

Modern Language Association

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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Jan., 1987), pp. 29-41

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462490>

Accessed: 11/04/2009 09:40

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Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage

RECENT LITERARY historians have pointed out that the English Renaissance theater was an important site of cultural transformation—a place where cultural change was not simply reflected but also rehearsed and enacted (Greenblatt; Moretti; Montrose). Thus it is instructive to examine theatrical representations of gender during that period, for the theater provided an arena where changing gender definitions could be displayed, deplored, or enforced and where anxieties about them could be expressed by playwrights and incited or repressed among their audiences.

The English Renaissance stage is an especially interesting subject for gender studies because women's parts were played by boys. As the term *gender roles* indicates, there is an important sense in which gender is a kind of act for all women, not only for actresses and not only for boys pretending to be women. Sandra Gilbert, for instance, points out that among modern writers, the women, in contrast to the men, perceive the fundamental sexual self as a kind of costume rather than as the naked bedrock reality it seems to their male contemporaries. On a stage where female characters were always played by male actors, feminine gender was inevitably a matter of costume; and in plays where the heroines dressed as boys, gender became doubly problematic, the unstable product of role-playing and costume, not only in the theatrical representation but also within the fiction presented on stage.¹

For a Renaissance audience, the sexual ambiguity of the boy heroine in masculine attire was likely to invoke a widespread and ambivalent mythological tradition centering on the figure of the androgyne (Slights; Hayles, "Ambivalent"). The androgyne could be an image of transcendence—of surpassing the bounds that limit the human condition in a fallen world, of breaking through the constraints that material existence imposes on spiritual aspiration or the personal restrictions that define our roles in society. But the androgyne could also be an object of ridicule or an image of monstrous deformity,

of social and physical abnormality. Both these images of the androgyne appear in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, expressing radically different conceptions of human life and society and of dramatic imitation as well.

The idealized image of the androgyne—supported by Neoplatonic, alchemical, and biblical traditions—appeared frequently in the literature of the sixteenth century (Keach 191). Increasingly, however, the high Renaissance image of the androgyne as a symbol of prelapsarian or mystical perfection was replaced by the satirical portrait of the hermaphrodite, a medical monstrosity or social misfit, an image of perversion or abnormality.² The spiritualized conception of the *supernatural* androgyne gave way to a more limited vision, confined within the social and natural worlds of ordinary life, which produced the image of the *unnatural* hermaphrodite. At the same time, literary theory increasingly subordinated art to nature: nature became the object of artistic imitation and the standard by which art was to be judged.³

I

These changing conceptions of gender, androgyny, and theatrical mimesis can be seen in the representations of transvestite heroines in five English Renaissance comedies: John Lyly's *Gallathea* (c. 1587); William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596), *As You Like It* (1599), and *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601); and Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* (1609). Although the five plays cover a span of only twenty-two years, they are well qualified to exhibit a changing theatrical tradition. Lyly, writing in the 1580s for Queen Elizabeth's court, was the most influential comic playwright of his age (Bradbrook 75–76; Thorp 49); and of all his plays, *Gallathea* seems to have exerted the greatest influence on Shakespeare (Scragg). He is also the only comic dramatist mentioned in Jonson's tribute to Shakespeare in the First Folio. Jonson, in turn, did more than any other Elizabethan playwright to influence the

drama of his successors. John Dryden considered him “the most learned and judicious writer which any theatre ever had” and singled out *Epicoene* as a model for the writers of his own age (247–49).

The five plays are also well qualified to display changing conceptions of gender. In each of them, the plot centers on marriage, the paradigm that governed the lives and defined the identities of Renaissance women (Maclean 18–20, 57, 75, 85). As *The Lawes Resolutions of Women’s Rights* (1632) proclaimed, “all women are understood either married, or to be married” (qtd. in Maclean 75). But the institution of marriage was changing profoundly, and the Renaissance “redefinition of marriage” necessarily entailed “a redefinition of the feminine” (Belsey 179). The archetypal relationship between men and women, marriage is also an archetypal symbol for the relations between contrasted sets of gender attributes. Thus what the marriages express is not only their authors’ and audiences’ changing visions of what is desirable and undesirable in relationships between persons of different sex but also—and perhaps more important—their changing gender definitions and changing visions of the relations between masculine and feminine gender attributes within an individual human psyche and within the culture that shapes it. Various conceptions of these relations can be seen in the changing figure of the boy heroine, who occupies a central position in all five plays. In each one, the bride-to-be wears a transvestite disguise, and in each the disguise plays a crucial role in the plot, impeding, enabling, or even motivating the marriage.

In *Gallathea*, the earliest of the plays, the two heroines, disguised as boys, fall in love with each other. When their true sex is revealed, the possibility of their marriage seems to be precluded; but at the end of the play the gods intervene, and we learn that the problem will be resolved by a kind of celestial sex-change operation (at the time of the marriage, one of the girls will be changed into a boy; we are not told—and the girls do not care—which one). By contrast, in *Epicoene*, the latest of the five plays, there are no gods, there is no heroine, and marriage represents not the object of the desired resolution but the chief obstacle to its achievement. *Epicoene* is a boy disguised as a girl and married to Morose. The play ends happily with the *dissolution* of the marriage when *Epicoene* is revealed as a boy. The hero, Dauphine, has arranged the deception so that he can secure his rightful inheritance by thwarting Morose’s plan to marry and beget another heir.

Gallathea and *Epicoene* represent opposite extremes. Although money is a central issue in *Epicoene*, in *Gallathea* it is important only in the realistic, comic subplot, where Rafe, Robin, and Dick, three impoverished boys, seek their fortunes in various dubious trades. Mercenary concerns have no impact on the marriage of Lyly’s heroines. One girl’s father states that he wishes to keep his daughter a girl in order to preserve his son’s inheritance intact, but no one pays any attention to his wishes. In *Epicoene* the claims of inheritance are opposed throughout to a character’s wish to marry, and here it is Dauphine’s desire to secure his inheritance (a desire the audience is made to share) that prevails.

There is a close connection in these plays between the value assigned to androgyny and the value assigned to marriage.⁴ *Gallathea* ends in a validation of both, *Epicoene* in a repudiation of both. Sexual identity is an obstacle to marriage in both plays; but in *Gallathea* it proves infinitely malleable in the hands of the gods and irrelevant in the eyes of the audience (since we neither know nor care which girl will become a boy), while in *Epicoene* it becomes the decisive factor in determining the outcome of the plot. No androgynous and no heroine, *Epicoene*, the “silent woman” of Jonson’s subtitle, is simply a pretty boy in female disguise, a pawn in Dauphine’s economic game with no stake in the outcome of the plot and no will or character of his own. The androgynous characters who do appear in the play—the mannish “collegiate ladies” and their effeminate male consorts—are minor characters conceived in purely satiric terms, present only to be mocked and abhorred by their fellow characters, their playwright, and their audience.

In their differing treatments of androgyny, Lyly and Jonson make strikingly different statements not only about gender but also about the relation between the play world and the real world. Gender is, above all, a social construct, arbitrary and varying from one society to another, related to sex but not identical with it; and gender roles vary from one culture to another just as the words we use to signify our meanings vary from one language community to another. Moreover, the relations between gender and sex are as various and problematic as those between signifying words and signified meanings or between poetic fictions and the elusive “realities” they imitate.⁵ Just as different cultures and even different individuals within a single culture can construe all those relations differently, so too the relation between gender and sex can be construed

in a variety of ways. Thus in *Epicoene*, where reality is social, gender is an ineluctable reality; instead of celebrating androgyny, the play indulges in homophobic satire, and sex roles are rigidly enforced. In contrast to Jonson's realistic social satire, set in a recognizable contemporary London, Lyly's fantasy, set in a never-never land where Greek gods can appear on the banks of the Humber, uses liberal doses of myth and magic and celebrates androgyny. For the girls and the gods in *Gallathea*, gender is arbitrary, unreal, and reversible because the vantage point transcends the social to include the realm of fantastic imagination and spirit where androgyny is an image of human self-completion rather than an aberrant social category.

The three Shakespearean plays, written after Lyly's and before Jonson's, are more ambivalent in their treatment of monetary considerations, the value of romantic love, and the significance of gender identity. Shakespeare celebrates romantic love, but he also satirizes it (in *Silvius* and *Phebe*, in *Orsino*, in *Olivia*, and even in *Orlando* and *Rosalind*); and although money and status are never the primary issues for his protagonists, they are never wholly discounted.⁶ *Portia*, like a princess in a fairy tale, will be won only by the suitor who can answer the fantastic riddle of the caskets, but the first thing we hear about her is that she is a "lady richly left"; and if *Bassanio* ends like a romantic hero, he begins very much like a fortune hunter. *Orlando* and *Rosalind* fall in love at first sight, but their wedding is crowned not only by the miraculous appearance of *Hymen* but also by the revelation that *Rosalind's* father has recovered his dukedom. *Olivia* is beautiful and she inspires *Orsino's* romantic love, but she is also a rich heiress, the object of *Malvolio's* dreams of social and economic advancement.⁷

Most important for my purposes, unlike either Lyly or Jonson, Shakespeare refuses to dissolve the difference between the sex of the boy actor and that of the heroine he plays; and he uses his boy heroines' sexual ambiguity not only to complicate his plots but also to resolve them. *Portia's* masculine disguise enables her to save *Antonio*, but her female reality, which enables her to love and marry *Bassanio*, is what motivates her to do it in the first place. By playing the boy's part of *Ganymede*, *Rosalind* enables *Silvius* to marry *Phebe*. By playing the girl's part of *Rosalind*, she enables *Orlando* to marry herself. These heroines' transvestite disguises are neither fully repudiated (as in *Epicoene*)

nor fully authenticated (as in *Gallathea*). Instead, they become provisionally real, as, for instance, in *Twelfth Night*, *Viola's* disguise as the boy *Cesario* is both repudiated when she marries *Orsino* and authenticated when her twin brother, *Sebastian*, marries *Olivia*. Like Lyly, Shakespeare ends these comedies in the marriages of his boy heroines, but his conclusions vindicate the reality principle as well as the power of love and illusion. If Lyly and Jonson represent opposite extremes, Shakespeare occupies an ambiguous middle ground between them.

II

Even after such a cursory description of these five plays, an obvious question arises: what are we to make of the differences in their treatments of androgynous figures? Perhaps still more pressing for those of us who are primarily interested in Shakespeare's representations of women is the curious fact that his festive comedies celebrate heroines who are clearly the dominant figures in their worlds,⁸ while his later plays depict heroines who are either weaker or less sympathetic and, although still played by boy actors, almost never dressed in boys' clothing.⁹ Moreover, it is in Jonson's play, the latest of the five, that women are most powerless and most subject to misogynist satire.

Various explanations suggest themselves. Perhaps the passing of the English throne from a powerful and beloved queen to a misogynist king influenced the entire climate of English opinion regarding women (or at least the tastes of London's theater-going public). Perhaps the shift from public to private theaters was responsible: as *Alfred Harbage* points out, the misogynist picture of women and the debased view of marriage that emerge from plays written for the private theaters differ markedly from the more enlightened view that prevails in the public-theater plays (*Rival Traditions* 222–58). Still, even *Harbage's* distinction between the two audiences has been questioned (*Cook*). Moreover, Lyly was writing for Queen *Elizabeth's* court, and the misogyny of a writer like Jonson seems to persist whether he is writing for the public or the private theater—indeed, it is evident even in his private conversation (*Conversations*, *Jonson* I: 141–42).

The issue of the changing positions of women in Renaissance England has been much debated in recent years. Was humanist education a force for

women's liberation (Dusinberre 2), or did it inculcate "docility and obedience" (Jardine 53)? Was the presence of a powerful female ruler "a spur to feminism" (Dusinberre 303), or was Elizabeth the proverbial "token" woman who reinforces patriarchal restraints on the rest of her sex (Jardine 195)? Does the *hic-mulier* controversy of the early seventeenth century point to a widespread female practice of transvestism and a growing assertiveness among women (Woodbridge 156–57, 265–66); does it betoken an intensified enforcement of patriarchal restrictions; or is it simply an expression of a general uneasiness about increased social mobility and disorder (Jardine 158–62)? Did the rising middle class elevate the status of women (Dusinberre 7), or did feminism do better in an aristocratic society with "a solid royalist regime" (Woodbridge 328; cf. Kelly)? Did Protestantism and Puritanism, with their new conceptions of marriage, undermine "the old Pauline orthodoxies about women" and provide for a significant advance in women's status during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Dusinberre 5; Stone, *Crisis* 269–302)? Or did "the Reformation actually [remove] some of the possibilities for women's independent thought and action" (Jardine 49) and the Puritan conception of marriage actually lead to "greater patriarchy in husband-wife relations," a "decline" in the status and legal rights of wives, and the increased subordination of women within an increasingly sanctified and nuclear family structure (Stone, *Family* 136–37)?

Although different writers, examining similar evidence, come to opposite conclusions (Neely 20–21), the preponderance of evidence suggests that in most ways the position of women declined during the Renaissance. The reasons for that decline are complicated and still somewhat obscure, its course is uneven and difficult to chart (Prior), but a variety of indicators suggest a loss of status and opportunity for women in virtually every area of English life. By the end of Elizabeth's reign, the humanist tradition of female learning was already fading, the learned woman a subject for ridicule (Plowden 168). During the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, English women were increasingly excluded from work they had earlier performed; removed from participation in economic, political, and cultural life; relegated to a marginal and dependent economic status; excluded from the public arenas of political power and cultural authority; and confined within the rising barriers that marked off the

home as a separate, private sphere (Clark; Kelly).

The plays I have chosen to discuss delineate a similar pattern of decline. It would, of course, be a mistake to attempt to make simple equations between the boy heroines in these five plays and the real women who watched them in Renaissance audiences. All five heroines are the creations of men: not only the playwrights who wrote their parts but also the actors who played them were male. Moreover, the relation between actual life and theatrical representation is inherently complicated and problematic, a dialectical process that inevitably involves anxiety, compensation, and wish fulfillment rather than simple, mimetic reproduction. Male writers in every period have managed to celebrate feminine projections of their own ideals while maintaining misogynist attitudes and practices in their responses to actual women. In this case, the relation between reality and representation is particularly complicated because, as I hope to show, the issue of gender is intimately connected in the drama of the English Renaissance to the issue of theatrical representation itself.

III

The theater of a world in transition, the English Renaissance stage offered a field of contention for competing ideologies. The changing conceptions of gender and theatrical mimesis it displayed were intimately related to the changing conceptions of language, nature, and human society produced by the emergent discursive field that was to shape the age to come.¹⁰ The ascendancy of a literalist copy theory of language that sought to tighten the relation between word and "thing" had obvious affinities with the tightening of the sex-gender relation. Moreover, feminist historians of science have shown how the new science, rejecting the ancient ideal of Nature as a nurturing mother and the traditional alchemical metaphors of erotic union and androgynous perfection, played an important part in the reification and polarization of gender definitions and the devaluation of the feminine at the beginning of the modern age (Merchant; Keller). An analogous process can be traced in the English drama of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, where changing conceptions of the dramatists' art are related to increasingly rigid and degraded conceptions of gender and femininity. In delineating a variety of relations between the sex of the actor and that of the character he plays, these

playwrights express varying assumptions about the relation between art and life, which is analogous in all these plays to relations between gender and sex. The androgyne, in fact, becomes the fullest expression of both relations.

Thus, in Jonson's play, which subscribes to the neoclassical ideal of art as an imitation of life, gender also imitates life—both in a limited, literal sense, since the sex of Epicoene is finally revealed as male (the sex of the actor who played the part), and in a broader sense, since women in the play are subjected to the same calumny, stereotyping, and social restrictions that real women suffered in Jonson's world. For Lyly and for Shakespeare, the relation between art and life is complementary as well as reflective: that is, it resembles the relation between two complementary angles, one growing as the other decreases. What is real in one world becomes unreal in the other, what is impossible in one world becomes possible in the other, and the work of the world of art is not only to imitate the defects of the real world but also to supply what is wanting. Thus, in these plays, the true gender of the transvestite figure turns out to be feminine, the opposite of the real sex of the boy who played her part. Similarly, the dynamics of the plots make femininity a desideratum rather than the liability it was in actual life, and within the represented action female characters exercise power, even though the boy actors who played them were either apprentices, the lowliest members of an adult company, or subjected to the miserable conditions of a children's company.¹¹

The best example of the relation I am calling complementary is the characterization of Portia in *Merchant of Venice*. The chief inhabitant of the fantastic world of Belmont, Portia is introduced to the audience as a kind of mythical fairy-tale princess:

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues. . . .
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchis' strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1.1.161–72)

And one of the first things we hear Portia say is the curious disclaimer she makes when she tells her waiting woman, "you will come into the court and

swear that I have a poor pennyworth in the English" (1.2.70–72). She speaks the lines, of course, in English on an English stage, but they seem calculated not only to indicate that Portia is an Italian lady, the inhabitant of a remote and exotic country, but also to remind the audience that their world and their language are different from hers. Shakespeare's allusion to the tacit stage convention that allows almost all his characters, even his ancient Romans, to speak beautiful English invokes and insists on the difference between the world represented on stage and the world inhabited by the audience, between the rich and powerful Italian lady and the poor and powerless English boy who played her part.

The same difference is invoked when Portia leaves her fantastic realm of Belmont to enter the more prosaic and contemporary world of Venice (which, although Italian, is still part of the literal geography of the sixteenth century), a world where trials take place in law courts rather than in the form of a fairy-tale contest in which suitors from many countries attempt to win a rich and beautiful wife by solving the riddles of the caskets. When Portia moves from Belmont to Venice, she takes on the disguise of a boy, dressing in garments of the same gender that the real boy who played her part would have worn when he stepped outside the theater. What is important, I think, is that this is a false appearance. The reality within the play—the reality that Portia is a woman—can be seen only in the fantastic world of Belmont, a world that is not a reflection but a reversal of the world the play's audience actually inhabited. In Belmont the boy actor takes on a false gender that belies his true sex to depict the truth about the character he plays. The Elizabethan platitude about poets and playwrights holding mirrors up to nature is more complicated and problematic than it seems: a mirror image always reverses the reality it reflects.

The complementary relation to nature and society that I have ascribed to dramatic fantasy can be figured by the yin-yang diagram that symbolizes the relation of male and female, the fantastic dramatic complement playing the part of the female principle, the "reality" it complements playing the part of the male. The association is most apparent in fantastic plays because they flaunt their artificiality, but it can be said to characterize dramatic representation per se. In an androcentric culture, the female principle is negative, like the blank space that defines a positive pictorial image or like the

concept of feminine gender that allows the male to define itself as masculine; it is also supplementary, like the artistic imitation that represents natural life.¹² Fantastic drama reverses this equation, locating the reality principle within the world of art rather than outside it, creating an antiworld where object becomes subject and the feminine can be characterized as real. Realistic art, by contrast, strives to replicate within itself the hierarchal relations that its society has defined as natural. Thus it is not surprising that Jonson's realistic dramatic technique is often praised for its virility or that his play ends by banishing the feminine principle, or that Lyly's fantasy can make a marriage between two characters who started out as girls.

Close analogies can be drawn between changing conceptions of gender and androgyny and changes in mimetic theory and practice. Neoplatonic tradition idealized the androgyne and exalted the feminine, stressing "the spirituality of woman and her close link with the mysteries" (Maclean 55, 90). It also provided the basis for the Renaissance literary theory that described poetic fictions as idealized visions of supernatural perfection transcending the limitations of ordinary life and nature. This conception of poetry can be found in Sir Philip Sidney's description of the poet making "things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature. . . . Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done. . . . Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (157).

The golden world is a focus for nostalgia. Sidney associates it with prelapsarian nature, and Shakespeare associates it with a romanticized version of the feudal past. Portia's Belmont, Duke Senior's forest court, and Illyria are places where wealth comes by inheritance and social status through kinship (a system that some feminist historians would argue was in fact more hospitable to women than the one that was replacing it in Shakespeare's time). By contrast, Venice is a world of "commodity" and "trade" (3.1.27–30), and the bonds of kinship are disrupted in both households in act 1 of *As You Like It*. The same contrast can be seen in *Gallathea*, where the comic subplot anticipates Jonson's contemporary characters and settings, his satiric treatment of alchemy, and his emphasis on the harsh economic realities of a changing world. Rafe, Robin, and Dick search for masters and go hungry in a recognizable sixteenth-century Lincolnshire where the woods are being cut down to make ships

(1.4.70–71), while Gallathea and Phyllida exist on another plane entirely—idealized, mythological, and ahistorical.

The inhabitants of the golden world are not realistic contemporary portraits; instead, they are images of ideal types. Sidney's Neoplatonic poet "painteth not Lucretia whom he never saw, but painteth the outward beauty of such a virtue." In creating characters, the poet does not imitate "what hath been, or shall be" but considers "what may be or should be." Nature never "brought forth so true a lover as Theagenes, so constant a friend as Pylades, so valiant a man as Orlando, so right a prince as Xenophon's Cyrus, so excellent a man every way as Virgil's Aeneas." The poet, inspired "with the force of a divine breath . . . bringeth things forth far surpassing [Nature's] doings" to depict images of the perfection that disappeared from the world with "that first accursed fall of Adam" (157–58). The androgyne, also associated in Neoplatonic tradition with an ideal perfection lost at the time of the Fall, is exactly the sort of subject Sidney envisions here.

The association of the androgyne with magic, prevalent in primitive cultures as well as in Renaissance tradition, is echoed by Lyly's magical transformations and also by the hint of magic associated with Shakespeare's *Rosalind*, who claims to have conversed with a magician from the age of three (5.1.60) and who comes on stage to her marriage accompanied by the god Hymen. The association of androgyny with alchemy and of both with dramatic fantasy is not directly expressed in these plays, but Lyly's subplot, which anticipates Jonson's satire on alchemy as a hoax, also anticipates his rejection of androgyny and his realistic subject matter. The boys in Lyly's subplot, contemporary English types, never lose their social or sexual identities, and at the end of the play their problems are resolved when they are invited to sing at Gallathea and Phyllida's wedding—invited, that is, to become the boy choristers their actors really were. His fantastic main plot, by contrast, celebrates androgyny and relies for its resolution on the power of magic transformations.

Sidney distinguishes poetry from every other form of discourse by its maker's refusal to be bound by the limitations of nature: "Only the poet, disdainful to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature." For Jonson, by contrast, although poets may "invent, faine, and devise many

things,” they must “accommodate all they invent to the use and service of nature”; “[t]he true Artificer will not run away from nature, as hee were afraid of her, or depart from life and the likenesse of Truth” (*Timber*, Jonson 8: 609–10, 587). Rejecting the extravagant fantasies of his predecessors and contemporaries and anticipating the taste of the age to come, Jonson’s prefatory letter to *The Alchemist* warns his readers, “thou wert never more fair in the way to be cos’ned (then in this Age) in Poetry, especially in Playes: wherein . . . to runne away from Nature, and be afraid of her, is the onely point of art that tickles the Spectators” (5: 291).

Jonson’s *Alchemist* can, in fact, be read as an extended metaphor condemning fantastic playwrights who transgress the rule of nature and the hierarchical order of human society. Poets who attempt to improve on nature are no better than the cozening alchemists who pretend to transmute base metals into gold and poor persons into rich. Sir Epicure Mammon sounds, in Subtle’s description, very much like Sidney’s poet of the golden world:

He will make
Nature asham’d, of her long sleepe: when art,
Who’s but a step-dame, shall doe more, then shee,
In her best love to man-kind, ever could.
If his dreame last, hee’ll turne the age, to gold.
(5: 1.4.25–29)

With the philosopher’s stone and the wealth it will bring, Mammon plans to “make an old man, of fourescore, a childe” (2.1.53) and transform his cook into a knight (2.2.87). Reminded that the fulfillment of his extravagant desires will not be tolerated in a monarchy, “being a wealth unfit for any private subject,” he proposes to move to a free state (4.1.147–56). Jonson’s satire in *The Alchemist* associates the subversive power of alchemy with the power of new money to undermine the established social and political order, and his letter “To the Reader” points up an additional association with the subversive power of theatrical representation. The actor, no less than the alchemist, transgresses the social and ontological categories that keep the world an orderly place. Taking on a variety of roles, an actor belies his own identity. Theatrical impersonation transforms the poor into the rich, the commoner into the king, the old into the young, the male into the female (Barish).

In his analogy between fantastic playwrights and cozening alchemists, Jonson attempts to deal with

the antisocial aspects of theatrical representation by relegating them to the rejected category of dramatic fantasy. Renaissance writers took various positions on fantasy and on the theater itself. Some praised the actors for their protean ability to assume disparate shapes, while others condemned them as hypocrites who belied the natures and roles that God had seen fit to give them, but admirers and detractors alike understood that the player was a dangerous anomaly in a hierarchical society, a creator of “anti-structures” that, like the inversions of carnival, could undermine as well as reinforce existing social hierarchies (Montrose, “Purpose” 55–65). In his condemnation of false artificers who run away from nature and in his satire of mannish women who transgress their gender roles, Jonson attempts to contain this subversive potential by drawing sharp distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate uses of dramatic representation and subjects his art to the laws of nature and society. True art, for Jonson, is conservative, offering a “rule and Patterne of living well . . . and disposing us to all Civill offices of Society” (*Timber* 636).

The issue of gender-role transgression is intimately related, not only in Jonson but in other Elizabethan discussions of the theater, to the issue of theatrical representation. The negative association that I am suggesting, the pejorative analogy between the boy actor’s sexual ambiguity and the ambiguity of dramatic mirroring, is a familiar feature of Puritan diatribes against the stage. Typically, the argument begins by echoing the Platonic charge that poets misrepresent the world they imitate, but it almost invariably ends by citing the scriptural injunctions against transvestism (Deut. 22.5). As Rabbi Zeal-of-the-Land Busy tells the puppets in Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*, “my maine argument against you, is, that you are an *abomination*: for the Male, among you, putteth on the apparell of the *Female*, and the *Female* of the *Male*” (6: 5.5.98–100).¹³

The proscription, of course, involved sexual as well as social and political anxieties. As Lisa Jardine points out, the incitement to homosexual lust with which the Puritans charged the pretty boy actresses wearing female clothes may have been more than a matter of overheated Puritan imagination (9–36). In his homophobic satire in *Epicoene* Jonson foregrounds the social dimension of the prohibition: he characterizes the mannish “collegiates” as unnatural, but chiefly because they violate the hierarchical divisions between the sexes that should prevail

in society. But the sexual dimension is also present, for instance, in Truewit's scornful description of Clerimont melting away his time "betweene his mistress abroad, and his engle at home" (5: 1.1.23–25). Shakespeare, by contrast, emphasizes the attractiveness of his transvestite heroines, to other women as well as to the men they love, and Lyly's transvestite heroines are depicted as more beautiful and more worthy than Hebe—a character named for Jove's female cupbearer, who was replaced, after she fell and exposed her private parts, by Ganymede, the archetypal catamite whose name Shakespeare's Rosalind will take to go with her transvestite disguise.

In *Epicœne*, Jonson attempts to deal with the dangers of social and sexual transgression by upholding the socially sanctioned gender divisions and by resolving his play in the abolition of sexual ambiguity: the transvestite figure is finally revealed as the boy the actor who played him really was. In *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson uses another strategy. There, the puppet Dionisius (named for the androgynous god in whose festivals the Greek drama originated) confutes the Puritan by lifting up its garment to show that the puppets (like souls redeemed in Christ), "have neither male nor female amongst us" (6: 5.5.105). Human actors have sexual bodies, but the characters they play are "whatever sex . . . the playwright asserts" (Kimbrough, "Androgyny" 17). By making his actor a sexless puppet, Jonson avoids the dangerous duplicity between sex and gender embodied in the figure of the boy actress. Shakespeare, by contrast, insists on this duplicity, most notably in *As You Like It*, where he uses a complicated layering on of disguise to render Rosalind's sexual identity thoroughly ambivalent (Hayles, "Disguise" 65–66). Played by a boy actor, Rosalind is a female character who disguises herself as a boy and then, wearing that masculine disguise, playacts the part of her own female self. And the ambiguities of the conclusion to that play involve not only gender but sex itself, and not only the character Rosalind but also the boy actor who played her part. In the epilogue, that ambivalent figure refuses to choose between actor and character or between male and female but instead insists on the ambiguities: within the same short speech, she is both the lady Rosalind (when she says, "it is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue") and the boy who played Rosalind's part (when he promises, "If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleas'd me, complexions that

lik'd me, and breaths that I defied not . . .").¹⁴

IV

The epilogue to *As You Like It* associates Rosalind's sexual ambiguity with the complicated relations between the male actor and the female character he portrays, the dramatic representation and the reality it imitates, the play and the audience that watches it. Rosalind (or the boy who plays her part) insists that the audience must cooperate if the play is to work:

I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you; and I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women (as I perceive by your simp'ring, none of you hates them), that between you and the women the play may please.

The epilogue's suggestive reference to a sexual transaction between the men and women in Shakespeare's audience echoes the multiple marriages that have just been depicted on stage and also implies that the relation between the play and its audience is a kind of sexual transaction or marriage.¹⁵ To be successful, the play must win both sexes with a playful androgynous appeal that is most appropriately expressed by the ambiguous figure who no longer has a single name or sexual identity, combining in one nature Rosalind, Ganymede, and the boy who played their parts.

The relationship Rosalind proposes between Shakespeare's play and its audience is significantly different from the relationships between play and audience contemplated in *Gallathea* and in *Epicœne*. Written for boys to perform at Queen Elizabeth's court, *Gallathea* addressed an audience for whom, as for the gods within the play, all things were possible and for whom life, like the play itself, was a kind of elaborate, artificial spectacle.¹⁶ *Epicœne* was written for boys to perform in a private theater before an audience for whom the very act of attending the play was an assertion of social status.¹⁷ In both cases, the actors and the audience constituted two homogeneous groups, the boys performing on stage clearly inferior to the adults who watched them. Shakespeare's plays, by contrast, were written for an adult company to perform for a mixed audience. The leading actors were shareholders in the company—entrepreneurs rather than unpaid workers for a master—and their heterogeneous audience would include people whose social

rank and economic power were less than their own.

In the first two situations, the reality of the audience dominates that of the actors.¹⁸ One of Lyly's girls becomes a man in order to marry the other, and Jonson's boy is revealed as a boy so that a marriage can be annulled and an inheritance ensured. But despite these differences, there are important similarities. Both plays resolve the tensions between real sex and illusory gender, and both resolutions privilege the sex that wielded authority in the plays' audience. Designed to please a female monarch who wielded patriarchal authority, *Gallathea* looks beyond the end of the play for its resolution—a resolution in which one of the girls will become a boy in order to please the other. In Jonson's play, all the important characters are male, and at the end the revelation that the boy is a boy satisfies a man's desire for money, restores to the actor the sex he has offstage, and gratifies a status-hungry audience. In Shakespeare's transvestite comedies, the relation between sex and gender and the relation between play world and audience world, like the relation between adult actors and their heterogeneous audience, remain dialectical, with neither reality obliterating the other.¹⁹

That neither we nor the characters know or care which of Lyly's girls will be transformed demonstrates the arbitrary quality of sexual difference in *Gallathea*. Like the terms in a Euphuistic paradox, sexual difference is endlessly reversible. In the artificial world of Lyly's fantasy, deceptive gender can become a model for true sex, costume for body, name for thing, disguise for reality. The result, however, is paradoxically similar to Jonson's, for although Lyly transforms a sexual disguise into truth to permit a marriage and Jonson removes a sexual disguise to annul a marriage, both plays end in the abolition of sexual ambiguity. Jonson strips away Epicoene's deceptive gender identity to reveal his true sex, rejecting artifice and grounding his resolution in nature. Lyly invokes the supernatural to dissolve that ground and celebrate the power of artifice. Jonson comes to rest in the masculine reality principle. Lyly contains it within the comic subplot. In the main plot, he wishes it away. But Lyly, no less than Jonson, resolves the marriage plot by rejecting the troublesome discrepancy between sex and gender embodied in the figure of the boy heroine.

Shakespeare's transvestite comedies, unlike Lyly's and Jonson's, sustain that ambiguity to the end. Rejecting both Lyly's abolition of sexual difference

and Jonson's denial of the inevitable gap that separates physical sex from social gender, Shakespeare marries his unlike lovers, joining male and female characters on his stage just as he joins masculine and feminine qualities in the androgynous figures of his boy heroines. Refusing to collapse the artistic representation into a simple replica of the world outside the theater or to abandon that world for a flight into escapist fantasy, he insists on the necessary ambivalence of his play as a kind of marriage, a mediation between opposites, which can be brought together only by the power of love and imagination.

V

That marriage, however, becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. It seems perfect at the end of *As You Like It*, when the saucy Epilogue, like Jonson's saucy puppet lifting its garment in *Bartholomew Fair*, seems to dissolve in sophisticated laughter the problematic questions of gender and of the status of dramatic representations. In *Twelfth Night*, however, Shakespeare returns to those problems, and this time he insists on their seriousness. Viola, like Lyly's disguised girls and unlike Portia and Rosalind, is unhappy in her transvestite disguise; and, almost as Rabbi Busy might do, she refers to her disguised self as a "monster" and characterizes her disguise as "a wickedness wherein the pregnant enemy does much" (2.2.27–34).

This is not to say that Shakespeare abandons fantasy in *Twelfth Night*. The entire play is set in the fantastic world of Illyria, where sanity looks like madness and madness like sanity, and Viola's true sex is the opposite of that of the actor who played her part. Here as in *The Merchant of Venice* the truth in the play is an illusion from the point of view of the literal world, and the disguise in the play corresponds to the truth in the literal world. Here, however, as in *As You Like It*, the disguise is associated with the fantasy world within the play,²⁰ and the scheme is complicated by the presence of Viola's twin brother, Sebastian. He provides a kind of reality principle, and his presence, no less than Viola's, is necessary before the marriages that resolve the plot can take place.

In assuming her masculine disguise, Viola "imitates" Sebastian's reality (3.3.383), just as art was said in Renaissance literary theory to imitate natural life. Olivia falls in love with the imitation, thus

providing for a wonderfully complicated plot in which the disguised Viola adores Orsino, who is hopelessly in love with Olivia, who, in turn, dotes on Viola, whom she takes for the boy Cesario. Helpless in the face of this muddle, Viola comments, "Poor lady, she were better love a dream" (2.2.26); and later, when she first suspects that her brother has miraculously appeared in Illyria, she prays, "Prove true, imagination, O, prove true, / That I, dear brother, be now ta'en for you" (3.4.375-76).²¹ Finally, of course, the dream and the imagination do "prove true" when Sebastian materializes on stage to marry Olivia and untangle the love triangle. Thus the conclusion of the play vindicates both the imagination that proves true and the truth that proves it. Without the illusion (Viola's disguise as a boy), the right characters would not have fallen in love; without the reality, they could not have married. In the figure of Sebastian, gender and sex correspond, both within the play world and between the play world and the world of the audience. *Twelfth Night* incorporates the reality principle in its conclusion by splitting the unitary figure of the androgyne into the marvelously identical boy-girl twins who are needed to make the resolution possible.²²

At the end of the recognition scene, Orsino says to Viola-Cesario, "Give me thy hand / And let me see thee in thy woman's weeds" (5.1.272-73), a curious statement, which seems to make their marriage contingent on her change of costume. Orsino's demand serves to bring Malvolio back on stage for the attempted resolution of the gulling plot, for Viola is apparently unable to obtain a set of women's clothes without his intercession. Her women's clothes are being held by the captain who brought her ashore—a figure from the presumably real world outside Illyria—but he has been imprisoned on a lawsuit initiated by the puritanical, literal-minded Malvolio, the refuser of Illyrian madness and fantasy, who wants to marry Olivia for the same reasons Jonson's Dauphine does not want Morose to marry anyone—out of concern for his own social and economic status. Without the cooperation of the reality principle that Malvolio and the captain represent, the boy actor cannot put on Viola's clothes, and the play ends on an equivocal note, with Malvolio stalking off the stage cry-

ing "I'll be reveng'd on the whole pack of you" (5.1.378) and the clown singing a melancholy song that contrasts the ease and pleasing wish fulfillment of the festival world with conditions in the outside world, where "the rain it raineth every day." As C. L. Barber remarks, "in the 1640's, Malvolio was revenged on the whole pack of them" (257), and even within Shakespeare's career, this is the last play where an androgynous heroine can put on her femininity with a theatrical costume.

The Puritans closed the theaters, and a multitude of causes, which we are only beginning to understand, closed off many of the opportunities and possibilities that had been open to women at the beginning of the modern age (Keller 62-63; Clark; Kelly). Changing portrayals of transvestite heroines on the Renaissance stage help to illuminate the early phase of the process, and they also give us a glimpse of a liminal moment when gender definitions were open to play. At the time these plays were written, gender was still defined according to the old, medieval associations of masculinity with spirit and femininity with body (Montrose, "Shaping" 73; Keller 48; Merchant 1-40). But on the stage, the boy actress's body was male, while the character he portrayed was female. Thus inverting the offstage associations, stage illusion radically subverted the gender divisions of the Elizabethan world. The increasingly masculinist thinking of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—expressed in forms as diverse as the persecution of witches, the suppression of women, and the rise of Baconian science—also expressed itself in new theories of mimesis that drew sharp distinctions between the reality of the world and the illusions of art and betrayed a deepening antitheatrical prejudice, even among writers for the stage (Barish 337). If, as the new historians of Renaissance literature are now arguing, the Elizabethan theater was a creator as well as a creation of its culture, "shap[ing] the fantasies by which it [was] shaped, beget[ting] that by which it [was] begotten" (Montrose, "Shaping" 86), then it is perhaps worth remembering that the masculinist ideology that shaped the modern world established its hegemony in the same period when the theaters were closed.²³

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Notes

¹ For examples of transvestite heroines, see the chapter entitled “The Female Page” in Freeburg (61–99).

² The first recorded English use of *hermaphrodite* occurred in 1594, closely following a cluster of other words of similar meaning and similar pejorative connotations (Brown). Jackson argues brilliantly that the fantasy of sexual self-sufficiency was a widespread and powerful expression of the Renaissance ideal of transcendence, that it was associated with the figure of the androgyne, that this ideal was increasingly rejected, and that Jonson in particular was criticizing it.

³ Sidney’s *Apology* manages to advocate both views, without any apparent awareness of contradiction (Rackin 206). For an account of the debate between the Renaissance advocates of icastic and fantastic imitation, see Hathaway. For an example, see the selections from Torquato Tasso and Jacopo Mazzoni in Allen Gilbert.

⁴ As Kimbrough points out, “marriage is often presented as a symbol of androgyny—the sign of human fulfillment, the mark of wholeness, the token of primordial unity and apocalyptic reunion . . .” (“Macbeth” 190). Shakespeare invokes this ideal in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where Cleopatra renounces her sex (“I have nothing of woman in me”) just before she claims Antony as her husband in the life to come (5.2.239, 287). He also invokes it when he describes the mysterious union of the Phoenix and the Turtle: “Single nature’s double name / Neither two nor one was called.”

⁵ As Barbara Johnson argues, “Literature . . . inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals” (qtd. in Abel 1), and, as Abel goes on to remark, “sexuality and textuality both depend on difference.” Cf. Belsey 177–78.

⁶ Montrose, in fact, discusses *As You Like It* as a representation of male anxieties about money and status (“‘Place . . .’”).

⁷ Williamson shows how Queen Elizabeth’s practice of eroticizing her relationships with men at court, together with her power to bestow the largest rewards in society, provides a revealing social context for the characterization of the heroines in Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, who fulfill the heroes’ social and economic ambitions as well as their romantic desires (ch. 1).

⁸ These three Shakespearean plays all belong to what Barber calls his “festive comedies,” but Barber sees the heroines’ transvestite disguises as a reassertion of male power in the real world: “Just as a saturnalian reversal of social roles need not threaten the social structure, but can serve instead to consolidate it, so a temporary, playful reversal of sexual roles can renew the meaning of the normal relation” (245). Cf. Linda Woodbridge’s argument that “transvestite disguise in Shakespeare does not blur the distinction between the sexes but heightens it” (154). Davis, however, argues that the comic and festive sexual inversion that was “a widespread form of cultural play” in preindustrial Europe “could undermine as well as reinforce patriarchal authority” (129–31).

⁹ Imogen and Cleopatra are notable exceptions, but Cleopatra never wears masculine attire on stage, and Imogen, who adopts the disguise in obedience to a man’s suggestion (3.4.151–72), becomes a completely passive figure in her boy’s clothes. As Bono explains, “In the later plays, although boys still play the woman’s part, the extradramatic referents of their play have become an imagined woman, not an excluded middle term”

(202n). For an argument that the change in Shakespeare’s treatment of his female characters results from differences in dramatic genre, see Bamber.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Foucault’s argument:

At the beginning of the seventeenth century . . . thought ceases to move in the element of resemblance. Similitude is no longer the form of knowledge but rather the occasion of error, the danger to which one exposes oneself when one does not examine the obscure region of confusions. . . . The age of resemblance is drawing to a close. (51)

Such a change would emphasize gender distinctions and reject androgyny as a misleading chimera (“the chimeras of similitude loom up on all sides, but they are recognized as chimeras” [51]), just as Jonson does in *Epicoene*, a play written at the very time Foucault describes.

¹¹ For the point about the apprentices I am indebted to Carolyn Heilbrun, who made it at a panel discussion on women in Shakespeare at Columbia University on 12 November 1983. As for the actor in the children’s company, Harbage writes that he “was little more than a chattel,” “divorced from his parents, huddled up in lodgings, . . . worked to what must often have been the limit of physical endurance,” and provided only with his subsistence (*Shakespeare’s Audience* 32–33).

¹² On art as supplement, see Derrida 144–45. On the association between the artistic imitation and the feminine, see Zeitlin, who points out that “the ambiguities of the feminine and those of art [are] linked together in various ways in Greek notions of poetics from their earliest formulations” (133).

¹³ I am indebted to Maureen Quilligan for the reference to Rabbi Busy and the puppets.

¹⁴ The epilogue exemplifies what Erickson calls “heterosexual androgyny”—a gender-role exchange that does not “dissolve the boundary between ‘male’ and ‘female’” but instead crosses “back and forth over a boundary no longer seen as a rigid barrier dividing the two sexes into two absolutely separate groups” (133). Erickson, of course, would dispute my use of his term here, since he uses it in his description of *Antony and Cleopatra* to distinguish that play from *As You Like It*, which he sees as a play that uses androgyny in the service of male bonds.

¹⁵ On the presence of women in Shakespeare’s audience, see Harbage, *Shakespeare’s Audience* 74–78. On their presence in Jacobean theaters, see Woodbridge 250–52.

¹⁶ See Powell. See also Saccio: “the conventional allegorization of the Iphis-Ianthe story told in Ovid” (Lyly’s source for the sex-change plot) was “that men should despair of nothing: since althings were in the power of the Gods to give . . .” (146).

¹⁷ See, e.g., Shapiro (*Children* 66–71), where he observes:

In the private theaters, opportunities for self-dramatization probably attracted members of the upper classes who felt their social status to be precarious: either old-line aristocrats struggling to maintain their standing; or gentry, *nouveaux riches*, and young men from the inns of court striving for higher status. Whatever its actual size, this group of spectators set the tone for private-theater audiences. . . . (69)

He also points out that “in *Epicoene*, Jonson provides his audience with a pleasing image of itself while directing its mockery to a gallery of deviants from its aristocratic ethos” (82). Even if, as most recent scholarship concludes, there was much more overlap between public and private theater audiences than we formerly assumed, I believe the distinction remains valid; for, although many of the same people may have gone to both kinds of theater, they are very likely to have gone for different kinds of entertainment and to have assumed different roles once they got there. I might go to the opera one night and to a baseball game the next, but my motives, expectations, dress, and behavior would be very different on the two occasions. Moreover, as Shapiro argues, “the efforts at Paul’s and Blackfriars to recreate the conditions and atmosphere of court performance would probably have produced a more aristocratic ambiance in those playhouses than what prevailed in public theatres like the Globe” (“Boying” 2n).

¹⁸ As Lancashire points out, *Gallathea* is “essentially a court entertainment . . . designed to be a part of court social life” (Lyly xix). And Shapiro argues that unlike adult plays, where even passages of metadramatic self-reference “can sometimes strengthen the illusion created by the dramatic action,” plays written for the children’s troupes were generally designed “to make the dramatic action seem artificial in comparison with the audience’s world” (*Children* 108–09).

¹⁹ A similar pattern can be seen in the three authors’ treatments of their androgynous characters: in each case the degree of autonomy accorded the character corresponds to the degree of power available to the actors who performed the play. Although Shakespeare’s transvestite heroines, like Lyly’s and Jonson’s, were played by boys, they exhibit the same autonomy that distinguished the adult actors who constituted Shakespeare’s company from the powerless boys who acted in *Gallathea* and *Epicoene*. Epicoene is Dauphine’s creation and acts at his command. Although Lyly’s disguised girls have wills of their own, they do not choose their male disguises but are compelled to wear

them by their fathers, and their problems are solved at the end by the intervention of the gods. By contrast, Shakespeare’s Portia, Rosalind, and Viola choose and act for themselves, and all three are central characters in their respective plays—the ones with whom the audience identifies, the ones who see the most, the ones who, by virtue of their transvestite disguises, make possible the marriages that bring joy and well-being to the other characters. Just as Jonson’s satirical treatment of androgyny expresses his uneasiness about the dangers of theatrical impersonation, Shakespeare’s celebration of androgynous heroines implies a celebration of the actor’s freedom.

²⁰ I am indebted to Marianne Novy for this important observation. The difference is important because it shows a progression from the simple chiasmic relation between reality and fantasy in *The Merchant of Venice* to their more complicated intermingling in *As You Like It*, where the green world of the forest is subject to winter and rough weather, where Rosalind and Celia must buy their sheep farm for money, and where a fantasy shepherd like Silvius keeps company with a real one like Corin.

²¹ On the association between dreams and poetic fantasy, see Mazzoni: “the phantasy is the common power of the mind for dreams and for poetic verisimilitude. . . . the phantasy is the power on which dreams depend . . . poetic verisimilitude is also founded on the same power of the mind” (*On the Defense of the Comedy of Dante* 1.67, in A. Gilbert 386–87).

²² For a perceptive discussion of the “identical”-opposite-sex-twins symbol, including a reminder that Shakespeare himself was the father of opposite-sex twins, see Heilbrun 34–45.

²³ Earlier versions of this paper were presented in 1984 at the Ohio Shakespeare Conference, the Berkshire Conference on Women’s History, and a conference entitled *After The Second Sex* at the University of Pennsylvania. In revising and expanding my discussion I have profited greatly from the stimulating discussions at the Ohio Shakespeare Conference and from the commentaries of Maureen Quilligan and Carolyn Heilbrun, the respondents at the Berkshire and Pennsylvania conferences.

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