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DISSERTATION PROSPECTUS

“If I were a woman”:
Gendered Artifice on the Shakespearean Stage

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In this doctoral dissertation, I intend to argue for a more nuanced reading of the performance of female characters on the English Renaissance stage that categorizes cross-dressing along a spectrum of theatrical artifice.¹ To demonstrate my argument, each chapter of this project will consider the degree to which the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries indicate a range of gendered artifice in their representation of female characters. I maintain that we cannot treat all of these women the same with respect to onstage cross-dressing, and that we must account for these differences in characters' "artificial femaleness" with the play text as our guide.

For a brief illustration of what I mean by "range of gendered artifice," consider the necessary difference in performance between Ursula in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, a grotesque Falstaffian woman, and John Webster's title character in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Both require male players to cross-dress as women, but the solemnity with which we treat the artificial femaleness of each character is starkly different. While Ursula describes herself as "all fire and fat" (much as Falstaff in *Henry IV* Part 1 does) and seems to revel in her own grotesqueness, the Duchess of Malfi is an unnamed paragon of integrity whose dramatic power is attached to her status as a beautiful, Stoic woman of unshakeable virtue. By virtue of genre differences alone, there is an overt sense that these two roles (both of which necessitated cross-dressing in the historical situation of Renaissance England since women could not appear onstage) would be played in very different ways; indeed, Ursula's representation in the text seems to invite a shamelessly mannish portrayal that would capitalize on her grotesque physical comedy.

Since we cannot literally sit in the audience of an Elizabethan production of a play

¹ By "cross-dressing," I am referring to male-as-female performance in general, not simply characters who cross-dress as a plot device.

like *Romeo and Juliet*, we will always struggle to draw conclusions about how gender appeared on Shakespeare's stage. Our distance, then, from the dramaturgical world of this theatre affirms that our general assumptions about cross-dressed performance are well grounded; if female actors were not yet acceptable on the English stage, then audiences had no reason to expect the realistic qualities of an actual young woman playing the part of the young Juliet Capulet.² But what if English Renaissance dramatists experimented with strategies that either increased or decreased the feminine artifice of their characters, despite the limitations of strictly male performers? Did playwrights create female characters in such a way that they encouraged their audiences to view these characters "as women" with varying degrees of seriousness? Were some roles written such that the female character more convincingly "passed" as a woman, while others did not shy away from highlighting the man beneath the dress? The audience who first experienced the stage plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries certainly had a different understanding of realism than we do today, and yet the question of whether or not Renaissance theatre-goers possessed some desire for realistic qualities in theatrical representation is nonetheless compelling (and is the subject of a later discussion in this Prospectus).

With respect to the questions suggested above, we know that cross-dressing can and does occur with "various levels of artifice" in our own century's all-male performances of Shakespeare's plays; "various levels of artifice" is a phrase James C.

² It is important to note that women *did* in fact appear onstage during the age of Shakespeare, but typically only in masques at Court or in productions by theatrical companies from other European countries. Stephen Orgel makes this point about England's unique emphasis on maintaining an all-male English theatre in *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (1996), which is listed in the bibliography of this Prospectus.

Bulman employs to discuss the range of transvestism in Mark Rylance's renowned 2002 production of *Twelfth Night* at the Globe (since revived on Broadway in 2014) (Bulman 579). Rylance's *Twelfth Night* certainly offers a strong suggestion for how the female characters might be staged: Viola/Cesario must "pass" for a woman disguised as a man, Olivia (played by Rylance and arguably modeled after Queen Elizabeth I) displays the gestures of femininity yet is noticeably male, and Maria is something of a one man-woman drag act complete with a five o'clock shadow. Of Maria's character, played by Paul Chahidi in the 2002 production, Bulman remarks,

A stocky man whose Maria was middle-aged and matronly, [Chahidi] made no effort to disguise the rich timbre of his baritone voice nor, despite the white make-up which the Globe's program noted was authentically Elizabethan, to fully disguise his dark beard... The comedy of Chahidi/Maria's interactions with Sirs Toby and Andrew derived in part from his scarcely concealed masculinity, reminiscent not so much of cross-dressers who try to "pass" for women today as of comedians such as Dame Edna³ who camp it up in women's clothing. (579)

By virtue of the contemporary Globe's performance laboratory, we see different shades of "femaleness" alive in a recent production that uses all-male casting. Indeed, the performance of Chahidi's Maria's "scarcely concealed masculinity" in the New Globe's production invites these questions: what is it about the characters themselves, as written in Shakespeare's text, that invites these "various levels of artifice," and what hypotheses can we formulate about this range of transvestism on Shakespeare's stage? To my knowledge, no other studies have investigated this spectrum of artifice as it appears in the

³ "Dame Edna Everage" is a famous drag persona created by Australian comedian Barry Humphries. ("She" is known for her signature lavender hair and cat-eye glasses.) First appearing onstage in 1955, Dame Edna continues to appear in live performances and on television to this day.

play texts themselves.

After offering an introduction that will serve as Chapter One (“An Introduction to *‘If I were a woman’: Gendered Artifice on the Shakespearean Stage*”), this dissertation will include five subsequent chapters that demonstrate my argument that female characters were represented onstage along a spectrum of theatrical artifice.⁴ The following chapter descriptions outline my tentative plan for exploring this thesis.

One of the most exciting versions of artifice in English Renaissance drama strips away all artifice in the first place: the popular trope of the heroine disguised as a young man. In these moments, the female character receives the most convincing disguise possible in the visage of an actual young man, a player whose onstage dress is likely not to be that different from his everyday garb. *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice* all feature memorable heroines who choose to disguise themselves as men, but other than delay the comic resolution, what other pragmatic reasons exist for these heroines to disguise their gender? In Chapter Two (“The Completion of a Courtier in Shakespeare’s Cross-Dressed Comedies”), I argue that, by capitalizing on the representation of the “exposed” male player in the comedies listed above, we see how the paired characters of Cesario/Orsino, Ganymede/Orlando, and Balthazar/Bassanio might complement one another in terms of Renaissance male courtesy. In other words, the trope of the disguised heroine in these three plays heightens our observance of how a female character’s enactment of male courtesy, such as that outlined in Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, might adjudicate and correct any apparent lack of

⁴ I envision each chapter as article length, or 22-25 pages (excluding endnotes).

courtesy in the heroine's male counterpart.⁵ In all three of these pairings, the disguised heroine is in a position to advise and instruct her male companion within the context either of friendship (which is the case between Cesario/Orsino and Ganymede/Orlando) or of a moment of influential public display (which is the case with Balthazar and Bassanio).

Truly, the connection between Shakespeare's body of work and *The Book of the Courtier* is not a new vein in studies of the English Renaissance, especially within studies of Shakespeare's history cycles.⁶ As to the specific qualities of Renaissance male courtesy in Castiglione's text, Margaret M. Toole offers her own concise summary of "the courtier":

His purpose in life and his duty to his prince are to teach goodness, to encourage continency, to stimulate courage, to enact justice, and to suggest temperance.

Never does he surpass the prince, who evinces diligence, gentleness, kindness, and liberality on all occasions. But he is the ideal and not the real gentleman.

(Toole 87)

Toole's final comment in this passage, that the courtier "is the ideal and not the real gentleman," has special bearing on my own argument. The disguised heroines in *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, after all, are not "real" gentleman within the context of their stories, despite the fact that male players perform them; in the worlds of each play, they are women disguised as gentlemen. Yet the ideals they

⁵ For the purposes of my argument in this chapter, *The Book of the Courtier*'s emphasis on the virtuous influence the courtier might have on his lord is of the greatest interest to me (this appears in Books III and IV of Castiglione's text).

⁶ I am thinking specifically of E. M. W. Tillyard (*Shakespeare's History Plays*), who is (to my knowledge) the first scholar to explicitly connect Prince Hal in *Henry IV* Parts 1 and 2 to a vision of the *cortegiano* (Tillyard 275-9).

represent in their respective plays (such as Cesario's empathy, Ganymede's grounded vision of *Eros*, and Balthazar's graceful rhetoric) reveal the qualities they can model for their male counterparts. These heroines not only have greater access to their male counterparts by way of their disguise, but they also have the ability to model physically the ideals of Renaissance courtesy. (And, in all three cases, these "ideals" are qualities that their male partners are evidently lacking.) Ultimately, within the range of gendered artifice that I have suggested, these female characters' onstage representations enact a *rejection* of artifice that accentuates the realistic qualities of the actual young male player, and I contend that this apparent attempt at onstage realism heightens these female characters' ability to model courtesy for their male counterparts.

As a London city comedy, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* celebrates the intriguing phenomenon of Mary Frith, a cross-dressing celebrity in her own right during the English Renaissance. Within my own discussion about realism and the theatrical effect of the cross-dressed heroine, *The Roaring Girl* presents an interesting case study since the starting place for the main character is an actual historical figure, one who was known for her unapologetic gender bending on the "stage" of the London streets. In Chapter Three ("*The Roaring Girl's* Theatrical Memorialization of Mary Frith"), I argue that, while *The Roaring Girl* has been criticized by feminist scholars for the way it undermines the powerful independence and gender transgression of the real Mary Frith (in the play, for instance, Moll Cutpurse tends to uphold a traditional vision of marriage rather than critique it), the play nonetheless attempts to memorialize the fascinating, real-life character of Mary Frith in a way that uses the most literal representation of her target costume (a real man). Thomas Middleton himself indicates

this effort at theatrical memorialization in The Epistle to the 1611 printed text of *The Roaring Girl*: “Worse things, I must needs confess, the world has taxed [Mary Frith] for than has been written of her; but ‘tis the excellency of a writer to leave things better than he finds ‘em” (Epistle 20-22).⁷ In addition to using a male player to represent “Moll” onstage, Middleton and Dekker purposefully stray away from depicting her with the same level of criminal infamy that was most of the basis for her celebrity. As Michael Shapiro explains, “The play exploits the notoriety and sensual exploits of the real-life model, but throughout, and explicitly in the epilogue, it distinguishes her criminality from the more benign idiosyncrasy of the play’s heroine” (Shapiro 26). For rather than coming across as a criminal known mostly for her lasciviousness, the Moll Cutpurse of Middleton and Dekker’s play is a protector of female chastity, content to play the matchmaking Puck to the lovers’ qualms. Ultimately, Moll Cutpurse is a figure whose life seems to epitomize what cross-dressing comedies celebrate: she transcends the limits of the female gender for the sake of accomplishing a noble or romantic goal, such as helping lovers who are divided by familial circumstances find their way to marriage.

An undergirding argument extending across both of the above chapter descriptions is that the dramatic trope of the heroine disguised as a young man was potentially a rejection of artifice on the Renaissance stage, thus satisfying a desire for theatrical performances with overtly realistic qualities. In other words, perhaps the reason this plot choice was so popular was not, in fact, because of the disorienting effect of layered gender identities, but instead because it afforded the character to speak through the vehicle of the most convincing costume the player had on hand: that of a real boy.

⁷ Quotations from *The Roaring Girl* are from *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, edited by Bevington, Engle, Maus, and Rasmussen.

This suggestion is a slight departure from popular theories of the disguised young heroine in Renaissance drama, which tend to emphasize the disorienting effects of gendered layering (i.e. a man playing a woman playing a man) or the inherent homoeroticism of cross-dressed, heterosexual characters.⁸ My intention here is not to refute the claims of other scholars who have written extensively on the significance of onstage transvestism in the English Renaissance, particularly as it pertains to cross-dressed heroines. These studies have taught us how to read Shakespeare and his contemporaries' cross-dressed comedies with an appreciation for their comic complexities, their shameless layering, and their invincible attachment to Renaissance men and women's fluid understanding of gender and sexuality. From the position of an analyst who is deeply indebted to these interpretations of onstage transvestism, I want to add to this ongoing discussion by highlighting the dramatically pragmatic choice of including a disguised heroine in plays driven by female characters.

How do powerful, tragic women in Renaissance drama fit into the spectrum of feminine artifice I have already suggested? When we consider the seriousness of their respective plots, we might deduce that these characters would likely be represented with a serious attempt at onstage femaleness (in other words, they should "pass" as women) despite the male players wearing the gowns. Their representation seems to stress artifice for the sake of accentuating their femininity and thus occludes the boy player. This emphasis on feminine artifice is very different from the disguised heroine trope, which exposes the boy player for the sake of accentuating realism, and the over-exaggerated "manly woman," whose masculinity is emphasized for the sake of comedy. Within this

⁸ I am thinking particularly of the works of Stephen Orgel, Marjorie Garber, and Michael Shapiro, all of which are included in the bibliography at the end of this Prospectus.

spectrum of gendered artifice, this in-between space is perhaps the most challenging subset of female characters to discuss because so many of Renaissance drama's women could fit into this category, even outside of the genre of tragedy. For instance, this group could include the likes of Hermia and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Miranda in *The Tempest*, Celia in *As You Like It*, Perdita and Hermione in *A Winter's Tale*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Desdemona in *Othello*, etc.—all in the same category. Because of the size of this group, I have decided to limit myself to the genre of tragedy in the following chapter description, not only for the sake of narrowing my focus, but also to see if I can draw any genre-specific conclusions about male-as-female performance.

In Chapter Four (“Faithful Feminine Artifice in English Renaissance Tragedy”), I argue that one of the strategies for maintaining a sense of faithful feminine artifice in the genre of tragedy is connected to a character's enactment of female integrity. To put this claim another way, it appears that female characters that we are inclined to treat with deep solemnity preserve their “artificial femaleness” through behaviors that accentuate their innate female integrity. My primary example is Webster's Duchess of Malfi, a character whose speeches and behavior go so far as to resonate with the ideals of Stoicism, which is typically a male preserve. Subsequently, her enactment of traditionally masculine, Stoic qualities (such as her calm demeanor in the face of her execution in Act 4) raises suspicions about whether this substrate of masculinity increases her onstage impact in her tragedy. Specifically, this sense of masculine Stoic honor combined with her onstage femaleness causes us to view her as a figure who transcends gender categorizations precisely because she represents an amalgam of both genders. Indeed, the fact that we never learn the Duchess's Christian name seems to cast her less

as an individual and more as a monumental and transcendent figure. And, with respect to her presentation as a character who maintains a faithful attempt at feminine artifice, this emphasis on Stoic integrity effectively deflects attention away from the destabilizing effect of the male player who actually performs the role of the Duchess and directs our attention toward the powerful impact of the character herself. While the majority of this chapter pertains to the Duchess, I also plan to show how the Duchess, specifically, proves to be a potentially descriptive case for the onstage representation of other virtuous tragic heroines like Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Desdemona in *Othello*, or Cordelia in *King Lear*.

Turning away from tragedy to comedy, the final two chapters of this proposed dissertation explore whether some female characters are written such that they intentionally highlight the players' masculinity in a burlesque manner, with the ultimate effect being comic show or horrific representation.⁹ In some ways, this is the easiest vision of female artifice to discuss since we can imagine some outlandish female characters in Renaissance drama garnering much of their dramatic intrigue from a scarcely concealed masculinity. Retrospectively, if the first two iterations of gendered artifice outlined in this Prospectus were "rejection of artifice" (the trope of the disguised heroine) and "faithful artifice" (tragic women of integrity), then this final version could be categorized as "intentionally sloppy artifice."

Despite that fact that much of the humor of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* fifth act arises from poor Francis Flute doing his absolute best to play Thisby, there are no existing theories about what the Pyramus and Thisby play-within-a-play implies about

⁹ This form of accentuated masculinity has a rather different purpose than that of the disguised heroine trope, which seems to use exposed masculinity as a vehicle for realistic onstage representation.

cross-dressing's comic potential in Renaissance drama. My argument in Chapter Five ("The Case of Thisby: What Shakespeare Implies about Cross-Dressing's Comic Potential") is that the mechanicals' performance of "Pyramus and Thisby" purposefully suggests that it is possible to play a woman poorly, and that this ineptness is an intentional form of comic show. In some ways, this claim seems relatively obvious; of course Flute's less-than-convincing portrayal of Thisby is designed to be comic. But, by so explicitly demonstrating the comic potential inherent in a man playing a woman poorly, Shakespeare implies that cross-dressing can be a source of overt physical comedy.

Furthermore, there are many female characters throughout the corpus of Renaissance drama that we might conceive of as more mannish than others. Often marginal and presented primarily in comic vignettes, these characters offer an exaggerated artifice slightly more suited to spectacle than drama. Consonant with suggestions made in the previous chapter description, this spectacle is connected with physical comedy and appears to make few apologies about the male player masquerading as a woman. Thus my purpose in Chapter Six ("Female Falstaffs: Manly Women in English Renaissance Drama") is to identify possible comedic and/or grotesque instances of the "Man-Woman" in Renaissance drama, using the text of the plays as well as performance analyses from modern, all-male productions.

Perhaps the easiest character to visualize within this categorization is Ursula in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. For the sake of illustration, I will linger on the example of Ursula for a moment in order to demonstrate explicitly what I mean by "Female Falstaffs." The occasionally grotesque qualities of *Bartholomew Fair*'s carnival setting

anticipates Ursula's characterization as an ogreish woman in the first place, and her own actions throughout the comedy suggest that her revolting behavior is best suited to an onstage representation that comically highlights her mannishness. Her name, Ursula, which means "she-bear," also implies that this woman was likely larger and more foreboding than normal. When she is first introduced at her booth at the fair, she begins by calling out for ale:

NIGHTINGALE: How now, Ursula? In a heat, in a heat?

URSULA: [*to Mooncalf*] My chair, you false faucet, you, and my morning's draft, quickly, a bottle of ale, to quench me, rascal.

[*Mooncalf disappears*]

URSULA: [*to Nightingale*] I am all fire and fat, Nightingale. I shall e'en melt away to the first woman, a rib, again, I am afraid. I do water the ground in knots, as I go, like a great garden pot; you may follow me by the S's I make. (2.2.48-55)¹⁰

The impression we get from her introduction is much like our first impression of Sir John Falstaff in *Henry IV Part I*, particularly the claim that she is "all fire and fat." Falstaff is clearly fat, a quality we learn within his first moments on stage:

FALSTAFF: Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?

PRINCE HAL: Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that though has forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldest truly know. What a devil hast thou to

¹⁰ Quotations from *Bartholomew Fair* are from *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*.

do with the time of the day? (1.2.1-6)¹¹

Indeed, reading these two introductions alongside each other subtly implies that the notion of Ursula as a “female Falstaff” is not too far off the mark. But what is most interesting about her introduction is its immediate evocation of the grotesque. Not only is she “all fire and fat,” but also she disgustingly “water[s] the ground with knots...like a great garden pot,” shamelessly urinating publicly. The grotesqueness we witness with Ursula’s characterization fits neatly with a theory of her performance that accentuates the player’s masculinity for the purpose of comedy. And this connection between the grotesque and burlesque masculinity seems similarly applicable to other female characters throughout Renaissance drama. Structurally, I plan to organize this chapter around several female figures, in addition to Ursula, whose characterizations in the text invite the suspicion of a comically or grotesquely “exposed” masculinity: Mistress Quickly in 1 and 2 *Henry IV*, Queen Margaret in *Richard III*, the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the three Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*.

Amidst the great volume of excellent research on gendered performance in Renaissance drama, this proposed dissertation ultimately attempts to offer a new theory of performance for the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, one that among other things considers whether we can extract indications of performance practices from the text alone. Much of the well-known research on English Renaissance theatrical cross-dressing arose in the 1990s, during the advent of Queer Studies and the maturation of New Historicism. The result of this combination of a historical question (such as Stephen Orgel’s, “Why did the English stage take boys for women?”) with a particular theoretical framework is that our speculations about authentic performance practices have been

¹¹ Quotations from *Henry IV* Part 1 are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

filtered almost exclusively through theory. What I hope to accomplish in this project is not to reject that preceding theoretical framework, but instead to see if that framework can help us work backwards to a more faithful reading of these texts and their original performances.

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