

THE 'FEMALE PAGE': TRANSVESTISM AND 'AMBIGUITY' IN ELIZABETHAN THEATRE ROLES¹

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What an odd double confusion it must have made, to see a boy playing a woman playing a man one cannot disentangle the perplexity without some violence to the imagination.

C. Lamb

There are two stimulating, if apparently contradictory, quotations with which I would like to introduce the question of transvestism in Elizabethan drama: a highly intricate question which, as we shall see, touches upon a myriad of levels. The first of these comments was made by Carmelo Bene:

After the Elizabethan summer came the autumn of the English Restoration and the inevitable wintery harshness of the European theatrical season ... The coming of women onto the scene signalled, once and for all, the division between the categories of male and female,

¹ This is an expanded version of the article entitled, "The 'Female Page': trasvestitismo e ambiguità dei ruoli nel testo elisabettiano", which appeared in *Forme drammatiche e tradizione al femminile nel teatro inglese*, ed. by R. Baccolini, V. Fortunati, R. Zacchi, Urbino, Quattro Venti, 1991.

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consigned to different sexual characters ... Actors and actresses had lost their femininity, but then, art is androgynous.¹

The second quotation is taken from the Prologue to the 1660 performance of *Othello* in which, for the first time ever in England, a female came upon the stage to play the part of Desdemona:

The woman plays today: mistake me not,
No man in gown, or page in petticoat,
... in this reforming age
We have intents to civilize our stage²

It is far from easy to pin-point the socio-historical reasons for the exclusion of women from the theatre, on the one hand because of the difficulty in unearthing adequate material from the various historical contexts themselves, and on the other, because the “woman-theatre” rapport has frankly never been a simple or direct one, filtered as it is through the relationship between fiction and reality that is clearly inherent in the genre of theatre itself. Indeed, those who have dealt with the question of transvestism, and conversely, that of the representation of the “feminine” in Elizabethan theatre, have inevitably found themselves obliged to deal with the larger question of the theatre’s relationship with society as well. So it is that Shakespearean criticism, together with that branch of feminist studies that has concentrated on the role and the position of women in the theatre, can still be said to be divided between the so-called ‘traditionalist’ position -characterized by a rather superficial historical realism which would see the theatre as a “mirror” that the playwright holds up to contemporary social reality- and a position which, in concentrating upon illusionist technique and theatrical convention, tends to render the relationship between the play and the reality it represents a problematic one.

In the light of such critical dichotomy, the position recently delineated by Stephen Greenblatt is of even greater interest. Against the simple idea of theatrical ‘reflection’, Greenblatt sets up one of ‘exchange’,

¹ C. Bene, *La Voce di Narciso*, ed. by S. Colomba, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1982, pp. 65-67, [our translation].

² cited in G. Boas, *Shakespeare and the Young Actor*, London, Barrie and Rockcliff, p. 6.

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of 'negotiation', between the two systems. Thus between theatre and society a complex relationship of 'give and take' is established, an interrelationship by which the 'social energy' that is unloaded on the stage is then, by means of theatrical technique, reformulated by the theatre for public consumption. As Greenblatt puts it:

Through its representational means, each play carries charges of social energy onto the stage; the stage in its turn revives that energy and returns to the audience¹

Although the methodology she adopts may vary, it is along these same lines that the feminist critic, Lisa Jardine, is also moving. What Jardine tenaciously objects to is a form of crude feminist criticism that insists -in an ultimately vain attempt at finding traces of the dominant or opposing ideologies in Shakespeare- on labelling his heroines as exempla of either emancipated women or victims of the system, thus simplistically attributing the dramatist with either the merit of having been some rare sort of proto-feminist or flinging at him the accusation of having been the spokesman for some villanous brand of contemporary male chauvinism. As Jardine tells us:

We now know a considerable amount about this historical period, in particular about the position of woman and about views concerning women: enough to know that Shakespeare's plays neither mirror the social scene, nor articulate explicitly any of the contemporary views on "the woman question" ... I try to suggest alternative (corrective possibilities for reading the relationship between the real social condition and literary representation.²

Now, I in no way propose to go into a detailed philological analysis of these issues, but rather intend to discuss various aspects of a theme that appears to remain in large part still unexplored and highly enigmatic. While the relationship between women and writing in literature has received a good deal of attention in recent years, it seems to me that theoretical studies of woman's rapport with the thatrical genre have been relatively few. One

¹ S. Greenblatt, *Shakespeare Negotiations*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990, p. 14.

² L. Jardine, *Still Harping on daughters, Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1983, pp. 6-7.

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reason for such an omission may be that, despite the many studies done in recent years on the subject of contemporary feminist plays written by women, what seems to be missing is a real ‘historical memory’ regarding women and the theatre. Such a history, as I said above, remains mysterious; but it is also discontinuous. Above all, however, it is a history which must still be investigated and awarded its proper place in our ‘memory’.¹ In an attempt to bring forth some elements of this submerged history in this paper, I have chosen to concentrate on the subject of transvestism as dramatic convention, and, in particular, on that of ‘the female page’ - a key figure for the understanding of how, from the very beginning, ‘woman-as-sign’ could only find its place in relation to theatrical space globally speaking- a space permeated with and dominated by invention, by fiction.

There would appear to be two primary reasons for the historical exclusion of women from the stage. In the first place, the theatre is conventionally a public space and, as we know, for centuries women were not considered to be socio-historical subjects in their own right. The domestic space alone was their assigned realm. Unquestionably, such a motive for exclusion conjures up for us once again the age-old silence and submission of the woman kept within the ‘prison-walls’ of the home. But theatre space is also a ritual space, and at this level I would say that the deprivation is even deeper, woman being thus excluded from any mediation with the divine. Although in western culture women are both mythically and ritually associated with Earth and, like the Earth, participate in the mystery of Nature, in theatre, in the theatrical space, the rite, the ritual act, is denied her.²

From the point of view of the history of manners, the banning of woman from the stage is also undoubtedly linked to the way the acting profession was generally regarded: as threatening figure, not only because he is able to play an infinite number of roles, to sport an infinite number of masks, but also because, according to the stereotype, he was inclined to lead

¹ This problem was the subject of intense discussion at two separate, recent conferences: the first, “Transformations and Transpositions: Changing Patterns in Women’s Theatre History”, which took place at the University of Warwick in 1986, and the second, held in Bologna in 1989, “Forme drammatiche e tradizione al femminile nel teatro inglese.”

² Cfr. the entry under “Woman” by F.O. Basaglia in the *Einaudi Enciclopedia*, vol. 5, Torino, Einaudi, p. 5 ff.

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a dissolute life in which alcohol, brawls and prostitutes all had their ample place.¹

And yet the theatre, insomuch as it was a space in which the return of the repressed was brought to light and elaborated, could not entirely refuse to talk about women. Thus our task is to focus upon just how the genre resolved the contradiction by which, on the one hand, it denied women a status high enough for them to be able to personally tread the stage and, on the other, it was unable to suppress that denial, indeed, it was obliged to represent it. In short, how did the theatre resolve the problem of representing woman, even in her absence?

In his study of transvestism-as-performance, Peter Ackroyd² stresses the fact that the convention of the 'female impersonator' is one that goes back to antiquity: to the convention in classical Greek tragedy of the male who, in acting the female role, donned not only female masks, but also high buskins and richly decorated gowns, as well as to the Roman games, in which the comic possibilities of dressing up were exploited to the full. So it was from the very beginning of the genre that the representation of women on the stage presented a series of difficulties which, to my mind, can be seen as evidence of the discomfort that society has always felt in the face of the necessity of representing 'woman-as-sign'.

If we consider transvestism in terms of performance, two main types can be distinguished. The first of these is the comico-parodic kind, which emphasizes and exaggerates the sign, producing a caricature, a mockery. Such transvestism would exorcize what is threatening and enigmatic about woman by means of a liberating, anarchic laughter, but such laughter also has a misogynous ring. From this point of view, however, transvestism appears to be linked to fertility rites, one societal ritual from which sexual distinctions were eliminated.

¹ Cfr. A. Pitt, *Shakespeare's Women*, London, David and Charles, Newton Abbott, 1981.

² P. Ackroyd, *Dressing Up, Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1979. On the same subject, see R. Baker, *Drag, A History of Female Impersonification on the Stage*, London, Triton Boon, 1968. Concerning the history of female transvestism, cfr. L. van de Pol & R. Dekker, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe*, London, the Macmillan Press, 1989.

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The second type of transvestism tends towards a stylization, an idealization of woman such as can typically be found in Japanese No theatre, where 'female actors' don masks and recite their parts in a highly conventionalized style, and where the predominant element becomes androgyny.

But let us get back to the problem of transvestism in Elizabethan drama. Whether the exclusion of women from the stage was an advantage for the playwright who had to represent the female, or not, is a point that has long been debated by theatre historians.¹ Moreover, in recent years several Shakespearean critics have stressed the importance of considering the actual conditions surrounding female character representation for a true understanding of the phenomenon which would seek to avoid the pitfall of overly-idealizing the concept of femininity. In addition, there has also been much talk of how Shakespeare, being the good theatre man he was, would not have been able to fail to take into consideration the fact that female roles were to be played by very young actors.² Indeed, precisely the presence of these 'boy-actors' can explain, at least in part, why the female roles in Shakespeare are generally shorter in length than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the reason that Shakespeare rarely chose to write lengthy parts for mature women lies precisely in the objective difficulties that any young man has in portraying a woman in full sexual bloom. The notable exceptions are, of course, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra. These motives clearly go a long way towards explaining the propension Shakespeare had for fleeting and febrile emotions, and for adopting the device, the 'diversion' of transvestism as a conventional element of *Romance* -an element that, according to Pett, was employed precisely for the purpose of putting the playwright's boy-actors at their ease:

No doubt much of Shakespeare's fondness for this device is to be explained by the fact that he had only boy-actors to perform his female

¹ G. Fréjåville, *Les Travesties de Shakespeare*, Paris, Editions Seheur, 1930 and M. Jamieson, "Shakespeare's Celibate Stage", in *The Seventeenth-century Stage*, ed. G. E. Bentley, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1968. These two studies of transvestism stress the ambiguous fascination that the dressed up character produced on the stage.

² Cfr. on this point, J. Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, London, 1975.

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parts; certainly it must have seemed an attractive solution to his difficulties.¹

In addition, there is an undeniable preference in Shakespearean drama for *telling* the love scenes rather than *showing* them. G. Melchiori has noted how the characterization of Ophelia is nebulous, indeed quite insufficiently delineated in the text of *Hamlet*, and that this is most likely due to the fact that the part was to have been played by some young man whose own personality was highly slippery and unclearly defined. And, if one performs a line count to ascertain exactly what proportion of the play is dedicated to Ophelia, the hypothesis is thereby strengthened. Indeed, one cannot help but think that the part only began to be acted once the 'woman-actress' finally came upon the scene. From this point of view, the Shakespearean text would seem to be an *open* one, especially as regards its female roles.

There are still several considerations, however, which I believe need to be made if one is to approach, correctly, the problem of transvestism in Elizabethan times. In the first place, one cannot ignore the fact that the world-view of the Elizabethan public was not our own.² For the Elizabethan theatre public, the boy-actors who played the parts of females on the stage constituted the norm, not the exception, as they would for us today. It is in this sense, then, that the term 'transvestism' is a loaded one for us to use today in reference to Elizabethan drama. connoting as it does both the parody of the female sign that is operated by, say, the dame of the pantomime and the world of sexual perversion associated with the "drag queen", as Meg Twigcross has pointed out in her interesting study of transvestism in the Mystery Plays.³

Secondly, the Elizabethan public genuinely delighted in the sight of these precocious young boys, these little *enfant prodiges*, ably directed by

¹ E. C. Pett, *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition*, London, Staples Press, 1949, p. 82.

² C. J. S. Thompson, *Mysteries of Sex, Woman who Posed as Men and Men who Impersonated Women*, London, Hutchinson, 1938 and M.C. Bradbrook, "The Rise of the Common Player, a Study of Actor and Society", in *Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

³ M. Twigcross, "Transvestism in the Mystery Plays". in *Medieval English Theatre*, V, 2, 1983, pp. 123-180.

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their tutors,¹ as they acted out their adult women's roles, while to us today, the very idea of seeing some boy still wet behind the ears impersonating Cleopatra is quite monstrous, freakish.

In the third place, the theatre historians that have investigated this question tend to suggest that the boy-actors indulged in a highly stylized and codified manner of role playing which was in no way naturalistic.² This fact may go some way towards explaining why it was that a Puritan public should have accepted the practice of transvestism at all -a practice which, as Puritan teaching did not fail to remind its followers, constituted a serious transgression against the admonition set forth in Deuteronomy:

A woman shall not wear an article proper to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's dress; for anyone who does such things is an abomination to the Lord, your God.

It was around this very passage from the Bible that the debate on the sinful repercussions of transvestism in Elizabethan drama raged in the fascinating exchange of letters among three eminent Oxford dons: Dr John Rainolds, who argued for a strictly literal interpretation of the Biblical passage, and William Gager, along with his friend, Alberico Gentili, who attempted to argue in defense of contemporary drama and theatrical practice.³ I do not intend on going into the details of this controversy, yet I would like to emphasize two of its aspects that appear to be relevant to our discussion of transvestism and the representation of the female.

For the Puritans, transvestism was a source of anxiety inasmuch as it threatened the clear-cut lines between the sexes, and did this by means of a simple change of clothes. Indeed, the Puritan attack on the boy-actors was based precisely upon this link between costume and sex. Even the rather

¹ W. Baldwin, *The Organization of Personnel of Shakespeare's Company*, Princeton University Press, 1927.

² On this question, cfr., for example, A. Nicoll, "Actors and Theatres", in *Shakespeare Survey*, 17, 1964, p. 91; W. Robertson Davies, *Shakespeare's Boy Actors*, London, Dent and Sons, 1939; J.R. Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance*, London, Edward Arnold, 1966 and R. Baker, *Drag, A History of Female Impersonification on the Stage*, London, Triton Book, 1968.

³ J. W. Binns, "Women or Transvestites on the Elizabethan Stage? An Oxford Controversy", in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 2, vol. v, October, 1974.

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androgynous fashions of the times were considered by the Puritans to be a grave symptom of the process of sexual barrier erosion at work in contemporary society. Since it cloaked traditional signs of recognition, such a confusion of the sexes obscured social identity and, according to the polemist Stubbes in his *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), generated social monsters -who were nonetheless not without a certain wicked fascination in Puritan eyes:

To weare the Apparel of another sex ... was to participate with the same, and to adulterate the verite of his owne kinde...these women may not improperly be called Hermaphrodita, that is, Monsters of bothe kinds, half women half men.¹

There is, however, an interesting phenomenon to be discovered in the Puritan tracts attacking the theatre of the times: that is, it was precisely those who had the most intimate knowledge of the theatre practice, due to their studies or obsessive observation of it, who emerge as its severest denigrators. Such is certainly the case of Dr Rainolds, who in his investigation into the erotic feelings prompted by the boy-actor in his audience, demonstrates to have fully grasped the erotic potential of a young boy in female dress. Rainold's condemnation of the practice was based upon the strong homo-erotic feelings stimulated in an audience by both the sexual disguise and the effeminacy of the boy-actor himself. And the weight of his censorship was added to by accusations of alleged homosexual practices and outright sodomy taking place between the boy-actor and his trainer-tutor -accusations which theatre historians have, however, proven to be unfounded:

... then, these goodly pageants being done every mate sorts to his mate, every one brings another homeword of their way verie friendly, and in their secret conclaves (covertly) they play the Sodomits, or worse.²

Finally, as J. Kott reminds us, we must not forget that the *Masquerade* was an extremely popular form of entertainment in the English

¹ P. Stubbes, *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), in J. C. Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

² P. Stubbes, *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), cited in W. Robertson Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

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court, as well as in those aristocratic families which followed Italian fashions. Marlowe, in his *Edward II*, provides us with a detailed description of such revelries and Edward's passion for the courtier, Gaveston, finds expression in theatrical guise:

And in the day, when he shall walk abroad,
Like sylvan nymphs my pages shall be clad;
My men like satyrs grazing on the lawns,
Shall with their goat-feet dance an antic hay;
Sometime a lovely boy in Dian's shape,
With hair that gilds the water as it glides,
Crownets of pearl about his naked arms,
And in his sportful hands an olive-tree,
To hide those parts which men delight to see,
Shall bathe him in a spring; ... (I,i,56-65)

To the modern spectator, such a description cannot help but echo with the ambiguous and grotesque verbal portraits of Firkbank or the images of Beardsley.

Yet even Shakespeare, I suggest, is not unaware of the disturbing and menacing effect that the masquerade could have upon an audience, insomuch as what we have is a transvestism which occurs at more than one level, as we shall see. To begin with, we have a boy-actor dressed up as a female character, who in turn is disguised as a female-page. The allusions to this theatrical practice within the Shakespearean *corpus* are many. Thus, for instance, Duke Orsino speaks to Viola, disguised as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*:

Dear lad, believe it;
For they shall yet belie thy happy years,
That say thou art a man: Diana's lip
is not more smooth and rubious;thy small pipe
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman's part. (I,iv, 29-34)¹

¹ This and all of the following quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans, Boston, Houghton and Mifflin, 1974.

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And the Epilogue delivered by Rosalind at the close of *As You Like it* also serves to highlight the way in which theatrical fiction is highlighted by the practice of transvestism. What occurs here in essence is a return to extra-dramatic reality, "... in which Rosalind slowly vanishes and the actor goes back -the magic of the play dispelled- to being merely an actor, a man who, together with the audience, had been but a willing conspirator in this theatrical play of disguise":¹

... my way is to conjure you; and I'll begin with the women. I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you: and I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women, -as I perceive by your simpering, none of you hates them, -that between you and the women the play may please. If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not: and, I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell.

(Epilogue)

The sign of sexual connotation in the play is, *par excellence*, the voice -a voice that for the female parts was obliged to resemble a eunuch's, as Viola tells us in *Twelfth Night*:

I prithee, -and I'll pay thee bounteously-
onceal me what I am; and be my aid
For such disguise as, haply, shall become
The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke;
Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him;
It may be worth thy pains; for I can sing,
And speak to him in many forms of music,
That will allow me very worth his service. (I,ii, 52-59)

Such a voice had to be, as Hamlet says in a scene full of interesting notions concerning the 'Children of the Chapel' (II,ii): "... a piece of

¹ R. Mullini, "Pluridirezionalità della comunicazione nella convenzione drammatica del travestimento", in *Spicilegio Moderno*, 10, 1978, p. 151, [our translation]

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uncurrent gold ... not cracked within the ring”, neither ‘squeeking’, nor ‘harsh’.

The exchange of parts and roles in Shakespeare, however, is centered around dressing up (the ‘doublet and hose’). It is, indeed, the clothes that make the ‘man’, his (or her) character, and which can create truly dramatic effects. As Rosalind tells us:

I could find in my heart to disgrace my man’s apparel and to cry like a woman; but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat; therefore, courage, good Aliena.

As You Like It (II,ii, 4-8)

It is natural that many scholars should have discovered close links between the ‘woman in breeches’ and the heroine dressed up as a page¹ -a fashion that the Puritans strongly opposed since it blurred the lines between the sexes, transforming female into male, as numerous writings of the period testify:

... flat-chested [they] wore ruffs and appropriated the masculinity of high-crowned hats and simultaneously the androgynous splendour of slashed and jewelled bodices.²

What I want to stress at this point is the vital importance of costume in Shakespeare, of costume as a sign triggering certain dramatic effects. As O. Wilde perceptively noted in his essay, “The Truth of the Masks”:

Shakespeare was very much interested in costume. I do not mean in that shallow sense by which it has been concluded that he was the Blackstone and Paxton of the Elizabethan age; but that he saw that costumes could be made at once impressive of a certain effect on the audience and expressive of certain types of characters and is one of the

¹See, for example, L. Van de Pol & R. Dekker, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe*, London, Macmillan, 1989 and S. Shepherd, *Amazons and Warrior Women*, Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1981.

²E. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, London, Virago Press, 1987, p. 118.

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essential factors of the means which a true illusionist has at his disposal.¹

Yet, the power of the costume lies not solely in its ability to transfigure the character, to penetrate his or her most intimate essence; it lies in its capacity to create and transform language itself. Indeed, the metaphors derived from Shakespearean dress are part of the fabric of the Shakespearean word. But if so much is true, then it is also true that what we have in Shakespeare is a sort of disquieting play of mirrors, of interpenetrating genders, for as V. Woolf reminds us in *Orlando*:

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.²

So then, we might say that the banning of women from the stage in Shakespeare's time, though it often constituted a gross limitation and inconvenience for the dramatist as we have seen, could be transformed into a powerful tool for better probing female identity by this continuous switching of roles and parts. In this sense, the age-old convention of transvestism becomes in Shakespeare a means for revealing the endless variety of roles that an individual can play. The theatrical device of the boy-actor thus leads the playwright not only to a keen observation of the resemblances between the sexes, but prods him also to a discerning portrait of the female personality. Now, this representation is successful precisely because femininity is presented to the audience as a concept, a category, rather than merely as some attribute of some 'real' person. The dressing up of the boy-actor, precisely because of the disturbing, defamiliarizing effect it provokes in the audience, is able to highlight the particular characteristics specific to each sex. As Brecht remarked, "If the part is played by a person of the opposite sex, the sex of that character will be much more clearly highlighted." This same sort of defamiliarizing effect was also observed by Goethe at a 1788 production of the *Locandiera* in which men were acting the parts of the female characters:

¹ O. Wilde, "The Truth of the Masks", in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, Collins, 1966, p. 1074.

² V. Woolf, *Orlando*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1979, pp. 171-172.

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I found [at the Roman comedies] a pleasure to which I had hitherto been a stranger ... in the particular kind of representation we witnessed, the idea of imitation, the thought of art was called forth vividly, and ... only a kind of self-conscious illusion was produced.

We ... experience a double charm from the fact that these people are not women, but play the part of women. We see a youth who has studied the idiosyncrasies of the female sex in their character and behaviour; he has learned to know them, and reproduces them as an artist; he plays not himself, but a third, and in truth, a foreign nature.¹

Shakespeare had clearly studied the convention of the female page in detail and knew how to take full advantage of the reactions that the boy-actor in women's clothes stimulated in his audience -reactions which Shapiro has defined as 'dual consciousness' and which consist in an awareness on the part of the spectator of a continuous tension between the actor and the part he is playing.²

Neither is it unusual for the dramatist to have his boy-actors (dressed up as women who are in turn dressed up as pages) comment aloud upon their stage state. The result is an unquieting metadramatic irony:

Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
How easy is it for the proper-false
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we;
For, such as we are made of, such we be.
How will this fadge? My master loves her dearly,
And I, poor monster, fond as much on him;
And she, mistaken, seems to dote on me.
What will become of this? As I am man,
My state is desperate for my master's love;
As I am woman, now alas the day!
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe?

Twelfth Night (II,ii, 27-39)

¹ From *Goethe's Travels in Italy* (1883), in M. Jamieson, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

² M. Shapiro, *Children of the Revels*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1977.

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So it is that Shakespearean female characters -from Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, to Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*- study themselves, as in a mirror, while they play their dual roles, each of these roles presenting various characteristics which are constantly juxtaposed, in opposition: on the one hand, the clever wit of the male and, on the other, the delicate sensitivity of the woman.

In both *Twelfth Night* and in *As You Like It*, the disguise operates on three different levels. Viola in *Twelfth Night* is a girl who dresses up as a boy, Cesario, who at the play's conclusion takes on the semblance of a boy dressed up as a girl. And the same roles are played by Rosalind/Ganymede in *As You Like It*. The theatrical technique of disguise working together with the convention of the boy-actor becomes in Shakespeare a highly refined instrument for the weaving -through a distinctive register replete with puns, paradox and homosexual allusions- of the subtlest, most highly intricate misunderstandings. *As You Like it*, for instance, contains several passages with double, sexual, *entendres*:

You have simply misused our sex in your love-prate: we must have
your doublet and hose plucked over your head, and show the world what
the bird hath done to her own nest.

(IV, i, 201-204)

Here, of course, the double meaning is evinced by the word 'bird', with its reference to the male sexual organ, the comic effect being due to the obvious impossibility of Rosalind's revealing something that, as a woman, she simply has not got.

However -as has been rightly pointed out- the full meaning of the passage can only be understood if the role of the boy-actor is duly taken into account. In so doing, to the apparent double *entendre* of this 'smutty joke',¹ is added a third meaning. The first is metaphorical: indeed, Celia is using the term, not in its literal sense, but for the purpose of expressing to Rosalind her unfitness for criticizing her own sex; the second derives from the conventional reference to the male organ, which Rosalind as woman lacks, and the third is linked to the recognition of the fact that this woman's

¹ Cfr. P. H. Parry, "The Boyhood of Shakespeare's Heroines", in *Shakespeare Survey*, 42, 1990, p. 108.

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role is being played by a boy. Consequently, the play on the word becomes even more risqué.¹

So then, in making use of the dramatic convention of disguise, and of that of the boy-actor as well, Shakespeare is indeed playing on a triple ambiguity, the primary fiction being provided by the boy-actor's dressing up as a girl, which is then compounded by the disguise adopted by the heroine to trick the other characters in the play. These, of course, remain unaware of the deception for the best part of the performance, but the audience, which has been in on the (double) game from the very start, sits back and enjoys the multiplication of misunderstandings:

Viola: I am not that I play
Twelfth Night, (I,v,184)

Viola: I am not what I am.
Twelfth Night, (III,i, 141)

Within the play, then, the Shakespearean heroine serves a dual function. Not only does she draw the audience close to the action of the play, but she contemporaneously distances it from its fiction, putting it in touch with extra-theatrical reality. By means of the disguise -and the continuous metadramatic reflection in operation- what takes place within the play is in essence a reproduction of its very mechanisms.

The setting of this subtle and perturbing role-exchange is Illyria, or the Forest of Arden.² These are, of course, utopias *par excellence*, places where all is turned upside-down and no one is left untouched. In this sense, it appears that Shakespeare turns the stage into a scene of illusions, a space in which "no one is what he is ... or everyone is what they seem", a space in which everything is at once real and unreal, true and false, where both theatrical form and theme continually interpenetrate. And the play on

¹ Concerning erotic-sexual connotation in the dialogue of Shakespeare's comedies, cfr. S. Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 90: "Dallying with words is the principal Shakespearean representation of erotic heat".

² Cfr. N. Frye, *A Natural perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*, London, Columbia University Press, 1962 and J. Kott, *Arcadia Amara*, Milano, il Formichiere, pp. 7-57.

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appearance and reality goes deeper than any metadramatic commentary; it pervades the very structure of the play itself.¹

The appearance, the deception, have, paradoxically, a truth-revealing function and, in the case of *As You Like It* in particular, the task of probing the male-female rapport. The double disguise of Rosalind/Ganymede/ Rosalind serves to show Orlando the difference between the real woman and her idealized image, and thus the conflict that exists between the male and female modes of perception.

And yet the utopia here is at once magical and deranging , lyrical and tragic, because if it is true that the disguise in Shakespeare begins as a game, the playwright does not fail to give us a hint of the insidious nature of the game. The myth of Arcadia, that is, is dual. There is its realisticosexual level on which we have an exchange of roles that appears to indicate a willingness to get beyond the limits of one's own body, one's own sex.

But then there is another, metaphysical level, typical of the Renaissance culture. And it is at this level that we have the Shakespearean tension towards the great myth of androgyny -the reconciliation of contradictions, the unification of opposites.² In this light then, Rosalind, Portia, Viola etc. can be seen as evoking the myth of androgyny in the context of an Arcadia that is no more, where the categories of male and female were once in perfect balance, perfect harmony -a balance, a harmony, based upon a conscious acceptance, an ironic sureness, of the admixture of both the male and female in either sex.

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¹ N. K. Hayles, "Sexual Disguise in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*", in *Shakespeare Survey*, 32, 1979.

² Regarding the myth of androgyny in Shakespeare, Cfr. also C. G. Heilbrun, *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny*, London, Victor Gollanz, 1973.