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## Abstract

One key debate in the critical reception of Shakespearean late romance concerns how best to approach the functionality of the dramatised worlds that constitute it. What I call ‘containment’ readings of late romance argue that the alternative realities explored in the plays – realities of miraculous revivals, pastoral escapes and divine interventions, – serve to affirm the inevitable return of extant power structures. Utopian readings dispute this, making the case that the political and existential destructurements exposed in these plays point toward a new orientation for the dramatic subjects they produce.

With the aim of contributing to the debate between containment and utopian readings, I explore in this thesis how late romance produces its subjects. I interrogate the plays’ structures with the help of the anthropological model of the *limen*, which is shown to be a useful category through which to educe the meaningfulness of certain ritual sequences. The *limen*’s three phases – separation; *limen*; aggregation – are employed to make sense of the transitions that subjects undergo in the four plays studied: *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*. To study the liminality of these plays is, I argue, to study how dramatic subjects are produced therein, guided by the fact that their language shares properties with ritual discourse. When studying this discourse the focus falls on that class of language which impinges most lastingly on subjects: performatives. How performatives function in late romance will show us how real the changes induced in liminal subjects are.

I examine the four plays in turn and find that their performative language produces subjects in a *limen*-consistent fashion. Aristocratic subjects are first of all estranged from those discursive practices that nourish their identity; their subjectivities are then glued back together in the ritualised, emblematising language of the *limen*. The conclusion I draw from my interrogation of the liminal patterns uncovered is that the functionality of late romance is broadly consistent with containment readings; I claim to have extended such readings, however, in showing that Shakespeare’s dramatisation of the state’s return to power usefully exposes its logic and symbolic grammar.

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**“Repetition to the life”: Liminality, subjectivity, and speech acts in  
Shakespearean late romance**

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