# Cross-dressing, Sexuality, Identity. Sexual Representation and Body Politics in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

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***Résumé:*** *La Nuit des rois, ou Ce que vous voudrez, la dernière des comédies de Shakespeare, reprend l'intérêt récurrent que celui-ci montre pour la fausse identité, le déguisement sexuel, l'amour romantique déçu, la folie et le mariage. Toutes ces choses-là rendent la pièce appropriée à une analyse à multiples niveaux de la politique du corps et de la/des représentation(s) sexuelle(s) telles comme elles étaient perçues à l'époque de Shakespeare. La sexualité est liée à la construction et à la représentation de l'identité. A l'aide du travesti et les personnages s'attribuent des identités différentes en générant des confusions qui démontrent l'artificialité des définitions du genre et même la possibilité de l'amour entre des gens du même sexe. L'identité sexe-genre devient beaucoup plus sophistiquée si l'on pense à l'usage des représentations de l'époque élisabéthaine à savoir que les rôles féminins étaient joués par des jeunes hommes: Viola se déguise en Césario – un acteur garçon qui joue le rôle d'une femme qui s'habille en homme– en offrant une gamme d'identités sexe-genre. Un autre aspect important serait la liaison entre la sexualité et le statut qui est manifeste dans les rêves et de Malvolio en s'appuyant sur son désir sexuel pour Olivia, aussi que sur son désir de transcender son statut social. Mais finalement, l'ordre social est rétabli: les fantaisies de Malvolio sont démasqués et ridiculisés, l'amour homosexuel entre Olivia et Viola et celui entre Orsino et Césario deviennent impossibles. Le temps des fêtes (indiqué par le titre même de la pièce) et des transgressions est fini: la fin de la pièce fournit une solution convenable du point de vue dans laquelle les valeurs sociales traditionnelles sont gardées.*

***Mots clés:*** *travesti, représentation sexuelle, idéologie*

## 1. Introduction

Sexuality, sexual representation, sex-gender identities, as well as their link to the construction of identity, to social order and to the mentalities and ideologies present in Elizabethan England were long neglected by or even banned from disciplines such as history and literary criticism, as marginal or not worthy of academic research. The more recent trends in both history and literary criticism have marked a shift of perspective from the central to the marginal, focusing on aspects such as those mentioned above, among many others. From the perspective of our analysis, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night,* or *What You Will* offers a plethora of examples of the way in which sexuality and the body were approached and represented in the mentalities of Elizabethan England, thus providing the opportunity of a multi-layered analysis of sexual representation and its ideological implications.

Shakespearean romantic comedy, at its core, is fuelled by desire. The central plots as well as the low humour of the clowns and fools are driven by erotic energies which cross the spectra from heteroerotic to homoerotic, from platonic and elevated to openly sexual and low. *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, the last of Shakespeare's comedies, recapitulates Shakespeare's recurring interest in sexual disguise, folly, mistaken identity, thwarted romantic love, marriage, and metamorphosis.

The play's title refers to the Twelfth Night after Christmas, January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany (marking the visit of the three kings to Bethlehem to worship the Christ child) in the Christian calendar. In Elizabethan England, the time between Christmas and Twelfth Night was one of celebration, and festivity during which the overturning of traditional hierarchical rule was permitted. The title was therefore "originally intended simply to evoke a festive occasion comparable to that celebrating the last of the Christmas holidays when revelry and folly were permitted to turn the world topsy-turvy under a Lord of Misrule. Both plots of *Twelfth Night* - the romantic fantasies of the young lovers and the saturnalian high jinks of Sir Toby and his crew – give evidence of the illusions, deceptions and misrule that could characterize such an occasion, but these actions are distanced from the real world by

being set in the never-never land of Illyria." [1] Perhaps the most obvious link to festivity in the play is evident in the subplot with Sir Toby Belch, Maria, and the Fool, whose name, appropriately, is Feste. But there are also other, more subtle links to festivity, topsy-turvydom and the world upside down: transvestism, cross-dressing (violating both the boundaries of gender demarcation – Viola, and class hierarchy – Malvolio), mistaken (gender) identity.

The play's alternative title, *What You Will*, seems at first to be dismissive, like *As You Like It* or *Much Ado About Nothing*; each of these titles, however, has been shown to relate closely to themes of their respective plays, and the phrase "what you will", which is equivalent, in Elizabethan idiom, to "whatever you would", and which recurs in *Twelfth Night*, is part of the play's investigation of identity. "Taken together, Shakespeare's title and its alternative evoke the mood of twelfth-night holiday: a time for sentiment, frivolity, pranks and misrule – indeed, for whatever you wish." [2] The characters are thus called upon to enjoy the temporary freedoms of courtship and to submit to "carnival's alternative rule – the 'uncivil rule' of cakes and ale – which characterizes the whole mood of idleness and entertainment in Olivia's noisy household" [3]. On the other hand, "will" in Shakespeare's period, "as well as possibly alluding to the male and female genitalia, could more generally mean 'desire'." [4]

## 2. "*I am not that I play*": Cross-dressing, mistaken identity and sexuality

Shakespeare's first romantic comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*, founded its plot on a shipwreck which divided a family and led to a farcical plot of mistaken identity. In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare revisited this plot. But rather than two sets of twin brothers, as in *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare now created a single set, a twin brother and sister. "This shift in gender between the two plays suggests how Shakespeare's interests developed over the course of writing his comedies, for the roles of his female characters became markedly more complex and substantial." [5] *Twelfth Night*'s Viola follows in the line of active comic heroines – from Julia (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*) and Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*) to Rosalind (*As You Like It*) – who disguise themselves, play roles in relation to their lovers, and take over large parts of their plays.

In early modern England, cross-dressing was not an unusual practice among women. "A few women actually attempted to live as men, sometimes temporarily, sometimes more permanently… […] These women were not using men's guises simply to achieve the essentially female end of recovering their husbands. They used them as a means of travelling and finding adventure in ways which were normally closed to women. Cross-dressing undermined definitions of gender and thus of relations between the sexes, especially relations concerned with power." [6]

"Cesario" is the name Viola assumes when she disguises herself as a male – in fact, as a "eunuch" (1.2.52) [7] – to serve Orsino. Viola quickly falls in love with Orsino, in spite of his obsession with of Olivia, and in an ironic situation already explored with Julia's disguise in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Orsino commissions Cesario/Viola to woo Olivia on his behalf. "Viola can only be true to herself by doing her best for Orsino, thereby doing the worst to her own chances for Orsino's love." [8] Malvolio's delusion is his belief "that all that look on him love him", but that description more nearly describes Cesario's position, for Olivia falls in love with Cesario rather than with "his" master, and Orsino will discover, at the end of the play, that he has also fallen in love with Cesario (hinting to the possibility of same-sex love).

Here Shakespeare plays with the artificiality of gender definitions in a highly sophisticated way. Behind the part of "Viola" is the boy at the Globe Theatre; "Viola" then disguises "herself" as "Cesario", a young man, but also a "eunuch": a boy actor playing a

woman who cross-dresses as a man, offering a spectrum of sex-gender identities. Dympna Callaghan discusses this representational practice in terms of castration: "The production of sexual difference within the all-male mimesis of the English stage is, however, shadowed by a culturally and anatomically closer option for achieving a dramatic fabrication of femininity than the use of female performers, and it is one that would be vocally as well as visually compelling, namely the castrato… Symbolic yet plausible, the castration embodied by the castrato actualized the articulation of difference on which male mimesis was based." [9] Cesario's sexuality is ambivalent – or perhaps, erased. So Olivia can fall in love with Cesario's masculine characteristics, while Orsino is attracted to the "female" aspects of the "male", Cesario. The androgynous figure of Cesario is thus "what you will": the object of desire suitable for either sex, for heterosexual love and for homosexual love. "Thus the logic of identity-formation involves distinctive associations and switching between location, class and the body, and these are not imposed upon subject-identity from the outside, they are the core terms of an exchange network, an economy of signs, in which individuals, writers and authors are sometimes but perplexed agencies. A fundamental rule seems to be that what is excluded at the overt level of identity-formation is productive of new objects of desire." [10]

Viola and Olivia are equals in poise and wit, and as so often Shakespeare uses wit to suggest relationship, or potential relationship. The two characters strike up an immediate rapport, which develops on Olivia's side into interest and finally love. Thus "an atmosphere of erotic ambiguity is established, which dominates the Viola/Olivia scenes as it does the Viola/Orsino ones." [11]

The Orsino-Olivia-Viola triangle could, in a tragedy, lead to disaster, but Shakespeare designs another kind of ending. In Shakespeare's early comedies, such as *The Comedy of Errors* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, the cases of mistaken identity were resolved in a predictable moment of unmasking, literally or figuratively: the twin Antipholus brothers finally come on stage at the same time in *The Comedy of Errors*, and Hero removes her veil in *Much Ado*. In *Twelfth Night*, though, the moment of discovery is also a moment of gender division. When Viola's brother Sebastian, whom she thought dead, appears in the final scene, the figure of Cesario is in effect split in two. Orsino sees "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not" (5.1.213-4). "A perspective was a distorting glass which, by optical illusion, could make one picture or object appear like two or more, but the same effect, Orsino says, is here created naturally." [12] However, the "two persons" are not finally, as Orsino thinks, identical, since one is a woman; yet Shakespeare is also here playing on several layers of performance, since Viola is dressed as a young man and is, beneath all the costumes, a male actor playing the part. So what one sees "is and is not male". "Cesario" disappears into two figures: the male Sebastian, and Viola, who as a "female" now can serve as a permissible object of Orsino's desire. Yet Viola never quite shifts back to her female identity, either, for "she" remains in male clothing through the end of the play, and Orsino addressed her still as Cesario: "Cesario, come - / For so you shall be while you are a man; / But when in other habits you are seen, / Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen." (5.1.381-4). Clothes thus make the man – or woman, or both.

"The "natural perspective" of the ending, when one sees what is and what is not at the same time, can serve as a paradigm for the ways in which the various characters see, or fail to see, both themselves and others throughout the play." [13] Sebastian and Cesario/Viola are seen as what they are not, until the final scene, with both comic and erotic consequences. More frequently, however, a character is transformed or deformed by vision that is shaped by the power of desire. Desire affects identities, as well as the characters' bodies. Orsino says: "O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first / Methought she purged the air of pestilence; / That instant was I turned into a hart, / And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds, / E'er since pursue me." (1.1.18-22) Using the same language of pestilence, Olivia remarks on her first

sight of Cesario: “Even so quickly may one catch the plague? / Methinks I feel this youth’s perfections / With an invisible and subtle stealth / To creep in at mine eyes.” (1.5.285-8). All the characters who are in love suffer from some kind of disease; even one name, Aguecheek (who loves Olivia), derives from “ague” (a fever).

### 3. Sexuality and status

Malvolio (whose name means “ill-will”) is one of Shakespeare’s great comic creations. Malvolio’s self-love is a kind of illness, comically taken to be a form of madness later, leading to Malvolio’s imprisonment in the “dark” house (in 4.2) and the attempted exorcism by Feste (playing the role of Sir Topas, the curate). But Malvolio has always been imprisoned – “this house is as dark as ignorance” (4.2.46) – by his own inability to “see” himself and to see life. He is described as a “kind of puritan” because he opposes festivity: that is, life itself, with all its noise, excess, festivity, and grossness. When he confronts the loud, drunken singers late at night, Malvolio is challenged by Sir Tony Belch in one of the most memorable lines in Shakespeare: “Dost thou think because you art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?” (2.3.110-1). As much as Shakespeare seems to mock Malvolio’s behaviour, though, he also shows that Toby’s festivity crosses the line from mere exuberance into disorderly excess (and he too is cautioned by Olivia). Still, at the end of the play, Malvolio is the one figure who refuses to take part in the general reconciliation. Olivia notes that “He hath been most notoriously abused” (5.1.375). His parting line – “I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you” (5.1.374) – strongly suggests that his (self)-alienation will not be cured. Once again he fails to see himself, to understand others, to accept life itself, with its festive side.

Malvolio’s sub-plot can be seen as a kind of ultimate parody of the lovers in the rest of the play. His love is narcissistic, turned entirely inward. Orsino’s narcissistic, egocentric love parallels, to a certain extent, other similar debilities. Olivia, for example, has committed to mourning her dead brother – or, as Valentine states it, “A brother’s dead love, which she would keep fresh / And lasting in her sad remembrance” (1.1.30-1) – for seven more years, an unusually long time, which Toby (her uncle) elegantly notes: “What a plague means my niece to take the death of her brother thus? I am sure care’s an enemy to life” (1.3.1-2). Olivia has therefore to be brought from this denial of life – a “dead love” – to another kind of love. Similarly, Orsino suffers from another kind of love-sickness. His desire to be fed by the music to the point where he becomes sick of it can be interpreted as an expression merely of self-indulgence: “If music be the food of love, play on, / Give me excess of it that, surfeiting, / The appetite may sicken and so die” (1.1.1-3). His unattained love manifests itself in a self-indulgent melancholy nearly as crippling as Malvolio’s own. Another unrequited lover in the play is Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who also pines for Olivia, and who will be tricked into fighting a laughably cowardly duel for her sake. And there is Viola, who like Olivia has lost a brother (she believes) to shipwreck, and must suffer an unattained love herself as she pines for Orsino.

Malvolio is definitely the character most notoriously afflicted by a deforming vision; he is “sick of self-love”. The scene in which he reads Maria’s counterfeit letter is one of Shakespeare’s great comic moments. A somewhat similar scene occurs in *Much Ado About Nothing*, when counterfeited letters are read aloud so that they will be overheard by Benedick and Beatrice, who will be tricked into admitting their love for one another. But the scene in *Twelfth Night* is more spectacularly comic because of its grossness, because of Malvolio’s extravagant and grotesque posturings, and because of the incongruity between Malvolio the puritan steward and Malvolio the courtly lover. Malvolio does all the damage to himself.

The letter has been written by Maria in Olivia’s handwriting, and it seems to be Olivia’s invitation to Malvolio to approach her as a lover. “The mere possibility releases in

Malvolio long suppressed fantasies of power and sexuality. His dreams rest as well on a desire to transcend his class status" [14] "To be Count Malvolio!" (2.5.33), he fantasizes. Then he recalls another instance of upward social mobility, when "The Lady of the Strachey married the yeoman of the wardrobe" (2.5.37-8). In early modern England, women were "transmitters of status by marriage, and they might enhance or confirm a man's standing and acceptance" [15] This dream of social climbing leads to an imagined scenario of revenge, in which Toby and his friends will pay for their indiscretions: "And then to have the humour of state and – after a demure travel of regard, telling them I know my place, as I would they should do theirs – to ask for my kinsman Toby… Seven of my people with an obedient start make out for him. I frown the while, and perchance wind up my watch, or play with my – [*touching his chain*] some rich jewel. Toby approaches; curtsies there to me… I extend my hand to him thus, quenching my familiar smile with an austere regard of control" (2.5.50-65) and so forth, until he discovers the counterfeit letter.

Here Malvolio professes to recognize Olivia's handwriting: "These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus makes she her great P's. It is in contempt of question her hand", to which Sir Andrew wonders, "Her c's, her u's, her t's. Why that?" (2.5.85-88). The answer is that Malvolio has unwittingly spelled out c-u-t, a slang word for the female genitals, with a further hint to urination ("her great P's"). "The allusion further deforms veiled, cloistered, aristocratic femininity into the grotesque and, paradoxically, more suitable object of Malvolio's sexual and social ambitions." [16] Malvolio, in other words, thinks he recognizes Olivia's desire in the letter, but his failure to hear his own sexual reference and his gross allusions indicates that he doesn't know what he is saying or reading. Olivia's sexuality is thus visible but not intelligible, as far as he is concerned. Once again he fails to see and "read" others, as much as he fails to see himself.

Then, in the famous riddle in the letter – "M.O.A.I. doth sway my life" (2.5.106) – Malvolio strains to read the text as relating to him: "If I could make that resemble something in me" (2.5.117-8), which inverts what has just happened with c-u-t. Of course, he manages to connect the riddle to himself: "and yet to crush this a little, it would bow to me, for every one of these letters are in my name" (2.5.136-7). This remarkable scene concludes with Malvolio's embrace of the letter's instructions to wear yellow stockings, dress cross-gartered, put himself "into the trick of singularity" – that is, to cultivate eccentricity – and in Olivia's presence "still smile". So this fantasy on Malvolio's part is put into perspective when he appears before Olivia wearing yellow stockings (which, in early modern times signaled illicit sexuality and marital betrayal) and cross-garters, and smiling incessantly. Even more startling to her than his dress is the "ridiculous boldness" of his talk. Convinced that he is "tainted in his wits", she accepts his strange words as evidence that something is wrong and solicitously asks: "Wilt thou go to bed, Malvolio?". Taking this seriously, since it accords with his secret desires, he responds: "To bed? Ay, sweetheart, and I'll come to thee." The audacity of this response is further highlighted by "Shakespeare's establishing the time-scheme by means of adroit references. […] In the exchange between Viola and the fool which opens this scene, Feste comments that foolery like the sun shines everywhere, which suggests that it is now midday. Thus Malvolio's avidity to go to bed at noon strikes an even more lubricious note." [17] "Malvolio thus becomes a paradigm, or rather a parody, of the transformed lover, for whom every sign seems to point to his lady's love, and who is himself utterly changed by the power of love." [18] But he is changed into an even more absurd and grotesque character; the absurdity and grotesqueness stem from the discrepancy between his image as a puritan steward and his image as a lover, a discrepancy which apparently he fails to see.

## 4. Sexual representation and ideology

In her book entitled *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama*, Pauline Kiernan speaks about dramatic illusion and the deceptive character of drama, arguing that "[drama's] power lies in its evocation of concrete, physical nature in an immediate presence through the language and the body of the actor, and requires an insistence on the fictitiousness of what is being presented, since to re-present or imitate reality is to "mock" nature, to ignore temporality and deceive us into thinking that the counterfeit is the truth. The story, the action, the characters, these are all a fiction. What is real is the bodily presence of the actor, breathing, speaking, moving on the stage before us now." [19] But is drama merely fiction, simply re-presenting and imitating reality? Or does it also have a social, political and ideological role?

A possible answer comes from Shepherd and Womack, who, in their cultural history of English drama, define theatre as a "kind of social behaviour": "Beholders, delineators, critical judges: the characterization of good posture infers the gaze of a discriminating spectator at every point. Social behaviour is inherently theatrical – that is, it is formed by a consciousness of being watched, and an intention of affording pleasure. And because sociability is in this sense a kind of performance, the performance on the stage is not purely a mimetic practice, removed from society in a transcendent artistic space, but rather is itself a kind of social behaviour." [20]

Stephen Greenblatt defines theatre in terms of "social energy". The role of a theatrical performance is not only to represent and reproduce the real world, but also to organize and shape mentalities: "We identify energia only indirectly, by its effects: it is manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural and visual traces to produce, shape and organize collective physical and mental experiences. Hence it is associated with repeatable forms of pleasure and interest, with the capacity to arouse disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder." [21] The theatre manipulates the audience through its energy. This energy was "calculated", designed, and the circulation of social energy by and through the stage was not part of "a single coherent, totalizing system. Rather it was partial, fragmentary, conflictual; elements were crossed, torn apart, recombined, set against each other; particular social practices were magnified by the stage, others diminished, exalted, evacuated […]. Power, charisma, sexual excitement, free-floating intensities of experience […], everything produced by the society can circulate unless it is deliberately excluded from circulation." [22]

For Greenblatt, the theatre has a normative function: "The theatre is widely perceived in the period as the concrete manifestation of the histrionic quality of life, and, more specifically, of power […]. The stage justifies itself against recurrent charges of immorality by invoking this normative function: it is the expression of those rules that govern a properly ordered society and displays the punishment, in laughter and evidence, that is meted out upon those who violate the rules." [23]

Theatre thus becomes, in Foucauldian terms, a disciplining institution, subtly reinforcing prescribed forms of conduct and social norms. In *Twelfth Night*, this is obvious in the play's ending. Identities are revealed, conflicts are resolved, the possibility of same-sex love (Olivia – Viola, Orsino – Cesario) is ruled out, and everything comes back to "normal" from the topsy-turvydom of a festive world: "normality" is thus restored. The whole play, as its title suggests, brings its audience into a world upside down, a festive world with a subversive and transgressive character. Festivity in Shakespeare's comedies is "endowed with a truly subversive power and with a desire to destabilize authority and its serious, official, one-sided, vertical vision of the world. Popular festivals and charivaris thus contributed to the expression of dissent, to the simultaneous presence of multiple voices, including those of children and women (through the rites of inversion of the Boy-Bishop or

cross-dressing or witchcraft).” [24] But transgression and subversion represent a deviance which only lasts as long as the deviance in the play: this is only an interval, a safety valve. In the end, deviance is replaced by normality and order is restored.

In *Twelfth Night*, as S. Greenblatt remarks, “the plot initially invoked by Shakespeare’s play is displaced by another, equally familiar, plot – the plot of cross-dressing and cross-coupling…” [25] The shipwreck that keeps Viola and Sebastian from reaching their destination, the blocking of Viola’s initial intention to serve Olivia, Viola’s relatively unmotivated decision to disguise herself in men’s clothing, the mistaking of Sebastian for the disguised Viola, all these apparently random accidents are “swervings” that, according to Greenblatt, represent “a source of festive surprise and a time – honored theatrical method of achieving a conventional, reassuring resolution” [26]

Speaking of the theatre in terms of social struggle and of “the sexually ambivalent boy player as one sign of a sex-gender system in crisis”, London’s playhouses can be imagined as “dangerously sexualized sites where English culture’s ‘intense anxieties’ could be staged and their ‘transgressive erotic impulses released” [27] But, as Catherine Belsey argues, at the end of the play “the heroine abandons her disguise and dwindles into a wife. Closure depends on closing off the glimpsed transgression and reinstating a clearly defined sexual difference.” [28]

*“Twelfth Night* ends with the “natural perspective” revealing the confused identities of Sebastian and Cesario/Viola, and this revelation also leads Orsino to see himself and his own desires more clearly.” [29] Identities are clarified, sexual issues resolved through the prospect of the wedding of Orsino and Viola; the mood is darkened only by Malvolio’s call for revenge. Feste’s poignant song at the end of the play, “When that I was and a little tiny boy, / With hey, ho, the wind and the rain, / A foolish thing was but a toy, / For the rain it raineth every day.” (5.1.385-8), describes a kind of Four Ages of Man (reminding of Jacques’s famous “seven ages” of man speech in *As You Like It*, 2.7), when man is a “boy”, when in “man’s estate”, when he comes “to wive”, and when he comes “unto my beds” (either drunk, or in old age): a man’s growth, sexuality (the “foolish thing” or phallus – a “toy” in youth), marriage, and ageing. [30] With its refrain reminding the audience that “the rain it raineth every day”, the song is a reminder of and a return to the “every day” realities of life: festivity is over, the world is no longer turned upside-down, the traditional values and conventions are reinforced, order is restored and preserved.

## 5. Final remarks

*Twelfth Night* raises complex questions related to the function of sexual representations and their connection to the construction of identity, to social order, and to hierarchy, power and status. Throughout the play, traditional values and mentalities linked to sexuality and identity are questioned and challenged, pointing to the artificiality of gender relations, to the possibility of same-sex love and of violating the boundaries of gender demarcation, as well as of class hierarchy. This is because (as the very title of the play suggests) the play’s action takes place at a time of festivity, when everything is possible: transgression, overturning traditional social rules, turning the world upside down. But the solution provided by the play’s ending is an ideologically convenient one, bringing back social order and traditional values. Malvolio’s fantasies, resting on his sexual desire for Olivia, as well as on his desire to transcend his class status, are unmasked and mocked; the homosexual love between Olivia and Viola and between Orsino and Cesario is ruled out. The time of festivity, which only functioned as a safety valve, is over. Deviations are no longer permitted. Social order is restored.

**Notes**

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Carroll, W. C., p. 190
[15] Laurence, *Women in England 1500-1760. A Social History*, p. 17.
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[30] Ibid.

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