Separating the Men from the Boys: Gender Representation and Cross-dressing in the plays of Shakespeare

Angela O’Brien

Abstract

This paper was presented at a Melbourne Shakespeare Society meeting in August 2003. The written version aims to give readers an opportunity to read the talk as presented. An academic version of this paper is currently being developed for publishing in the future. The paper discusses the representation of female characters by boy actors in the age of Shakespeare.

Author

Associate Professor Angela O’Brien is currently the foundation head of the School of Creative Arts in the University of Melbourne. Her academic interests in theatre history are broad, ranging from Australian theatre to Shakespeare. She was Chairperson of the Victorian organising committee of the Shakespeare Schools Festival from 1990 to 1999. She has recently completed an on-line history of student theatre at the University of Melbourne.

Paper

Today I am going to be talking about the issues of transvestitism on the Shakespearean stage. I am going to consider this from a number of angles:

- Why were there no women on the English Stage?
- What was the view of women at the time and how might that affect their representation on stage?
- What was the role of boy actors in the theatre?
- What was the effect on the audience, particularly in those cross-dressing plays in which female characters disguise themselves as boys so we have boys dressing as women dressing as boys?

There are female roles in all Shakespearean plays. The plays in which the cross-dressing role is a key issue in terms of character development or plot include: The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, Twelfth Night and Cymbeline.

A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream offers an interesting case study. In this play, boys would have dressed as women in the roles of Hermia, Helena and Hippolyta. The final wedding scene presents us with a parody of cross-dressing boy actors in the performance of the “mechanicals”. In this play within a play, the actor playing the boy actor (Flute) dresses as a female character in front of Hermia, Helena and Hippolyta, all played by boys. We are aware that Flute has not been happy to be given the female role when he pleads of Quince, “Nay, faith, let me not play a woman; I have a beard coming.” (Act1,Sc2,40). The interjections of the
characters during the “play” give a clear indication of the status accorded to actors. There are layers and layers of gender complexity in the play and particularly the wedding scene, generally obscured by the slapstick comedy used in presenting it. It is clear from this play that it was considered unmanly andemasculating to play a woman. This gender chauvinism is also evident in another play where a male is gullled into playing a woman by female characters (Mrs Ford and Mrs Page) being played by boys. This play is The Merry Wives of Windsor, and the scene is when Falstaff is tricked into dressing up as the loathsome old fat woman of Brainford (Act4, Sc2).

So why were there no women performers in Shakespeare’s time? We know there were women performers in France, Italy and Spain from the middle of the sixteenth century with the development of the improvised Commedia del Arte. We also know that it was not an issue of morality – actresses were associated with whores in France and Italy but they still performed on the stage. In Spain – more moral than England – they appeared on stage with the approval of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, although the problem of chastity was resolved by insisting they were married. The English attitude towards foreign actresses was clear. The playwright Thomas Nashe wrote:

Our players are not as the players beyond the sea, a sort of squirming bawdy comedians that have whores and common courtesans to play women’s parts and forebear no immodest speech or unchaste action that may provoke laughter.

In England, it seems that the issue of women appearing on stage was never in question. Despite the fact that there were many debates about the moral dangers associated with transvestite boys appearing on stage, there were never arguments in favour of women appearing as an alternative.

So why did the fashion for female performers not spread to England until almost a century later under the restored monarchy? Until then, the English Stage was exclusively male. Stephen Orgel in his excellent book Impersonations, argues that some women had performed in late medieval guild plays and that amateur women performers were at times involved in court masques, so it is even more surprising that they were excluded from the public stage. He cites a pageant in 1519 when two maidsens were engaged to play Our Lady & St Elisabeth and another in 1534 when ladies played the Virgin and three attendants. Orgel makes the point that for those for whom the theatre itself was not problematical, there was no stigma attached to women performing in plays as long as they did not do it as a profession.

He also argues that European companies often performed in England to varying responses. Orgel makes another very interesting observation, which is that the theatre was one place where women could attend freely, unescorted and unmasked despite the restrictions placed on them in other spheres of their lives. The Elizabethan audience then, was made up of both men and women so theatrical representations depended on the response from a mixed audience. What we might see as male-oriented depictions of women on stage must have represented a broad cultural fantasy, not just that of men. It seems it was all right to see foreign women on the public stage – just not English women.

So what was the difference between the sexes? Are the differences on Shakespeare’s stage superficial – a matter of costumes and paint – or is there something more?

A number of commentators argue that in Renaissance physiology the distinction of the sexes could be frighteningly blurred. This is generally known as the one sex model initially discussed by Stephen Greenblatt. From the time of Galen there was a belief that male and female were versions of the same unitary species but the female genitals were inverted and carried internally rather than externally. The theory went that the sexual experience was the same during intercourse with both experiencing orgasm and ejaculating seed. Both male and female seeds were present in every foetus and gender depended on which was dominant - if the male seed was dominant this seemed to generate more heat, which pressed the genitals downward, and out. Crooke, the most famous of the English Renaissance biologists, used this theory as the basis for his view that women were, in fact, incomplete men:

The testicles in men are larger and of a hotter nature than in Women heat abounding in men thrusts them forth out of the body whereas in women they remain within because their dull and sluggish heat is not enough to thrust them out. He goes on to say “a woman is so much less perfect than a man by how much her heat is less and weaker than his; yet ….. this imperfection is turned into perfection because without the woman mankind could not have been perfected by the perfecter sex.”

In support of this argument - that additional heat can turn a woman into a man - cases were cited, one in particular about a woman, Marie Garnier, whose genitals turned inside out at 15 when she was chasing her pigs, thereby changing her from female to male. Montaigne subsequently wrote an essay on the topic in which he summarises the history of the man Germain Garnier and the townspeople’s accounts of him as “heavily bearded, and old, and not married”.

Feminist writer Janet Adelman discusses these theories when looking at the plays of Shakespeare indicating that there is much evidence to suggest that Shakespeare saw women as defective men. She cites Portia’s comment in The Merchant of Venice: “They shall think we are accomplished with that we lack” and Viola’s remark in Twelfth Night: “a little thing would make me tell them how much I lack as a man”. She argues that the joke is that the actors playing these parts in fact do not ‘lack’ and the language calls attention to the boy actor’s body, which in turn underwrites the representation on stage doing away with sexual difference because women simply disappear.

Let’s turn now to the role of the boy actors on stage. Orgel writes that the frightening part of the teleology of the one sex model is the fantasy of reversal. If a woman can become a man, the men can be turned back into women. It followed that if a man associated with women too much it could be dangerous. Love, for example, can emasculate men; sexual passion for women makes men more effeminate. Transvestism on stage is particularly worrying. Firstly the boys playing women’s roles could be transformed into their roles and play the part in reality. Secondly male spectators might be seduced by the impersonation and,
losing their reason, become effeminate, lusting after the woman in the drama and the youth beneath the woman’s clothes - thus becoming a woman themselves.

This argument is developed by Laura Levine who argues that the theatre effeminized the boy actors and that this was the hallmark of anti-theatricality during the period. Levine’s thesis is that the anti-theatrical critics, particularly Stephen Gosson in 1579 and later Philip Stubbes - argued that boy actors wearing women’s clothing can literally adulterate the male gender - that the costume can structurally turn men into women. At this point the issues of sodomy and homoeroticism enter into the debate. Levine cites Stubbes as saying:

...that after plays “every one brings another homeward of their way very friendly and in their secret enclaves (covertly) they play the sodomites or worse. And these be the fruits of Plays and Interludes for the most - in other words they will emulat what has been seen on stage, namely boys in an embrace.

The anti-theatrical movement reaches its crises in Prunne’s Histriomastix (1633), which cites a long list of precedents that sodomites titillate themselves by dressing their boys in women’s clothing. Prunne claims the theatre is always a pretext for male homosexuality. In turn homosexuality is associated with a loss of masculine gender through its association with incubi & succubi who have no gender, and an association with castration through the idea that doing what a woman does leads to being a woman. Locked away in the man is the womb waiting for the appropriate attire and the removal of “virilities” which will allow “her” to assume her proper shape. This was a terrifying thought for English Renaissance man and, Levine argues, at the basis for the growing focus on homosexuality and the pre-occupation with sodomy.

For Prunne while it was anathema for a woman to wear men’s clothing, “then doth not a man in woman’s clothing much more demerit?”

The argument went like this: there is an assumption that the theatre is erotic; secondly because it is erotic it is uncontrollably exciting; and thirdly the essential form of erotic excitement in men is homosexual. The representations of women are only a cover for the relationships between men. The gaze is focussed not on the female character, but on the young boy under the disguise.

Let’s turn to the next issues. Was there substance in the arguments of the anti-theatre movement or did audiences see it very differently? Does the transvestite stage, in fact, resist sexual and narrative teleologies? Is it an-erotic? Is it not the boy being liked but the action of the play? Are the audiences always clearly aware they are not watching women and as such what was the role of the boy actors? The tradition of the boy actor stems from the middle ages within the mystery and morality plays when the choirboys assisted the clerks in their presentations. The boys had their own ceremony of the Boy Bishop. The lay minstrels generally had one boy actor who traveled with them and played the woman’s parts in interludes. Older academic works argue that because the players were ostensibly the servants of nobleman, the stage was a profession that a boy might enter without reproach and that actors might take on a boy to train whom they would in turn sell to the company for a wage. Robertson Davies cites passages from Henslowe in which he seems to suggest he bought a boy from another player and that, in turn, the company owed him for the boy’s wage. It would seem the boys were lowly in status and irrespective of the importance of their parts, they did not receive star listings.

Orgel argues that, in fact, the boys were not apprenticed as actors but to actors as members of other guilds. He cites evidence that Ben Jonson continued to pay his membership dues to the bricklayers guild long after he became an actor. Members of guilds had the freedom of the city. In this way, Orgel argues, the boys could be controlled. He also argues that it was further evidence of a patriarchal system more associated with mercantile and artisanal economics than with the theatre. The only exception to this legality, that boys could not be apprentice actors, was with the boys’ companies associated with the Royal Chapel.

The apprentice lived in his Master’s household, was fed & clothed by him and wages went to the master. There was a familial relationship which Sue Ellen Case has taken further to describe as not dissimilar from that of the dependent relationship between husband and wife. What seems clear is that they were trained to play women but it is not clear whether they went on to play male roles.

Orgel argues that physically boys were like the ideal of the Elizabethan woman – slim hipped and flat chested. Like women, boys were acknowledged objects of sexual desire for men and this is made fairly obvious in both As You Like It and Twelfth Night. The boy player, Orgel argues, was also an object of erotic desire for women. He develops this into a thesis that women are also implicated in this homoeroticism and the effeminisation of men and cites Cleopatra’s dressing Anthony in her garments as evidence. He suggests that in a society as patriarchally stratified as England, to see a boy dressed in skirts might be to disarm and socialise him in ways that were female so that he might be seen not as possessor or master of women but rather as companionable, complicable and one of them. Indeed this is how Olivia sees the attraction of Viola/Cesario in Twelfth Night. S/he offers a provocative but controllable diversion for Olivia, suffering from a wounded heart and Viola is not as dangerous as a real man is (such as Orsino). Olivia’s fascination for Cesario also reflects both the female audience members’ attraction for young boys, as well as the male audience members’ erotic attraction for both men and women. It is interesting how easily Olivia readjusts and realigns her affiliations once she discovers Cesario’s “female” identity as Viola. Similarly Orsino’s clear attraction for Cesario is legitimised when “he” is revealed as a woman – but he remains only, of course the representation of one.

Orgel argues that the position of the transvestite boy is as a response to cultural anxiety and a manifestation for a “disarmed” woman. He suggests it can also be seen as a performative construction that reveals the malleability of the masculine and empowers the feminine allowing her masculine potential to be seen albeit it in the four walls of the theatre. In a way both boys and women are a medium for exchange in the patriarchal society. Boys and women are not in competition in the system. They are antithetical not to each other but to men. They are, in many ways, interchangeable and share a common temperament - irrational, emotional and mercurial. The cross-dressing in plays such as Twelfth Night
supports this idea. What allows boys to play women is the costume. It is not enough to be like a woman; one must be seen to be like a woman.

Let us now turn to cross-dressing and disguise. Disguise is an important convention in the Elizabethan theatre; cross-gender disguise is an extension of disguise, and is a feature of many Shakespearean plays.

In his book on this topic Michael Shapiro takes us through a history of cross dressing in which he puts the argument that women sometimes assumed the disguise of male attire to escape or to conceal their identities while conducting illicit liaisons. Cross-dressing, he argues, was associated with wantonness, and this view certainly supports an argument that identifies homoeroticism as a feature of the convention of cross-dressing transvestitism in the Elizabethan theatre. The role of women in these plays, however, is much more romantic than the view held by magistrates who castigated and punished cross-dressed women for sexual misdemeanours.

Shapiro suggests that assuming the third layer of disguise presented a problem because the actor had to first establish femininity with unmistakable clarity. He suggests he did this by firstly signaling female identity through male disguise. Shapiro questions how the boy actors created their double-layered characterisations, particularly the boy disguise. He suggests the boy version used to portray the heroine’s disguised male identity need not have been based on the actor’s own boy persona. It was more probably a fabricated persona — perhaps an enlargement of some boyish component of his personality or more likely one of the cultural norms — audacity or shyness. These two traits are both evident in the persona of Cesario. For a “play-boy” with a high level of skill then the audience would find it difficult to distinguish between the heroine in disguise and the boy himself. In that instance the spectators might have seen the heroine’s assumption of disguise as the play-boy’s resumption of his own identity. This calculated ambiguity between the personality of the heroine’s male disguise and the playboy’s real personality provides an interesting gloss on how we read these plays. Shapiro also suggests that the disguised heroines were inevitably played beside male actors playing men, throwing into relief the boy actor’s effeminacy. Although at times, as in Twelfth Night, the juxtaposition is with another cross-dressed boy, which further complicates gender representation and reading.

Finally, inherent in the language may well be clues about what is happening and these, in turn, increase the theatrical tension.

We might now turn to a couple of readings and then a discussion.

The talk concluded with a reading of Twelfth Night, Act 1 Scene 5, when Viola/Cesario presents Orsino’s suit to Olivia. This was followed by a discussion about the complexities of transvestitism coupled with cross-dressed disguise in the one scene.

Reading List — see page 4

A Director’s Perspective on ‘As You Like It’ Jason Freddi

As I am not an academic, please forgive me if elements of what follows appear dogmatic or unsubstantiated.

Why Perform Shakespeare?

Every attempt to perform Shakespeare is an experiment. One has in hand a four hundred year old text with no pictures and only intimations as to how it was performed. One is faced with the task of bringing words to life. But how? By acting them out. By committing them to memory and then saying them aloud as if they were one’s own. This requires imagination.

Getting to know Shakespeare

If the actors understand what they are saying, then the audience has a chance. If understanding is reached for every phrase and passage that is spoken (words gain meaning, not in themselves, but in context) then one develops character. How many directors and actors put in the time to find this basic level of understanding?

In this article, I intend to outline what I discovered about ‘As You Like It’ when analysing it from the viewpoint of playwright; asking myself how Shakespeare wrote this play. This involved looking closely at the structure of the text and the rhythms inherent within it. This is Shakespeare as playwright. This analysis provided me with a radical basis from which to adapt the text and direct the performance.

Why perform ‘As You Like It’?

The decision to perform ‘As you Like It’ was a pragmatic one based on my desire to produce a musical play. With ‘As You Like It’, I was able to increase the musical element by borrowing from other Shakespeare sources. The themes in many of Shakespeare’s songs are universal and were easily adapted to illustrate the themes in ‘As You Like It’.

I used only three of the songs from ‘As You Like It’: Come Hither; Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind and Sweet Lovers Love the Spring. The other eight songs, I borrowed from other plays and from a group of lyrics in the collected works titled: ‘Sundry Sonnets Set to Music’.

The Sundry Sonnets offered some rich material. I took some of the verses of ‘Were Kisses All the Joys in Bed’ and used them as lectures from Sir Oliver Martext and Jaques to Touchstone, admonishing him for his ignoble intentions towards Audrey. I arranged ‘Come Live With Me’ as a round with Phoebe singing to Silvius: ‘If that the world and love were young, and truth in every shepherd’s tongue…’, and he replying to her: ‘Come live with me and be my love’, while Phoebe sings the same line to Ganymede.

Some of the non-‘As You Like It’ songs were used as transitions between scenes sung as if by a chorus. I used Lord Amiens as leader of this chorus. Oh Mistress Mine from ‘Twelfth Night’ and Hey the doxy o’er the dales from “The Winter’s Tale” were used in this manner.
The enduring popularity of this play

I later discovered that not only was I to produce 'As You Like It' this year, but the VCA third-year class was to present an all-male production in April, and the Bell Shakespeare with Lindy Davies was to present a production in August. This provided a special opportunity for insight into alternate interpretations of the play.

An interpretation of the play

'As You Like It' is about the games people play and the risks that come when we play games with the feelings of those whom we love. Rosalind plays a game with her lover, Orlando. She finds herself in a situation where she has the power to test his love for her without exposing herself and her feelings to him. She shares this game with the audience, and we feel the excitement whenever she almost loses her cover. Yet, she pushes this game too far, and almost loses him. And Shakespeare shows us that games are false and feelings are real.

Phebe also plays a game with her love, Silvius, though it is less self-conscious. She adores the attention which he gives her, and leads him on, but all the time affects a disdain for him, playing hard-to-get. Rosalind reveals the truth about Phebe when she instructs her to 'sell while you can; you are not for all markets'.

Touchstone plays at loving Audrey, yet admits to us that he intends to leave her once he has grown tired of her. Audrey does not know this. Touchstone is the more fool for it.

It is apparent also that Jaques, as elsewhere in this essay, is playing a game. He plays a game with himself. As a melancholy and a mock 'wise man', he is constantly reinforcing to himself that he knows something that others do not. This breeds in him a heightened sense of his own importance. Yet he is unhappy and whenever he meets others, he cheers himself by distributing his melancholy among them. So he plays his part.

All are playing at being true people, but only Rosalind is becoming true. Most of the characters experience a transformation of their situation at the end of the play, but only Rosalind has to make a choice to effect the transformation. She has to stop acting and end the game with Orlando. She has to love him for real. In summary, though all the world's a stage and people are like actors on-a-stage, they are not. They have real feelings and real lives. A relationship built on a lie or a game is only like a relationship.

Shakespeare's Rhythm

'As You Like It' begins with the fight between Orlando and Oliver. This abruptly demands our attention and throws us into the action. The rest of Act 1 sets the scene for the flights to the forest. The first-act is slow and weighed down by the impending fate that all the 'good' people are going to end up in the forest. Strangely, much of the material introduced is only revisited at the very end of the play, almost as an afterthought.

At the beginning of Act 2 we are shown the forest where the graceful duke and his 'co-mates in exile' ruminate on the pleasures and misfortunes of forest life. These scenes are interspersed with those of Orlando and Rosalind making their way through the forest. Duke Frederick's enraged reaction to their flight shows how the repercussions of his dastardly rule are bound to interrupt the idyllic forest scenes. This passage of the play culminates with Orlando's invasion of the Duke's party, and the sad conclusions which follow, as elaborated in 'Blow, blow, thou winter wind', and the cynical 'All the world's a stage'.

But by Act 3, scene 2, where Orlando is inscribing love-poems into tree-bark, the pace is entirely idyllic. And it stays this way to the end, even through the abrupt plot twist signified by the arrival of Oliver. It is these later scenes that are the ones which the audience most enjoys. There is no longer the sense of impending fate which makes us impatient for the play to keep moving. In these meandering scenes we get to know the characters by their relationships with others - not in relation to 'a plot'. However, in the final scenes, Shakespeare takes pains to remind us of the details of the plot and the fate of Duke Frederick and Co whom we - and, it seems, the author - have pleasantly forgotten about. Perhaps this is why the ending strikes us as unsatisfactory.

How to cut the play?

After repeated readings, I found that the forest scenes could stand alone with only a perfunctory introduction. To achieve this I had to remove/replace three significant parts: Oliver, Celia and Adam.

I was impressed, in my reading of the play, by a lack of enthusiasm for Celia and Oliver and I came to the conclusion that they were not central to the play: Celia is written as a foil to Rosalind, and Oliver is the prompt by which Orlando is evicted from Frederick's court. Both could be cut without disrupting the central plot.

The Picture of a Revised 'As You Like It'

To change a Shakespeare play to any significant degree, a new rhythm must be created to ensure the play's unity. I wanted a play of under two hours, including music, so I arrived at the following:

ACT I - Introductory Narrated Pageant (From Shakespeare's Act 1): 6-7 minutes.

ACT II - The Forest Scenes involving the Duke and Jaques, including Orlando's invasion (Act 2): 20 minutes.

ACT III - Rosalind's Scenes (Acts 2 and 3): 25 minutes

ACT IV - The Phebe Scenes and Ending (Act 3 scene 5 through Acts 4 & 5): 55 minutes
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Author/s:  
O'BRIEN, ANGELA

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