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Parodies of Manhood Bent: Ann-Marie MacDonald's Queer Verona

Jacqueline Petropoulos

The cover illustration of Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* superimposes women's features on top of a well-known portrait of William Shakespeare. On the one hand, this postmodern collage positions the reader to view the text as a feminist appropriation of Shakespeare, a rereading and rewriting of his works from a contemporary woman's perspective. On the other hand, the glamorous image of Shakespeare with blue eye shadow, full red lips, and a ladylike hand twirling a cigarette looks a bit queer. The composite of multiple body parts and faces decentres the subject, blurring the lines of male and female, past and present, self and other. By destabilizing the gendered and historical identity of a famous literary icon whose work represents the cultural authority of English literature, this playful reinvention of Shakespeare signifies two things at once: a feminist challenge to the male-dominated canon and a queer deconstruction of gender binaries.

MacDonald's highly successful play is now well known as a feminist revisioning of Shakespeare. Scholars have extensively analyzed how *Goodnight Desdemona* challenges the representation of women in *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, transforming Shakespeare's tragic heroines from passive victims to agents of their own stories, making women the focal point of the narrative by pushing Shakespeare's male characters to the margins and appropriating their lines and actions. The Canadian protagonist, Constance, learns to break free from patriarchal oppression when she encounters these more empowering role models, sparking her journey of self-discovery. MacDonald also comments on the process of representation itself by making Constance the author of the story and the resistant reader whose search for a lost source text uncovers new meanings that disrupt the ideological construction of Shakespeare as a site of universal truths (Knowles par. 43). This leads to a celebration of women's writing and feminist literary criticism as a counterpoint to the patriarchal canon. MacDonald also explores the relationship

between gender and nation by connecting Constance's oppression as an untenured female academic to her marginalization by male-dominated colonial institutions represented by the Shakespearean canon and the institutionalization of English literature in the academy by men such as Professor Claude Knight, her exploitative British colleague (Harrington). MacDonald's revisionist narrative, therefore, challenges both the patriarchal authority and the cultural imperialism of English literature, writing back to the centre to reclaim power for Canadian women as colonized subjects (Wilson 10).

The common understanding of the play is thus one of a politics of empowerment and feminist resistance to patriarchal and colonial ideologies of gender, sexuality, and nation that oppress women. While many scholars acknowledge MacDonald's critique of heteronormativity, they often link sexuality more broadly to overlapping sites of otherness, focusing on the marginalization of lesbian identity rather than exploring how the text disrupts and exceeds the binary categories of hetero- and homosexuality (Hadfield; Hengen; Novy; Porter; Wilson). Studies by Marta Dvorak and Shelley Scott, in contrast, analyze MacDonald's representation of sexual fluidity and multiplicity. Ellen MacKay argues that the play reminds us that the early modern period "lacked a rigid concept of sexual identity" (74) by critiquing "the spectre of straight Shakespeare" constructed by conservative institutions such as the Stratford Festival that impose "straight and narrow gender roles" on the historical canon (69).

Although these studies pave the way for considering *Goodnight Desdemona* as a "queer" text, only Scott explicitly uses this term in her analysis. However, she links the play's celebration of queer sexuality to third-wave feminism, which "retain[s] a desire for empowerment without telling women how to experience their sexuality" (Phoca, qtd. in Scott 122). Rather than view MacDonald's destabilization of identity as an extension of feminism, I believe that it is important to recontextualize *Goodnight Desdemona* as a queering of Shakespeare in order to highlight the text's two competing political goals. As a feminist revisioning of Shakespeare, *Goodnight Desdemona* calls for greater representation and power for women in a male-dominated society, giving rise to the comic inversions and role reversals that position the female characters as subjects rather than objects of the narrative. Yet MacDonald deconstructs the notion of a stable and normative identity, dismantling the categories of male and female, man and woman, hetero and homo, when the play's

main character, Constance, lands in queer Verona, a site of fluidity and multiplicity that exceeds the binary sex-gender system. In so doing, the text opens a space for women at the centre of the dramatic canon only to disrupt this very category of identity as part of its anti-essentialist critique, moving from a feminist to a queer vision of theatre and society.

In 1990, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* revolutionized gender studies by introducing the idea of gender performativity and the subsequent understanding of the term "queer" as an anti-essentialist breakdown of identity categories. Butler begins her study with a discussion of the foundational subject of feminism as a site that excludes queer subjects by surreptitiously supporting the heterosexist construction of a binary sex-gender system. MacDonald dramatizes this shift from a woman-centred discourse of representation to a queer subversion of identity in her play. She also exploits the Shakespearean convention of cross-dressing as a theatrical site of gender performativity to denaturalize cultural constructions of maleness and femaleness. Although *Goodnight Desdemona* was written two years before the publication of Butler's landmark study, it deserves to be reinterpreted in light of Butler's theories to understand its queer intervention. As James Bulman notes, "revolutionary theater productions [give] voice to contested ideas even as they are being theorized by the academy" ("Bringing" 80), and this is exactly what MacDonald's play did for its time. *Goodnight Desdemona* was not only groundbreaking for its feminist discourse of empowerment — a fact well noted by scholars and theatre critics — but also revolutionary for queering Shakespeare by experimenting with gender role play and performativity.

Goodnight Desdemona is now one of Canada's most successful plays. It won the Chalmers Award for Outstanding New Play in 1989, followed by the Governor General's Literary Award in 1990 and the Canadian Authors Association Award in 1991. It has been translated into nineteen languages and performed all over the world, including in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Japan. Since it is beyond the scope of this essay to address the many theatrical productions of *Goodnight Desdemona*, I compare the reception of the play during its 1988 premiere and subsequent 1990 national tour with more recent professional productions in Canada to consider how theatre critics have interpreted the play's gender politics over time. Although the text's feminism has been downplayed at times, this political label continues to shape cultural expectations of the play. Given that MacDonald's play calls for new contextualized readings of canonical

texts to challenge conventional interpretations, I argue that an active reframing and rereading of *Goodnight Desdemona* as "Shakesqueer," to borrow a term from Madhavi Menon, opens up new interpretive possibilities often overlooked in the critical reception of the play because of the narrow focus on the feminist concept of rewriting women's identities.

When *Goodnight Desdemona* was first produced by Nightwood Theatre in 1988 at Toronto's Annex Theatre, a small venue on the theatrical fringe, it was hailed by critics as an important new feminist work. At the time, Nightwood was well known as a feminist company following the recent success of *This Is for You, Anna*, a collective creation on which MacDonald worked as a member of the company. As D.A. Hadfield notes, "MacDonald [likely] owes her emergence as a playwright extraordinaire to her association with the most visible and credible group of feminist theatre practitioners in Toronto" (243). *Goodnight Desdemona* would later move from the margin to the mainstream; however, since Nightwood had already established itself "by working in the kind of radical, marginal theatre that the mainstream can easily name as feminist, contributing to the horizon of expectations for [the] play," this ensured that "readers will inevitably approach it assuming its feminist politics" (Hadfield 255).

Between the first production of *Goodnight Desdemona* in 1988 and its subsequent rewriting for the national tour in 1990, Nightwood underwent a radical institutional upheaval that affected its feminist politics. When MacDonald wrote her play, Nightwood "presented itself as a producer of new works by Canadian women" and "a provider of opportunities for women theatre artists," but in 1989 the company reformulated its mandate to become "an inclusive theatre company committed to producing works by women of colour" (Scott 23). This third-generation mandate was created under the direction of Kate Lushington at a turning point in Nightwood's history when all of its founding members had left their positions of leadership. The company's first artistic director, Cynthia Grant, later commented that "the homophobic undertones" of Nightwood's decision to reject works by lesbian performance artists was one of the reasons that she left the company (150). MacDonald's critique of heteronormativity could thus be seen as a response to this charge of institutionalized homophobia. However, the play's failure to comment on race and racism — despite this being a main theme of *Othello* — was inconsistent with the company's new mandate. In 1997, Nightwood

produced Djanet Sear's *Harlem Duet*, a revisioning of *Othello* from the perspective of gender and race. The shift toward greater diversity during this period was not coincidental but reflected the cultural debates taking place at that time, when feminist discourse was critiqued for excluding subjects of race, class, and sexuality. *Goodnight Desdemona*, produced at the cusp of this change in Nightwood's mandate, had its feet in both camps: it was part of a second-wave discourse on women's identity that failed to address racism, yet it challenged the heterosexism of this exclusionary movement. Although scholarly studies have focused on the text's intersectionality, the critical reception in the mainstream press tends to view the play more broadly in terms of a second-wave emphasis on women as a generic category of identification.

When *Goodnight Desdemona* was first produced by Nightwood at the Annex Theatre in 1988, it was celebrated as an innovative feminist work that rewrote Shakespeare to create strong roles for women. Ray Conlogue's review in *The Globe and Mail* hailed the play "as one of the wildest and woolliest feminist reappraisals that the theatre has recently seen" ("New Roles"), while Robert Crew of the *Toronto Star* noted that "This Nightwood Theatre production has a feminist line running through it, with Constance trying to find her womanly identity" ("*Goodnight*"). When the play was remounted at the Canadian Stage two years later for its national tour, both critics refrained from categorizing it as feminist. Conlogue, who previously praised MacDonald for "confront[ing] . . . the dilemma of women in the theatre who find that the greatest writer for the theatre was still limited by the patriarchal and half-civilized culture in which he lived" ("New Roles"), concluded his 1990 review with an apolitical statement about the play's intellectual daring. Mainstream reviews in *Maclean's*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the Montreal *Gazette* similarly omitted any mention of feminism in their discussions of Nightwood's touring production. The situation was different in Edmonton, however, where "the presenter, Gyllian Raby, emphasized Nightwood's position as a feminist theatre more than the other host companies had" (Scott 28). A review in the *Edmonton Journal*, for instance, remarked that "The play is galvanized by a very enlivening non-prescriptive feminism" (Nicholls). This statement echoed Lushington's insistence in an interview for the *Toronto Star* that Nightwood did not adhere "to preconceived ideas about feminism" in response to criticism that the company was "going soft" for producing a mainstream play about Shakespeare (Wagner). Unlike the

Toronto reviews that followed, this feature story profiled Nightwood's history and its political commitment to producing women's theatre, contextualizing the representation of gender in MacDonald's play within this institutional context. As Lushington put it, "This is very much a feminist process — women in charge of their own destiny" (Wagner).

According to Ric Knowles, when *Goodnight Desdemona* was remounted for its national tour in 1990, playing to mainstream audiences in larger theatres, the text's political critique of gender ideologies was contained by a universalizing discourse that erased differences in order to appeal to a wider demographic. In so doing, MacDonald's feminist narrative of empowerment as well as her "direct attack on compulsory heterosexuality" was converted into "a generalized humanist fable" and reduced to "saucy and irreverent parody of 'the Bard,' who survived with his patriarchal authority intact" (par. 48). This explains the depoliticized readings of the play and the near erasure of the term "feminist" from the critical reception of the national tour. A closer look at the critical discourse, however, reveals covert references to feminism. Although Crew focuses on the humanist narrative of self-discovery, linked to MacDonald's use of Jungian archetypes and the key metaphor of alchemy that celebrates the protagonist's transformation from base metal to pure gold, he associates this theme with a second-wave feminist discourse of women's liberation, arguing that "the exploited female scholar . . . is finally empowered and freed by her journey of self-discovery" ("*Desdemona*"). Conlogue similarly asserts that "the liberation of woman" is one of the main themes of the play (Review), and John Bemrose notes that the protagonist discovers her "own powerful sexuality" and becomes "far more confident and womanly." In yet another nod to the play's gender politics, Crew complains that "The male-bashing does become a little crude" ("*Desdemona*") — a loaded statement easily recognizable as a negative stereotype of feminists. Lloyd Dykk of the *Vancover Sun* reveals a similar ideological bias when he dismisses MacDonald's play as "a comedy of correctness," griping that "All Constance winds up knowing is that she is the agent of her own destiny." While these critics do not explicitly name feminism, it is clear from their comments that they read the play in terms of the feminist motif identified by Lushington as women taking control of their own destinies, and, as Dykk's sarcastic comment indicates, this gendered narrative of self-discovery had already become a familiar cultural trope. Reduced to a cultural cliché, this oversimplified view of feminism was

thus easier to commodify and assimilate into a mainstream ideology of humanism and universality, softening the political message of the play to appeal to a wider audience.

Although this historical trajectory suggests that the play's political association with feminist theatre was downplayed and nearly erased as the play became more mainstream, in the past decade feminism has been taken out of the closet, making a comeback in the critical discourse. All of the reviews of the most recent staging in Canada, as part of the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre's Shakespearefest, celebrate *Goodnight Desdemona* as a feminist revisioning of the Bard without any negative resistance to the label. However, the focus on comedy and universality remains, and there is very little discussion of the play's gender politics. The situation was very different in 2016 when *Goodnight Desdemona* was produced in Calgary by Handsome Alice Theatre, an independent feminist company. Press coverage emphasized the company's theatrical mandate to "unleash the female voice by supporting female artists and writers" (Hobson, "*Goodnight*"), noting that it was seeking to create greater gender equality in the theatre at a time when, according to one article, "women comprise" an abysmal "30 per cent of directors, artistic directors, and playwrights" in Canada (Bailey). This production was also celebrated for its recontextualization of the Shakespearean setting to the 1970s and its deliberate reversal of the Shakespearean tradition of all-male players. The first girls-only staging, this political choice added another "feminist twist" (Hobson, "*Goodnight*") to MacDonald's revisionist play while also supporting Handsome Alice Theatre's goal of balancing the scales of gender representation by providing more roles for female artists. Significantly, this political goal directly paralleled Nightwood's second-generation mandate to provide more theatrical opportunities for women that led to the creation of *Goodnight Desdemona*.

Although this recent staging highlights the fact that there is still a need for feminist theatre, making MacDonald's work just as relevant today as it was in 1988, the recuperation of a feminist theatrical context also led to more politicized readings of the play. Taking their cue from Newby, who emphasizes MacDonald's criticism of patriarchal institutions in Canada that oppress women (Hobson, "*Goodnight*"), theatre reviews frequently echo this interpretation. Meg MacKay comments that the play "critiques academia and the patriarchy" and "the glass ceiling for female academics," dramatizing "Constance's journey

of self-discovery [to] reclai[m] her identity from patriarchal subjugation." She also praises the play for "deconstructing the male gaze" and challenging "male-centric interpretations of English literature." Michael Hemminger celebrates MacDonald's "subversive script" for "taking a shot at the canon," explaining that "it's less about the Bard than the cultural institutions that can't see past his legacy." Moving beyond a liberal humanist notion of female empowerment, the Handsome Alice Theatre production recuperates with even more force the feminist "resistant politics" (Hadfield 251) of *Goodnight Desdemona* by positioning the play within a poststructuralist critique of patriarchal institutions and representations while highlighting the larger political goal of greater equity and representation for women in theatre and society. While this critical response likely reflects increased cultural awareness of feminist theory, the lack of such commentary in the reception of the 2020 RMTC production indicates that the recontextualization of MacDonald's play by an independent feminist theatre company helped to promote a more politicized interpretation of her work.

Although *Goodnight Desdemona* is now routinely classified as a feminist revisioning of Shakespeare, these recent productions prove the point raised by Knowles and later by Hadfield that the play's feminism can be contained or foregrounded depending on the institutional and theatrical contexts, mirroring the same tension between the margin and the mainstream that shaped the play's move from a fringe institution in 1988 to a successful national tour in 1990. The Handsome Alice staging reveals that *Goodnight Desdemona* is still revolutionary today as a feminist intervention that questions the patriarchal oppression of women, but there is still little to no discussion of the political significance of sexuality in the critical reception of the play. Theatre reviews continue to celebrate the text's creation of powerful roles for women, whereas the queering of gender is often trivialized as fun and games if not overlooked completely. Ever since the play's premiere, critics have easily grasped the political message of the *Othello* narrative, for instance, which transforms Desdemona into an indomitable warrior woman, mirroring the protagonist's empowering journey of self-discovery, but there is no clear consensus about Juliet. While most critics associate her character with the feminist goal of creating strong roles for Shakespeare's female victims, others read her relationship with Constance as a symbolic one that allows the protagonist to get in touch with her repressed sexuality. However, this interpretation is often couched in the humanist

discourse of a universal female sexuality not named as lesbian or bisexual. Whenever non-normative sexuality is explicitly referenced, comical descriptions abound: critics called Juliet "the randiest 14-year-old in unrecorded history" (Conlogue, "New Roles") and "a horny little teenager, willing to take on all comers" (Crew, "*Desdemona*"), in 1988 and 1990, respectively, while a 2016 review quips that "the Verona lads are switch hitters" (Hobson).

Queer issues are more prevalent in the criticism that mentions cross-dressing, but there is no real political analysis of gender fluidity since this theatrical device is often treated as a comedic gag and trivialized along with the representation of Verona's youth. In some cases, references to gender role play function as coded commentary on LGBTQ+ characters without having to address explicitly the theme of sexual multiplicity. Surprisingly, the critical reception of the Handsome Alice production is no different. Although that staging deliberately reversed the Shakespearean tradition of the cross-dressed boy actor by having women play all of the parts, there is no discussion of how the same-sex world on stage contributes to the queering of gender roles and sexual desire in the play. This theatrical practice is viewed as a feminist political intervention consistent with the larger goal of providing more roles for women, whereas the textual representation of cross-dressing and gender confusion is still seen as farce. The 1990 reviews similarly vacillate between the outright erasure of non-normative sexuality and a tendency to depoliticize queer parts of the theatrical narrative as a comedic device linked to the theatrical tradition of cross-dressing and identity confusion.

Despite the emergence of queer theory in the 1990s that led to a growing cultural awareness of gender as fluid and performative, MacDonald's critique of binary forms of identity is noticeably absent from recent reviews, which, surprisingly, pay even less attention to the question of sexuality than the critical discourse of 1988 and 1990. In 2020, reviews for CBC News and the *Winnipeg Free Press* ignored queer issues aside from a passing reference to "bi-curious Romeo" in the latter (King). The critical reception of Handsome Alice Theatre's feminist production in 2016 varies between those who completely overlook queer sexuality to those who link it covertly to cross-dressing, "gender bending," and the "free love" movement that serves as the new setting of the play.

When *Goodnight Desdemona* was first produced in 1988, both Crew

and Conlogue used the term "Sapphic" as a euphemism for the term "lesbian" but one specific enough to signal same-sex desire, unlike the more generic references to cross-dressing in the critical discourse that followed. Crew's 1990 review provides the only explicit discussion of gender subversion as a key theme of the play. According to Crew, "conventional notions of sexuality are stood on their head: Romeo dons a dress to pursue a 'Hellenic deviant'; Juliet is more than interested in her own sex" ("*Desdemona*"). His 1988 review also draws attention to the text's critique of heteronormativity by quoting the line "'Zounds, does no one in Verona sail straight?'" as an example of MacDonald's "skill" and "keen sense of fun in making up pseudo-Shakespearean blank verse" ("*Goodnight*"). Two reviews from the 1990 national tour stand out in this respect as well. Liz Nicholls notes that "MacDonald's blank verse is infiltrated with all kinds of clever little jokes and puns (says Romeo, fearing rejection from Constance dressed as a boy: 'if this be so, I'll to my closet straight')." Helen Bratswell of the *Vancouver Sun* also connects cross-dressing to queer desire when she writes that "The discovery that Constantine is Constance does nothing to deter Juliet from her quest. 'Oh, most forbidden love,' she gloats in rapturous anticipation." Although these reviews remain the exception to the rule by taking queer sexuality out of the closet and explicitly signalling its presence in MacDonald's theatrical narrative, both Nicholls and Crew reduce the text's queer intervention to linguistic fun and games — more comedic device than political commentary. Crew later identifies sexual subversion as a key theme in his 1990 review, but he nevertheless concludes by calling the play "delicious fun" ("*Desdemona*").

While the majority of critics take a lighthearted approach to the text's treatment of sexuality, if they mention it all, Conlogue was clearly disturbed by the queer parts of the narrative: "MacDonald could have developed the [Desdemona] situation more fully, but instead — and inexplicably — she now plunges us into Romeo and Juliet [sic], complicating things beyond endurance, lengthening the play to nearly three hours and accomplishing little that the Othello story couldn't have done" ("New Roles"). In his review of the remount two years later, Conlogue was able to grasp the reason for the inclusion of the Verona characters: "The idea seems to be that where Desdemona demonstrates the liberation of woman into her physical strength, Juliet — who turns out to be horny, promiscuous and possibly bisexual — will liberate her sexuality." Yet he remained fixed in his belief that this addition is "too

much" and "a wrong turn" (Review). Joff Schmidt took a similar stance in 2020, arguing that "The second half, which moves into the world of *Romeo and Juliet*, is less successful." A scholarly study by Martha Tuck Rozett likewise dismisses the Verona narrative, complaining that "the play degenerates into silliness and confusion," and "parody for its own sake threatens to overwhelm the play's feminist agenda" (165). Although neither voices concerns about the play's representation of sexuality, the Romeo and Juliet subplot is inextricably linked to the celebration of gender fluidity and the queering of Shakespeare.

Conlogue stands out for his outright dismissal of the play's queer themes, yet perhaps his resistance is no different from the many reviews that failed to comment on the play's representation of non-normative sexuality, erasing its presence in the narrative. Like Conlogue, these critics could not accommodate queer desire and gender instability into their vision of theatre, society, or feminism for that matter. Moreover, Conlogue's insistence that the script should not venture past the *Othello* rewrite, which corrects the imbalance of power between the sexes by transforming Desdemona from a victim of gendered violence to a warrior woman, but does not go the extra length of destabilizing identity, suggests that Conlogue is only willing to accept a limited model of feminism: a liberal humanist discourse of equality that does not question the fixed categories of man and woman, even if it tries to revalue those identities.

Jill Dolan argues that "mainstream criticism both shapes and reflects the ideological workings of the dominant culture whose concerns it represents" (19). Only those works that do not "substantially threaten the canon's dramatic or ideological values" are valorized (20). This explains the wide acceptance of the play's feminist narrative, which draws on a familiar cultural trope of female empowerment while also paying homage to the Shakespearean canon. The lack of political insight into the representation of fluid sexual identities on stage, however, suggests that MacDonald did have something radical and oppositional to say; the Verona narrative, through its mimicry of the signs that produce identity, disturbs the sex-gender system. Significantly, this aspect of the text consistently eludes critical understanding in the mainstream press, often downplayed as comedic spectacle or effaced by comments that seek to contain the text's feminist politics within a liberal humanist ideology that centres on a woman's search for power and identity.

Recontextualizing *Goodnight Desdemona* as a queering of Shakespeare would move interpretation of the play into a more explicitly anti-essentialist framework and position mainstream critics to look beyond the feminist representation of women to consider the play's critique of a stable and normative gender identity. Viewed through the lens of queer theory, cross-dressing becomes not just a comedic device of mistaken identity but also a political commentary on the fluidity of gender and sexual desire. Shakespearean criticism began exploring this issue as early as the 1980s, with pioneering studies by Alice Jardine and Laura Levine that address cross-dressing as a theatrical practice. This led to the common understanding of the boy actor as a site of gender instability and performativity. Shakespeare's comedies, in particular, deconstruct essentialist ideas about maleness and femaleness since many feature cross-dressing as a device that blurs the boundaries of gender and desire, leading to metatheatrical commentary on gender performativity. In addition, historical studies of the anti-theatricalists note that there was widespread anxiety among this conservative element of society about the boy actor as a site of gender confusion and eroticism for men in the audience, suggesting that the theatrical performance of the woman's part could destabilize identity and desire. Although feminist interpretations of *Goodnight Desdemona* often note that tragedy privileges men, unlike comedy, which has more central roles for women (Harrington; Levenson; Porter), this is not the only reason that MacDonald subverts genre in her play. Since she specifically reworks Shakespeare's cross-dressed comedies, she also exploits the queer dynamics of this genre.

According to Butler, gender is a performative construction that creates the illusion of an essential self. It might appear to be real and natural, but it is actually a social fiction constituted by citational practices and external signs, such as clothing and other embodied acts. In her view, subversive performances such as cross-dressing denaturalize gender by pointing to the fictitiousness of cultural constructions of maleness and femaleness. Her theory also challenges the notion of the binary sex-gender system by arguing that all gender performances are fluid and multiple, exceeding the limits of the heterosexual matrix. In MacDonald's queer Verona, gender performance and parody proliferate at a dizzying pace, and the possibilities for romantic combinations are endless, twisting at every turn the notion of a stable gender identity and the binary construction of a cisgender heterosexual couple. When Constance arrives in Verona, minus her skirt, she is mistaken for a boy

and quickly changes her name to Constantine. In a replay of plots such as *Twelfth Night*, in which the cross-dressed heroine attracts male and female attention, both Romeo and Juliet fall for Constantine and comically switch costumes and roles in order to pursue their new love interest. Romeo dons a dress and changes his name to Romiet to pursue the newcomer, whom he reads as straight, whereas Juliet dresses as a boy to attract the young lad, whom she perceives as "bent." When she discovers that Constantine is really Constance, a middle-aged woman, Juliet resumes her female identity and nearly succeeds in seducing Constance, shifting from the role of a cross-dressed boy in pursuit of a homosexual youth to a lesbian in pursuit of an older woman. Romeo, meanwhile, loses interest in Constantine once he meets Desdemona, the masculine warrior woman, and is later swept off stage by Tybalt, leading to yet another queer coupling. In each of these examples, not only do characters quickly and easily shift their identities and desires, but also they engage in gender role play that exceeds the binary categories of male and female, hetero and homo, blurring the boundaries of gender and sexuality to create a queer space of fluidity and multiplicity.

Constantine, the cross-dressed figure, serves as the catalyst for the rampant gender role play and sexual fluidity in queer Verona. As Romeo predicts, this foreign intruder heralds the "sweet subversion of Verona's youth" (MacDonald 62). In this land of queer performativity, gender "is cued almost entirely by clothing, something one can easily put on and take off" (Scott 121). Not only do clothes make the man or the woman, but also the interplay between different time periods reveals the arbitrariness of the external signs that construct gender. After her skirt is hilariously impaled on Desdemona's avenging sword, Constance is reduced to wearing her long johns and tweed jacket, which the Shakespearean characters mistake for a doublet and hose, the traditional attire of Renaissance men, illustrating the notion of gender as a performative site of historically produced cultural signifiers. Because of his/her foreign look and name, Constantine is also mistaken for a Greek boy, further distorting historical and cultural boundaries by transforming the protagonist into a strange and sexually intoxicating mixture of Renaissance, contemporary Canadian, and ancient Greek cultural referents. Time is played with further in the sense of age when an adult female is transformed into an adolescent boy, illustrating the malleability of the body and the social construction of allegedly biological markers such as age and sex. This act of gender role play reverses the

Shakespearean tradition of boy actors who played women and reveals what the Elizabethans perceived as the blurred boundaries between these two identities, as noted in a well-known anti-theatrical tract that states "as boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour" (Jardine). The cross-dressed figure thus becomes a site of category confusion, as theorized by Marjorie Garber, serving as a "disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself" (17). Indeed, Constance's presence in the theatrical narrative continually disturbs multiple systems of classification, blurring the lines of genre, gender, desire, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nation, literary texts, and time periods as well as crossing the boundaries between reality and fiction and conscious and unconscious states of mind.

According to Menon, "queerness is not a category but the confusion engendered by and despite categorization"; not solely linked to the notion of sexuality, it "recognizes the absurdity of limits and interrupts the way we live our lives and write our texts" (7). Shakespeare, like queer theory, "shakes" things up by destabilizing "language, temporality, and identity" (13). According to Menon, Shakesqueer shows us how we stray in our desires and deviate from these parameters. MacDonald's revisioning of the Bard likewise "shakes" him up, straying from his original texts in interesting ways to queer time, identity, and language (as noted in the reviews that comment on the linguistic play that interjects contemporary references to queer sexuality into Shakespearean blank verse). As Dvorak puts it, mirroring the language of the play, "Characters are deviant, bent, do not 'sail straight,' 'plunder both shirt and skirt,' curse their own sex" (par. 23). She also notes that MacDonald's decontextualization and recombination of Shakespearean texts result in "a systematic turning upside down, a strategy of deviance" that mirrors the claim by MacDonald that she wanted audiences to sympathize "'with people they perceive as perverse, alien, or deviant'" (par. 10). In so doing, MacDonald develops a queer aesthetic of deviance to subvert normative representations of sexuality on stage. *Goodnight Desdemona* also strays from the traditional view of Shakespeare as a site of "trans-historical truths" by deconstructing humanist ideas of universality and originality, thereby challenging colonialist and "straight" interpretations of his work (E. MacKay 71). This "anti-normative stance," to borrow a term from Menon, deconstructs both the notion of a stable text and that of a stable gender identity through its comical recuperation of the "real" Romeo and Juliet (E. MacKay 71).

MacDonald's deconstruction of originality is integrally linked to her queering of gender roles. There is no such thing as a "real" or natural gender, according to Butler, just an imaginary ideal that has been socially constructed and naturalized over time, legitimizing certain performances while disqualifying others to the extent that heterosexuality is seen as origin and homosexuality as copy. However, the very multiplicity and instability of gender performances frequently exceed the binary constructions that ground the heterosexual matrix, making a mockery of its own fictitious ideals. For this reason, "the failure of naturalized sexuality . . . can become an occasion for a subversive proliferation and parody of gender norms in which the very claim to originality and the real is shown to be the effect of a kind of naturalized gender mime" (Butler, "Imitation" 314). MacDonald's subversive exploration of queer performativity likewise denaturalizes notions of male and female, hetero and homo, forcing readers and audiences to question ideas about normativity and deviance. In so doing, the play also parodies and exposes the misogynist and homophobic notion of a "real" man.

Unlike the typical association of femininity and homosexuality with masquerade and deviance, MacDonald recasts masculinity and heterosexuality as fake copy. When Constance first arrives in Verona, for instance, Tybalt and Mercutio nauseate her with their hyperbolic performance of heteromasculinity. Once they become friends, inadvertently turning Shakespeare's tragedy into a comedy, we see the two young men engaging in"*[l]ewd Renaissance gestures and laughter*" while "*making dreadful jokes*" about disease-ridden "bawds" and "green maid[s]" ripe for the picking (MacDonald 51). In a clear spoof of Renaissance literary conventions, they engage in stereotypically ribald and misogynist jokes, equating masculinity with the sexual denigration and violation of women. In the scenes that follow, the play continues to satirize Tybalt's toxic masculinity: his eagerness to hang with the guys at the bath, his friendly jock-like punches, his homophobic and misogynistic comments, and his aggressive sexuality all contribute to his exaggerated performance of manhood. Although Constance consciously plays the part of a man in Verona, Tybalt's excessive posturing at being a manly man also seems to be an act. His larger-than-life imitation of gender ideals is ultimately no different from Constance's feigned performance of maleness, yet Tybalt ironically takes himself to be a "real" man, unlike the newcomer, whom he views with homophobic suspicion: "And dares this mockery of manhood bent, / *come hither, covered with an antic face,*

/ to fleer and lisp at our solemnity?" (62). Tybalt instantly assumes that the androgynous boy is an aberration of human nature, casting the perceived homosexuality of the foreign intruder in the heterosexist trope of fake copy. Of course, Constantine, the disguised identity of Constance, really is a mockery of manhood but not in the way that Tybalt imagines. Moreover, parodies of masculinity proliferate at a dizzying pace in this land of gender subversion: from Constantine to Romiet, to Juliet cross-dressed as a boy, to Desdemona the woman warrior whose thirst for blood and vengeance rivals even the most masculine of men, and most of all to Tybalt himself, whose "bent" side emerges in the tomb scene when his necrophiliac fascination with a dead man's member and a "maiden corse" (84) literalizes Shakespeare's metaphorical connection between sex and death. Already a mockery of gender because of his macho bravado, this scene ridicules Tybalt's phallic sensibility and effectively shatters his quest to maintain heteronormative gender binaries by pairing Tybalt with Romiet. Thus, there is no such thing as a real man in this play: masculinity is always a performance with no original in sight, just endless repetitions and resignifications that continually blur the boundaries of gender, sex, and desire. This open celebration of the fluidity of gender challenges heteronormativity by depicting sexuality as an unstable site of play and fantasy with no original essence. In so doing, MacDonald effectively transforms her narrative from a feminist politics of rewriting women to a queer disruption of the categories of identity that construct a binary view of gender.

By lampooning the notion of a "real" man, not only does the play challenge the concept of a natural gender identity, but also it deconstructs a normative category that has traditionally been set up as an ideal against which all others, including women and queer subjects, have been measured and deemed inferior. Similarly, the play debunks Tybalt's view of homosexuality as a travesty of human nature by refusing to view sexuality either in binary terms or as the product of an inner immutable essence. In fact, the line between hetero and homo is continually crossed and recrossed in Verona in performative gestures that continuously destabilize sexuality. In this theatrical setting, it is not heterosexuality but homosexuality that functions as a normative ideal. When Romeo longs to "splash" with his "Greekling" (MacDonald 52) and Juliet dreams of the isle of Sappho, homosexuality becomes an idealized space, drawn from a romanticized and exoticized view of ancient Greece, a foreign culture far removed in time and space that did

not have the same proscriptions against same-sex desire. This alternative discourse enables the two characters to construct newly fashioned sexual identities for themselves. Juliet cries, "O take me to thine island's curvèd shore, / and lay me on the bosom of the sand; / there sing to me the psalm that Sappho wrote; / her hymn will be our Song of Songs" (77-78). Meanwhile, Romeo's pursuit of an idealized vision of homosexuality, which Romeo attempts to approximate with an older woman, depicts heterosexuality as a masquerade of homosexuality. The fact that he is trying to pursue a homosexual relationship while pretending to be a heterosexual woman in order to court a woman posing as a boy further destabilizes the binaries of male/female and hetero/homo. Even Romeo's seemingly heterosexual declaration of love for Desdemona serves as a site of gender confusion and instability since he is still disguised as Romiet: "I am no ma'am, but man, and worship thee" (83). The fact that Desdemona has reversed roles with Othello, becoming the most violent and warlike character in MacDonald's play, similarly blurs the lines of gender by denaturalizing masculinity and femininity and refusing to connect these traits to a biological essence. When read together, all of these instances of gender imitation and fluidity destabilize at every turn the heteronormative categories of "man" and "woman." There is no essential or fixed human nature in any of these visions of the self, just a continuous reconstruction of corporeal styles and sexual desires.

MacDonald's queer Verona also provides a space for the inscription of lesbian desire into *Romeo and Juliet*, using the theatrical strategies and conventions that traditionally have serviced heterosexual ideals. In what has come to be known as the reverse balcony scene, Juliet dressed in Romeo's clothes appropriates his famous lines to woo Constance, taking over the active masculine role of lover instead of playing the stereotypically feminine part of the passive love object of the male gaze (Dvorak par. 22). During their courtship, Juliet will have Constance as Constantine, "a deviant of Greece," a "timid [male] virgin" (MacDonald 68), or a mature woman — preferably from Lesbos — and changes her identity, method of address, and erotic style (dress, strategy of seduction, sexual metaphors and desires) to accommodate each fantasy construction. Indeed, her poetry transforms with words the embodied identity of her lover, converting both the slant of her desires and the object of her affections from boyhood to womanhood: "More beauty in thy testament of years, / than in the face of smooth and depthless youth" (78-79). This queer reiteration of one of the most famous love scenes of

all time celebrates the performative aspects of romantic love, revealed to be a social construction of codified acts and expressions that can be endlessly reconstituted by different combinations of sex, gender, and desire. Significantly, Elizabethan theatre, which cast boy actors in female parts, was already a site of gender imitation and subversion. Although *Romeo and Juliet* has been the banner of heterosexual love for centuries, it was originally performed by an all-male cast that could not help but blur the lines of gender and sexuality. The performativity of gender is part of our theatrical past, and it is this convention that MacDonald reverses and repurposes by calling on girls and women to cross-dress and replay the queer dynamics of Shakespeare's theatre in which men courted boys.

The continuous negotiation and renegotiation of roles in MacDonald's queer Verona draws attention to the politics and pleasures of theatrical representation, which demand that performers discard their own identities for new ones that they play and replay for the viewing public; the body of the actor is always a malleable entity, subject to the kind of reinscriptions that shape the many performances of identity in the play. MacDonald highlights this process by requiring all of the actors, except the one playing Constance, to perform multiple roles. This often necessitates the use of cross-gender casting, which further destabilizes identity (the actor who plays Othello, for instance, often doubles as Juliet's nurse, wearing a beard for both roles). Moreover, productions of *Goodnight Desdemona* since the 1990s include cross-race casting, leading to "a reshuffling of many different kinds of stereotypes of race, gender, and sexuality, which alludes to and goes beyond the ambiguous eroticism of Shakespeare's cross-dressing plays" (Novy 79).

In addition to these casting choices that denaturalize the performance of identity, MacDonald's feminist appropriation of Shakespeare, which reassigns men's parts to female characters, functions as a form of cross-gender casting that allows women to perform roles traditionally assigned to men. According to Bulman, contemporary productions of Shakespeare "since the early 1990s have tapped into a fascination with gender as a cultural construction, staging an ever increasing number of productions which have used cross-gender casting," adding that "Only a revolution in our way of viewing gender in Western societies — a revolution born of the women's movement, but soon including the identity politics of the gay movement and a 'queering' of our understanding of gender roles — can account for this interest" (Introduction 13). Since *Goodnight Desdemona* was written a few years before "the sudden surge

of interest in cross-gender casting" that Bulman attributes to the early 1990s (Introduction 13), MacDonald broke new ground by anticipating this trend in Shakespearean performance. Bulman's contextualization of this contemporary theatrical practice resonates with MacDonald's play since Bulman positions it within a feminist politics of women's representation and a queer interest in the instability of gender roles (as evidenced by same-sex productions that recuperated the boy actor tradition, most notably at the New Globe Theatre). MacDonald unites these two approaches in order to revise Shakespeare from both a feminist perspective and a queer perspective that centralize women yet destabilize gender identity.

MacDonald exploits both the theatrical tradition and the comedic convention of cross-dressing to queer Shakespeare for contemporary audiences. *Goodnight Desdemona* ends on a different note than Shakespeare's comedies, however, in which characters arguably resume their "normal" gender roles by revealing their disguises and partnering with the opposite sex. Although the theatrical tradition of the boy actor is a site of excess that disrupts what appears to be a heteronormative ending, in *Goodnight Desdemona* there is no original or normative identity to return to because gender and sexuality are exposed as fluid and arbitrary concepts. The play's dizzying combinations of sex, gender, and desire reveal that the signs of identity are never fixed and far from natural. Ironically, Constance's quest to find the author's "true" identity, though empowering in the feminist sense, also teaches Constance to break free from the categories of male and female that ground heteronormativity. Not only do these cultural constructions privilege men over women, but they also seek to erase queer bodies and forms of desire that do not fit within rigid gender binaries. In MacDonald's queer Verona, by contrast, both pleasure and power can be found in the shattering of these arbitrarily imposed limits.

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