. For the sake of a physical relationship—for sex—he would accept. The same effect was and is at work in men's indifferent behavior with prostitutes.

The Duke advises Cesario to find a girl his own age: "For women are as roses, whose fair flower / Being once display'd, doth fall that very hour"(39-40). He might just as well have had Cesario himself in mind, however, since the image he invokes also applies to boys. They fade fast and become men. The "boy" Cesario, perhaps thinking of the boy he himself (the boy actor) is, confirms the Duke observation: "And so they are; alas, that they are so! / To die, even when they to perfection grow!" (41-42). Boyhood, whether in an acting company or in everyday life, had a short term of perfection, whether to play the parts of women or simply to be a boy. Little has changed on this score since Shakespeare's time.

Again suppose for a moment that Orsino is speaking of boys when he replies to Cesario's suggestion that the Duke give up on Olivia, since Cesario knows there is someone who loves him even more, namely, the woman he is disguising. Perhaps, then, there is such a thing as a boy who loves a man more than the man in question loves the boy, in this case, the boy playing Olivia. That would have been a unique situation, one that once perhaps Shakespeare knew and wrote about in the sonnets, as Wilde's character conjectures.

We get the "man's" point of view (II v) from the Duke:

There is no woman's sides
 Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
 As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart
 So big, to hold so much. They lack retention.
 Alas, their love may be call'd appetite,
 No motion of the liver, but the palate,
 That suffer surfeit, cloyment, and revolt;
 But mine is all as hungry as the sea,
 And can digest as much. Make no compare
 Between that love a woman can bear me
 And that I owe Olivia. (96-106)

But, again, what about the boys? Are they also all about immediate gratification and incapable of deep-seated love. Substitute 'boy' for 'woman' in the following speech and listen to Cesario, that is to say, the boy actor playing Viola impersonating Cesario:

Too well what love women to men may owe.
 In faith, they are as true of heart as we.
 My father had a daughter lov'd a man,
 As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,
 I should your lordship. (108-112)

Viola desperately wants to come clean at that moment, but if she did we would still find a boy's face underneath all the make-up.

Very soon after, Shakespeare gives Cesario one of his greatest speeches about love and *he gives it to a boy playing a woman playing a boy*. Briefly, Cesario tells what happened when the boy playing Viola was unable to show his love. Convert the female pronoun to the male and read:

She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek. She pin'd in thought,
And with a green and yellow melancholy
She sat, like Patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed? (113-118)¹³

How out of tune all of this sounds even today, when boys are still taught how *not* to talk about their feelings. The infidelity of men also seems to have been average expectable then as now:

We men may say more, swear more; but indeed
Our shows are more than will, for still we prove
Much in our vows, but little in our love. (119-121)

What happens between boyhood and manhood so that males lose the capacity for loving?

On stage in Shakespeare's time, unlike our own, women talked openly about their feelings but only when they were given voice by boys, and men talked openly. Now, both in life and on stage, women talk openly without the need of boys to give them voice while men have gone silent about matters of the heart. I think we may understand something of these changes by paying attention to what Shakespeare reveals about boys in his world of the theatre. That is one goal of this paper.

But back to *Twelfth Night*. Viola backs out of self-disclosure while also giving a clue about her double gender by saying to the Duke, "I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too . . ." (123-124). With that, Cesario is sent on his way once again to plead Orsino's case for Olivia in Act III.

After Feste's exchange with the lad (who notes the hidden wisdom of what clowns and fools say, that is, the deep seriousness of jokes) and after Cesario's near face-off with Sir Toby Belch, Olivia arrives and takes the beautiful boy's hand. In a telling aside

¹³ "He never told his love, / But let concealment, like a worm I' the bud, / Feed on his damask cheek. *He pin'd in thought, And with a green and yellow melancholy / He sat, like Patience on a monument, Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?*" (Forgive me, Will, and not only for the italics.) Line 116: "green and yellow, signifying hope and jealousy." Note in Neilson Hill, p. 292.

about counterfeiting, disguise and playacting, she observes (III i): "'Twas never merry world / Since lowly feigning was call'd compliment" (109-110). This is especially true, I would add, for boys when they must grow up and become men. Olivia then turns all her attention to Cesario, admits to the ring ploy, and tries to evoke Cesario's romantic interest. Unhappily for her, however, it is time for Cesario to go. A proper lady, Olivia must feign the proper thing to do, to send him away, reminding him, however, that perhaps one day, when he has matured, "[y]our wife is like to reap a proper man" (144). Just maybe, she wonders (and hopes), when Cesario is a little older, he will warm up to her and let her make him her choice.

Before Cesario ages, however, Olivia finds one more chance to ask him what he thinks of her. His reply: "That you do think you are not what you are" (151). Consider this a bit more closely with the reading strategy I have proposed in mind. Speaking to another boy actor (let us not forget), he addresses the psychological strain such boys, including himself—the boy who played Viola impersonating Cesario (in effect, himself—perhaps Nat Field)—must be experiencing all the time. Olivia replies tellingly to Cesario's comment (and that means as a fellow made-up "female" boy): "If I think so, I think the same of you" (152). As though commiserating on stage, the two boy actors get even closer in the exchange that follows:

Oli. I would you were as I would have you be!
Vio. Would it be better, madam, than I am?
 I wish it might, for now I am your fool.
Oli. O, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful
 In the contempt and anger of his lip!
 A murd'rous guilt shows not itself more soon
 Than love that would seem hid. Love's night is noon.
 Cesario, by the roses of spring,
 By maidhood, honour, truth, and everything,
 I love thee so, that, maugre all thy pride,
 Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide. (154-164)

Olivia has not been able to control herself. Cesario's mouth turns her on, even though he is scowling. She is sure that everything is about to come out into the open: "Love's night is noon." Although at this point, audiences are usually smirking about Olivia's mistake in falling for a girl dressed as a boy, we may instead see this a moment of real affection between Shakespeare's boys.

In what otherwise might seem to be an odd turnabout of view regarding the sincerity of men, Shakespeare also has Cesario make the following claim against women:

By innocence I swear, and by my youth,
 I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth,
 And that no woman has; nor never none
 Shall mistress be of it, save I alone. (169-172)

Asserting his on-stage feigned masculinity in order to put off Olivia, Cesario's *double entendre* reminds Olivia that he has *a breast* (as we would now say of a male, a chest), not two of them (as we would say of a female). He (as Viola, it seems) adds that, as a man, he will be in charge ("mistress"!) of any relationship. No (other) woman (for example, Olivia) will.

Eventually, Cesario returns with Orsino for the three-way encounter that resolves the confusions of the evening. Feeling betrayed by Cesario, who is as much in love with him as ever, Orsino gives up on Olivia and as an older man warns the younger Cesario to stay out of his way. Sebastian, Viola's brother (and fraternal twin), appears in the middle of all this, and he and Viola are reunited. (We can imagine that, as a male version of Viola, he would have looked exactly like Cesario.) Thanks to Sebastian's revelations, Olivia's misperception is corrected. He consoles her by saying that if she *had* connected with Cesario: "You would have been contracted to a maid" (V,i, 267), instead of a fellow. On the other hand, Sebastian adds, as things stand, Olivia is in the odd position of being "betroth'd both to a maid and man" (270).¹⁴ For the moment Orsino remains in the dark, referring to Viola as "Boy" (274), even though they are about to head off-stage where Cesario will undress and be recostumed as Viola. "So much against the mettle of your sex" (330), says Orsino, he is nevertheless happy with the prospect of having Viola in the wings. For the moment, that leaves only poor (rich) Olivia alone, like Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, and until the end of the play the odd one out.

Imogen

All of the boy-lasses dressed as male youths appear in Shakespeare's comedies. The last of them to be conceived (according to the standard dating of the plays) is Imogen in *Cymbeline*. In III vi, she appears dressed as a boy, Fidele, a name chosen to indicate his later loyalty among men (IV iii, 381). Hiding in a cave, he is discovered by Belarius:

By Jupiter, an angel! or, if not,
An earthly paragon! Behold divineness
No elder than a boy! (43-45)

Belarius's appreciation of boys is forthright. The "fair youth" (63) is eventually courted by Guiderius:

Were you a woman, youth,
I should woo hard but be your groom. In honesty,
I bid for you as I'd buy. (68-70)

¹⁴ Shakespeare's omission of the article before 'man' subtly conveys the duality of the male and female, the man and woman, in the boy actor – and in all boys.

In fact, even though he is not a woman, Guiderius is attracted to him. Arviragus adds: "I'll make't my comfort / He is a man; I'll love him as my brother" (72-73).

Accepting Fidele as a fellow, he will have the next best thing to a woman, something like a fraternity brother. Evidently, Shakespeare understood and appreciated male bonding. Fidele is also admired by the other men for his behavior: "The boy has taught us manly duties," says Lucius (IV ii, 397).

Imogen's purpose in being disguised as a male is to check up on her husband, Posthumus Leonatus, in the last act. Ultimately, she says nothing about Shakespeare's thoughts about his boys. Had something changed in Shakespeare's life or the times?

Conclusions

I have suggested that Shakespeare was keenly affected by the lives of the boys who played the parts of women in his plays. Evidence for his understanding and compassion is found in the speeches of those characters who cross-dress female to male. By a double negation of his gender, the boy actor is given an opportunity to speak for himself through the female character he is portraying.

These speeches give us more than revelations about the boy actor's ambivalence and likely confused sense of what he was. They also tell us a great deal about the experience of being a boy, then and now. As with so many matters, Shakespeare's insights about boyhood are deeply insightful and enduring.¹⁵

¹⁵ Why the dearth of speeches about handsome men in Shakespeare's plays? They are there, of course, but speeches about beautiful women predominate and my guess is that the reason for this is that they are all about boys.