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DRESS CODES, OR THE THEATRICALITY OF DIFFERENCE

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‘None shall wear...’

ALL OVER EUROPE IN THE medieval and early modern periods sumptuary

laws were promulgated by cities, towns and nation states, attempting to regulate who wore what, and on what occasion. The term ‘sumptuary’ is related to ‘consumption’; the laws were designed in part to regulate commerce and to support local industries, as well as to prevent what today would be known as ‘conspicuous consumption’, the flaunting of wealth by those whose class or other social designation made such display seem transgressive. [...] These laws attempted to mark out as visible and above all *legible* distinction of wealth and rank within a society undergoing changes that threatened to blur or even obliterate such distinctions. [...] The threat to this legibility was ‘confusion’: ‘when as men of inferiour degree and calling, cannot be by their attire discerned from men of higher estate’ (Perkins, 1608; see also Barish, 1981). [...]

Discussion of sumptuary laws by scholars of Renaissance literature in the 1970s and early 1980s tended to emphasize the implications of such laws for *gender*, especially as reflected in the debates about cross-dressing and the English stage. It is worth remembering, however, that sumptuary legislation was overwhelmingly concerned with wealth [and] rank, and with gender largely as it was a subset of those categories. [...]

In Elizabethan England ‘confusion’, of both gender and status, became, perhaps inevitably, itself fashionable. The ‘Homily Against Excess of Apparel’ that Elizabeth commanded to be preached in the churches [draws attention to the issues at stake]. [...] Excess, that which overflows a boundary, is the space of the transvestite. The Homily’s iconographic indicators of excess— dancing shirts, ruffles, face painting—could be dislocated from the context of sumptuary laws and rearticulated as signs of another kind of vestimentary transgression, one that

violated expected boundaries of gender identification or gender decorum. For one kind of crossing, inevitably, crosses over into another: the categories of 'class' and 'rank', 'estate and condition', which seem to contain and to regulate gender ('earls and above'; 'knights' wives'), are, in turn, interrogated by it. Class, gender, sexuality, and even race and ethnicity—the determinate categories of analysis for modern and postmodern cultural critique—are themselves brought to crisis in dress codes and sumptuary regulation. I contend that the transvestite is the figure of and for that crisis. [...]

The Puritan Dr John Rainolds was one of many who warned specifically against 'beautifull boyes transformed into women by putting on their raiment, their feature, lookes, and facions' (Rainolds, 1972:34–5). [...]For Rainolds, women's clothes act as transferential objects, kindling a metonymic spark of desire: 'because a woman's garment being put on a man doeth vehemently touch and moue him with the remembrance and imagination of a woman; and the imagination of a thing desirable doth stirr up desire' (96–7).

This is a classic description of a fetishistic scenario, in which a woman who is remembered and imagined is the phallic mother. Freud writes that the fetish replaces the imagined maternal phallus. 'Something else[...]has been appointed its substitute[...]and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor...What other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all' (Freud, 1927, 21:154). But this mechanistic substitution, which is the trigger of transvestic fetishism, is also the very essence of theatre: role playing, improvization, costume and disguise. In other words, Rainolds had intuited something fundamental about how dramatic representation works—and about the power of the transvestite.

[...]The controversy about cross-dressed acting[...]also tapped into larger cultural anxieties. *Did* clothes, in fact, make the man—or woman? [...]These were deep-seated anxieties about the possibility that identity was not fixed, that there was no underlying 'self' at all, and that therefore identities had to be zealously and jealously safeguarded. [...]The spectre of transvestism, the uncanny intervention of the transvestite, came to mark and overdetermine this space of anxiety about fixed and changing identities, commutable or absent 'selves'. Transvestism was located at the juncture of 'class' and 'gender', and increasingly through its agency gender and class were revealed to be commutable, if not equivalent. To transgress against one set of boundaries was to call into question the inviolability of both, and of the set of social codes by which such categories were policed and maintained. The transvestite in this scenario is both terrifying and seductive precisely because s/he incarnates and emblemizes the disruptive element that intervenes, signalling not just another category crisis, but—much

more disquietingly—a crisis of ‘category’ itself.

Transvestite Shakespeare (I)

[...]Anyone who has seen a range of Shakespeare productions, from amateur school and college theatre to professional repertory companies, will be familiar with the phenomenon of ‘authentic’, ‘period’ or ‘Elizabethan’ dress: ruffs, tights, doublets and cloaks. [...]Alternatively, to attain ‘timelessness’ Shakespeare productions have often been done in ‘rehearsal clothes’ (jeans and black turtlenecks, leotards, sweat suits), perhaps with an acknowledgement of the fact that in Shakespeare’s day plays were generally staged in modern dress.

Elizabethan companies often had the use of the cast-off clothing of great public figures: in theory, at least, a ‘King’ could wear the costume of a King, or—more likely a ‘nobleman’ could wear a nobleman’s doublet or cloak. The traveller Thomas Platter of Basel reported that ‘the comedians are most expensively and elegantly apparelled, since it is customary in England, when distinguished gentlemen or knights die, for nearly the finest of their clothes to be made over and given to their servants, and as it is not proper for them to wear such clothes but only to imitate them, they give them to the comedians to purchase for a small sum’ (Chambers, 1923, vol. 2:365).

Actors were in effect *allowed* to violate the sumptuary laws that governed dress and social station—on the supposedly ‘safe’ space of the stage. [...] The stage was a privileged site of transgression in which *two* kinds of transvestism were permitted to players: changes of costume that violated edicts against wearing the clothing of the wrong rank as well as the wrong gender: ...licences to wear clothing forbidden by the various statutes were issued by Queen Elizabeth, as by her predecessors (Anon, 1856–72, 1:269).

[...]Since many of these costume distinctions are unfamiliar and therefore illegible or undecipherable to twentieth-century readers and audiences, [...]the plays’ obsessive emphasis on clothing as a marker of difference is obscured, as the reader’s (or director’s, or designer’s) eye glides absent-mindedly past lists of incomprehensible garments in search of moral or emotional (or even sexual or political) context.

Moreover, the *kinds* of difference particularized by the sumptuary laws are themselves governed by a mechanism of displacement, or slippage, that seems to come into play whenever things threaten to get out of hand. It is no accident that sex and degree are the twin categories of classification here, nor that they are rendered both rhetorically and functionally interchangeable. As Natalie Zemon Davis points out in ‘Women on Top’: ‘varied images of sexual topsy-turvy—from the transvestite

male escaping responsibility and harm to the transvestite fool and the unruly woman unmasking the truth' were powerful in early modern Europe 'so long as sexual symbolism had a close connection with questions of order and subordination' and 'so long as both traditional hierarchical structures *and* disputed changes in the distribution of power in family and political life' served as stimuli for inversion play (N.Z.Davis, 1985:136, 150). Thus Shakespeare's Viola, disguised as a boy, replies to the countess Olivia's question about her parentage, 'My state is well;/I am a gentleman' (*Twelfth Night* I. v:278–79), neatly conflating two lies in one.

Twelfth Night is a play as much concerned with status as with gender, and its masquerade centres on not one but two cross-dressers: Viola in her male attire, and Malvolio, imagining himself in his 'branch'd velvet gown' (II.v.47–48) — ornamented with an embroidered pattern of leafy branches, an elaborate fashion explicitly forbidden to all persons below the rank of knight[...] —before his final, humiliating appearance in cross-gartered yellow stockings. Malvolio, in other words, is as much a cross-dresser as Viola, but what he crosses is a boundary of rank rather than of gender. His desire is clearly for upward mobility, another kind of coming out of the closet. [...] Of the two no-man's lands, rank seems for *Twelfth Night* the more socially culpable. [...]

Just as sumptuary laws primarily regulated status rather than gender infractions, so a play like *Twelfth Night* marks the seriousness of Malvolio's transgression as contrasted with Viola's. But—and this is my main point here—the overlay of class or status anxieties onto gender anxieties is exemplary rather than merely 'factual' or 'historical'. What it points toward is the centrality of the transvestite as an index of category destabilization altogether. We are speaking of an underlying psychosocial, and not merely a local or historical, effect. What might be called the '*transvestite effect*'.

One of the cultural functions of the transvestite is precisely to mark this kind of displacement, substitution, or slippage: from class to gender, gender to class; or, equally plausibly, from gender to race or religion. The transvestite is both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification. It points toward itself—or rather toward the place where it is not. The transvestite as object of desire—as, indeed, the embodied construction of mimetic desire—is the manifestation of Freud's concept of overestimation of the object, as set forth in his essay on narcissism. For the transvestite is there and gone at once. Nobody gets 'Cesario' (or 'Ganymede'), but 'Cesario' (or 'Ganymede') is necessary to falling in love. The transvestite on the Renaissance stage, in fact, is not merely a signifier, but also a function. [...]

Transvestite Shakespeare (II)

Cleopatra, said British actress Helen Mirren, 'is the best-written female role ever. She's full of fire and spark and has balls' (*Exposure*, issue 3, 2, 1990:51). I presume that Mirren did not merely mean here that historically the role was originally played by a boy, nor that the play explicitly acknowledges that fact in the text (*Antony and Cleopatra* V.ii.21–20). [...]A woman with balls, or, more exactly, a 'female role' with balls, demonstrates in no uncertain terms the power of the transvestite to unsettle assumptions, structures and hierarchies.

The casting of two accomplished actresses in the major Shakespearean roles—King Lear (Marianne Hoppe in Robert Wilson's production of *Lear*) (Holmberg, 1990) and Falstaff (Pat Carroll in Michael Kahn's *Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Folger Library in Washington), (Rothstein, 1990) —may mark something of a shift in the recognition of the flexible power inherent in the structures of Shakespeare's transvestite theatre.¹

Women have played Shakespearean male roles to great critical acclaim from the Restoration to the twentieth century. Sarah Siddons was an early Hamlet, and Sarah Bernhardt a famous one. [...]Reviews commended the excellence of their portrayals, without any reference to gender cross-casting —no one apparently thought it strange or inappropriate. [...]The modern sense of this cross-dressed portrayal as a stunt seems to be a matter of cultural relativism, not of clear-cut historical anomaly. [...] The roles of Iago and Hamlet are, it might be argued, more stereotypically 'feminine' than Lear or Falstaff. What of Iago's jealous possessiveness, so obsessively trained on Othello that it manifests itself as hatred, as well as desire? Or recall the voice-over of Olivier's *Hamlet*: 'This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.' To which gender was this dilemma —in 1948, when the film was made—traditionally ascribed? [...]

It has been variously argued by critics over the years that virtually all of Shakespeare's great characters, from Richard III to Cleopatra, are 'suspended between male and female'. Cross-casting by modern directors like Wilson, or Mabou Mimes' Lee Breuer, who recently staged a cross-cast *King Lear*—like the 'original' cross-casting of boys as women on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage—only brings to the surface the fact that all theatrical gender assignments are, in a way, ungrounded and contingent. Moreover, recent literary and psychoanalytic criticism has tended more and more to see Falstaff—both the Falstaff of the history plays and the Falstaff of *Merry Wives*—as embodying a 'feminine principle' or as exhibiting pre-Oedipal symptoms like orality, appetite and unbounded desire.² (And since Falstaff himself cross-dresses in *Merry Wives*, Carroll would also be performing an act of double-crossing or of psychological externalization, showing the 'female' side already intrinsic to the Falstaff character even when dressed in male attire.)

So that it is not, after all, that women are seen as more capable of representing universal 'man', but rather that the female or feminine aspects of Lear[...]and Falstaff are becoming more available, more visible, both to critics and to actors and directors. [...]

What seems clear, however—and what I want here to emphasize—is that this capacity for realization onstage lies within the text; that it is not imposed from outside, as foreign, unwelcome, or overingenious overlay. 'Man' and 'woman' are *already* constructed within drama; within what is often recognized as 'great' drama, or 'great' theatre, the imaginative possibilities of a critique of gender in and through representation are already encoded as a system of signification.

Transvestite theatre is a common, and not an aberrant, phenomenon in many cultures. Indeed, it might be contended that transvestite theatre is the *norm*, not the aberration—that what we today regard as 'natural' in theatrical representations (men playing men's parts, women playing women) is itself a peculiar troping off, and from, the transvestite norm.

Notes

1 For discussion of Fiona Shaw as *Richard II* and Kathryn Hunter as *King Lear*, see above pp. xxiii–xxv—Eds.

2 Parker, 1987:21–2; Traub, 1989; Cotton, 1987:320–6; Kahn, 1981: 72–3; Finke, 1983:7–24; Parten, 1985; Auden, 1962:195–6. [The list could be extended considerably, with more recent work: see the Bibliography and Suggested Further Reading—Eds.]