



Intimate Without Intimacy: A Dramatic Reading of *Galatea* at the BMO Theatre Centre

by Jamie Paris. Published in 2018 Issue 1.

For the semi-staged reading: *Galatea* (2018, Goldcorp Stage at the BMO Theatre Centre). Performance attended: 2018-11-10. See production details at the end of the review.

ON NOVEMBER 10 2018, THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA (UBC), BARD ON THE BEACH, AND [Oecologies](#) presented an intimate staging of John Lyly's (1553-1606) *Galatea* (1588) on the Goldcorp Stage at the [BMO Theatre Centre](#) in Vancouver. The project was partly funded by the UBC Community-University Engagement Support Fund as a way to bring together scholars, students, and theatre professionals for a six-day workshop, culminating in a "Read Not Dead" style performance of the play. The actors were given five days to rehearse the play, and they were still using scripts during the performance. Patricia Badir (UBC) and Paul Budra (Simon Fraser University) were the academic supervisors of the project, and Bard's Associate Artistic Director Dean Paul Gibson directed. As Gibson noted during his pre-show talk, the production was still in the "messy" part of the process, where the actors were still learning the blocking and timing of the play. The production, thus, had an engagingly improvisational and intimate vibe.

Galatea was advertised as being by "Shakespeare's contemporary, John Lyly," reflecting an assumption that the audience's interest in Lyly would likely stem from his connection to Shakespeare. *Galatea* influenced Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1597), *As You Like It* (1599), and *Twelfth Night* (1601). While Lyly's influence on Shakespeare is often foregrounded, he was a great comic playwright in his own right, and in fact, "[i]t is difficult to overstate Lyly's impact on early modern culture" (Kesson 3). Lyly was the "most famous Elizabethan writer in his own time, famous for his rearticulation of the structure of the English prose sentence, for his ability to delight in storytelling in order to astonish readers and audiences and for his ability to question and defamiliarize the process of telling a story" (Kesson 3-4). Looking back on Shakespeare's career in 1623 and wanting to situate his friend's achievements in the business of early modern playwriting, Ben Jonson wrote in his dedicatory poem to the first folio that Shakespeare's works "didst our Lyly outshine, / Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe's mighty line" (Jonson, "To the memory," A4r)¹. If, for Jonson, Christopher Marlowe represented the gold standard for poetic achievement on the early modern stage, Lyly was the premiere comic and

¹ Spelling and punctuation modernized by author.

romantic writer of the era before Shakespeare. In many ways, Lyly's politics around gender, the environment, and class are strikingly modern. Perhaps it is time, then, for productions of his work to advertise him not as a playwright who influenced Shakespeare, but as someone who has something to say to our culture, especially on issues of gender and the environment.

The production used a stripped-down black box set with minimal costuming, lighting, and music. The minimalism allowed the skill of the actors to shine through while making clear that *Galatea* is a compelling work of theatre. The Goldcorp Stage enabled an intimate actor-audience relationship, an intimacy that is particularly appropriate for this play. *Galatea* was written for original performance by either the Children of the Chapel at the Blackfriars or the Children of Paul's at Paul's playhouse, both private indoor playhouses. If *Galatea* was written for the Blackfriars, then it might be the play performed at the Queen's residence in Greenwich on New Year's Day 1588, at night (Scragg 22). Blackfriars and/or Paul's would have allowed "a far more intimate actor-audience relationship than was possible on the public stage" (Scragg 15). The Greenwich performance—if it was *Galatea*—was likely in a banqueting hall by artificial light (candlelight), allowing for an equally "intimate relationship between those inside and outside the play world" (Scragg 22).

Since Lyly's *Galatea* runs for only about an hour and forty-five minutes, the play could be staged without substantial cuts to the original text and still meet the expectations of a twenty-first-century audience. The play interweaves three plots. The A plot is the story of attempts by Tityrus and Melibeus (David Marr and Ashley O'Connell) to hide their virgin daughters Galatea and Phillida (Luisa Jovic and Melissa Oei) and prevent them being sacrificed to Neptune (Mark Chavez). The B plot is the story of Cupid's (Shawn Ahmed) attempts to subvert Diana's (Alison Matthews) fairies (Arggy Jenati, Alison Matthews, and Laara Sadiq). The C plot deals with the misadventures of Peter, Robin, and Dick (played by Ahmed, Jenati, and Oei) as they try to find masters. The A and B plots address issues of gender, sexuality, and power while focussing on the lives of two middle-class daughters, while the C plot deals with the complexities of gender, labour, and apprenticeship for masterless boys. The C plot connects a bit awkwardly to the A and B plot at the end of the play when the boys agree to sing in honour of the goddess of marriage, Hymen, at Galatea's and Phillida's wedding (Lyly 5.3.207-208).

The nine-person cast played twenty-seven roles, using small costume changes to let the audience know that an actor was playing a different part. The compelling performances allowed me to visualize how this kind of play could be staged with apprentice actors. The original performers were boys between the ages of eight to sixteen, though it is likely that the choirmasters may have undertaken some of the adult roles in the plays (Scragg 15). While the parts of Galatea and Phillida are larger and would likely need to be played by older boys, this play would be ideal for an early

modern boy's company because most of the parts are smaller and allow for costume changes between scenes. The smaller roles in the C plot, for example, could be played by younger boys who are just learning how to act, and it would not be difficult to cross-cast those roles with those of the townspeople or the fairies. It would be fascinating to see a group of young actors perform the play or take up some of the smaller roles in a full-scale production, while working with professional actors.

While all of the performances were remarkable considering how little time the actors had with the script to bring the production together, Jojic's Galatea and Oei's Phillida were particularly strong. Both actors wore non-passing men's clothing. Jojic's Galatea wore black skinny jeans, a large white men's dress shirt, and a loose-fitting blue tie. Oei's Phillida was costumed in form-fitting pants and a blazer that drew attention to her feminine curves. Because both actors looked very feminine in their boy's attire, it was difficult for the audience to believe that either character really mistook the other for a boy, something heightened by their rather feminized body language around each other. This seemingly self-conscious performance of desire was highlighted by the intermission music choice of Katy Perry's 2008 ode to bi-curiosity, "I kissed a girl," played as house music. It was unclear whether the audience was meant to understand that the two girls saw through each other's disguises, but even with the ambiguity of this performance, Neptune's calling their love "An idle choice" that is "strange and foolish" (5.3.139) could be read as a kind of early modern patriarchal homophobia that needs to be rejected for the queer politics of the plot to work. A full production could do interesting things with Venus's offer to "turn one of them to be a man" (5.3.151-152).

There was a striking lack of physical contact between Galatea and Phillida during the production. In part, this dearth can be explained by the minimal blocking, and by the fact that it is difficult to perform intimacy with another actor while holding a script. Any full production would need to represent Galatea's and Phillida's physical affection towards each other before their genders are revealed, though, even in this performance, telling choices were made. In particular, there was a conspicuous absence of a kiss or a caress at the moment when the two characters go "into the grove" to "make much of one another, that cannot tell what to think of one another" (3.2.64-65). Denise A. Walen notes that Lyly "construct[s] an expectation of female homoerotics but [denies] its fulfillment, relying on the spectator's ability to pull references from various cultural discourses inscribing female homosexual behavior" (412). While this production does not deny the fulfillment of female homoerotic desire, neither does it perform that fulfillment.

The wedding itself was not shown in this production, just as it is promised but not shown in Lyly's play. Venus says "neither [Galatea or Phillida] shall know whose lot it shall be [to become a man] till they come to the church door" (5.3.183-184). The boys, thus, agree to sing without knowing or

seeming to care that the groom will be a recently transitioned man. Lyly leaves the audience with a promise of a happy wedding between Galatea and Phillida, where the gods and their fathers have consented to their union and to the transformation of one of the women into a man, with young boys singing for them as they would for any other heterosexual union. Lyly's play ends with one of the daughters, likely Galatea, encouraging the ladies watching the play to "yield to love" (Epilogue 5), but one imagines that the boys of the choir likely would have ended the production itself with a song and dancing while the newlyweds celebrated their nuptials. While this production did not show the wedding, it would be possible for a production to end the play by showing a wedding between a trans man and a young woman with their fathers and the gods celebrating their love while a choir of young boys sang songs in celebration of their nuptials. This potential celebration of queer desire is unique in early modern drama. *Galatea* was not performed on the Bard on the Beach main stage, but one hopes that such a performance may be a future possibility. Showing on the Bard on the Beach stage a community coming together to celebrate queer desire overcoming obstacles would be powerful because the staple productions of festival Shakespeare are comedies that end with young heterosexual lovers celebrating their wedding day.

Likewise, I wonder if the performance could have done more with Lyly's interest in the environment. This is a play that is set in a particular location dealing with a particular environmental crisis. The production began with Gibson giving a land acknowledgment, but there was no other sense that the play was set in its Canadian locale. A full production in Vancouver could use the stage set and costuming of the production to comment on why this play, set on the banks of the Humber estuary that divide the counties of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire on the east coast of England, might be particularly compelling for an audience in the Pacific Northwest.

References

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Links

Bard on the Beach. <https://bardonthebeach.org/>

BMO Theatre Centre. <https://bardonthebeach.org/about-us/bmo-theatre-centre/>

Goldcorp Stage. <https://artsclub.com/about/venue-rentals/goldcorp-stage>

Oecologies. <https://oecologies.com/>

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	<i>Galatea</i>
<i>Year</i>	2018
<i>Theatre Company</i>	Bard On the Beach
<i>Theatre</i>	Goldcorp Stage at the BMO Theatre Centre
<i>Date</i>	2018-11-10

Cast

CUPID / PETER / ERICHTHINIS	SHAWN AHMED
RAFE / NEPTUNE / RAMIA / A COUNTRYMAN	MARK CHAVEZ
HEBE / ROBIN / EUROPA / A FAIRY	ARGGY JENATI
GALATEA / LARISSA	LUISA JOJIC
TITYRUS / A MARINER / AN ASTRONOMER	DAVID MARR
DIANA / A FAIRY / AN AUGER	ALISON MATTHEWS
MELIBEUS / AN ALCHEMIST	ASHLEY O'CONNELL
PHILLIDA / DICK	MELISSA OEI
VENUS / TELUSA / A FAIRY / A COUNTRYMAN	LAARA SADIQ

Creatives

DIRECTOR	DEAN PAUL GIBSON
DRAMATURG	KATRINA DUNN
ACADEMIC ADVISORS	PATRICIA BADIR AND PAUL BUDRA
STAGE MANAGER	STEPHEN COURTENAY