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The Maid's Metamorphosis or The Metamorphoses of the Maid?

[Essay for Edward's Boys Theatre Programme, 2024]

Agnès Lafont and Lindsay Ann Reid

For a relatively short play, *The Maid's Metamorphosis* (written and first performed in 1600) seems to contain everything: an unjust ruler, a woman in distress, manipulative gods, a wise hermit, unintelligible prophesies, cheeky servant boys, a comic echo scene, shock revelations of paternity, homoerotic desire, mischievous fairies, and classical allusions galore. This mythological-pastoral comedy weaves together several loosely connected plot strands, providing extensive opportunities for song and spectacle. It also features an eclectic cast of characters, all of whom were originally performed by the boy actors of the Children of Paul's, a theatrical tradition that Edward's Boys continue to explore. While several of these characters meander in and out of the action, others appear onstage only once, performing in a single scene. It is Eurymine, the work's titular metamorphic maid, who provides coherence and a sense of continuity as she winds her way through the play's five acts, charming and evading the many men who pursue her through the woods and fields.

This is a work that feels both surprisingly familiar and delightfully strange. The action unfolds in a dizzyingly intertextual literary landscape, a place in which well-known classical personalities comfortably co-mingle with stock pastoral figures. No doubt, the play's sense of familiarity partially derives from the fact that theatrical analogues abound. Various elements of the play's plot, structure, and setting are reminiscent of John Lyly's theatrical *oeuvre*—so much so, in fact, that authorship of this anonymously written piece has sometimes been attributed to Lyly at various points throughout the past four centuries. Critics have often observed the striking

resemblance of the play's title to that of Lyly's earlier *Love's Metamorphosis*, a dramatic piece that similarly centres on the dogged male harassment of disinterested female love-objects. Further Lylian parallels are found in the plot strand of *The Maid's Metamorphosis* that follows Joculo, Mopso, and Frisco, whose antics and witty wordplay align them with the characteristic boy-pages found throughout Lyly's comedies. Other aspects, including Ascanio's onstage nap, feel almost plucked from Lyly's *Endymion*, while the characterisation of Apollo may put audiences in mind of Lyly's *Midas*. Perhaps most obviously, *The Maid's Metamorphosis* exhibits a sustained interest in physical mutability that is likewise explored in several of Lyly's plays: it conspicuously shares *Gallathea*'s interest in the possibility of female-to-male sex transformation.

This play's theatrical analogues extend far beyond the works of Lyly. The singing competition between Silvio and Gemulo seems to recall the musical contest between Therion and Espilus in Philip Sidney's earlier work *The Lady of May*, for example, while the mysterious cave-dwelling hermit Aramanthus may remind us of Bomelio in the anonymously published play *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune.* Numerous comparisons might be made with the works of William Shakespeare. It is hard not to equate the fairies of *The Maid's Metamorphosis* with those of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, or not to align the adventures of Eurymine-as-a-man with those of the cross-dressed Rosalind-as-Ganymede in *As You Like It* or the cross-dressed Viola-as-Cesario in *Twelfth Night*. In some respects, Eurymine also anticipates *Cymbeline*'s Innogen. In Shakespeare's later play, Innogen's husband, believing her unfaithful, orders his servant Pisanio to kill her. Instead, Pisanio fakes a 'bloody sign' as false evidence to present to his master as proof of Innogen's death. Her life spared, Innogen flees in male disguise.

Familiarity is also generated through the work's abundant use of mythological allusion. This play liberally borrows situations and characters from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a veritable compendium of Greco-Roman mythology that served as an Elizabethan schoolroom staple. From the start, the Arcadian landscape is peopled by Ovidian characters with links to the hunt: Diana, Actaeon, and Atalanta. The general air of Ovidianism in *The Maid's Metamorphosis* is heightened with the onstage appearance of Apollo, whose love for Hyacinth is relayed in the *Metamorphoses*. So too is Apollo's rapacious pursuit of Daphne, a nymph who escapes the sun god's threatening advances via metamorphosis into a laurel tree. Apollo recycles Ovidian pick-up lines when he first approaches Eurymine, and the early modern play thus invites us to consider Eurymine as a second Daphne. A multitude of additional allusions to well-known Ovidian personalities such as Ganymede, Echo, Phaethon, Adonis, Ceyx, and Alcyone repeatedly reaffirm this overt link between *The Maid's Metamorphosis* and the *Metamorphoses*.

Issues of shifting identity form the core of *The Maid's Metamorphosis*. As was the case in early modern society more generally, strictly defined social roles and norms potentially restrict characters' self-conceptions and choices in the world of this pastoral comedy. However, metamorphic moments—both figurative and literal—serve as vehicles for the re-examination of accepted social hierarchies and assumptions. It is worth observing that Eurymine's physical, bodily metamorphosis is not the only transformation that the heroine undergoes throughout the play's five acts. Although the ending ultimately manifests in a heterosexual marriage plot, Eurymine's many other transformations of identity along the way represent moments when the play's heroine confronts and sometimes confounds rigid social expectations. Metamorphosis is not

only a strategy of survival for Eurymine, but also a potential means of interrogation and subversion.

Metamorphosis intersects with meta-theatricality in *The Maid's Metamorphosis*, particularly when we consider the complexity of this work's relationship with costume, disguise, and embodied performance. In a time when only male actors were allowed to perform in public venues and when sumptuary laws proscribed what one might or might not wear in the streets, the theatre offered a space of relative freedom: on stage, early modern English actors were permitted to wear costumes, wigs, and dresses, to pretend to be other than what they were—and were duly criticised by Puritan thinkers for this, resulting in a lengthy closure of the nation's playhouses beginning in 1642. In this wider historical and cultural context, theatre-makers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries habitually turned to female-to-male cross-dressing plots. And they did so, as Michael Shapiro explains, to explore how 'all social roles could be exposed as inherently theatrical, nightmares and fantasies could be witnessed with impunity, and potentially disruptive energies could be safely agitated' (*Gender in Play on Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages*, 1995, p. 6).

The Maid's Metamorphosis serves as an interesting complement to the many early modern English plays that interrogated issues of gender and theatricality through the common trope of the cross-dressed heroine. In a number of well-known Shakespearean examples, non-heteronormative desire is explored via the costumed bodies of living actors and the layers of fictive personae that they represent on stage. This includes *Twelfth Night*, wherein Orsino finds himself unmistakably attracted to the androgynous Viola in her assumed guise as 'Cesario'. Eurymine's situation in *The Maid's Metamorphosis* both mirrors and is markedly distinct from the Shakespearean

Viola's, however. Indeed, there is no other Elizabethan or Jacobean play in which the audience is asked to believe that a female character inhabits the actual body of a man. Whereas Shakespeare's Viola dons the gender-coded garb of a boy and deliberately pretends to be someone else, Eurymine experiences a genuine biological transformation. In this respect, *The Maid's Metamorphosis* goes further, even, than Lyly's *Gallathea*, a play that ends with the suggestion that one of its female leads may well undergo a future sex change. Intriguingly, Eurymine continues to go by her original name post-transformation, and she clearly articulates the nuanced position that she retains a 'woman's mind' despite her superficial acquisition of a new 'manly shape'. It is thus that *The Maid's Metamorphosis* raises many of the same questions about taxonomies of sexuality and gender that continue to be discussed and theorised in our own twenty-first-century milieu.

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