

IMPERSONATIONS

culture. That this is not all there is to say about Renaissance homoeroticism is undeniable; the question is what the two have to do with each other: what do boys and women have in common that distinguishes both from men, and renders both objects of desire for men?

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Call me Ganymede

Let us consider two unusual, indeed unique, Shakespearean erotic substitutions that have been all but ignored by editors and critics. These are strikingly self-reflexive moments in which Shakespeare makes the practice of his theatre, the substitution of boys for women, into the subject of his drama; but they are moments that have been, in effect, rendered invisible.

At the opening of *Twelfth Night*, Viola, shipwrecked, orphaned, and believing that she has seen her twin brother Sebastian drowned, proposes attaching herself to the similarly orphaned Olivia, who is also in mourning for her dead brother. When told that this is impossible, that Olivia "will admit no kind of suit," Viola conceives a much more complex scheme. She says she will present herself to the Duke Orsino, Olivia's unrequited suitor, as "an eunuch," and "sing, / And speak to him in many sorts of music." She then dresses herself in male clothing, calls herself Cesario, and enters Orsino's service, acting as his page, confidant and the agent of his love.

The choice of the name Cesario for Viola as eunuch has gone unremarked, but it seems to me to have a good deal of resonance. Cesario is the Italian form of the Latin *Caesarius*, "belonging to Caesar" (and hence untouchable – in Wyatt's words, "*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar's I am"¹), but we can also find in it what etymologists from Varro onward found in the name Caesar itself, the past participle of *caedo*, *caesus*, "cut," alluding in Caesar's case to his Caesarian birth. Cesario's own claim of castration goes no further than this; we hear no more about it (though the play has some fun

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with the word "cut"), and Viola does not perform as a singer or musician anywhere in the action. Her silence, to be sure, may be a function of the textual history of the play — that is, there may once have been a version of *Twelfth Night* in which Viola *was* a musician, the true love "that can sing both high and low." But textual histories are nevertheless histories, and revisions, elisions, suppressions, accretions are essential elements of drama by its very nature. The text we have, moreover, is certainly more real than any text we might invent to account for a putative lacuna.

The question, then, is not how this moment functions dramatically, since in any practical sense it does not function at all, but, precisely because of its discreteness and uniqueness, what cultural implications it has. That single moment when Viola conceives herself as a eunuch has received very little editorial attention. The word "eunuch" is always glossed as if it were simply a term for a male treble voice, with no underlying history of surgical procedures. This, however, is an editorial fantasy; there is no such usage recorded in English. As with the later term "castrato," "eunuch" only meant "singer" if the singer was a eunuch. We ought therefore to confront the implications of Viola's conceiving herself as not simply a youth in disguise, but as surgically neutered in addition. She seems to be proposing a sexlessness that is an aspect of her mourning, that will effectively remove her, as Olivia has removed herself, from the world of love and wooing.

This in itself, however, is problematical: as Shakespeare's eunuch Mardian complains, the surgery incapacitates only sexual performance; the desire remains as intense as ever — "Yet have I fierce affections, and think / What Venus did with Mars."² If Mardian is to be our guide, Viola has with a single word created for herself a character in whom frustrated sexual desire is of the essence — created, in fact, the role she performs in the play. But there is a peculiar overtone as well: being a eunuch, a sexually incapacitated male, is conceived as an equivalent, or an alternative, to being a

woman. This fantasy is a very old one: Chaucer, expressing his doubts about the Pardoner's sexuality, describes him as "a geldyng or a mare."³ Cleopatra makes the same point even more explicitly, inviting Mardian to play billiards with her: "As well a woman with an eunuch played / As with a woman."⁴ What is missing in their play is what billiards is played with, a rod and balls — the essential element in sexuality⁵, in this formulation, male potency. The moment acts out a classic Freudian fantasy, whereby gender difference is a function of castration. *Twelfth Night* makes the fantasy all but explicit in its puns on "cut" and "cunt." If a eunuch is an alternative to a woman, and either is the opposite of a man, then the assumptions behind Viola's disguise desexualize women too.

Or do they? A brief look at the history of castrati complicates the question. The eunuch-singers in Shakespeare's time were the most famous choirboys of the Roman Catholic church, used first in Spain from the early sixteenth century, and subsequently, most notoriously, in the Vatican. The paternal decision to castrate a son to make him eligible for choir school sounds like a particularly radical and invasive instance of patriarchal authority in action, but we should consider whether it is in fact much more radical than the absolute right exercised by fathers in arranging their children's marriages. In a Renaissance Catholic society, good arguments could be produced in favor of castrating your son — the same good arguments as those involved in deciding that he was going to have a career as a priest or a monk, or in sending your daughter into a convent. Such decisions guaranteed the child a good and, in the case of castrati, often lucrative career; and celibacy, if you were serious about your religion, was a virtue.⁵ Castration had the disadvantage of being irreversible (marriage was usually irreversible too), but the advantages, in terms of income and security, were correspondingly large. This all sounds appalling to us, but the practice continued through the eighteenth century. The Vatican castrati quickly started playing secular roles as well as religious ones: like the boys on the

English stage, they played the romantic women's parts in entertainments for the exclusively male society of the Catholic hierarchy. In this respect the boys were not at all desexualized; on the contrary, they enabled the introduction of overt sexuality, simultaneously heterosexual and homosexual, into the world of ecclesiastical celibacy.

Viola as eunuch, then, both closes down options for herself and implies a world of possibilities for others – possibilities that were, to a post-Reformation Protestant society, particularly (perhaps temptingly) illicit. The possibilities are conceived precisely in terms of sexual alternatives and equivalents of either-and-both; as Viola says to the uncomprehending Orsino, "I am all the daughters of my father's house, / And all the brothers too," and as her twin Sebastian, fresh from his adoring Antonio, says to Olivia, "You are betrothed both to a maid and man." This double-gendered figure realizes Shakespeare's master-mistress of Sonnet 20, the young man who is such a powerfully desirable alternative to a woman: better looking, less deceitful, more faithful; who has all the advantages of women with no disadvantages. Except, as the poem ends, one: the fact that he is "pricked out"; but it is not really clear that this constitutes a disadvantage. Sex, as all the sonnets in this sequence imply, is dangerous and destabilizing when you do it with women; but love is what you do with men – nor is it clear that the love between men, even in Sonnet 20, is necessarily nonsexual. The poem certainly denies that the speaker and his love are sleeping together; but if it is really true that men do not go to bed with other men because they have pricks, then the need for the denial is more significant than the denial itself. Whatever the speaker is doing with the master-mistress of his passion, Shakespeare's disclaimer insists on the reality of sex between men. Indeed, behind the final couplet,

since [nature] pricked thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure,

Stephen Booth finds a Martial epigram that says, "Nature has divided the male: one part is made for girls, one for men"⁶ – boys have something for everyone. Moreover, as both Randall McLeod and Peter Stallybrass have remarked to me, in an unmodernized text, the couplet does in fact allow for an explicitly sexual relationship between the poet and the young man. Here are the lines as they appeared in 1609, with only the typography modernized:

But since she prickt thee out for womens pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy loves use their treasure.

In this reading, "But" signals a reversal of the argument, and means "on the other hand": the "womens pleasure" the youth is "pricked out for" (i.e. selected for: see *OED* s. prick III.1.5) is not the pleasure he gives women but his ability to take pleasure as women do; "loves" in the last line is then not a possessive but a plural, and "use" is a verb – the line without its modern apostrophe need not be a renunciation at all: "let my love be yours, and let your loves make use of their treasure." If we look at *Twelfth Night* in this context, Orsino and Olivia have fallen in love with the same young man, Cesario; only the costume, the chosen role, distinguishes Cesario from Viola and Viola from the Sebastian who is effortlessly substituted for her in Olivia's affections. The gender of these figures is mutable, constructed, a matter of choice.⁸

If Viola the eunuch equivocates her sexuality, Rosalind as Ganymede in *As You Like It* makes the equation between women and boys not only explicit, but explicitly sexual. And here the idea of the boy displacing the woman appears in its most potentially threatening form, the catamite for whom Jove himself abandons his marriage bed. Why is this inescapable allusion a part of Orlando's and Rosalind's wooing? Why do the sexual dynamics of Orlando's love include not simply a boy, but the one boy capable of incapacitating his marriage? And why do the sexual dynamics of Rosalind's love involve her in not merely disguising herself as the dangerous

alternative, but in maintaining her disguise as Ganymede even after she knows Orlando loves her as Rosalind? "Alas the day," she says to Celia in the middle of act 3, when the play is less than half over, "what shall I do with my doublet and hose?" — what is the point of my male clothing now? It is a real question, one that the play is willing to confront, but that editors have been almost without exception shy of.

I observed earlier that English Renaissance culture does not appear to have had a morbid fear of male homoerotic behavior, and I cited a number of instances where the love of men for boys (homosexuality is generally, though not exclusively, conceived to be pederastic in the period) is assumed to be inherently preferable to the love of men for women. The abominable crime of sodomy was fervently condemned throughout the age, but the legal definition of sodomy was in fact exceedingly narrow. According to the Lord Chief Justice Sir Edward Coke, the sex had to be nonconsensual — that is, it had to be a rape; the prosecution had to be able to prove that there had been both anal penetration and an ejaculation ("*emissio seminis*" alone, Coke observes, "maketh it not buggery"); and in actual practice, the courts required a witness — and there were strict rules about who could serve as a witness in such cases. The laws of Renaissance England as elucidated by Justice Coke said nothing about sex between consenting male partners, about sex between men other than anal sex, about homosexual activity of any kind performed in private: none of these legally constituted sodomy.⁹

The legal situation does not at all coincide with popular attitudes, of course, in which the term sodomy covered a multitude of horrendous sins, not all of them by any means involving homosexuality; but precisely for this reason it is to the point that sodomy was legally construed in such a way that it could hardly ever be prosecuted. Coke's definition was developed in Jacobean times (and the third part of the *Institutes*, in which the definition finally

appears, was not published until 1644), but though the statutory language relating to sodomy was always portentously vague ("the most horrible and detestable vice . . . to the high displeasure of almighty God," etc.¹⁰), and sounds like a license for indiscriminate prosecution, it is evident that Coke's analysis is firmly based on judicial precedent: Bruce Smith's study of the Assize courts in the Home Counties reveals a total of only six sodomy trials in the entire reign of Elizabeth; all involved the rape of a minor, and five of the six resulted in acquittals.¹¹ Legally, in effect, buggery was defined as pederastic rape: as Smith puts it, Coke "treats the forcible rape of an underaged boy as the only kind of [sodomitical] act in which the law takes an interest."¹² In the particular precedent Coke cites, a 1607 case of the rape of a sixteen-year-old youth, the victim's age too is significant: he was legally a minor; but the age of consent had been raised from fourteen to twenty-one only three years earlier. If the act had been committed in 1603, it is not clear that it would even have been considered criminal.

Sodomy, then, does not mean what we mean by homosexuality. As proliferating studies in the history of sexuality have shown, the binary division of sexual appetites into the normative heterosexual and the deviant homosexual is a very recent invention; neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality existed as categories for the Renaissance mind. Indeed, the very idea that sexual preferences constitute categories — that people can be identified according to what kinds of sex they enjoy — and moreover that such categories are exclusive ones — that an interest in men necessarily precludes or conflicts with an interest in women — is largely a piece of post-Enlightenment taxonomy.¹³ Men in the period who preferred not to marry — like two of Shakespeare's Antonios — were eccentric, certainly, but they did not therefore constitute a special class, nor are they associated with the discourse of sodomy.

Indeed, overt imputations of sodomy in the drama rarely treat it as an exclusive taste, and are, as I have suggested, more often a subject

for comedy than for moral outrage. In Fletcher's *The Honest Man's Fortune* (1613), a courtier named Laverdine is attracted to Veramour, a handsome page, because he looks like a woman, and woos him:

LAVARDINE. Thou art a pretty boy . . . I have not seen a youth that hath pleased me better: I would thou couldst like me, so far as to leave thy lady and wait on me! . . . Thy lodging—
VERAMOUR. Should be in a brothel.

LAVARDINE. No; but in mine arms.

VERAMOUR. That may be the circle of a bawdy-house, or worse.

LAVARDINE. I mean thou shalt lie with me.

VERAMOUR. Lie with you! I had rather lie with my lady's monkey: 'twas never good world since our French lords learned of the Neapolitans to make their pages their bedfellows . . .¹⁴

The displacement of the desire onto the French and Italians is sufficient to render it comic. Veramour's response should establish him as both male and undeducible, but Laverdine decides that Veramour's refusal can only indicate that he is in fact a woman. Veramour's defense against the vicissitudes of being a pretty boy is then to claim that he is, in truth, a woman in disguise; but this of course is just what Laverdine wants, and he at once proposes marriage. At the play's end Veramour appears in woman's dress and much is made of the difficulty of distinguishing boys and women; though here, unlike the end of *Twelfth Night*, clothes do not make the woman: it is observed that "a blind man by the hand / Could have discover'd the ring from the stone,"¹⁵ both determined its quality and distinguished the vagina from testicles. Thus unmasked, Veramour announces his intention of going to the city to become an apprentice, and Laverdine is finally vanquished by the revelation that his beloved is really male; though given the obvious catholicity of a sexual taste that finds attractive boys indistinguishable from women, the logic of this resolution is not airtight. But the idea that being an apprentice is an alternative to being

a woman is one that, as we shall see, has significant cultural implications.

The metamorphic quality of gender in such a scene is paradigmatic; and the paradigm remained unchanged until almost the end of the seventeenth century. We might compare it to a similar scene in Thomas Southern's *Sir Anthony Love* (1690), in which the eponymous hero, actually a woman disguised as a youth, is propositioned by a lecherous, elderly French abbé: "We're very luckily alone, and should make a good use of our time; no body will come to disturb us . . . I vow I'll teize you, and kiss you into good humour." Sir Anthony cuts short the proposal by revealing that he is a woman, and the abbé retires in confusion, begging her "to muzzle the scandal" — in its comic context, the scandal is less that he has been discovered making a pass at a man than that he has for once made a pass at a woman.¹⁶ English satire had identified foreign Papist priests as sodomites since the Reformation, but in fact the implications of the flirtation are even less determinedly homoerotic than Fletcher's had been three-quarters of a century earlier. This youth, after all, unlike Veramour, is only pretending to be male; and the abbé is initially attracted to him not by his masculinity, but precisely by the femininity of his features, observing that "One might indeed mistake him, by his face."¹⁷ In its conviction that the subtext of homoeroticism is really heterosexual, the scene might have been devised by a latter-day Rainoldes or Stubbes.

In Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1697), we can see that the paradigm has at last changed: homoeroticism is both unqualified and domesticated in the person of the lecherous Coupler — this is the first character I know of who would be recognizable as gay in the modern sense. A young man named Fashion is negotiating with Coupler, a professional matchmaker, for his aid in securing both a wife and his patrimony. Coupler immediately makes a pass at the young man:

COUPLER. . . . Ha, you young lascivious rogue, you! Let me put my hand in your bosom, sirrah.

FASHION. Stand off, old Sodom!

But when Coupler assures the youth that he can indeed help him, here is the result:

FASHION. Sayest thou so, old Satan? Show me but that, and my soul is thine.

COUPLER. Pox o' thy soul, give me thy warm body, sirrah. I shall have a substantial title to 't when I tell thee my project.

FASHION. Out with it then, dear dad, and take possession as soon as thou wilt.

COUPLER. Sayst thou so, my Hephestion? . . . 18

The unabashed overtress and singlemindedness of Coupler's sexual appetite, unmitigated by foreignness or Roman Catholicism, is in its way even more striking than Fashion's easy acquiescence, and does seem to be genuinely new — a significant step beyond the freewheeling polymorphousness celebrated only two decades earlier in Lord Rochester's *Sodom*, for example, or the equitable alternatives proposed in "The Maim'd Debauchee" for the sexual enjoyment of a handsome servant:

Nor shall our Love-fits, Cloris, be forgot,

When each the well-look'd Link-Boy, strove t' enjoy

And the best Kiss, was the deciding Lot,

Whether the Boy us'd you, or I the Boy.¹⁹

The line of descent from the view of sexuality implied in Shakespeare's "master-mistress" sonnet to this is perfectly clear. Vanbrugh marks a shift, though doubtless a less radical one in the theatre than on the page, since Fashion was played in the original production, as attractive young men often were on the Restoration stage, by a woman. To use the terms homosexual and heterosexual to describe the pre-Enlightenment situation, therefore, is anachronistic

and misleading. A much more direct way of putting the situation expressed in *As You Like It*, would be that eroticized boys appear to be a middle term between men and women, and far from precluding the love of women, they are represented as enabling figures, as a way of getting from men to women. But they also destabilize the categories, and question what it means to be a man or a woman.

Rosalind's doubler and hose therefore register the same cultural anxiety that is expressed in Galenic gynecology, and in the Elizabethan judicial practice relating to fornication. In a society that has an investment in seeing women as imperfect men, the danger points will be those at which women reveal that they have an independent essence, an existence that is not, in fact, under male control, a power and authority that either challenges male authority, or, more dangerously, that is not simply a version or parody of maleness, but is specifically female. In romance plots, this point is reached when the wooing starts, when the woman's separateness becomes essential, and her sexual nature has to be taken into account. This is the moment in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* when Viola and Rosalind start to feel trapped by their disguises rather than protected by them. The Renaissance fantasy about women's sexuality is that it is voracious, uncontrollable, capable of enslaving and exhausting men — that it is, in short, male sexuality out of control: the great danger in women's sexuality is its power to evoke men's sexuality. In this context Rosalind's male disguise would be, in the deepest sense, for Orlando's benefit, not for Rosalind's; it would constitute a way around the dangers of the female libido. It is clear from Rosalind's epilogue, however, that the disguise is not only for Orlando's benefit, nor need it be so narrowly construed. In a moment unique in Shakespeare, the heroine directly addresses the men in the audience and undoes her gender: "If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me . . ." Even after the wooing has been successfully accomplished, the play insists that the wife is really a boy — and this too, of course, may be a way of

offering Orlando (or any number of spectators of either sex) what he "really" wants.

The demystification, destabilizing, deconstruction of the Shakespearean text has increasingly become the business of criticism, and to read the plays through Renaissance documents, rather than through our own, refigures them, often radically. It can be argued that this is a historical claim only in a special sense, and that the plays are thereby being refigured not as Renaissance texts but as modern or postmodern ones; but in fact all claims about the past except the most narrowly archeological are historical in the same sense: they assume - often, to be sure, without acknowledging it - that we are involved in history as much as Shakespeare or Galen or archival documents. However responsible we undertake to be to our texts and their contexts, we can look only with our own eyes, and interpret only with our own minds, which have been formed by our own history. All historical claims, even the most tactful and unpolicyed, are ultimately concerned to make the past comprehensible, usable and relevant to our own interests - to make it, that is, present. Even for documentary historians (as even historians are beginning to be aware) the Renaissance changes with every generation.

I want to turn now to the practical reality behind Viola as eunuch and Rosalind as catamite, the position of boys in the Elizabethan theatre company, and their relation to the female roles they played and to the women in the audience. Standard theatrical history holds that the boys of the company were its apprentices, that they got their training playing women's roles and, when their voices changed, they progressed to playing adult males. But there are several problems with this version of the situation. To begin with, the boys were apprenticed, but not to the actors of the company, or at least, not in their capacity as actors: only members of guilds could have apprentices, and there was no actors' guild. The boys were

apprenticed instead to those actors who happened to be guild members, of which there were a substantial number - in Shakespeare's company, for example, John Heminges was a grocer, Robert Armin and John Lowin were goldsmiths, and a number of other guilds were represented as well. The boys of the troupe were thus technically not apprentice actors but apprentice grocers, goldsmiths, drapers, shoemakers, joiners, and so forth, and when they completed their apprenticeships they were (or were entitled to be) full members of whatever guild they had been apprenticed in. A great deal has always been made of Ben Jonson's early training as a bricklayer, and in fact David Riggs has recently discovered that Jonson, despite his notorious distaste for the craft, renewed his membership in the bricklayers' guild in 1599, long after he became an actor (the receipt for his back dues - astonishingly - survives).²⁰ Riggs takes this to imply that Jonson was hedging his bets against the possibility of failure on the stage. On the contrary, it indicates to me his definitive incorporation into Henslowe's company: there is nothing at all anomalous about it, and for Henslowe's troupe, it signifies most immediately not any ambivalence on Jonson's part, but that female roles could thenceforth be played by an apprentice bricklayer.

Why did this clumsy use of the apprentice system constitute an advantageous arrangement for the acting companies? Why was it better than simply hiring a group of boys? One answer might be that the statutes governing apprenticeship were designed precisely to limit and control child labor, and though the professional theatres were not in fact covered by these regulations, the companies nevertheless found apprenticeship as defined by statute a system that worked for them. Whatever its specific practical merits, moreover, it worked more subtly by relating the work of acting to the crafts and professions, and thereby implicitly laying claim to their rights and privileges. But the derivation of this claim from the presence of boy apprentices in the company is worth pausing over: it is another

instance of the patriarchal model at work in the culture, the assertion of position and authority through the deployment of legally obligated children. It also means that the companies were set up in such a way that the fact their plays could include female roles at all was dependent on a controlled social structure that had everything to do with mercantile and artisanal economics and nothing to do with theatre.

There is one exception to the generalization that boys could not be apprentice actors, and it is an instructive one. Under a royal patent, the children's companies were granted the right to impress boys into service – the logic of this was that the boys were to be trained as choristers, providing music for the royal chapel; they provided plays as well, but this was considered incidental. The boys legally served under an indenture of apprenticeship, and in a number of cases came to the company with their parents' authorization; this was an advantageous arrangement, a way of preparing a youth for a career as a professional musician. But the patent actually authorized the choirs to practice what amounted to legalized kidnapping, and in a remarkable suit in 1601, a gentleman named Henry Clifton brought an action in the Star Chamber against the director of the Blackfriars, Henry Evans, charging that Evans had removed his son and seven other boys from their grammar school to be forcibly apprenticed as actors. The Blackfriars at this period was really two companies, a chorus and a commercial theatrical enterprise; but the theatre operated under the same royal patent as the choir, or at least believed that it did. Clifton was able to enlist the Chancellor of the Exchequer on his side, and eventually his son was returned to him, though the rest of the boys seem to have remained with the troupe – to persuade the court to override the royal warrant in this particular instance, a great deal of influence was required. Evans was apparently felt to have overstepped his authority in this case, and was forbidden thenceforth to participate in the management of the company; this judgment, however, amounted to a slap on the wrist, since he

returned to the Blackfriars shortly after – he was clearly being punished for tactlessness, rather than for a violation of the terms of the patent. The rules finally changed in 1606, when a new royal patent was issued specifically prohibiting the Blackfriars from using any impressed boys in plays.²¹ What is notable here is both the class bias of the arrangement, and the dependence of the children's companies, at least in part, on enforced labor. The model for those troupes that operated under royal patents was as much the army as the guild.

If the adult companies were modeling themselves on the guilds, however, the relationship between the two was always an uneasy one. The persistent complaint of London commercial interests, that theatres are subversive, that the existence of theatres interferes with business, particularly that theatre seduces apprentices away from their craft, must have included a sense that the theatrical companies were in effect operating as unlicensed guilds, and even as antiguilds. There is also, surely, a doubly competitive edge to the complaint: theatre had been, for centuries in England, one of the most visible perquisites of the craftsmen's companies through the performance of mystery plays.

For the Elizabethan theatre to model itself on the guild has large ideological implications, which the mercantile world of Elizabethan London registers in its continual discomfort with and distrust of the new institution in its midst. For the acting companies, guild membership, in the context of Elizabethan London, was clearly more than an enabling mechanism for the hiring of boys. What other reasons might Jonson's theatrical colleagues have had for encouraging him to reaffirm his unpoetic status as a bricklayer? Belonging to a London guild conferred both privilege and protection. It meant that one had the freedom of the city – that one was a citizen with full rights to engage in business, trade or craft (in London, it conferred the right to engage in any trade, not simply the one in which one had been apprenticed). Since theatres were

businesses, the freedom of the city was essential, though of course only the owners of the company had to possess it, and there were other ways of getting it than by membership in a guild — it could be bought, or inherited. But for a theatrical company to include a large number of free citizens also conferred on it a degree of respectability that must have seemed finally to put to rest the traditional actors' taint of vagrancy and marginality. I think it is most likely that the initial impulse of acting troupes toward the guild system came from this, its promise of respectability within the city structure, rather than from its utility as an enabling mechanism for theatrical apprentices.

Why then were the boys apprentices? Apprenticeship was certainly a convenient, if not essential, way of providing for the minors of the company. It benefited both the boys and their masters. The apprentice lived in his master's household, and was fed and clothed by him; in return, all wages due for the boy's services, with the exception of a small stipulated percentage, belonged to the master. For the actors, therefore, apprentices were good investments. This is not to say that the boys were simply being exploited: G. E. Bentley cites a number of cases in which the relationship was an explicitly familial one, with the boy being treated as an adoptive son, and being provided for as such in the master's will, even after the indenture period was over.

But here, too, practical considerations cannot have been the only ones. To problematize the question of why the boy actors were apprentices, we might rephrase it to ask what apprentices have to do with the representation of women. Sue-Ellen Case, in a brief and very provocative survey, notes that there are significant ways in which the relation of master and apprentice parallels that of husband and wife in a patriarchal society: the analogy between boys and women so prevalent in the disguise plots of Renaissance comedy is through the apprentice system asserted on an economic level as well.²² The difference, of course, is that the boys complete their

apprenticeships and end as members of the guild, men in a society of other men. It is always assumed that this was the model for the theatre as well, that the boys got their training playing women, but graduated to adult male roles. This sounds logical and may well be correct, but it is worth remarking how few documented instances there are of adult actors in the period who began by playing women: a search of Chambers and Bentley produces only two; T. J. King adds five more — this is for all the acting companies during the reigns of Elizabeth, James and Charles.²³ Are these seven normative? Evidence, of course, is hard to come by in such matters, and the meagerness may certainly be only of documentation, rather than of boy actresses-turned-actors; but we should at least consider the possibility that what we are dealing with is not simply a company organized according to categories of age, adults and adolescents, but two different classes of actors as well. *Did* boys who played women go on to play men? Some did, certainly, but what about the rest? As the system was structured, their apprenticeships legally entitled them to practice not as actors but as grocers, goldsmiths, bricklayers, etc., and in London to practice in any trade or craft they chose. Whether they decided to leave the company or not, this was what their expertise in the role of women legally prepared the boys to do.

Viewed in this light, it is less significant that the acting companies were all male than that they consisted of men and boys, masters and indentured servants, two asymmetrical classes of performers. So let us now rephrase our initial question once again: the question is not simply why boys played women; it is, more significantly, why boys played women.²⁴ Verisimilitude is not the issue here, though it is almost invariably assumed to be: boys do not look any more like women than men do. It is important to bear in mind how time-bound the notion of what "women" look like is: boys have no facial hair, like women, but they also are slim-hipped and without breasts. There are also, needless to say, women with facial hair, or small breasts or slim hips, or with all of these (just as there are buxom men

with large hips); but to judge from the evidence of portraits, the Elizabethan ideal, at least of aristocratic womanhood, was what we would call boyish and they called womanly: slim-hipped and flat-chested. Whether boys are thought to look like women or not depends on how society constructs the norm of womanliness; clearly it is in our interests to view boys as versions of men, but the Renaissance equally clearly sought the similitude in boys and women. What constitutes an acceptable representation of female behavior on the stage, moreover, is determined entirely by the conventions of that stage. Thomas Coryat was surprised to find that Italian actresses were quite as good at playing women as English boys were, and after the Restoration, when Edward Kynaston was playing female roles, he was declared by John Downes to be more convincingly female than any of his female colleagues.²⁵ For both these observers, realism was clearly not the major factor; the assumption is that the best actor makes the best woman. Spanish companies at various times used *both* boys and women in female roles, and in other all-male theatrical traditions, such as Kabuki and Noh, the age of the actor is as irrelevant as the gender: womanliness is simply a matter of acting.²⁶

Why then did only boys play women? For Renaissance society the economic analogy between boys and women overlaid a more essential one: boys were like women — but unlike men — acknowledged objects of sexual attraction for men. This is an element of the tradition that we prefer to elide or suppress, but, as I have observed, the homosexual, and particularly the pederastic, component of the Elizabethan erotic imagination is both explicit and for the most part surprisingly unproblematic. We might set beside Orlando's wooing of a youth he knows as Ganymede, the moment near the end of Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* when Sebastian embraces his fiancée Mary, who is disguised as a boy, and remarks that he much prefers kissing her as a boy to kissing her as a girl:

MOLL. How strange this shows, one man to kiss another.

SEBASTIAN. I'd kiss such men to choose [i.e., by choice], Moll; Methinks a woman's lip tastes well in a doublet. (4.1.45-7)

The assumptions behind this preference are also clearly present in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, though they are never made explicit. The love of men for boys is all but axiomatic in the period; and despite fulminations in theological and legal contexts against the abominable crime of sodomy, most of what men and boys could do with each other did not constitute sodomy, and it was, as we have seen, a crime that was hardly ever prosecuted.

This is not to say that sex in itself is unproblematic in the period; but it is a problem with women as well as with men, and if we can judge from the evidence of Shakespeare's sonnets, despite all the age's heavy rhetoric about the monstrous unnameable crime against nature, the problem of sex between men involves a good deal less anxiety. The difficulties of homosexual intercourse, as the sonnets present them, are technical, not moral: "But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure, / Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure." Whatever the sexual dynamics implied here — they are, at best, terminally ambiguous — the poem, as Eve Sedgwick shrewdly remarks, assures the lover that it is perfectly all right to go on being passionately in love with the young man.²⁷ "Paederastice," E. K. similarly assures the reader of the January eclogue of Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, "is much to be preferred before gynerastice, that is, the love which enflameth men with lust toward womankind."²⁸

But what has all this to do with women — not with the representation of women, but with women themselves? The boy player was apparently as much an object of erotic attraction for women as for men: Pandarus and Cressida agree that Troilus has "not past three or four hairs on his chin" (1.2.105); Rosalind and Celia comment on Orlando's extreme youth (1.2.139ff.); Venus calls

Adonis "more lovely than a man, / More white and red than doves or roses are" (9-10). I have observed that to call the Elizabethan stage a male preserve is only narrowly correct - London theatre, like London itself, was a place of unusual freedom for women. Foreign visitors remark on the fact that women attend plays unescorted and unmasked, and all the sources agree that a large part of the audience were women. What *was* the place of women in the English Renaissance theatre? Standard history implies that until the Restoration women were banned from the stage, but in fact this is not the case; there were no statutes whatever relating to the matter. Hence, as we have seen, the occasional presence of French, Italian and even English actresses in Tudor, Jacobean and Caroline England; performers whose existence is elided from our construction of the English Renaissance theatre because it is inconvenient. And here once again the apprentice system provides a striking and unexpected analogy.

Standard history holds that the guilds were an all-male preserve, and that women could not be apprentices or guild members. This would be an especially useful fact if it were true, because the theatre then could be seen as a true mirror of the guild system. But standard history is wrong. The economic historian K. D. M. Snell, in a chapter of his book *Annals of the Labouring Poor* entitled "The Apprenticeship of Women," observes that although female apprenticeship is documented from the fifteenth century onward, and was relatively commonplace in the early seventeenth century, most historians absolutely deny its existence - "seemingly," he tactfully remarks, "through its incompatibility with prevailing judgements on the domestic roles of women."²⁹ The group of erring historians he cites includes a couple whom literary scholars regularly cite as oracles of historical truth: Lawrence Stone and E. P. Thompson.

Snell reports statistics that are absolutely astonishing: records survive of women in fifteenth-century London as full apprentices

and guild members in the silk trade; in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the statutes of the masons' and carpenters' guilds are addressed to "systeren and bretheren"; until late in the seventeenth century women, in one place or another, were admitted into practically every English trade or guild. Women did not, moreover, limit their efforts to ladylike pursuits: in Chester, in 1575, there were five women blacksmiths. Elsewhere, women were armourers, bootmakers, printers, pewterers, goldsmiths, farrriers, and so forth (Snell's list is a great deal longer), and they pursued these trades not as wives, widows, or surrogates, but as fully independent, legally responsible craftspersons. This point needs especially to be stressed, since a common modern way of ignoring the presence of women in the Renaissance workforce is to claim that they were there only as emanations of absent or dead husbands: this is not the case. The *percentage of female apprentices is especially notable, for a practice that Lawrence Stone and E. P. Thompson believe did not exist. In Southampton, for example, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, 48 percent - almost half - the apprentices were women.*³⁰

There is, in short, nothing in the statutes relating to the guilds excluding women from apprenticeship, or limiting guild membership to men; nor were guilds, in the period we are concerned with, and indeed long after, ever so limited. The fact that the presence of women in the guild system declined markedly (it dropped, in Southampton, during the course of the seventeenth century to 9 percent) was, like the fact that there were no English actresses on the Elizabethan and early Stuart stage, a matter of social convention, not statute.³¹ Presumably, as long as the labor force was small enough for women to be needed in it, the guild system accommodated them. When they started to represent competition to men (when, for example, in the seventeenth century the crafts guilds became a viable professional option for the younger sons of gentry) women were gradually either eased out, or eased into such clearly gender-linked crafts as the needle trades. To know whether

this might constitute a model for the development of the all-male stage we would have to be able to compare the structure of early sixteenth-century theatrical companies with those from the middle of the century, something that the surviving evidence does not permit us to do. But the situation in both the guilds and the theatre confirms Joan Kelly's thesis that medieval women enjoyed more rights and had considerably more mobility than their Renaissance descendants – rights that, in the guilds, persisted much longer than they did in other areas of English society.

Though once again, not in as many other areas as modern historians have claimed: Patricia Crawford stunned the members of a recent conference of Early Modern historians by pointing out that a study of the voting registers shows that in certain parts of the country, women had been regularly voting in parliamentary elections during the seventeenth century into the 1650s at least, despite the fact that, according to Lord Chief Justice Coke, women were not legally entitled to vote.³² This being the case, it becomes especially important not simply to assume that women were excluded from all areas of public life, and to look closely at those endeavors in which they did in fact participate, whether we believe they were legally empowered to do so or not. For the world of London, the public theatre should be considered a prime example. As Jean Howard observes,

To go to the theatre was, in short, to be positioned at the crossroads of cultural change and contradiction – and this seems to me particularly true for the middle-class female playgoer, who by her practices was calling into question the “place” of woman, perhaps more radically than did Shakespeare’s fictions of cross-dressing.³³

What did women enjoy about a theatre we find misogynistic? I have already suggested certain kinds of answers: plays about love matches are especially powerful fantasies of freedom in a patriarchal society, for women even more than for men; and the positive side of

cuckoldry plots from the woman's perspective is the conviction that her sexuality is powerful and attractive, threatening to husbands, and under her own control: the point is made explicitly in Portia and Nerissa's ring trick at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*. This moment was largely ignored in critical treatments of the play until quite recently; but in 1980 Leonard Tenenhouse and in 1987 Lisa Jardine and Karen Newman built around the episode readings of the play that may be taken as manifestos for this generation's *Merchant of Venice*, challenging a critical history in which the play concludes with divine harmony and the joys of marriage.³⁴ The episode is, once one notices it, genuinely disruptive, pitting friendship against love, and leaving the conflict significantly unresolved. Its consistent elision from the history of criticism is not a matter of simple de-emphasis or dismissal. It has been, like Viola the eunuch and Rosalind the catamite, all but invisible.

Here, briefly, is the plot: at the conclusion of the trial scene, Portia and Nerissa, disguised as young men, demand as their recompense for saving Antonio's life the rings they have given Bassanio and Gratiano as love tokens and promises of marriage. Their fiancés object: they have sworn to wear the rings. The youths produce some heavy rhetoric about the monstrosity of ingratitude, Antonio lends his support, and the men unhappily give up the rings. When they return to Portia and Nerissa, now in their own persons, and reveal that the rings have been given to two youths as the price of an overwhelming debt of gratitude, the women feign outrage, accuse the men of faithlessness, and declare that they will consider themselves thenceforth relieved of the burden of fidelity to their husbands.

What is the point of this strange and discordant conclusion to a play that seemed to have resolved its problems in the containment of Shylock and the marriages of Portia and Bassanio, Lorenzo and Jessica? It could be a salutary point, reminding us that in this world there are no absolutes, that however steadfast we believe we will be

to our vows, there are situations in which we will inevitably break them. In the circumstances of Antonio's trial, Bassanio was not wrong to give up the ring; Portia set up a test for him that she knew he was bound to fail. But the failure could lead the play to a great humane moral, that there are always extenuating circumstances, that the good isn't single, or isn't always clearly visible, urging us to be patient of our own and others' failings – demonstrating to us at last, as nothing else in the play does, that the quality of mercy is not strained. But the final revelation of Portia's and Nerissa's disguising evokes no such reassurance. The play ends not with the heavenly harmony that opens the final act, but, in its last moments, with threats and fears of a justified cuckoldry, combined, moreover, with a startling pederastic fantasy. In another one of those invisible moments, Gratiano conceives of his wedding night in terms of being in bed with the young man to whom he gave Nerissa's ring:

were the day come, I should wish it dark

Till I were couching with the doctor's clerk.

Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing

So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring -

"ring" being not simply the love token, but a word for both the vagina and the anus (of which "ring" is a literal translation): even sexually, Nerissa and the doctor's clerk are equivalents and alternatives. These are the last lines of the play: the women's charade has given Portia and Nerissa something to hold over their husbands forever, something to ensure that in marriage the men can never be certain of their wives' chastity and the women always have the upper hand. The patriarchal structure is always in place, always threatened.

If we resist the impulse simply to dismiss this as a pointless joke the women play on the men, with no larger implications, but focus instead on the anxieties it expresses, as criticism has begun to do, it is part of a fantasy of female sexual power that is difficult to read as humane or benevolent. It sets the demands of marriage not only

against those of friendship, but, more dangerously, against those of gratitude, and in a culture of clientage, as this is, ingratitude is the primal sin – as it still is in Milton's version of the Fall, that exemplary case of a man required to choose between loyalty to his wife or to his patron, and making the wrong choice. Portia is, after all, in the most literal sense Antonio's gift to Bassanio: as Edward II finding a wife for his beloved Gaveston, and James I arranging marriages for his favorites Carr and Villiers make clear, a wife is the supreme gift of male friendship, not at all a repudiation of it. Portia, however, engineers a marriage that does constitute a repudiation of male friendship; and it is to the point that she has to pose as a man in order to do so. People who are disturbed by the depiction of Portia in this episode – if we take both it and the Renaissance patronage system seriously, the play's conclusion can be seen as powerfully misogynistic – are being offended by the extent to which the women in this play are represented precisely as acting like men; and the domineering – or, as the age significantly put it, *masculine* – woman was in this culture both a figure of fun and deeply destabilizing. Indeed, Tennenhouse maintains that in *The Merchant of Venice*, "Shakespeare has created a problem which can only be resolved by a transvestite."³⁵

But we need to look further than interpretation, beyond the plots: asking what Renaissance women would have liked about such a play is certainly to ask the wrong question. There are many reasons for going to theatre, and very few of them have anything to do with the texts of plays. We need to ask structural questions – not only why women were excluded from a stage that two generations earlier had apparently employed them unproblematically, but what kind of freedom the social dimension of theatre represented for Renaissance women; and more speculatively, whether there was anything in the transvestite theatre itself that might have been positively appealing to a Renaissance female audience. This is a matter in which our own responses to what have become our classic texts will be very

uncertain guides; we naturally concentrate our attention on Shakespeare, but most of what the Renaissance stage presented was not Shakespeare. And recent attempts to read back from how we feel about boys dressed as women to what Renaissance women "must" have felt strike me as utterly unpersuasive, not only methodologically.

A better starting point seems to me Lisa Jardine's contention that "playing the woman's part – male effeminacy – is an act for a male audience's appreciation."³⁶ There is ample evidence, from the Jonson of *Epicoene* to Dame Edna Everedge that this is true; but is there anything in the act for a female audience as well? Renaissance literature is in fact rich in plots involving male transvestism in which women are deeply implicated, not only as the cause, but sometimes directly as the instigators. Cleopatra, for example, amuses herself by dressing the drunken Antony in her garments:

the next morn

Ere the ninth hour I drunk him to his bed;

Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst

I bore his sword Philippan.

(2.5.20ff.)

In doing so, she replicates the behavior of Queen Omphale with Antony's ancestor Hercules, commanded by the gods to serve her as her slave in whatever capacity she wished. Omphale set him to doing women's household work; in some versions of the story this was intended simply as a humiliation, but in others it was a device to keep him by her side, and Hercules fell deeply in love with her. Ancient representations of the couple show Hercules in Omphale's garments and holding her distaff, while she wears his lion skin and bears his club.

Sidney's *Aradia* includes a transvestite episode that also alludes to the classic Herculean model, and moralizes it in a way that emphasizes both the arbitrary element in gender construction and the deep ambiguities implicit in cross-dressing.³⁷ The heroes of this

epic romance, the warrior friends Pyrocles and Musidorus, have fallen in love with two sisters, the princesses Pamela and Philocleia. Pyrocles, in order to gain access to Philocleia, disguises himself as an Amazon warrior. Musidorus comes upon him in the forest, and is appalled at the transformation he sees. He urges Pyrocles to give up the disguise, effeminate and unworthy of a soldier. But Pyrocles defends himself with some surprisingly forceful Platonic logic. He says that it is in the nature of love to imitate the beloved; that since women are virtuous, imitating them cannot be vicious; and that no human being's virtue is complete unless it encompasses the virtue of women as well as men. Pyrocles is, in short, realizing Aristophanes' fable in Plato's *Symposium* in which humankind as originally created was a double creature, subsequently separated by the gods in envy of its perfect happiness. This explains our deep desire for coupling, and Pyrocles is undertaking to reunite in himself the severed halves of the original humanity, to make his beloved literally a part of himself.

This argument baffles Musidorus, but it half persuades him, and he himself adopts the disguise of a menial shepherd in order to woo Philocleia's sister Pamela – transformations of gender and those of social class are here identified, prompted by the same impulse, as means to the same end. For a reader the incident is more baffling still. Are we intended to endorse Pyrocles' reasoning, and see in it the acting out of a Platonic allegory? Or is it merely an instance of the irrationality characteristically induced by love? The ambiguities of the scene are summed up in a visual emblem: Pyrocles wears a brooch engraved with the figure of Hercules bearing the distaff of Omphale; its motto is "Never more valiant." What does it mean? That Hercules is never more valiant than when he performs the tasks of Omphale? This labor, after all, was imposed on him by the gods, and his willingness to undertake it is an instance of his extraordinary piety. Or does it mean that having taken on the character of Omphale, having abandoned his manhood to the effeminating passion of love, Hercules will never more be valiant? The emblem

embodies the traditional moral ambivalence of the Herculean hero, an ambivalence expressed here specifically through the double image of the dominating woman and the transvestite man.

For all its moral ambiguities, however, Pyrocles' ruse is an unqualified success. He takes the name Zelmane, his Amazonian disguise admits him to Philocleia's presence, and in due time he is lodged as fully in her affections as the most passionate lover could wish. Sidney's account of the growth of Philocleia's love confirms the claims made by Pyrocles in his Platonic justification of his cross-dressing:

Then followed that most natural effect of conforming ones self to that, which she did like . . . so that as Zelmane did often eye her, she would often eye Zelmane; and as Zelmane's eyes would deliver a submissive, but vehement desire in their looks, she, though as yet she had not the desire in her, yet should her eyes answer in like piercing kindness of a looke . . . till at the last (poore soule, ere she were aware) she accepted not onely the band, but the service; not only the signe, but the passion signified.³⁸

The nature of love is to strive to be like the beloved; women are therefore best wooed by imitation. It is, indeed, precisely Pyrocles' ability to perform as a woman that persuades Philocleia to love him.

Is this tale of the extraordinary effectiveness of cross-dressing in love affairs really designed for the appreciation of male readers? Since the readership of romances was overwhelmingly female — Sidney's title, after all, is *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* — this would, at the very least, constitute a large miscalculation. Indeed, almost a century later, at a time when women were regularly appearing on the English stage and constituted fair game for the attentions of male spectators, Nathaniel Lee warned the men in the audience of the consequence of luring female actors away from the stage and into domesticity. The theatre will return to using boys, and this will deprive men not only of the women on the stage, but more particularly of the women in the audience:

For we have vow'd to find a sort of Toys
Known to black Fryars, a Tribe of chopping Boys.
If once they come, they'l quickly spoil your sport;
There's not one Lady will receive your Court:
But for the Youth in Petticoats run wild,
With oh the archest Wagg, the sweetest Child.
The panting Breasts, white Hands and little Feet
No more shall your pall'd thoughts with pleasure meet.³⁹

Peter Stallybrass remarks that here "the threat to replace women with boy actors is not imagined as a *general* loss but as a loss to the male spectator alone. The female spectator, on the contrary, is imagined as running wild after the Youth in Petticoats. The boy-actor is thus depicted as particularly alluring to women."⁴⁰

This is, no doubt, not at all what we believe women want, or ought to want; and doubtless too there is a large element of fantasy in Lee's warning, as there is in Sidney's and Shakespeare's transvestite plots — there is no evidence that Sidney wore drag when he undertook to woo Penelope Rich and Frances Walsingham. But the fantasies extend well beyond Sidney, Shakespeare and Lee; they are cultural ones, and have to do with the way the age constructs femininity. To deny women a place in these fantasies is to deny them their place in the culture. For a female audience, in a culture as patriarchally stratified as that of Renaissance England, to see the youth in skirts might be to disarm and socialize him in ways that were specifically female, to see him not as a possessor of master, but as companionable and pliable and one of them — as everything, in fact, that the socialized Renaissance woman herself is supposed to be. It strikes me that *Twelfth Night* provides just such a model in Olivia, in love with the boy/girl/eunuch Cesario/Sebastian, "maid and man" — she might, after all, have been paired off instead with the one "real" man in the play, the fighter-pirate — and lover of boys —

⁴ strapping

Antonio, who ends, like his namesake in *The Merchant of Venice*, coupled with no one. Falling in love with "real" men in Shakespeare is a dangerous matter: the model for it is provided in *Othello*.

One thing such moments certainly suggest, even for us, is the degree to which both gender and sexual desire, in any era, are socially and culturally constructed. This is true for both sexes, and women profit from these representations and are empowered by them precisely through that recognition. It is, after all, Omphale who dresses Hercules in her garments, Cleopatra who puts Antony into her tires and mantles. These are represented not as male stratagems, but as transformations that give women power and pleasure.

Masculine apparel

The emblem of Hercules and Omphale, however, has more prejudicial cultural implications than those elicited by Sidney from Pyrocles' mythological cameo. The mythographer Alexander Ross observes that "Hercules dishonoured all his former actions by dotting upon Omphale," and that therefore

it was not lawful for women to swear by Hercules, nor to enter into his temple: this was a punishment laid upon that sex, for the insolency of Queen Omphale over Hercules, in causing him so effeminately to serve her.¹

The other side of male effeminacy was female masculinity, and the identification of socially offensive behavior in women as "masculine" constitutes one of the most commonplace of Renaissance slippages — what Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* implies by calling the argumentative Paulina "a mankind witch," not merely a witch, the essence of feminine wickedness, but something even worse, one who behaves like a man. In social contexts, the complaint focused particularly on fashions in clothing, which were construed as instances of cross-dressing. The *locus classicus* here is King James's well-known admonition to the London clergy, requiring them "to inveigh vehemently and bitterly in their sermons against the insolency of our women, and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn, and some of them stilletos or poniards . . . adding withall that if pulpit admonitions will not reform them he would proceed by another course."² This admonition was directed against what was seen as a