

Boys Becoming Women in Shakespeare's Plays

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In the wonderful reconstruction of the theatrical conditions of Shakespeare's Globe which we see on Bankside at its original site, it is still impossible to recapture the ambience surrounding the Elizabethan boy actor, even if in a twentieth-century production women's parts are played by men. The laws governing children's participation in theatre, their education, the place of children and adolescents in twentieth-century British society, all make any re-entry into that past situation highly problematic. Nevertheless many aspects of Shakespeare's plays seem initially irretrievable to the modern consciousness, so why balk at the boy actor? In this essay I want to consider some of the ways in which Shakespeare negotiated writing women's parts for boys, and also some of the changes in audience perception which occur once those parts are played by women. Do the parts need re-writing?

Take the Epilogue to *As You Like It*. Rosalind in her wedding garments remains on stage: "It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue; but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue." All right. But twenty lines on: "If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleas'd me, . . . and breaths that I defied not."¹ How can an actress say

these lines? They must be said by a boy, defying his female garments. The whole epilogue is based on an idea of gender identity as costume: put it on, take it off. The boy acting Rosalind revels in the choice, a choice he has had in the Forest of Arden, where he moves with lightning speed between the roles and voices of Rosalind and Ganymede the shepherd boy. In so doing, his own biological identity becomes unimportant. It is as though it ceased to exist. One might compare Virginia Woolf's fictional hero/heroine, Orlando, as he moves from period to period, putting on gender as though it were a suit of clothes. The body of the actor becomes a blank page on which gender identity, as opposed to biological sexual identity, can be written. In the history of women's acting of Shakespeare's female parts, however, the fiction of gender identity has never been allowed to usurp the fact of biological sex. Women remain women in a way that was not possible on Shakespeare's stage because there were no biological women on stage, and therefore gender identity was a fiction, generated between player and audience. What happens to that fiction once the player doesn't need it any more, because *he* has become *she*?

In the history of theatrical performance it is clear that from the earliest days of women's acting of heroines who disguised themselves as boys, there was no real attempt to suggest a male gender identity. This is apparent if one looks at recollections of the performance of Rosalind by the great eighteenth-century actress, Sarah Siddons. The *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons* state that "she ventured to appear upon the London stage in a dress which more strongly reminded the spectator of the sex which she had laid down, than that which she had taken up. Even this, which

showed the struggle of modesty to save all unnecessary exposure, was a thousand times more captivating as to female loveliness, than the studious display of all that must have rendered concealment impossible" (Boaden, 166). Dressing as a boy emphasised womanhood to a delighted audience. The femininity of the actress was enhanced by her assumed masculine attire, and this became particularly seductive during the mid-nineteenth century period of Victorian prudishness, when a doublet-and-hose outlined the female body, notably female legs, usually hidden under huge crinolines. When the American actress Ada Rehan played Rosalind in 1897 she exploited the sexual suggestiveness of her costume as Ganymede. Clement Scott wrote of her London performance: "The great feature of Miss Rehan's Rosalind is that she never for one moment forgets, or allows herself to forget, that she is a woman" (Scott, 85) (Fig. 1)². Nobody wanted her to look like a boy, let alone be one. The idea that she did look like one was a fiction, just as the leading pantomime boy in *Cinderella* (always played by a girl) is a fiction.

This situation was first challenged in 1919 with Nigel Playfair's post-first-world-war production of *As You Like It* at Stratford, which delighted some by its dispensing with hallowed theatrical traditions, although many people were horrified. The *Manchester Guardian* reported:

Rosalind has been seen for so many generations in dresses approaching in more or less degree that of the "principal boy" of pantomime that deep disappointment was caused in many quarters by the complete absence of the low-necked tunic, tights, high-heeled boots, and the inevitable pheasant's feather in her cap which have hitherto been regarded

as indispensable in her forest dress.
(“The Stratford Festival”)

This model of Shakespeare’s heroine is perfectly exemplified by the photograph of Julia Nelson playing Rosalind in 1896, even down to the pheasant’s feather in her cap (Fig. 2). Like the pantomime boy, no one doubts for a moment that this voluptuous figure is a woman.

The twentieth century creates in the West its own version of the problem by providing an audience in which women are routinely wearing trousers (Fig. 3). How is Rosalind to be disguised as a boy, when women have usurped the clothing which was the traditional marker of male gender? In the stage history of *As You Like It*, Vanessa Redgrave’s performance of the role in Stratford in 1961 marked a new attempt to give Rosalind authentic boyishness (Fig. 4). A critic from the *Glasgow Herald* wrote that Redgrave “avoids turning the character into a jolly Dick Whittington” (7 July, 1961). When Juliet Stevenson played the part in Adrian Noble’s production of 1985 the whole question of gender had become much more fluid than had been the case in any theatre other than Shakespeare’s own (Fig. 5). Stevenson entered “deeper waters where neither she, her lover, nor the audience can tell truth from masquerade” (Wardle, 1985). Michael Billington spoke of the Orlando and Rosalind in this production embodying the Jungian animus and anima (*The Guardian*, 26 April 1985). Stevenson herself, in an interview in *Plays and Players*, related the play’s gender concerns, somewhat tenuously it must be said, to the political protest of women at Greenham Common against the nuclear warhead. What is clear from the discussion of this production is that the play had

recovered in the 1980s some of the multiplicity of reference with regard to gender, society and politics, which it must have had in its original performance at the turn of the sixteenth century. Stevenson did seem to have captured something of the fluidity of movement between boy and woman which was at the disposal of Shakespeare's boy actor, but which seemed later to have been written out of the part in the course of stage production. Why had it proved so difficult to play Rosalind as boy?

Part of the answer is that audience, society, directors and critics, and actresses themselves in many cases, didn't want there to be any doubt of the heroine's femininity. Once women started to play the parts which Shakespeare wrote for boy actors, a rigidity which had not been there in the Elizabethan period, began to be apparent in the way in which the theatre negotiated an idea of the feminine. Within this context the concept of being a "lady" acquired a special prominence. In *As You Like It* the word "lady" is used quite specifically to indicate a whole range of characteristics associated with feminine propriety. Rosalind, in stating that "it is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue; but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue," alludes to courtesy rituals. Ladies come first; it is rude to let them follow gentlemen; but as ladies do not come first in the theatre because the prologue is always spoken by a man, there is nothing discourteous in having a lady come last. This inversion of polite behaviour is part of the gender inversion in which Rosalind herself takes part. Ladies last. But with a wink: she is not really a lady, or even a woman: if I were, I would kiss those of you who have good beards. So courtesy is not really offended. An apprentice, not a lady, speaks the Epilogue. But the fantasy

of the lady is so powerful that we still believe in her, and when she curtsies, whom do we applaud? A woman? A boy? Or our own fantasy of freedom from the social constraints of gender?

The social significance of being a lady is pointed up in the early scenes of the play at Duke Frederick's court, when Le Beau, the Frenchified courtier, describes the feats of Charles, the Duke's wrestler, who has felled three young men, causing their old father such grief "that all the beholders take his part with weeping." "But," enquires Touchstone, "what is the sport, monsieur, that the ladies have lost?" The courteous Le Beau is mystified: "Why, this that I speak of." Touchstone retorts: "It is the first time that ever I heard breaking of ribs was sport for ladies." Celia agrees: "Or I, I promise thee" (1.2.131-40). Both man and "woman" acquiesce in a social code where ladies do not find entertainment in the sufferings of old men over their children. Femininity is too finely strung for this coarse amusement.

On a different level that same conviction lies behind the outrage of Gloucester's blinding by Regan, and of both daughters' treatment of their father in *King Lear*. They become monsters, tigers not daughters, not ladies but "unnatural hags" (2.4.278), masquerading as ladies. "Proper deformity shows not in the fiend / So horrid as in woman," exclaims Albany (4.2.60). Cordelia's reported cry to the Gentleman on hearing of her sisters' treatment of the King underlines the same disjunction between womanhood and cruelty: "Sisters, sisters! Shame of ladies, sisters!" (4.3.27). Ladies reinforce civility, that concept of being civilised which rejects violence as a mark not of manhood but of bestiality.

When, in *As You Like It*, Le Beau enters to tell the “ladies” of the wrestling, his reception is not what he expected from these sensitive creatures. They are talking about smells. A lot of Rosalind’s speeches were considered indelicate once female rather than male actors had to speak them. Even in the Elizabethan period it may have been easier for the boy actor to conjure up a free-spoken lady on the stage, than it would have been for a woman actress (had there been one) to do it, despite the precedent set by Elizabeth I who was renowned for not mincing her words. It is easy to chart a very steady cleaning-up of the language of Shakespeare’s heroines once women had to speak it. For behind the critic’s delight that when the nineteenth-century actress Ada Rehan played Rosalind she never let anyone forget that she was a woman, lies the whole gamut of propriety: “There is not an atom of vulgarity in Miss Rehan’s Rosalind. . . . She is always refined. . . . No tomboy, or hoyden” (Scott, 85). The practice of cutting or altering anything the slightest bit dubious from Rosalind’s speeches (which means in practice tampering with almost everything she says) is apparent from even the most cursory study of theatre editions and prompt books. The part was being rewritten for the woman actress. The shift from the boy actor to women actresses makes explicit the assumptions of actors, audience and directors, about how femininity should be staged. The theatrical representation of femininity in a play and the actual feminine presence of the actress playing a female part, coexist in an uneasy triangle with the social construction of femininity in the world of the audience. The idea of the feminine generated through this relationship has historically given priority to notions of modesty in sexual

matters and of propriety in language in ways which Shakespeare never had to worry about, because boys not women spoke his lines. Modesty and propriety were part of the masquerade rather than its determining principle.

Were other kinds of rewriting in reference to the boys' parts made necessary by the advent of women to the stage? I want to take another famous case, that of Cleopatra's reference to the boy actor in Act V of *Antony and Cleopatra*. After the death of Antony, Cleopatra, tenuously protected in her monument from the wiles of the Romans, reflects with her women on her likely fate at the hands of Octavius Caesar. They will all be taken to Rome in triumph and displayed as the symbols of conquest before the Roman people:

The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels: Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I' th' posture of a whore. (5.2.216-21)

Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, reflects on the miseries of being poorly represented. A squeaking voice, a boy's figure, a common (and by implication comic) strumpet: pantomime characters, complemented by a drunken Antony. In the Elizabethan theatre this must have been a strange moment. Did the audience immediately recognise the self-reflexive nature of the remarks about the poor performances of boy actors, made by the boy playing Cleopatra? Did his own voice, at the end of an extraordinarily long and taxing part, exhibit a tendency to squeak, such as Flute the bellows-mender, who has a beard coming, brought

to the lamentations of Thisbe over the dead Pyramus? Even if the exigencies of the part caused no squeaking, the natural behaviour of the breaking voice in an adolescent boy does result in erratic and disconcerting changes of register. A boy old enough to play a part as taxing as that of Cleopatra might, by the end of the play, have found his voice playing tricks on him. After all, when Hamlet sees how tall the boy about to play the Player Queen has grown, he admonishes him: "Pray God your voice . . . be not crack'd within the ring" (2.2.427-8). But why draw attention to the theatrical difficulties attendant on having women's parts played by boys?

One answer might be that Shakespeare loved drawing attention to the inadequacies of theatrical representation. Think of the Prologue to *Henry V*:

Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt? (11-14)

Shakespeare's plays demonstrate a delight in taking fantastic risks: remember Gloucester on the cliff at Dover, falling flat on his face on the stage before an audience as bewildered as he is by the contrast between the steepness of the cliff conjured up by Edgar's description: "How fearful / And dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low!" and his own perceptions: "Methinks the ground is even" (*King Lear*, 4.6.11-12, 3). Or recall Falstaff, pretending to be dead on the battlefield at Shrewsbury in order to avoid being slain by Douglas. Hal dispatches Hotspur, spies his fat friend whom he presumes dead, and exits, at which the Stage Direction states: "*Falstaff riseth up.*" Falstaff eyes the dead

Percy with apprehension: “Zounds, I am afraid of this gun-powder Percy though he be dead. How if he should counterfeit too and rise?” (*1 Henry IV*, 5.4.121-3). Dryden said in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*: “I have observed that in all our tragedies, the audience cannot forbear laughing when the actors are to die; it is the most comic part of the whole play” (28). Hotspur’s fall is accompanied by that most ignominious of theatrical events, audience laughter, tickled up by another actor’s calling into question of the whole convention of stage death.

Even in the most tragic moment in the final scene of *King Lear* Shakespeare deliberately and audaciously draws the audience’s attention to the incipient life in the body of the actor playing the dead Cordelia: “This feather stirs, she lives!” (5.3.266) cries Lear. And his final lines in the Folio text: “Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips, / Look there, look there!” (5.3.311-12), create the peculiar situation where the audience, observing the breathing of the actor, might participate in Lear’s delusion in a moment which stretches theatrical illusion to its limits.

Shakespeare’s plays sail extremely close to the wind in highlighting the exigencies of theatrical performance. Viewed within this context Cleopatra’s scoffing references to the boy who would play her become part of a larger strategy of exposing dangerous moments and diffusing their danger by the supreme confidence of that exposure. Even as the boy actor’s voice squeaks out the Empress of Egypt’s protest against his histrionic limitations, so the audience registers the reality of a woman who defies representation. Cleopatra declares a gender identity which transcends poor performance. This is particularly re-

markable in view of the fact that her whole part embodies a concept of performance. She is always performing herself. There is no apparently stable persona beneath the multiple roles she plays. The unstable relation of the boy actor to gender, that ability to move between the social and linguistic roles of male and female which is evident in Rosalind's Epilogue to *As You Like It*, is perfectly suited to the instability of Cleopatra's own relationship to womanhood: which for her consists of multiple masquerades behind which there never seems to be a true face.

What then happens both to the speech about the boy's poor acting, and to the part of Cleopatra herself when it is played by a woman? Does it have to be in some sense rewritten? The irony of the speech and its self-reflexive nature is lost in the modern theatre. Moreover the notion that gender is performance is less clearly stated if there is no dialogue between the boy playing Cleopatra, and the character herself, who comments on his performance, both in the present—he is doing well—and in the projected Roman future, where he is making a total hash of it.

If one follows this argument to its logical conclusion one must end up saying that writing for boys gave the dramatist a flexibility in relation to the representation of gender on stage which could only occur because the sexual identity of the actor was erased in the act of performance, thus mirroring a social truth about gender itself, that it is a fiction which men and women learn and participate in, but which has no innate stability. Laura Levine's work argues that Elizabethan fear of the stage and of the boy actor did in fact grow from a fear about the ultimate elusiveness of gender identity.

However convincing the idea might be that the boy actor

liberated Shakespeare from many constraints which become obvious the moment women started to play his parts, there is something absurd about a position which says that Shakespeare wouldn't have preferred the real thing. Surely if instead of writing in the Prologue to *Henry V* the words "O for a Muse of fire," the playwright had been able to reach for a cine-camera, he would have done so. In that play he also stretches the theatrical medium to breaking-point. He needs cinema. Mightn't one suggest, that if he could have had a woman for Cleopatra, he would have leapt at the opportunity? After all, in her manipulation of womanhood as power Cleopatra bears many resemblances to the life model of Elizabeth I. Indeed, the full realisation in Shakespeare's play of that manipulative genius which is only barely suggested in Plutarch, may have come from the dramatist's observation of the real-life female model of the monarch. If that is so, an actress must be a more powerful tool through which to convey Cleopatra to an audience than the puny boy whose acting aroused such aversion in the character he purported to represent.

In theory, this must be true. It ought, furthermore, to be pre-eminently true of twentieth-century theatre in the West which grows from, and addresses itself to, social conditions in which gender identity has acquired a fluidity approaching that of the Elizabethan theatre, however different its origins may be. In practice, it is not so straightforward. An enormous entourage of prejudices surrounds every Cleopatra who steps on to the stage, because the challenges the part provides have often seemed too audacious for the conservative arenas in which Shakespeare, our national bard whom every British four-

teen-year-old must study in school, is now enshrined.

Part of the challenge lies in the sensuality of the heroine, which is evoked by the witness of other characters—Enobarbus, Antony, Octavius—as much as by Cleopatra's own presence. Once an actress is on stage her actual physical presence becomes central to the dramatic evocation of sensuality in a way that the boy actor's could never have been. Granville-Barker, the celebrated theatrical director, warned: "Let the usurping actress remember that her sex is a liability, not an asset. . . . Shakespeare has left no blank spaces for her to fill with her charm" (Granville-Barker, 15-16). Shakespeare's Cleopatra grows out of a complex web of interactions: between Shakespeare and Plutarch, between the boy actor and the woman he must play, between the Egyptian Empress and the Elizabethan Queen. Plutarch in his *Life of Antonius* (Shakespeare's principal source for the play) is as fascinated by Cleopatra as Enobarbus is. Shakespeare's Enobarbus, a part largely invented by the dramatist, impersonates Plutarch's crusty grudging tones about Cleopatra, even as he registers, as Plutarch also does, fascination at her witchery.

When Dryden rewrote the play for the Restoration stage in the form of *All for Love* he cut out Enobarbus, to a large extent bypassing Shakespeare's play, and returning to Plutarch for his interpretation of the story. Antony in *All for Love* is destroyed by illicit passion. His wife Octavia is Plutarch's Octavia, a noble Roman matron, not Shakespeare's pathetic victim of political manoeuvring. Dryden's Cleopatra is embourgeoised, belittled by being contained within the cultural bounds of Western constructions of female social roles. It is perhaps not totally

surprising that Dryden's version of the play ruled the English stage virtually unchallenged for more than a hundred and fifty years, because in simplifying the complex web of gender and politics within which Shakespeare's Cleopatra operates Dryden has made the part easier for an actress to manage.

In his review of the production of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* at Stratford-upon-Avon in the 1950s, in which Michael Redgrave and Peggy Ashcroft played the title roles, the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan wrote scathingly of the capacity of English actresses to portray the Egyptian Queen: "There is only one role in *Antony and Cleopatra* that English actresses are naturally equipped to play. This is Octavia, Caesar's docile sister. . . . The great sluts of world drama . . . have always puzzled our girls; and an English Cleopatra is a contradiction in terms." He described Ashcroft's Cleopatra as a version of Lady Chatterley: "A nice intense woman . . . such a pity she took up with the head gamekeeper" (Tynan, 49-50). He was even more dismissive of Vivien Leigh, who played Cleopatra opposite her husband, Laurence Olivier's, Antony:

"You were a boggler ever," says Antony at one point to his idle doxy; and one can feel Miss Leigh's imagination bogging at the thought of playing Cleopatra. Taking a deep breath and resolutely focusing her periwinkle charm, she launches another of her careful readings; ably and passionlessly she picks her way among its great challenges, presenting a glibly mown lawn where her author had imagined a jungle. (Tynan, 9-10)

No doubt there was much to be said for Tynan's criticisms of Leigh's performance; nevertheless they grow from an undisclosed agenda, which has its roots in Shakespeare's play itself,

not just in the acting of it at any particular time.

Shakespeare has set up a ruthless competition between Antony and Cleopatra for stage power, a competition which Cleopatra wins, hands down, as Elizabeth I also won the competition for centre stage, dispatching an overweening Essex on the exit line that she would be mistress in her own kingdom. As Linda Fitz has shown in her analysis of the male critical reception of the play from the nineteenth century, critics balk at the dynamic of subjection which Shakespeare has given to Antony. Linda Charnes points out that “in this play he occupies a subject position almost always culturally reserved for women, and in relation to a Cleopatra who occupies a position almost always reserved for men” (Charnes, 9).

Laurence Olivier, slated by Tynan for uxoriousness, both stage and real, in his performance opposite Vivien Leigh, was clear in his own mind about Antony's power relation to Cleopatra. He declared:

I'd never really thought a lot about Antony—as a person, that is. I mean, really, he's an absolute twerp, isn't he? A stupid man. But thank God Shakespeare didn't try to rectify that; if he had, there would have been no play. Not a lot between the ears has Antony. Now Cleopatra, she's the one. She has wit, style and sophistication, and if she's played well, no Antony, however brilliant, can touch her. (*Shakespeare Criticism* 17, 17).

Even if the actor playing Antony is willing to concede this point, directors and critics are often not so docile, as Kenneth Tynan's own case demonstrates. How did this dynamic between Antony and Cleopatra operate in Shakespeare's theatre when Cleopatra was played by a boy apprentice?

Shakespeare has arranged for the boy actor playing Cleopatra to upstage the adult actor, who in all likelihood was in the unrecorded first performances of the play that supreme tragedian, Richard Burbage. How did Burbage feel about the palpable stealing of the show not after all by another star actor, but simply by one of the boys, in all likelihood his own apprentice, who stood in relation to him as pupil to master? “Pray you stand farther from me” (1.3.18), demands Cleopatra in the opening act of the play, a command the great late nineteenth-century Shakespearean actor Henry Irving used to convey to the provincial theatres where minimum rehearsal time was available. Everyone was to stand at least two yards away from him all the time. Give me space to breathe, Cleopatra insists to Antony, at the same time that the boy actor instructs his master: Give me stage space to upstage *you*. Antony’s dying speech is constantly interrupted by the Queen: “I am dying, Egypt, dying,” he begins, “Give me some wine, and let me speak a little.” No such luck, however. “No,” cries Cleopatra, “Let *me* speak” (4.15.41-3, my emphasis). What fun the boy must have had with this scene. Almost as much fun as with the great obedience speech at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew* with which the boy playing Kate wins the wager for Petruchio, but in doing so silences not only the other husbands and rival wives, but his own master, again probably played by Burbage. It is as though in both cases the dramatist woos the boy to perform his best by allowing him to usurp the supremacy of the adult actor, whether Petruchio in *The Shrew* or Antony in the later play. In a theatre where Cleopatra is played by a woman, the history of stage performance shows that men find that act of usurpation difficult to swallow.

I want to look finally at a moment in a very early play in which Shakespeare elaborately draws attention to the boy actor, and to ask what the consequence is of having a woman say the lines, and whether any readjustment takes place such as I have argued for *As You Like It* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* offers a heroine, Julia, who is disguised as a page (named Sebastian) and obliged to woo Silvia on behalf of her own perfidious lover, Proteus. This part of the play is an obvious sketch for *Twelfth Night*, just as its forest scenes are a pre-run for the Forest of Arden. The suit is as unwelcome to Silvia as it is to Julia, as she is attached to Valentine, Proteus's closest friend. The page (Julia in disguise) describes for Silvia a dramatic production in which he took part, while Julia, his mistress, watched. It was a Whitsun performance, and he wore one of Julia's dresses in which to play Ariadne, deserted by Theseus. He reports that Julia, as audience, was moved to tears by his acting:

And at that time I made her weep agood,
 For I did play a lamentable part.
 Madam, 'twas Ariadne passioning
 For Theseus' perjury and unjust flight;
 Which I so lively acted with my tears
 That my poor mistress, moved therewithal,
 Wept bitterly; and would I might be dead
 If I in thought felt not her very sorrow. (4.4.165-72)

The boy weeping for Ariadne is Julia. But Julia the watching woman is also the boy, sharing through an act of imagination in the grief of the character he must play, not Ariadne, but Julia herself. Julia watches his performance, just as Cleopatra imagined watching the quick comedians staging her greatness in

likeness of a whore.

What exactly is going on here, except a playing with masks which is quite dizzying to the spectator? At the heart of this representation lies some question of the relation of the boy actor to the expression of strong emotion. Julia is required to feel, in her assumed role of page, a grief which cannot be expressed. Yet she does express it, through the fiction of the boy acting Ariadne, just as Viola, disguised as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, expresses her love for Orsino in the fiction of her sister:

My father had a daughter lov'd a man
As it might be perhaps, were I a woman,
I should your lordship. (2.4.107-9)

Why did Shakespeare do it that way? I suggest that the hardest skill for an actor to learn is restraint. This is certainly what Hamlet thinks, advising the Players not to “saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness” (3.2.4-8). The dramatist must have been sometimes concerned that the boy actor would ruin everything with a burst of amateurish and immature passion.

It's possible to read the scenes written for boys in Shakespeare's plays as evidence that the parts are written with some sense of two poles. At one extreme the boy grotesquely overacts, at the other he stands like a post, not acting at all. One might be describing perfectly the behaviour required of Goneril, Regan and Cordelia in the first scene of *Lear*. The two elder sisters totally overplay their declarations of love, and Cordelia completely underplays hers. The play requires them to do so. But

one might also say that the parts are perfectly written for two kinds of not very experienced actors: the ham, and the inhibited. Some of Shakespeare's most comic effects with the boy actors consist of allowing them to let rip: as in the marvellous quarrel between Hermia and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the equally raucous slanging match between Eleanor and Constance in *King John*, which is brought to a close, like a scrap between adolescents, with the impatient adult rebuke from King Philip: "Women and fools, break off your conference" (2.1.150). Some of the enjoyment of Rosalind's part as Gany-mede in the Forest of Arden lies in the overacting of the feminine:

I will be more jealous of thee than a Barbary cock-pigeon over his hen, more clamorous than a parrot against rain, more new-fangled than an ape, more giddy in my desires than a monkey. I will weep for nothing, like Diana in the fountain, and I will do that when you are dispos'd to be merry. I will laugh like a hyen, and that when thou art inclin'd to sleep. (4.1.149-156).

Orlando is bemused: "But will my Rosalind do so?" The boy answers gleefully: "By my life, she will do as I do."

Often when women are required to express strong emotion, they state their inability to do so. Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* when falsely accused of infidelity by Leontes, declares "I am not prone to weeping, as our sex / Commonly are" (2.1.108-9). When they do weep, as with Constance's laments over Arthur in *King John*, the effect is often strained, and it is possible wickedly to recall the Lord's advice to his Page in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* on how to act Sly's wife:

And if the boy have not a woman's gift
 To rain a shower of commanded tears,
 An onion will do well for such a shift,
 Which in a napkin (being close convey'd)
 Shall in despite enforce a watery eye.

(Induction, 1.124-8)

The faked tears are here assigned to women's hypocrisy. But they are also tied to the boy's acting ability. Julia speaking to Silvia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* does not need to weep for the faithless Proteus. All she needs to do is to conjure up a grief which is watched, both by Silvia, and by the theatre audience. Seeing their emotion, she feels it as if it were her own. Boy and woman are locked in a symbiotic relationship in which both play simultaneously actor and audience.

If a woman plays Julia's part, it should follow that the expression of feeling could be deeper and more complex because of the life experience as well as the technical control of the adult actress. In the recent production of the play at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, the feeling generated between the two women was stronger than any emotion registered between the men and the women on stage, and at the end of the play the two women embraced and the two men, recreating their friendship, also embraced. Perhaps, despite the closeness of Julia and Silvia in the play, this could not have happened in the Elizabethan theatre, when both women's parts were played by boys.

In that female embrace lies the history of the twentieth-century woman's movement in the West, which has created the closeness between women which Virginia Woolf prophesied, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), would light up a vast cave of

hidden experience. Almost simultaneously (in 1928) Woolf published the work in which the evocation of gender is as ludic as in *As You Like It*, the fantastic history of *Orlando*, the Elizabethan nobleman who progresses through four centuries, beginning as a man and ending as a woman. If Woolf's character is in many ways a reading of Shakespeare's Rosalind, so Rosalind in the modern theatre is an evocation of Woolf's Orlando. At one point Woolf's hero is courted by a woman who turns out to be a man in drag. The subterfuge exposed, Woolf writes that her characters "played the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse" (126). Behind the courtship games of Rosalind and Orlando in the Forest of Arden lies a dream of natural discourse, of freedom from the constraints of gender in language as well as in clothes, in mind as well as in body. This is not just the dream of every lover, but must supremely have been the dream of the creator, as he conjured up, with his own special magic, the young magician of the Forest of Arden, who could bewitch an audience by his playing of either gender: "If I were a woman...."

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NOTES

1. All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.
2. The illustrations are reproduced by courtesy of the Shakespeare Centre Library and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

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- Fig. 1. Ada Rehan as Rosalind, 1890.
- Fig. 2. Julia Nelson as Rosalind, 1896.
- Fig. 3. Dorothy Tutin in rehearsal for Rosalind, 1967.
- Fig. 4. Vanessa Redgrave as Rosalind, 1961.
- Fig. 5. Juliet Stevenson as Rosalind, 1985.