
Erotic Politics

Desire on the Renaissance stage

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Transvestism and the 'body beneath' Speculating on the boy actor'

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My paper starts from a puzzle: what did a Renaissance audience see when boy actors undressed on stage? The puzzle could, of course, be resolved by a simple (and, for my argument, damaging) move. The boy actor doesn't undress, or, at least, doesn't undress to the point of disturbing the illusion; the audience sees nothing. Against such a move, I want on the one hand to think quite bluntly about the prosthetic devices through which gender is rendered visible upon the stage. In that sense, the visible is an empirical question (although a question to which we seem to have surprisingly few answers). But, on the other hand, I want to suggest the degree to which the Renaissance spectator is required to *speculate* upon a boy actor who undresses, and thus to speculate upon the relation between the boy actor and the woman he plays. This speculation depends upon a cultural fantasy of sight, but a fantasy, I shall argue, that plays back and forth between sexual difference as a site of indeterminacy (the undoing of any stable or given difference) and sexual difference (and sexuality itself) as the production of contradictory fixations (fixations articulated through a fetishistic attention to particular items of clothing, particular parts of the body of an imagined woman, particular parts of an actual boy actor). I want to suggest that on the Renaissance stage the demand that the spectator sees is at its most intense in the undressing of the boy actor, at the very moment when *what* is seen is most vexed, being the point of intersection between spectatorship, the specular, and the speculative.

The prosthetic body

Perhaps the most substantial theatrical property of many Renaissance companies was a bed. It is a property which is called for in play after play, mainly in tragedy, but also in history and comedy. *Volpone* revolves around the bed in which Volpone simulates death, the bed from which he rises in his attempted rape of Celia; *Cymbeline* hinges upon Iachimo spying upon Imogen while she lies asleep in bed; in *The Maid's Tragedy*, Evadne ties the king to the bed in which they have made love before she kills him; in

Othello, the bed bears the bodies of Desdemona, Emilia and Othello in the final scene. One becomes accustomed to stage directions like: 'King a bed' (Beaumont and Fletcher 1610: 5.1.12); 'Enter Othello, and Desdemona in her bed' (Shakespeare 1623b: 5.12); 'Enter Imogen in her Bed, and a Lady' (Shakespeare 1623d: 2.2). The bed becomes a focal point of scenes of sleep, of sex, of death. But bed scenes also focus upon facts so obvious that they resist interpretation as we hasten on to find out what these scenes are *about*: they draw attention to undressing or being undressed, to the process of shedding those garments through which class and gender were made visible and staged. They stage clothes as signs which can be put on and off, outward signs which can be assumed or shed.

At the same time, bed scenes foreground the body: the body which is either literally or symbolically about to be exposed. And here we come to a peculiar problem. The consensus of recent scholars on Renaissance transvestism has been that it is self-consciously staged mainly, or only, in comedy. Lisa Jardine, in her important work on the boy actor to which I am deeply indebted, states what has now become a commonplace:

the eroticism of the boy player is invoked in the drama whenever it is openly alluded to: on the whole this means in comedy, where role-playing and disguise is part of the genre. In tragedy, the willing suspension of disbelief does customarily extend, I think, to the taking of the female parts by boy players; taken for granted, it is not alluded to. (Jardine 1983: 23)

But in bed scene after bed scene in Renaissance tragedy, we begin to witness an undressing or we are asked to see or to imagine an undressed (or partially undressed) body within the bed. What is it we are being asked to see?

If we take *Othello* as our starting point, we may reach some puzzling conclusions. As Lynda Boose has finely argued, the 'ocular proof' that Othello demands is reworked in the play as the audience's voyeuristic desire to see, to grossly gape (Boose 1987). But what are we to gape at? From the beginning of the eighteenth century, as Michael Neill has shown, illustrators of *Othello* were obsessively concerned with the depiction of the final bed scene. Even as Desdemona's 'Will you come to bed, my Lord?' (5.2.24) was cut from theatrical productions, illustrators focused upon the dead Desdemona lying in bed (Neill 1989: 35 fn.). And what the illustrators above all reveal (requiring that the spectator grossly gape) are the bedclothes and clothing pulled back to show a single exposed breast (see the illustrations by Boitard (1709), Louthembourg (1785), Metz (1789), and Leney (1799) in Neill 1989: 386-9). The bed scene, then, is taken by the illustrators as an opportunity for the display of the female body, and in particular of a woman's breast.

Although we cannot take such illustrations as reflecting eighteenth-century stage productions, we do, in fact, find the exposure of the female

breast recurrently called for by stage directions after the introduction of women actors to the stage in the previous century. On the Renaissance stage, actual boys played seeming 'boys' who were 'revealed' to be women – Ganymede as Rosalind, Cesario as Viola.³ But on the Restoration stage, women played boys who were revealed to be women. And they were often revealed as women by the exposure of their breasts.

In fact, the commonest technique for the revelation of the 'woman beneath' after the Restoration was the removal of a wig, whereupon the female actor's 'true' hair would be seen. In Boyle's *Guzman* (1669), for instance, a woman disguised as a priest is exposed when Francisco pulls off her Peruke, and her Womans Hair falls about her ears' (quoted in Wilson 1958: 84). Now this, of course, can depend upon the interplay of prostheses, an interplay which would have been perfectly possible on the Renaissance stage. The audience would have no means of knowing (any more than we do today) whether the hair beneath the wig was the hair of the actor or another wig. The play of difference (male wig/female hair) had no necessary relation to the anatomical specificities of the actor's body. If, then, the distinction of the sexes is staged as a distinction of hair (and above all of hair length), it will be constantly transformed by changes in hair styles. Sexual difference may, in this case, seem essentially prosthetic: the addition (or subtraction) of detachable (or growable/cuttable) parts.

It is precisely such a prosthetic view which William Prynne had denounced in *The Unloveliness of Lovelocks* (1628). There, he elaborates at length on St Paul: 'Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair it is a glory to her' (*I Corinthians* 11.14–15). From Prynne's perspective, the problem is precisely that 'nature' doesn't seem to have taught its lesson thoroughly enough. Cavalier men flaunt their long hair (and, from 1641, were to ridicule their opponents as 'Roundheads', in reference to their close-cropped hair). Prynne asserts that gender is defined by 'the outward Culture of [our] Heads, and Bodies' (Prynne 1628: A3v), and that the long hair of men and the short hair of women erase sexual difference. We live, he claims, in 'Unnaturall, and Unmanly times: wherein . . . sundry of our Mannish, Impudent, and inconstant Female sexe, are Hermaphrodited, and transformed into men' because they 'unnaturally clip, and cut their Haire' (ibid.: A3, G2). Asserting hair as a sign of *natural* difference, Prynne is particularly fierce in his denunciation of wigs: 'the wearing of counterfeite, false, and suppositious Haire, is *utterly unlawfull*' (ibid.: C4v, original emphasis). In using the putting on and the taking off of wigs as the mark of gender difference, the Restoration stage turned Prynne on his head. 'Natural' signs became the artifices of malleable gender.

But, as I noted above, the Restoration theatre used a second, overlapping method of revealing the 'woman beneath': the exposure of the female actor's breasts. The methods are overlapping because they could be used together:

in Wychetley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676), when Fidelia, in disguise, confesses that she is a woman, Vernish 'Pulls off her peruke and feels her breasts'; and in Hopkins' *Friendship Improv'd* (1699), Locris, refusing to fight with her lover, says: 'Here's my bare Breast, now if thou dar'st, strike here. (*She loosens her robe a little, her Helmet drops off, and her Hair appears*)' (Wilson 1958: 84–5). Here, the stage directions are ambiguous: if Vernish feels Fidelia's breast and Locris 'loosens her robe', we cannot be sure what it was that an audience was supposed actually to see.

The revelation of the female actor's breasts, though, is central to the staging of Aphra Behn's *The Younger Brother; Or, the Amorous Jilt* (1696). In that play, there is an elaborate bed scene in which Mirrilla, in love with the cross-dressed Olivia, says 'Come to my Bed' (stage direction: '*She leading him [sic] to her Bed*'), while the Prince, who is in love with Mirrilla, breaks in upon the scene. The prince grabs hold of the cross-dressed Olivia, and the stage direction reads: '*The Prince holding Olivia by the Bosom of her Coat, her Breast appears to Mirrilla.*' Mirrilla: 'Ha! what do I see? – Two Female rising Breasts. / By heav'n, a Woman.' The Prince, however, has not seen these signs of Olivia's gender, and so the revelation is repeated by Mirrilla who, as a later stage direction reads, '*Opens Olivia's Bosom, shows her Breasts*' (Behn 1696: 5.2. 390). It is worth remarking that Aphra Behn uses the revelation convention to play with the relation between woman and woman (it is Mirrilla who first sees Olivia's breasts, it is she who opens Olivia's bosom).⁴

But there can be little doubt that such stagings of the female actor's breasts were usually constituted for the arousal of the heterosexual male spectator. (A more extended discussion of this point would look at the significant position of the Restoration theatre in the *construction* of the heterosexual male spectator.) According to Colkey Cibber, the very presence of female actors upon the stage helped to constitute a new audience (or rather new spectators): 'The additional Objects then of real, beautiful Women, could not but draw a portion of new Admirers to the Theatre' (Cibber 1968: 55). In the Epilogue to Nathaniel Lee's *The Rival Queens* (1677), the actors protest that if their male spectators continue to lure female actors away from the stage, they will return to using boy actors:

For we have vow'd to find a sort of Toys
Known to black Fryars, a Tribe of chooping Boys.
If once they come, they'll 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.

The Woman in Boys Cloaths, all Boy shall be,
And never raise your thoughts above the Kneec.

(Lee 1677: 282)

There are several interesting features about this epilogue: first, 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, a possibility that has been addressed by Stephen Orgel (1989b: 8).

But the grammar of the Epilogue is strangely playful about the crucial question: the difference between a boy actor and a female actor. 'The panting Breasts, white Hands and little Feet' seem at first to follow directly on from, and thus to be the attributes of, the archest wags, the sweetest children, but this possibility is retracted in the next line: 'No more' shall such breasts, hands and feet be seen when boy actors return. Yet the *feet* of the boy actor would seem to be adequate enough for his female role, if we are to take literally that he will 'never raise your thoughts above the Kneec'. The crucial point of that latter line, of course, is what the boy actor does *not* have: implicitly a vagina; explicitly breasts.

It is that explicit absence upon which I want to dwell here. For recent criticism has been particularly concerned with the 'part' that the boy actor has which is not in his part. (I would want to suggest, incidentally, that that part has been peculiarly distorted [and enlarged] by being thought of as a 'phallus', as if a boy's small parts weren't peculiarly – and interestingly – at variance with the symbolic weight of THE phallus.) Criticism has thus been concerned with what Shakespeare calls the 'addition' which the boy actor brings to a female role. But in bed scene after bed scene, what is staged is a tableau in which we are about to witness the female body (and most particularly the female breast), even as it is a boy who is undressing. Indeed, there seems to be something so odd about this fact that it has simply been overlooked (an important exception, to which I am deeply indebted, is Shapiro 1990; for an earlier attempt to touch on this subject, see Rosenberg 1971: 17, 19).

So let me declare first of all what the puzzles are to which I have no solution. Did boy actors wear false breasts? There seem to be no records of such a practice, but the female fury at the beginning of *Salmacida Spolia* was presumably played by a professional actor and his/her 'breasts hung bagging down to her waist' (quoted in Gossett 1988: 112). Or did boys use tight lacing to gather up their flesh so as to create a cleavage, or were they simply flat-chested, or...? While John Rainolds denounces Achilles' transvestism, which William Gager had used in defence of the academic stage, he notes that Achilles had learned from Deidamia 'howe he must hold his naked brest' (Rainolds 1599: 17). A further question: in undressing

scenes, how far did the boy actor go in actually removing his clothes or, if he was in bed, how much of his flesh was revealed? These are the questions I shall *not* be attempting to resolve.

Indeed, I want less to suggest a resolution than to express the dimensions of the problem. Lisa Jardine, whom I quoted above, assumes that the significance of the boy actor is virtually erased in tragedy (although her argument as a whole finely attends to the crucial importance of the cross-dressed boy). And Kathleen McLuskie (in what I take to be an implicit critique of Jardine) pushes for a *generally* conventional view of the boy actor (McLuskie 1987). To support her argument, she draws upon R. A. Foakes' *Illustrations of the English Stage*, which reproduces title pages and illustrations to play quartos in which women are represented with their breasts fully or partially exposed. McLuskie appears to conclude that this is how we are meant to think of the boy actors: within the convention, we can imagine them fully as women. But Foakes' *Illustrations* are themselves puzzling when we try to relate them to the practices of the English Renaissance stage and to the boy actor. (Only one of the illustrations to which I will refer can, in my view, be thought of as in any way an illustration of the stage; the others are illustrations (some presumably re-uses of woodcuts made for other purposes) for a reader of play quartos, a very different matter.)

How do these illustrations depict the female body, and, in particular, women's breasts? There is no one answer to this. To start with the three different title pages to *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* in 1605, 1623, and 1639. All depict Elizabeth I, conventionally enough, in an elaborate gown with a low cut bodice (Foakes 1985: 91–3). But there is no suggestion of a cleavage, and only in the 1605 woodcut do two loops of pearls suggest the shape of her breasts. If a boy actor should want to imitate such an appearance, he would have no difficulty in doing so with the help of costume alone. And the same is true for the women represented on the title pages of *The Fair Maid of the West* (1631) and of *Englishmen for my Money* (1616) in which the attributes of gender depend upon hair and costume, and the bodices in these cases extend up to the neck (Foakes 1985: 130, 166). But the title page of William Alabaster's *Roxana* (1632) is more complicated. It is famous for the fact that in one of its panels it shows actors upon a stage (Foakes 1985: 73). The woman on the stage is clearly depicted as having swelling breasts. Another panel of the title page shows a couple in classical clothes, the man touching the woman's breasts, which are clearly depicted, as is her right nipple. At the furthest extreme, there are the title pages of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (1620) and Sir William Lower's *The Enchanted Lovers* (1658), both of which depict women with fully exposed breasts (Foakes 1985: 118, 146). (On 30 May 1668, Pepys went to see *Philaster*, 'where it is pretty to see how I could remember almost all along, ever since I was a boy, Aréthusa, the part which

I was to have acted at Sir Robert Cookes's; and it was very pleasant to me, but more to think what a ridiculous thing it would have been for me to have acted a beautiful woman' [Pepys 1916: 94–5].) Some play quartos, then, draw attention to the specifications of women's bodies in ways which would be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to represent upon the stage.

Now this whole discussion would be irrelevant if we assumed that the convention of the boy actor meant that the physical body of the boy was subsumed by the conventions of femininity signified by costume and gesture. That such subsumptions are, indeed, one feature of Renaissance theatrical and non-theatrical texts is a point to which I shall return. But what I want to emphasize here is the extent to which such subsumptions were also played with to the point of their undoing. That they *could* be played with has something to do with systematic dislocations between visual and linguistic systems of representation in the Renaissance. I noted above the extent to which visual representations of women in play quartos move between representations which depend upon costume/hair/gesture and those which also depend upon a display of the naked body, and in particular of the naked breast. The displayed breast is a metonymy for woman. Since for us, both 'breast' and 'bosom' are always already gendered, this comes as little surprise. But in the Renaissance, both 'breast' and 'bosom' are used interchangeably for men and women. ('Pap', on the other hand, was usually applied only to women.) 'Bosom', indeed, seems to be more frequently gendered as *masculine*. For instance, after the 1611 translation of the Bible which introduced the Hebraic 'wife of thy bosom' and 'husband of her bosome', it was only the *former* expression which became current, thus re-emphasizing the bosom as male (see *OED*). In Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Giovanni offers his dagger to his sister, Annabella, and says: 'And here's my breast; strike home! / Rip up my bosom' (1633a, 1.3) The language of breasts and bosoms tended to be either ungendered or absorbed into the power of the patriarch. To 'toy' with breasts verbally, then, had no obvious implications for the relation of the boy actor to his female role.

But this indeterminacy of gender at the verbal level (an indeterminacy which, I would argue, was determined by a motivated absorption of the female body) was opposed by the visual codes in which the breast was insistently gendered as female. What remains extraordinary is the extent to which this female-gendered breast is staged by the boy actor. In Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*, for instance, as Wittipol approaches '[t]hese sister-swelling breasts' of Frances Fitz-Dortrell, the stage direction reads: '*he growes more familiar in his Courtship, plays with her paps, kisseth her hands, &c.*' (1631: 2.6.71). (Michael Shapiro gives other striking examples [1990: 1–2].) But the boy actor's 'female body' is most commonly the object of attention in tragedy and tragi-comedy. There, we are asked not to *imagine* the boy actor as he is dressed *up*, but literally to *gaze* at him whilst *he undresses*.

This staging of the undressing boy is particularly striking in death scenes and bed scenes which draw attention to the boy actor's 'breast'. In Ford's *Love's Sacrifice*, the Duke says to Bianca 'Prepare to die', and she responds:

I do; and to the point

Of thy sharp sword with open breast I'll run
Half way thus naked.

(1633b, 5.1)

But even more striking is the way in which Shakespeare in both *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Cymbeline* changes his sources so as to stage the boy's breast. In Plutarch, Cleopatra attaches an asp to her *arm*. Shakespeare retains this, but only after she has already placed an asp upon her *breast*. And Cleopatra/the boy actor, who has already imagined seeing '[s]ome squeaking *Cleopatra* Boy my greatnesse', focuses upon the contradictory vision of Cleopatra's nursing breast/the boy actor's breast: 'Dost thou not see my Baby at my breast, / That suckes the Nurse asleepe' (1623c, 5.2.218, 308–9).⁵ An audience seems to be required to observe the splitting apart of what later critics assumed to be a stable 'convention'. More than that, critics have appealed to the presence of the boy actor to 'explain' that certain stagings would have been 'impossible'. Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra is thus taken as a technique of avoidance, by which the audience is spared the embarrassment of gazing at a transvestite boy. But what becomes of such explanations when, again and again, we find Renaissance dramatists going beyond their sources to demand that we witness the boy actor at the very point which a later audience has ruled unimaginable?

In *Cymbeline*, for instance, as Iachimo observes Imogen asleep in bed, he fetishizes both the chamber, the bracelet which will represent her lost honour, and a 'mole Cinque-spotted' upon 'her left bress' (1623d, 2.2.37–8). This last detail, like the asp on Cleopatra's breast, is truly remarkable. It has been argued that Shakespeare used *Frederyke of Jemen* as a source for *Cymbeline*, and in that pamphlet John of Florence notes *not* a mole on the breast, but a wart on the *arm* of Ambrose's wife: 'it fortuned that her lefte arme lay on the bed; and on that arme she had a blacke warte' (Anon. 1560: 197). But Shakespeare replaces the wart with a mole (thus following Boccaccio's version of the story), a mole which is given a *precise* but *imaginary* location upon the body of the boy actor. To make the left breast the object of this voyeuristic scene is to focus our attention on one of the sites of the cultural differentiation of gender. But that site produces antithetical readings: Imogen's swelling breast; the breast of a boy actor. It is as if within the dramatic fiction, the fetishistic signs of presence are forced to confront the absences which mark the actor's body. Or perhaps we might rather say that two contradictory realities are forced to peer into each other's faces. In *Cymbeline*, at the very moment where a later audience

would expect a discrete effacement of the theatrical means by which gender is produced, those means are verbally and visually staged.

The specifically erotic charge of such bed scenes is suggested by Aphra Behn, even as she attempts to defend herself against the supposed indecency of her plays. Accused of staging lewd revelations of the actor's body ('they cry, *That Mr. Leigh opens his Night Gown, when he comes into the Bride chamber*'), she responds that the best plays are full of such things:

Valentinian all loose and ruff'd a Moment after the Rape . . . , the *Moor of Venice* in many places. The *Maid's Tragedy* – see the Scene of undressing the Bride, and between the *King* and *Aminator*, and after between the *King* and *Evadne* . . .

(Behn 1687: 186)

It is striking that Behn, in thinking of the erotics of the theatre, thinks of Rochester's *Valentinian*, a Restoration play which explicitly stages homoeroticism,⁶ and Renaissance plays in which the undressing of the bride was performed by a boy. Behn, of course, would have seen the plays performed with female actors, but she nevertheless emphasizes the extent to which these plays reveal the body.

To be aware of the fetishistic staging of the boy actor, of the insistence that we see what is not there to see, is to conceptualize the erotics of the Renaissance drama in totally unfamiliar ways. Think, for instance, of the end of *Othello* (1623b. 4.3). 'Prithee, tonight / Lay on my bed our wedding-sheets', Desdemona says to Emilia. But interpolated between the command and the on-stage arrival of the bed itself, we are asked to witness the boy actor prepare for bed. In one sense, the scene suggests that this preparation is itself a kind of transvestism – a crossing from day to night, from the clothes of a Venetian noble to a shift. And it is curious to note how such 'closet' scenes are frequently – and strangely – marked by an explicit movement from formal to informal dress. Even ghosts obey this convention, if we are to believe the first quarto of *Hamlet*, where Hamlet Senior, appearing to his son in Gertrude's closet, has put off his armour and put on his nightgown. Both in *Othello* and *Hamlet*, the body seems to be simultaneously sexualized and made vulnerable. But in *Othello*, the movement from one set of clothes to another is curiously truncated. Desdemona's command to Emilia, 'Give me my nightly wearing', is followed some twenty lines later by Emilia's enquiry, 'Shall I go fetch your nightgown?' to which Desdemona answers 'No'. In fact, the absence of the nightgown makes all the more insistent the fact that we are witnessing Desdemona/a boy actor undress. The undressing is the more *present* as a strip-tease for the *absence* of any substitute clothing. 'Prithee unpin me', Desdemona says, and later, rejecting the nightgown, 'No, unpin me here.'⁷

Before I return to this moment of voyeuristic suspense where the staged body prepares to split into the unpinned clothes and the 'body beneath', I

want to note how the scene as a whole stages a series of splittings or – to put it another way – a series of radical crossings of perspective. First, there is the presentation to the audience of Emilia's impressively relativistic view of sexual morality, a view which threatens to re-present the whole play as grotesque farce, the absurd magnification of 'a *small vice*'. Curiously, and to the disturbance of many critics, the 'sport' which Emilia commends seems to migrate into the language of Desdemona:

DES. unpin me here;

This Lodovico is a proper man.

EMIL. A very handsome man.

DES. He speaks well.

EMIL. I know a lady in Venice would have walk'd barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.

As Desdemona is unpinned, Othello is displaced by that 'proper man', Lodovico. At the same time, Desdemona herself takes on the voice of a maidservant called Barbary. (I am here indebted to Rauma Evans's work on this scene.) The willow song is the song of that maid, whose name is itself a curious transposing of Iago's slur against Othello as he goads Brabantio: 'you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you'. Barbary: the name for bestial male sexuality; the name for a maid betrayed in love – 'poor Barbary'. A single signifier slides between male and female, animal and human, betrayer and betrayed, and at the same time between opposed notions of the 'barbarian' as oppressor and as victim. And it is the song of a poor maid which the Venetian noble will reiterate.

I want to draw attention to these slippages within the signifier because they provide one possible model through which we could read the undressing of Desdemona. On such a reading, the closure of the play would be unsettled by a startling moment of indeterminacy when we are held in suspension between cultural antitheses and, at the same time, between the fiction of Desdemona and the staging of the boy actor. But I do not believe that 'indeterminacy' is an adequate way of thinking about these moments. Rather, we are forced into contradictory attitudes about both sexuality and gender: on the one hand, gender as a set of prosthetic devices (in which case, the *object* of sexual attention is absorbed into the play of those devices); on the other, gender as the 'given' marks of the body (the breast, the vagina, the penis) which (however analogous in Galenic medicine) are read as the signs of an absolute difference (in which case, sexuality, whether between man and woman, woman and woman, or man and man, tends to be organized through a fixation upon the supposedly 'essential' features of gender). But on the Renaissance stage, even those 'essential' features are

located – whether prosthetically or at the level of the imaginary – upon another body.

In comedy, the relation between the boy's body, the female role and erotic play is at times explicitly articulated. In *The Taming of a Shrew*, the Lord says to the boy in the first scene:

And dresse yourselfe like some lovelie ladie,
 And when I call see that you come to me.
 For I will say to him thou art his wife,
 Dallye with him and hug him in thine armes,
 And if he desire to goe to bed with thee,
 Then faine some scuse and say thou wilt anon.

(Anon. 1594: 71)

And Sly puts *'The boy in Woman's attire'* on his knee and says that 'she and I will go to bed anon' (72). In Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Lord requires of the boy that he greet Sly not only with 'kinde embracements' but with 'tempting kisses' (Shakespeare 1623a: Ind. 1.1.116), and there is an expanded invocation of the pleasures of the bed:

Wee'l have thee to a Couch,
 Softer and sweeter then the lustfull bed
 On purpose trim'd up for Semiramis.

(Ind. 2.38–40)

Sly's invitation to bed is also amplified: 'Madam undresse you, and come now to bed' (Ind. 2.1.18). In both plays, any undressing or bed scene is explicitly circumvented, and this draws attention to the fact that in bed scenes (such as the ones I have looked at above) female clothes and boy actor are separated out.

But even here, I think, we can note a radical oscillation between a sense of the absolute difference of the boy from his role and the total absorption of the boy into the role. In other words, if Renaissance theatre constructs an eroticism that depends upon a play of differences (the boy's breast / the woman's breast), it also equally conjures up an eroticism which depends upon the total absorption of male into female, female into male. In the printed text of Shakespeare's *The Shrew* in 1623, the boy is named as 'Bartholomew my Page' (Ind. 1. 103) and yet, in changing into the clothes of a woman, he is entirely subsumed into her role. When in *A Shrew*, a stage direction reads *'Enter the boy in Woman's attire'*, in *The Shrew* it reads: *'Enter Lady with Attendants'* (Ind. 2. 99). Moreover, the speech prefixes are all for 'Lady' or 'La'. The text thus accomplishes what John Rainolds warns against in *Th' Overtthrow of Stage-Plays*: 'beware the beautifull boyes transformed into women by putting on their raiment, their feature, lookes and facions' (1599: 34, my emphasis). This transformation is carefully erased by a modern editor like Brian Morris, who emends the

stage direction to read *'Enter [PAGE as a] lady'* and changes the speech prefixes to read *'Page'* (Morris 1981: 168). In the Folio *The Shrew*, we are thus presented with a wild oscillation between contradictory positions: the plot of the induction demands that we remain aware of Bartholomew as Bartholomew, while the language of the text simply cuts Bartholomew, replacing him with 'Lady'.

Such wild oscillations are peculiarly resonant upon the stage, precisely because of the boy actor. But comparable shifts are also characteristic of non-dramatic texts. In *Frederyke of Jemen*, as soon as 'Ambroses wyfe' takes on the name of 'Frederyke' she becomes 'he'. Where a modern text would want to register the 'body beneath' (that is, 'she dressed as he'), *Frederyke* inscribes the transformation of female into male through name and clothes. But, on the other hand, the transformation of Frederick back into Ambrose's wife *does* depend upon the revelation of the body beneath:

in the meane whyle went the lorde Frederyke secretly away, and came into the chamber, where she did unclothe her al naked saving a clothe before her membres, and than came into the hall before the kyng and al his lordes . . .

(Anon. 1560: 202)

Yet this 'revelation' itself suggests no simple hierarchical relation of 'reality' between what would later be read as 'disguise' and the 'true' body: clothed, he is 'lorde Frederyke'; naked, she is 'the woman' and then 'his [Ambrose's] wyfe'.

This oscillation of gender within a single sentence is even more striking in Barnabe Rich's tale 'Of Apolonius and Silla': Silla dresses in men's clothes and assumes the name of her brother, Silvio. When accused by Julina of impregnating her, Silvio/Silla reveals 'his' body:

here with all loosing his garments doune to his stomacke, and shewed *Julina* his breastes and pretie teates, surmountyng farre the whitenesse of Snowe it self, saying: . . . see I am a woman the daughter of a noble Duke . . .

(Rich 1581: 177)

Silvio shows 'his' breasts which show that he is a woman (but also, curiously, that he is a nobleman's daughter). The phrase 'his breastes and pretie teates' thus enacts the very cross-gendering at the grammatical level which the sentence is undoing at the level of narrative. The garments which are 'his' – the social inscriptions of masculinity – retain, however briefly, their power to name a body which is equally powerfully asserted as *hers* ('I am a woman'). And the body which is 'hers' is in turn reinscribed as 'his' through the name of father and husband ('the daughter of a noble Duke', 'Ambroses wyfe').

The power of clothes, like language, to do things to the body is suggested

in both these romances, and it is this power of clothes which is so insistently asserted by anti-theatricalists. Calvin, in his sermons on Deuteronomy, if he sometimes thinks of clothes as *manifesting* sexual difference, equally thinks of them as *creating* difference: 'God intended to shew us that every bodies trying of themselves ought to be such, as *there may be difference betweene men and women*' (1583: 773, my emphasis). Similarly, Prynne thinks of women who 'mimic' masculinity as 'hermaphrodited and transformed into men' (1628: A3) and of male actors 'metamorphosed into women on the Stage' (1633: 171). And he follows Calvin in arguing that 'a mans trying himselfe in womans array . . . perverts one principall use of garments, to *difference men from women*' (1633: 207, original emphasis).

The anti-theatricalists thus feared the power of clothes to *produce* new subjects, to metamorphose boy into woman, commoner into aristocrat. John Rainolds' powerful attack upon the academic stage (and, by extension, upon all theatrical activity) was provoked in the first instance by the almost magical properties of transvestism (Boas 1914: 231-4; Young 1916: 593-604; Binns 1974: 95-101; Jardine 1983: 14-17). Rainolds, one of the greatest scholars of his day, had himself cross-dressed in his youth (Boas 1914: 105-6) and in *Th' Overthrow of Stage-Playes* he admits that 'he did play a womans part upon the same stage, the part of Hippolyta' (Rainolds 1599: 45). But what exactly is the danger of transvestism? Here, Rainolds' citations are frequently opaque, as, for instance, the following from Dionysius Carthusianus:

the apparell of women (saith he) is a great provocation of men to lust and lecherie: because a womans garment being put on a man doeth vehemently touch and move him with the remembrance and imagination of a woman: and the imagination of a thing desirable doth stirr up the desire.

(Rainolds 1599: 96)

What does Rainolds' translation imply? That the woman's body is imprinted upon or within the clothes? That women's clothes, when they touch and move the male wearer, will awaken the desire *for* women (whom he will remember and imagine) or the desire *to be* a woman? Will the desire be homo- or heteroerotic and will it be directed towards another or towards the self?

The Renaissance theatre was thus the site for the prosthetic production of the sexualized body through the clothing of the body and the mimed gestures of love. But it was also the site where the prosthetic production was dramatically staged and speculated upon, as the boy actor undressed, as the fixations of spectators were drawn back and forth between the clothes which embodied and determined a particular sexual identity and contradictory fantasies of the 'body beneath' - the body of a woman, the body of a boy; a body with and without breasts.

The transvestite body⁸

The interplay between clothing and undressing on the Renaissance stage organized gender around a process of fetishizing, which is conceived *both* as a process of fixation *and* as indeterminable. If the Renaissance stage demands that we 'see' particular body parts (the breast, the penis, the naked body), it also reveals that such fixations are inevitably unstable. The actor is both boy and woman, and he/she embodies the fact that sexual fixations are not the product of any categorical fixity of gender. Indeed, all attempts to fix gender are necessarily *prosthetic*: that is, they suggest the attempt to supply an imagined deficiency by the exchange of male clothes for female clothes or of female clothes for male clothes; by displacement from male to female space or from female to male space; by the replacement of male with female tasks or of female with male tasks. But all elaborations of the prosthesis which will supply the 'deficiency' can secure no essence. On the contrary, they suggest that gender itself is a fetish, the production of an identity through the fixation upon specific 'parts'. The imagined 'truth' of gender which a post-Renaissance culture would later construct is dependent upon the disavowal of the fetishism of gender, the disavowal of gender as fetish. In its place, it would put a fantasized biology of the 'real'.

But it is this notion of the 'real' which seems to be dramatically undone in undressing scenes, as in *Othello* when Desdemona/the boy actor is unpinned. Lynda Boose has demonstrated how the play itself demands both concealment (of the sexual scene, of the bed and its burden which 'poisons sight') and exposure (the stimulated desire that we should see, should 'grossly gape'). But, as I have argued, *what* we should see is radically uncertain. It is not so much a moment of indeterminacy as of contradictory fixations. On the one hand, the clothes themselves - the marks of Desdemona's gender and status - are held up to our attention; on the other, we teeter on the brink of seeing the boy's breastless but 'pinned' body revealed. It is as if, at the moments of greatest dramatic tension, the Renaissance theatre stages its own transvestism.

Contradictory fixations, though, are precisely what mobilize *Othello*. Think, for instance, of how Iago constructs the narrative of Desdemona's betrayal so that Othello can approach the 'grossly gaping' of her being 'topp'd'. He does it by casting *himself* in the role of Desdemona:

I lay with *Cassio* lately . . .

In sleepe I heard him say, sweet *Desdemona*,

Let us be wary, let us hide our Loves,

And then (Sir) would he gripe, and wring my hand:

Cry, oh sweet Creature: then kisse me hard,

As if he pluckt up kisses by the rootes,

That grew upon my lippen, laid his Leg ore my Thigh,
And sigh, and kisse . . .

(1623b: 3.3.419-31)
It is these contradictory fixations (Desdemona and/as the boy actor, Desdemona and/as Iago) which a later theatre would attempt to erase, precisely because the *site* of the audience's sexual fixation is so uncertain.

This uncertainty is, paradoxically, most powerfully felt by anti-theatrical writers. They oscillate between seeing the boy actor as woman, as neither woman nor man, as alluring boy, as male prostitute (or 'dogge', to use Rainolds' term). Prynne, for instance, incorporates Cyprian's account of how the theatre taught 'how a man might be effeminated into a female, how their sex might be changed by Art' (1633: 169). But he can also think of actors as those who, 'by unchaste infections of their members, effeminate their manly nature, being both effeminate men and women, yea, being neither men nor women' (ibid.). Yet the uncertainty of *what* anti-theatricalists saw in no way inhibited the fascinated fixity of their (imaginary) gaze. What they gazed at was a theatre imagined *as a bedroom*, a bedroom which spills off the stage and into the lives of players and audience alike:

O . . . that thou couldst in that sublime watch-tower insinuate thine eyes into these Players secrets; or set open the closed doves of their bed-chambers, and bring all their innermost hidden Cels unto the conscience of thine eyes. . . . [M]en rush on men with outrageous lusts.
(Prynne 1633: 135)

So writes Prynne, translating Cyprian. And Phillip Stubbes sees the actors as contaminating the spectators so that, 'these goodly pageants being done, every mate sorts to his mate . . . and in their secret conclaves (covertly) they play the *Sodomites*, or worse' (Stubbes 1583: 144-5). But *what* anti-theatricalists saw in the 'secret conclaves' of the theatrical bedroom constantly shifted, thus mimicking the shifting perspectives of the Renaissance stage itself.

For the bed scenes and undressing scenes with which I have been concerned produce moments of dizzying indeterminacy. It was such moments that Freud attempted to describe in his essay on 'Fetishism', where the fetish stands in for and mediates between the marks of sexual difference.⁹ Freud writes:

In very subtle instances both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration (of woman) have found their way into the construction of the fetish itself. This was so in the case of a man whose fetish was an athletic support-belt which could also be worn as bathing drawers. This piece of clothing covered up the genitals entirely and concealed the distinction between them. Analysis showed that it signified that women were castrated *and* that they were not castrated; and it also allowed of the hypo-

thesis that men were castrated, for all these possibilities could equally well be concealed under the belt. . . .

The athletic support-belt, through its concealments, supports contradictory hypotheses. But for Freud, all those hypotheses must be grounded in the fantasy of castration. Why? Because Freud needs to find a fixed point (and a *male* point) outside the play of fetishism, a point to which all other fetishes will teleologically point. The fetishist is, Freud suggests, someone whose interest '*comes to a halt half-way, as it were*' (my emphasis). 'Thus the foot or shoe owes its preference as a fetish - or a part of it - to the circumstance that the inquisitive boy peered at the woman's genitals from below, from her legs up.' The fetish is, for Freud, but part of the larger category of perversions. 'Perversions', he writes in the 'Three essays on the theory of sexuality':

are sexual activities which either a) *extend*, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or b) *linger*, over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the sexual aim.
(Freud 1905: 62)

The very notion of the perverse, like that of the fetish, can only emerge in relation to a) the parts of the body which are 'naturally' sexual and b) a teleological path towards the genitals. The transvestite theatre of the Renaissance, though, does not allow for any such distinction between the 'perverse' and the normal teleological path.

From a Freudian perspective, it 'comes to a halt half-way, as it were'. It does so because it resists the sexual and narrative teleologies which would be developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But that resistance I believe, less a matter of indeterminacy than of the production of contradictory fixations: the imagined body of a woman, the staged body of a boy actor, the material presence of clothes. Freud's brilliant insight was to see that the 'real person' was itself a displacement of fetishism:

The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts. It can, however, be diverted ('sublimated') in the direction of art, if its interest can be shifted away from the genitals on to the shape of the body as a whole.
(Freud 1905: 69)

'The body as a whole', then, is itself a fantasy, a sublimation. But for Freud, the real tends to reappear *behind* or *beneath* that fantasy, a real which always tends towards the formation of sexual difference. In the 'minglemangle', the 'hodge-podge', the 'gallimaufry' of Renaissance tragedy, though, contradictory fetishisms (body parts, costumes, handkerchiefs,

sheets) are staged not in the play of pure difference but in the play between indeterminacy and fixation.

Notes

- 1 I am deeply indebted for ideas, references and challenges to Lynda Boose, Greg Brebeck, Linda Charnes, Lisa Jardine, David Kastan, Michael Shapiro, and Valerie Traub; and I couldn't even have begun without the stimulus of Jonathan Dollimore, Marjorie Garber, Ann Rosalind Jones, Stephen Orgel, Phyllis Rackin and Susan Zimmerman.
- 2 For important revisions to Lisa Jardine's earlier work, see her 'Twins and travesties' in this volume.
- 3 On the occasional presence of women on English stages prior to the Restoration, see for instance Stokes (1985-6: 335-6); Bentley (1941: 25); and Gossett (1988).
- 4 Interestingly, it seems that it was for the revelation of the *male* body that Behn was most virulently criticized: taxing her with indecency, her critics, she writes, claim 'That Mr. Leigh opens his Night Gown, when he comes into the Bride-Chamber; if he do, which is a Jest of his own making, and which I never saw, I hope he has his Cloaths on underneath. And if so, where is the Indecency?' Behn goes on to imply that the charge of indecency is specifically levelled against her as a woman writer: 'had the Plays I have writ come forth under any Mans Name, and never known to have been mine; I appeal to all unbyast Judges of Sense, if they had not said that Person had made as many good Comedies, as any one Man that has writ in our Age; but a Devil on't the Woman damns the Poet' (Behn 1687: 186, 184).
- 5 For other accounts of Cleopatra and the boy actor, see Rackin (1972), Shapiro (1982), and Gruber (1985).
- 6 *Valentinian* 5.5 opens with 'Valentinian and the Eunuch discovered on a Couch'. Valentinian says:
 Oh let me press these balmy Lips all day,
 And bath my Love scorch'd Soul in thy moist Kisses.
 Now by my Joys thou art all sweet And soft,
 And thou shalt be the Altar of my love;
 Upon thy Beauties hourly will I offer,
 And pour out Pleasure and blest Sacrifice,
 To the dear Memory of my Lucina ...

(Rochester 1696: 215)

- 7 John Russell Brown has pointed out to me that, in the dominant theatrical tradition, the 'unpinning' refers to Desdemona's *hair*. That there is no Renaissance warrant for this is suggested by the *OED*, which actually quotes Desdemona's lines as referring to the unpinning of *clothes*, and also gives further examples.
- 8 My account of transvestism, and of the boy actor in general, is deeply indebted to Jonathan Dollimore's brilliant essay on 'Subjectivity, sexuality and transgression' (1986).
- 9 My account of fetishism is deeply indebted to Marjorie Garber (1989). See also her fine, wide-ranging study, *Vested Interests*.

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