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1
Gender Theory

In terms of my discussion of cross-gender performance as applied to Shakespeare, it needs to be rooted in an analytical framework that can help to unpack cultural notions of gender and gender-biased assumptions, identify the policing agents of gender and prescriptive ideologies, deconstruct articulations of gender in terms of social and theatrical acts and investigate reconstructions on differently configured bodies and in non-normative play in front of audiences. In order to facilitate such a discussion I have turned to key gender theorists, beginning with feminist theories, such as introduced by early feminist scholars (de Beauvoir, Dworkin and West) and newer, arguably also queer and liberal, stances made by Butler, Halberstam and Bornstein.

My reasoning for applying these theoretical viewpoints to this study of cross-gender Shakespeare in contemporary performance was that initially it was the early feminists that introduced considerations of gender, of women, as a category for study and focus, recognising patriarchal privilege and identifying the state of ‘otherness’ in a male-dominated culture. Feminists, and later Queer scholars, began to identify ‘gender’ and acknowledge genders in a plural sense (plurality), highlighting that there were more states of ‘beingness’ than being male.

These scholars have investigated all aspects of gender in terms of social, psychological, ontological and political construction. All of these areas of study are highly important to any discussion and understanding of gender but far too vast for me to cover in this volume. However, I will be drawing upon key foundational concepts to illuminate areas of my study such as in discussing the cultural expectations of gender in contemporary Western society, exclusively the USA and UK. By teasing out these expectations through a feminist viewpoint I hope to create a
shared analytical framework for discussing, deconstructing, reconsidering and playing with gender in theatrical practice.

Introducing feminist theory

Feminist theories and actions have historically faced internal and external challenges including conflicting messages and definitions of purpose and values. Early feminist Rebecca West (1913) stated

‘I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute.’

Although it is a highly referenced point in women’s history, the feminist project known as the Women’s Movement began much earlier than the explosive 1960s, growing in response to the work of early feminists like West, and female literary figures such as Schreiner, Woolf, de Beauvoir (Barry 1995: 121) and early liberationists that achieved voting and educational rights for women. Among its many aims, and pertinent to later discussions in this volume, the movement emphasised a critique of the Western canon in order to analyse women’s representation in the works, questioning their invisibility as primary subjects and authors. A great deal of writing from this wave of feminist thinking and theory focused on deconstructing classical texts and revisioning new possibilities for interpretation and representation that actively empowered women, rather than passively ignoring them. Feminists also spent time uncovering classical female writers and placing them at the forefront of scholarship and critical inquiry. A move to reconcile ‘his’ story with ‘her’ story was enacted as 1970s feminists ‘switched to the need to construct a new canon of women’s writing by rewriting the history of the novel and poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence’ (1995: 122–3). Current feminist criticism, scholarship and politics are direct descendants, ‘a product of the “women’s movement” of the 1960s’ (1995: 121), and continue to consider how women’s representation in literature and media supports a liberated role for women or serves to derail her hard-fought independence. However, since the 1960s feminist theory and criticism have been influenced by other theories: poststructural, postmodern, Marxism, and so on, and therefore when we refer to feminist theory we must think in plurality, as there is no longer one feminist position but many. Although they may share ‘woman’ as a principle subject, men have also contributed to feminist thinking and politics and even become a subject of concern as well.
Involving men in feminist dialogue has been a contentious issue across the different waves of feminist critique. Radical feminists (Dworkin, Firestone and Solanas) were the most disagreeable, forming women-only projects and spaces and working tirelessly to undo patriarchal programming and to develop new social, political, stylistic and even linguistic models of behaviour and communication (Crow 2000), all in the absence of men. Conversely, liberal feminisms, including Queer and intersectional feminisms, hold many of the same aims as early feminists but include men in their scope of study, mandating that equality is a project for all of society and therefore should include people of differing sexes, sexualities, races, religions and varying economic and social statuses.

My position, as evidenced throughout this volume, is of a liberal feminist position. In the past I have worked and lived in women-only contexts, projects and communities and certainly can see benefits from such endeavours. I recognise that I owe a great deal to my radical and liberal feminist sisters, in terms of my continued recognition of how I am affected by our patriarchal political and social structure and understanding of how single-sex environments can be important tools for exploring and discussing gender or gender bonding in the absence of ‘men’ or external ‘other’. I will explore this point fully in the discussion of Phylida Lloyd’s all-female Julius Caesar (2012) and we will hear from a few artists interviewed in this volume who find great value working in single-sex companies and projects.

However, I believe the fundamental issue of equality requires a great deal of education, action, diversity of experience and communal focus, and leaving men, or any group, out of that dialogue will not help us achieve our ends. Our collective actions must eradicate inequality by dismantling the political structure that creates oppression of others both internally as well as externally.

Social gender programming: Is gender essential or performed?

Describing the performative aspects of gender drag artist RuPaul in his memoir Lettin It All Hang Out (1996) explained to readers that simply

‘We’re born naked, and the rest is drag.’

One of the primary contemporary debates about gender is whether it is an essential condition based on biology or a constructed one dictated by culture. Judith Butler tackles this question in Gender Trouble (1999),
aligning her argument with early feminist thinking whilst taking new directions to conclude that gender is socially constructed and that governing ‘gender laws’ is ‘inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies’ (1999: 12). She also questions the mechanism of gender construction (1999: 11) and explains that the essentialist position is mistakenly not based on biology:

When the relevant ‘culture’ that ‘constructs’ gender is understood in terms of such a law or sets of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny. (1999: 12)

Feminist projects set about ‘undoing’ such gender constructs, freeing individuals from repressive and prescriptive categorisation. In order to address notions of equality and diversity in society, it becomes a task for us to rethink how we ‘essentialise’/‘do’ gender culturally and work to ‘undo’ the laws, dispelling cultural myths about men and women, masculinity and femininity, and gender binary thinking altogether.

In order to achieve this ‘undoing’ as a practical approach, particularly as applied to the performance of Shakespeare, we must first investigate what the gender laws are in our culture, identify its hallmarks and semiotics and recognise how we participate in the everyday performance of gender. We start our study with an interrogation of our social performance of gender in order to understand how we might ‘hold the mirror up to nature’ and distort her picture on the ‘unworthy scaffold’. Once we identify and define the ways in which we are ‘gendered’, how we perform our gender as a social construct, we can pervert these laws in subversive ways and undo the power of gender programming at the source – culture.

**Doing gender**

In contemporary Western society the social gendering process ‘begins the moment we are born; with a simple question; is it a boy or a girl; and each of the agencies of socialization reinforces the gender stereotypes’ (Emolu 2014: 23). Babies are immediately anatomically identified by their sexual parts and distinguished as boys or girls or male or female.

There’s a real simple way to look at gender: Once upon a time, someone drew a line in the sands of a culture and proclaimed with great self-importance, ‘On this side, you are a man; on the other side, you
are a woman.’ It’s time for the winds of change to blow that line away. Simple. (Bornstein 1994)

The inherent problem with this gendering process is that children are being sexually categorised and placed in a binary formulation wherein males gain immediate power and privilege. Elizabeth P. Rahilly (2014: 4) explains, ‘The first question that is asked after a child is born is the first of many iterations of this belief system, around which myriad institutions and practices are arranged.’ This process does not recognise the fact that biologically there are other sexes, such as hermaphrodites that are born into this ‘system’ where there is, upon birth, no place for them (Feinberg 1996). Countless families are faced with this conundrum and have to make the harrowing decision to surgically turn their newborn into a male or female child. All too many times these decisions are completely irrevocable and destroy lives.

Once anatomically categorised, also known as ‘biologically determining gender’, getting the babies to conform to the gender laws becomes the task of the parents, family and friends. ‘In these ways, the gender binary functions as a “truth regime” in society’ (Rahilly: 4). Colour, for example, is used in infancy so as to codify sexual difference; boys are given blue tones and girls pink. Parents initially feel compelled to gender their children in keeping with binary prescriptive laws:

The ‘truth regime’ framework intersects with the ‘doing gender’ approach. The dictates of the gender truth regime powerfully inform inter-actional practices, to which parents at first feel accountable. (5)

These colour codes signal to strangers the sex of the baby at a time when children look most similar as they have not begun to physically change biologically or learned to perform their gender as prescribed. This gender codifying of babies allows everyone to take part in the gendering process of the child before the child recognises an independent self.

This process continues to be forcibly mandated by family, peers, educators and the media as children ‘are socialized into their gender roles and are taught what it means to be male or female’ (Emolu 2014: 23). Interesting studies have been done on this subject, including the effects of consumerism and gender-typing on children (Freeman 2007) looking how ‘gender appropriate’ toys given to children establish their future gender roles and even employment possibilities: ‘their toy choices have also been shown to have long term consequences for later social and cognitive development’ (Cherney et al 2003: 96).
For example, girls are routinely given toys that ‘elicit nurturing, proximity and role play’ (96) preparing young girls for domestic life and child-rearing. Boys are given constructive toys that emphasise building and ‘foster higher mobility, activity and manipulative play’ (97) preparing them for industrial and scientific professions. Moreover, girls’ toys are defined as ‘feminine’ and given such qualities as ‘attractive, creative, nurturing and manipulable’ (97). These feminine toys often stimulate fantasy and highly vivid imaginations in young girls, whereas the masculine toys given to boys such as ‘balls, guns and construction toys’ are described as ‘more competitive, aggressive, constructive’ and ‘reality based’ (97).

Such distinction has meant that young people are gender stereotyped from birth and individual expression in both male and female children is often repressed. This is a crippling system for both men and women. For example, although men may receive the power and privilege over women in our society, it comes at a personal cost. Many men have reported that they were raised to not show affection and learned to suppress inner feelings. Seidler (1989) explains that masculinity is ‘identified with rationality’ and his experience of being a man in society meant that Seidler lost ‘a sense of individual identity’ and that ‘learning to be a man means learning to be impersonal’ (113). Like Seidler, many men struggle to maintain intimate relationships later in their adult lives and admit that they were not encouraged or taught to nurture children and others in the way women were in their formative years. The result of such gender socialising is that many men feel they have no connection to an interior self and ‘barely get a chance to value a connection’ to their ‘inner lives’ (116) as well as their personal needs. Many men, as boys, are taught that ‘emotions are unseemly’ and this causes breakdowns in their later intimate relationships and marriages as they struggle to share their feelings with their partners; ‘though women have been rendered invisible in history and the public realm, men have been rendered invisible to themselves’ (122).

These issues propelled ‘the Men’s Movement’ making masculinity and men an area of enquiry and focus in the 1980s and 1990s. The work of the Women’s Movement and feminist critique and practice inspired liberal-minded men to reclaim their lives and break free of the gender laws through male/masculinity consciousness raising. Men created spaces for sharing intimate thoughts and feelings with others and aimed to embrace their ‘feminine’ attributes, rather than ‘despise our softer feelings’ choosing to ‘recognize them as integral parts of ourselves’ (195).
Men began to break away from stereotypical roles, taking employment in traditionally female professions and roles such as nursing, child-rearing and homemaking.

In terms of our discussion of gender performativity and the ‘doing’ of gender, masculinity can be defined as the polar opposite performance of gender from that of femininity. In our male-centric society masculinity is seen as the one ‘true’ gender’ (the rest are ‘other’ or non-genders) and establishes its dominance as natural through appropriation of mostly unnatural signs. Through closer observation, these ‘natural’ characteristics are found to be infinite in expression as no two masculinities are alike and become increasingly diverse across cultures and generations. However, ‘gendering’ processes (under a patriarchal ideology and political system that creates a gender binary and is predicated upon its stability) categorise and value these characteristics as authentic, biological and desirable.

These culturally constructed categories function as generic prescriptions for gendered behaviour and social coding, resulting in gender stereotypes. The effect is that all bodies and physical expressions are read as gendered; humans are ‘not legible until gendered’ (Butler 1999) and put into categories of male/masculine and female/feminine. This hetero-sexist patriarchal conditioning, starting at birth, mandates that we enact these designated stereotypes through physical and material signs conveying gender semiotic language that is legible, constant and repeatable. The social gendering system seeks to persuade us that gender is an essential biological condition that is entirely ‘natural’. Throughout this volume we will interrogate this idea by exploring the myriad of ways we can play and perform gender through the works and characters of Shakespeare.

**Heteronormativity**

Another adverse effect of the social gendering process is not only the repression of unique identities and personal expression, as illustrated in the previous discussion, but also mandated conformity to heteronormativity. Heteronormativity can be defined as a social set of acts and behaviours designed to constitute and regulate ‘bodies according to normative notions of sex, gender and sexuality’ (Lloyd 2013: 818). Linked closely to gender socialisation, heteronormativity insists that biological sex, gender expression and sexual preference are congruent and therefore natural; men are masculine and attracted to women.
Heteronormativity asserts that people are naturally heteronormative in sex and gender presentation, as well as heterosexual, and does little to recognise any alternatives to this assertion: ‘heteronormative assumptions are those that view heterosexuality as natural, inevitable, and desirable’ and use such assumptions to justify heterosexual privilege (Montgomery and Stewart 2012: 164).

With the rise of the gay liberation movement in the 1960s, homosexuality and alternative genders became visible and began to challenge the supremacy of heterosexual privilege and heteronormativity’s ‘natural’ claim, biological essentialism. Gay, Queer and transgender scholars interrogated heteronormativity and activists sought to change perceptions and resist its stranglehold. Younger and some older generations have shifted such perceptions and now more easily accept sexual difference; current homosexuality and gender studies reveal that ‘Attitudes toward gay rights and same-sex marriage have become more positive in the past few decades’ (164). However, heteronormativity still is a system of privilege and power that is pervasive over the lives of many, particularly people that fall between or outside of the binary hetero-matrix.

Heteronormativity, as applied to some, can be a violent policing of gender expression, such as in the killing of transwoman Gwen Araujo in 2002. Although this case demonstrates extreme violence, in Araujo’s case resulting in death, heteronormativity places many interlopers on dangerous ground. As Moya Lloyd (2013) points out, there are a large number of grim reminders of this policing as evidenced on the ‘Transgender Day of Remembrance’ website. And it is not just transgendered persons that are violently targeted. Homophobic hate crimes are also heavily documented, and many of us are victims of such ‘street policing’ in our society.

For example, my wife who identifies her gender as ‘masculine’ is a teacher in a private school and wears ‘male’-identified clothing as she teaches. One day her class of six- and seven-year olds discussed the topic stating that it was ‘okay for girls to wear boy’s clothes’ but that it was ‘illegal for boys to wear girls’ clothes’. When she tried to correct them on the issue, even explaining that she knew lots of ‘men who dress as women’, they still insisted that it was against the law. This was 2015 in a very liberal school in Southern California. My wife found this statement perplexing, explaining to me that she knew that the parents of her children would never have had such a conversation with their children or supported this idea. So where, she wondered, had such a thought been introduced?
This is the invisible violence of heteronormativity as discussed by Lloyd:

Attention must also be paid, however, to the multiple modalities through which heteronormativity performs its violence on, through, and against bodies and persons. This includes but is not limited to the violence of gender norms; the way those norms work to position certain bodies and persons outside the realm of ‘recognizable’ violence. (2013: 820)

That children are predisposed to notions of gender heteronormativity at such an early age and with such strict notions of regulation as it being ‘illegal’ seems a violent and repressive assault on the developing psyche of these young people.

Prescriptive limitations of heteronormativity also affect performers who cross-dress on our stages, directors who wish to play with such norms and audiences’ response to non-normative castings and gender play in contemporary productions of Shakespeare. Cross-gender Shakespeare as a practice is an important tool for challenging cultural gender stereotypes and for staging ‘otherness’. All of the productions and companies and artists featured in this volume are appropriating, dismantling, challenging and redressing Shakespeare in engaging and provocative stagings and making inroads in changing attitudes and perceptions of gender. We are asked as an audience to rethink gender and reimagine Shakespeare. In turn, we also begin to redress ourselves and reimagine the world around us as we are presented with gender alternatives to those presented on a ‘traditional’, and all too often, repressive stage.
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