

The Mystification of Gender Affirmation: *Galathea*, Gender, and Fantasy

In literary texts, gender affirmation reflects the ways in which the text imagines and depicts gender presentation. The manner in which characters' gender is or is not affirmed offers insight into the text's position on the nature of gender identity. John Lyly's *Galathea*, a late-sixteenth century play, serves as a radical depiction of gender alteration and community observance. The play follows the love story of Galatea and Phillida, characters initially depicted as women. The two assert masculine gender identities to avoid the violent traditions of the home. In order to be able to live happily together, they gain the assistance of the play's pantheon of gods. Venus agrees to transform one of them (not revealing which) into a man as they enter the church to be married. While not pictured, this intervention by an outside divine force serves as the affirming act that allows for the two characters' romance to be made valid in the eyes of their community. Lyly tackles shockingly contemporary ideas here, questioning how gender identity relates to marriage and how gender affirmation is tied to interactions with others. If one is to believe that community acceptance of the two characters' romantic relationship amounts to affirming Galatea and Phillida's genders, this would seem to imply that divine intervention is required. However, the play actively constructs gendered realities for Galatea and Phillida outside of their community in which they mutually affirm one another. While Venus does intercede, her actions are superfluous in comparison with the radical gender liberation found within Galatea and Phillida. I argue that Lyly's *Galathea* envisions gender as affirmed through mutual respect and recognition of the self, with outside observers' thoughts on identity acting as an intruding force rather than a deciding factor. In doing this, *Galathea* imagines gender to be more radical and transformative, rather than a rigid binary of being.

In tackling this topic, I first will ground *Galathea* in Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, specifically her work in *Gender Trouble*. To understand how gender is recognized within the play, we should consider how Lyly first introduces the audience to Galatea and Phillida's community. The community's understanding of gender is presented as being rooted within biologically essentialist norms. In contrast, Galatea and Phillida's interactions present gender as something created through mutual recognition of the other. This rejects a biologically essentialist idea of gender. Their romance becomes the catalyst for the play's interest in this more radical vision of gender, a concept which I explore through the framework of Melina Moore's analysis of lesbian pulp fiction (2019). Conceptions of gender as derived from social interaction also exist within the gods of the play. Lyly portrays these deities as constructing gender through the system of worshiper and subject. Jamie Paris's writings on hegemonic masculinity act as a basis for understanding these actions as indicative of a similar, albeit violent, social gender affirmation (2020). Hegemonic masculinity imagines masculinity as being derived from the assertion and enforcement of hierarchies, with those who are the most masculine being the most dominant. The gods' genders do not exist within them, instead emerging through the action of themselves and their worshippers. The gods' constructions of gender are then mirrored in the community, a fact that is explored in the final scene. The climax of the play is devoted to exposing the flaws in the community's supposed essentialist beliefs. The scene portrays them as being able to understand gender as coming from an outside force, though it requires the action of a deity for it to be made true to them. Because of the fact that Galatea and Phillida's genders have already been affirmed through their interaction, this recognition through the affirmation of a god serves as yet another depiction of gender being affirmed through social relationships. *Galathea's* vision of gender is meant to leave the audience with not just an understanding of how

gender exists as a social construct, but also how individuals may unconsciously recognize its fluid nature.

A core aspect of this discussion is the definition of gender affirmation and its relation to the events of the play. The concept of gender affirmation does not just refer to pronouns and gendered honorifics. Instead, gender affirmation exists when one views gender as a socially constructed system that is recognized through communal understanding. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler's image of gender as being created through performance, the audience being the general population, situates gender within the action of the individual rather than biologically determined factors (192).¹ In understanding gender within these terms, gender affirmation is the social application of one's gender expression. Simply put, it is the synchronization of gender performance and audience to gender. Due to gender's nature as a nebulous, less neatly defined concept, an individual's understanding of where gender emerges from may differ from the more radical definitions that exist. Consequently, even those who perceive gender within these strict biological definitions find themselves immersed in the world of socially constructed gender. The incongruities between the belief in innate gender and a socially constructed reality allow for one to analyze where this view of binary gender falls apart. The assertion of gender roles, even within regressive systems, involves the enforcement of socially constructed ideas around gendered behavior. Where *Galathea* enters this conversation is in how Galatea's and Phillida's character arcs relate to this system of gender in their community. As they are two people who are broadly perceived as women, their romance conflicts with the binary vision of gender that the community holds. By examining how *Galathea* creates systems of affirmation both inside and

¹ My fixation on Butler's work is due to their position as an intellectual figurehead of transgender studies. Many contemporary scholars cite *Gender Trouble* as a core text to transgender theory, such as *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker, Aizura 2013), *Transgender Marxism* (Gleeson, O'Rourke 2021), and "Or Whatever You Be" (Chess 2015).

outside of their community, this allows one to create their own framework for how gender can be created and affirmed. Gender in *Galathea* is portrayed as being derived from this social interaction, though not all individuals within it seem to understand it as such.

A key component of Galatea and Phillida's relationship is how they grow to understand gender is something observed and created by an outside force. Early into their time disguised as men, Galatea and Phillida grapple with how they are to exist within a masculine environment while still recognizing themselves as feminine. Phillida directly questions many of the actions she would be forced to take in assuming a masculine identity. The majority of her anxieties are rooted in how the actions she takes in a masculine gender presentation will be misconstrued by others: "For then I must keep company with boys, and commit follies unseemly for / my sex; or keep company with girls, and be thought more wanton than / becometh" (1.3 121-123). Phillida is questioning how her masculine presentation will be viewed through the context of male or female social groups. Here she recognizes that her gender performance does not exist in isolation. This vulnerability of gender expression places some of the power of gender in those outside of the self. Phillida is touching on the idea of gendered performance as defined by Judith Butler. They liken gender to stage acting, describing gender as "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 192). As gender is constructed from the social audience one exists in and how that audience perceives gender, this means gender is not constructed within the self. In *Galathea*, this is first seen as placing the power of gender identification with the dominant culture. This idea of gender being rooted in external factors appears often in the play. The crux of the plot lies on how forces (the gods) beyond the community impose gender-based laws (the demand of women sacrifices). Here, a

baseline of how gender exists in this society is established. While the community in *Galathea* claims biological essentialism is the root of their vision of gender, their desire for men to present in specific external ways shows a vision of gender as something distinct from biological traits. Despite believing that being a man is an inherent trait, the community has tied traits of aggression and specific male-coded attire to the idea of being a man. By partially decoupling gender from the body, the community of *Galathea* has already begun to recognize the abstract nature of gender. This abstraction becomes more and more prevalent as Galatea's and Phillida's masculine presentations collide with each other.

While much of Galatea's and Phillida's desire for masculine gender expression is coded through the observation of those not within their relationship, their personal visions of gender emerge during their personal affirmations. Gender affirmation within romantic relationships serves as an incredibly intimate gesture, seen prominently in *Galathea*. In act 3, the two share a private conversation that treads around the topic of their gender identity. Phillida proposes a hypothetical to Galatea, asking "Suppose I were a virgin (I blush in supposing myself one), and that under / the habit of a boy were the person of a maid: if I should utter my affection / with sighs, manifest my sweet love by my salt tears, and prove my loyalty / unspotted and my griefs intolerable, would not then that fair face pity this / true heart?" (3.2 521-525). Her remarks here indicate some awareness of Galatea's masculine presentation and her awareness of Phillida's presentation. As the two converse they continue to propose these romantic hypotheticals, never questioning whether the other's gender identity is different from what they present it as. Both desire one another and wish to act upon this, but neither wishes to question the masculine presentation of the other. As they worry that they may be found out as putting on a masculine front, their fears of each are quelled by the other's affirmation. As they engage in a queer vision

of gender expression of love, this creates a new vision of gender distinct from the normative one seen prior. To engage with this style of gender validation means to twist gender in line with transgender philosophies of gender expression.

Rather than the cisnormative system of gender assumed by Galatea and Phillida's community, the two characters' interactions manifest a more queer, internally focused form of gender validation. They seek affirmation through mutual recognition and respect. In doing so they take on the role of a transmasculine romantic relationship derived from a traditionally lesbian interaction. A theoretical framework for the distillation of a transmasculine narrative from lesbian fiction exists in the work of Melina Moore, describing the way in which pulp novels create characters who "resonate both as a butch in the lesbian pulp tradition and as an early transmasculine figure" (Moore 571). Moore argues that transmasculine lives are often erased as a form of rhetorical protection and argues for the examination of masculine-presenting women as transgender figures (573). Galatea and Phillida's interactions are not simply a form of queer love, but also as an exploration of the other's transmasculine presentation as shown in act 3, scene 2. Here, Phillida asks "What a toy is it to tell me of that tree, being nothing to the purpose? I say it / is pity you are not a woman. / I would not wish to be a woman unless it were because thou art a man" (3.2 512-514). The two characters' expressions of mutual attraction are predicated on the recognition of each other's gender presentation. The two find validity in their gender through the mutual expression of queer desire. Simone Chess, a scholar of queer literature, discusses this in her essay on the subject of gender labor. She remarks that the two characters' resistance to masculine disguises falls away once they spend time together: "As soon as there are two crossdressers in relationship with one another, their attitudes towards and performance of their genders shift. Together, mutually, they begin the queer gender that is at the core of *Galathea*"

(Chess 156). Chess's observations focus on the gender labor of Galatea and Phillida as causing the recognition of an aspect of the internal self in an external expression. As they see transmasculine expressions they find valid in the other, this draws out the non-conformist ideas of gender that exist within themselves. Each of them serves as the observer of the other. An important factor to note is that these ideas of masculine expression are not imposed upon one member by the other. Chiefly, Galatea's affirmation emboldens Philida to be more confident in her gender presentation, saying "You promised me in the woods that you would love me before all Diana's nymphs" (3.2 543-544). As the two were raised in a cisnormative culture that does not account for the wide spectrum of gender, the two do not have a frame of reference for what transmasculine identities may look like. Each serves as a blueprint of transmasculine beauty for the other. As they are attracted to each other and recognize one another as beautiful, the two characters are able to direct these feelings towards their internal masculine desires and find validation through their mutual interaction.

The framework of gender presented in this mutual affirmation contrasts with the more simplified idea of gender presented earlier on. In the first scene, Tityrus's speech establishes the community's curse as follows: "every five years' day, the fairest and chastest virgin in all the country should be brought unto this tree, and, here being bound, is left for a peace-offering unto Neptune" (1.1 43-46). The rituals enacted by the community imagine women as what is meant to be sacrificed to Neptune, and men are not to be sacrificed. For the gods to follow in these constructions would affirm this view of gender as biocentric. As the community imagines gender to be an innate property, their sacrifice of women is tied to their vision of gender as a biological trait. However, the gods continue to twist gender and reveal the flaws in the more simplified, cisnormative idea seen within the community. The gods, mainly the men among them, seek

gender affirmation by exerting their willpower over others. For them, masculinity is the byproduct of a hierarchy of power being enforced. The manipulation of gender and form becomes a tool to enforce power, as Neptune himself admits to these acts: “Then, Neptune, that hast taken sundry shapes / to obtain love, stick not to practice some deceit to show thy deity, and, / having often thrust thyself into the shape of beasts to deceive men, be not / coy to use the shape of a shepherd to show thyself a god” (2.2 285-287). This kind of masculinity is defined as hegemonic masculinity, discussed in relation to *Galathea* by Jamie Paris. Their article concerning this focuses on how gender is created for both the gods and mortal men through the delineation of greater and lesser men. Paris writes that “While hegemonic forms of masculinity can be maintained through force, they can also be maintained by making men who embody ascendant ways of being male feel ashamed of themselves. It is telling that the mortals of this play experience their gendered identity in terms of an internalized shame” (Paris 89). This vision of masculinity is created through mutual recognition of the gods and their masculine worshippers, where each party perceives and affirms the other as a man. Galatea and Phillida’s relationship also takes the form of mutual affirmation, the two working to understand and affirm the other as an existing masculine figure. Their meeting in the grove asserts this, contrasting hegemonic masculinity as the two’s reverence for the other’s presentation creates a mutual gender affirmation, as Phillida’s remark that “What a toy is it to tell me of that tree, being nothing to the purpose? I say it / is pity you are not a woman” (3.2 512-513). While the conversation is meant to establish their burgeoning feelings, the two continually establish that their attraction coexists with the other’s masculine presentation. Their attraction does not deny the other’s masculinity and vice versa. Even as these masculinities differ in application, both forms require each party to observe the other and derive their own gender from them. The

masculinity embodied by both the men and the mortals of the play could not exist in a vacuum. It requires the active participation of another party in order for the characters to be seen as wholly male. This shows gender to be, once again, not a static concept derived from biologically essentialist terms, but a dynamic identity that emerges from action. Furthermore, the ingraining of this gender affirmation into the societal traditions of their community binds gender identity to culture. To participate in and propagate one's cultural beliefs is to teach an individual's perception of gender to the next generation. In recognizing that gender is part of one's cultural system and belief, this further proves that gender exists as a projected construct rather than an innate trait.

Having established that gender exists through an individual's self-expression to an outside world, *Galathea's* climax holds an idea of gender that breaks the traditionalist constructs of the cisnormative community it centers. In this, the god Venus offers a solution by transforming one of the central characters into a man: "What is to Love or the mistress of love impossible? Was it not Venus that / did the like to Iphis and Ianthes? How say ye? Are / ye agreed? One to be a boy presently?" (5.5 1096-1098). Galatea and Phillida openly express their affection for one another, making it clear they feel bound together in their love. Despite this, the acceptance of their love and expression requires the outside force turning it into a heterosexual relationship. Upon passive observation it may seem that this conflicts with the thesis of the play up to this point. The argument that Venus makes seems to parallel biological constructions of gender put forth by Tityrus, as he states "Then shouldst thou not / repine that I have disguised thee in this attire, for thy beauty will make thee / to be thought worthy of this god" (1.2 57-59). Tityrus's gambit against Neptune involves an idea of gender as constructed through natural traits of one's appearance. However, I argue this rebukes this sentiment and is instead a critique of

reductive views of gender. Here, Venus and the text of *Galathea* recognize the shaky foundations that these reductive ideas sit upon. When the community sees the relationship of Galatea and Phillida, they see it as invalid due to both of them being perceived as women. Even as the two choose to present differently, Galatea and Phillida do not see this alternate expression as relevant as to them, the two do not hold dominion over their gender identity. However, the mere mention of Venus's intervention makes the two characters' fathers open to the idea. The two fathers say "Soft, daughter, you must know whether I will have you a son. / Take me with you, Galatea: I will keep you as I begat you, a daughter" (5.5 1101-1102). The men do not place doubt on the possibility of this, instead already reorienting their desires to this imposed reality. This recognition of Venus's dominion over gender speaks to their belief that gender can be altered through outside action.

This gambit of Venus's as well as the men's reactions holds two central themes of *Galathea*. First, it establishes that the men are able to view gender as mutable. Even if that mutability requires divine intervention, the fact they are able to conceive of gender as something that can be manipulated speaks to an unconscious awareness of gender variation. Second, it shows how the main difference between Galatea and Phillida's romance and the community's perception is the placement of power in the hierarchy of gender expression. Both groups hold an idea of gender expression similar to the male gods of the play. Mainly, they imbue those they see as worthy with the power to create gender. Galatea and Phillida both imbue their lovers with the power to create gender. Their gender is born of their mutual interaction and recognition. The community falls closer to the male gods, structuring this in a hegemonic way. As they see the gods as above them, they attribute the power to restructure gender to those they see as superior. Here is where *Galathea* makes its most profound points on gender expression and its variations,

showing an awareness of the ever-shifting nature of gender roles through the medium of godly intervention.

While the community's belief in Venus's commands seems to indicate a belief that only gods have dominion over gender, their reactions speak to their subconscious ability to recognize gender as a constructed idea. As the gods speak of gender as something they have full command over, they see themselves as a higher authority that has dominion over the concept. This claim of power over gender establishes it as a non-biological trait that takes on a more amorphous form. The community's belief that the power of gender reidentification lies within divinity speaks to how they see gender being manifested through social interaction. If they are to believe that the word of a god is able to change the gender identity of either Galatea or Phillida, this means that they recognize gender as being instilled into a person rather than inherent. This does still place the power of gender reassignment into something fantastical. If only a god can truly revise someone's gender, this would mean mortal people cannot change their gender without a deity's intervention. But in the text, neither the audience nor the community sees Venus take any non-verbal action. In her final comments on the transfiguration, Venus says that "Then let us depart. Neither of them shall know whose lot it shall be till they / come to the church door. One shall be. Doth it suffice?" (5.5 1118-1119), making a verbal affirmation to transfigure one of their genders but not a physical one. Venus's lack of action makes it clear that the community recognizes gender as a non-physical concept. Even as she has not taken the actions she has promised, they are willing to celebrate Galatea and Phillida's love. This is because they, though unconsciously, recognize that Venus saying one of them will be a man is equivalent to enacting a magical transformation. The transformation is not a physical action and instead occurs through the nonverbal gender affirmation that takes place. By doing this, Lyly decouples gender from the

biologically essential. Venus's lack of physical intervention speaks to the non-bodily nature of gender identity. Venus's offer to Galatea and Phillida reflects mindset. She knows that, while the community thinks gender is tied to the body, their fathers see gender as a more amorphous trait instilled into the individual through social interaction. As the two men become figureheads for the community, their expansion of gendered understanding reflects an expansion of the community's understanding. Just as gender was shown to be social through Galatea and Phillida's interactions, Venus shows gender to be social in her verbal reassignment of Galatea's and Phillida's gender.

The radical nature of Lyly's *Galathea* takes on a new level of relevance when considering contemporary transgender discourse. As debates about the validity of transition and the origin of gender roles rage, the play speaks to the social nature of gender and how its shifting nature is subconsciously recognized by all. Transphobia is rooted in the belief that gender is a trait beyond humanity, something written into the biology of the individual. While the presence of divinity and gods may seem to indicate a world in which only immortals can take power over gender, instead Lyly's writing places the power of gender in its rightful place: the social systems constructed by societies and reinforced through social interaction. As transgender theory explores gender as something beyond manifestations of biology, works like *Galathea* show that these concepts have always existed. Gender has always existed beyond the body, and contemporary transgender activism is tied to the recognition of these expansive ideas of gender. A radical departure from gender essentialist rhetoric, *Galathea's* communally created system of gender feels relevant and bold in the face of anti-trans rhetoric.

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