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La performance de genre au théâtre élisabéthain et au-delà

Paris is Burning for Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the development of an undergraduate course on cross-dressing in early modern drama in which students are encouraged to relate current discourse and debates about gender identity and expression to gender performance in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama. I address Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990) as a work that opens up avenues for exploring cross-dressing on the early modern stage. I contrast the embrace of drag as a creative, empowering experience in *Paris is Burning* to the depiction of cross-dressed performance in the film *Stage Beauty* (2004), which features a protagonist loosely based on the historical Edward Kynaston, a renowned actor, who specialized in female roles during the first few years of the Restoration period (1660-1661). Where *Stage Beauty*'s Kynaston is depicted as traumatized and damaged by cross-dressed performance, the drag performers in *Paris is Burning* are empowered and validated. I argue that *Paris is Burning* serves as a powerful counter example to the Hollywood fantasies of early modern cross-dressing presented in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Stage Beauty*.

KEYWORDS

Paris is Burning, Stage Beauty, drag, cross-dressing

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Cross-dressed performance in the early modern professional theatre has remained a lively topic of research for literary scholars and theatre historians since the 1980s. Over the decades, theatre historians have made some progress in locating archival evidence relating to issues such as the age of the boy actors who played female roles and the professional structures in which they were trained.[1] Nonetheless, many of the material and practical details of cross-dressed performance remain unclear, such as the types of prosthetics, cosmetics, and body movements used by boys and young men when playing female characters. Precisely how did boys convincingly impersonate complex characters like Cleopatra, the Duchess of Malfi, or Hermione? Beyond the aspects of performance that fall within the purview of theatre history, what has attracted even more attention from scholars are the theoretical, cultural, and interpretive issues raised by cross-dressing, those questions that deal with reconstructing Elizabethan assumptions and fantasies about gender difference and sexuality. When literary scholars turned their attention to the topic of cross-dressing in the 1980s, their inquiries were inspired by the emergence and consolidation of feminist and queer theory. Several decades later, this research is now fueled by the advent of Trans studies, a field which explores "gender diversity in the broadest sense".[2] As Ardel Haefele-Thomas explains, "Trans is an overarching term that includes transgender, transsexual, nonbinary, and multiple gender identities," such as "genderqueer, nonbinary, gender-variant, gender-expansive, or agender".[3]

In the world beyond academia, the popularization of drag performance has made the topic of early modern cross-dressing more relevant than ever, especially to the current generation of undergraduate students. As indicated by sociological surveys, not to mention the graphic evidence of social media, mass media, and celebrity culture, the demographic now known as Generation Z is marked by an unprecedented receptiveness to the fluidity of gender and sexuality.[4] However, in the past few years, as drag has been embraced by the mainstream entertainment industry, implying its depoliticization, we have also witnessed a reactionary politicization of drag by the religious and political right. Issues connected with drag performance and, far more seriously, the rights of transgender and nonbinary individuals, lie at the centre of a renewed outbreak of the culture wars. In this social climate, the topic of early modern cross-dressing is one which resonates with students and warrants a place in undergraduate English literary studies.

In what follows, I outline the development of an undergraduate course on cross-dressing in early modern drama in which students are encouraged to relate current discourse and debates about gender identity and expression to the performance of gender in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama. More specifically, I will be focussing on the inclusion of the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990) in the course as a work that opens up avenues for exploring cross-dressing on the early modern stage.

I first developed an undergraduate course on the topic of cross-dressing in 2013. Entitled "Early Modern Cross-dressing," the course was first offered as a seminar for students in their final year of study in English Studies. In 2021, I redesigned this course, opening it up to a broader range of students. Now cross-listed with the Gender Studies department, the course is entitled **"**Performing Gender: Cross-dressing on Stage and on Screen." It is this version of the course that is the focus of this paper.

The course explores the history of cross-dressing as a theatrical practice, plot device, literary topic, cultural fantasy, and historical phenomenon, with a focus not only on Shakespearean drama, but also on film, including adaptations of the plays and films set in the playhouses of early modern London. Alongside *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Roaring Girl*, we study cinematic reconstructions of early modern theatrical cross-dressing, such as, *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden, 1998) and *Stage Beauty* (dir. Richard Eyre, 2004). We also consider films that bring the cross-dressing theme into modern contexts, such as *She's the Man* (dir. Andy Fickman, 2006). The central goal of this course is to explore the connections between the past and the present, as we investigate the ways in which theatre and film participate in the cultural construction of gender difference.

At the centre of our inquiry lie some key questions: why is the performance practice of cross-dressing, which is supposedly invisible to audiences, so often highlighted in early modern plays through the inclusion of cross-dressing as a plot device? Does cross-dressing in Elizabethan drama tend to stabilize or destabilize dominant assumptions about gender difference? How does erotic desire figure in narratives of cross-dressing? How do literary treatments of cross-dressing relate to transgender issues in today's culture? What is the relationship between modern drag performance and early modern cross-dressed performance?

Oddly enough, the connections between XXIst-century drag performance and Elizabethan theatrical cross-dressing have become more visible with the emergence of an anti-drag political discourse by the religious and conservative right in the US and the UK. In some jurisdictions in the US, new laws are being crafted to supress drag performance. In a recent class I covered Elizabethan antitheatricalist polemic by highlighting its resemblance to current anti-drag discourse. Alongside William Prynne's labelling of stage plays as "the very pompes of the divell"[5] in 1632, we looked at an item published in 2019 in a fundamentalist Christian journal, in which the author inveighs against drag queen story hours in public libraries: "The body language and dress of the drag queens teach children things. Namely, that the abnormal is normal, the immoral is moral, and vice is virtue".[6] This writer accuses drag queens of promoting "The bad philosophy of rebellion against God. That's what drag queens are foisting on our children in our public libraries. And it's monstrous." To denounce cross-dressing as monstrosity is a familiar move, dating back not only to antitheatrical polemic but to *Twelfth Night*, where Viola labels herself a "poor monster" (II.2.33) and her disguise as Cesario a "wickedness" (II.2.33).

Viola's moment of self-recrimination for engaging in the "wickedness" of gender impersonation is brief in a play that otherwise happily entertains cross-dressing as an excusable ploy, one which ultimately yields two heteronormative marriages. Likewise, by all accounts, the custom of cross-dressed young men performing the roles of Viola and Olivia was broadly accepted by Shakespeare's London audiences. The antitheatricalists, at least up until the outbreak of the Civil Wars, seem to have represented a minority view.[7] On the issue of drag performance, Western cultures today seem to be poised on a similar moment: widespread acceptance of drag as mainstream entertainment, shadowed by a clamorous minority voice of opposition.

The cultural shift toward acceptance of drag, its transition from fringe to mainstream entertainment, may be credited in large part to the success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise, which premiered on cable television in 2009. Today's undergraduate students have grown up with

RuPaul's franchise. It is reality television's version of drag that frames the current generation's awareness of the tradition. In an episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* which features a "ShakesQueer" challenge (Season 7, Episode 3), RuPaul asserts that the term "drag" was originated by Shakespeare as an acronym for "dressed as a girl." The etymology is patently false.[8] However, it reflects a desire to legitimize modern drag performance by situating it in relation to Shakespearean drama. While there are many valuable parallels to be traced between modern drag and Elizabethan cross-dressed performance, there are, of course, significant differences. Rather than drawing upon *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise for models of Elizabethan cross-dressing, I turn to *Paris is Burning*, the 1990 documentary directed by Jennie Livingston. This film showcases the Latino and African American Drag Ball scene in late 1980s Harlem, New York City, while also chronicling the lives of its gay and trans participants. At first glance, this film may seem embedded in a social and cultural context that is remote from Shakespeare's London. What can a drag tradition that belongs to a specifically American subculture tell us about cross-dressing on the Elizabethan stage?

I screen *Paris is Burning* in its entirety early in my course on cross-dressing, for a variety of reasons. Foremost among these is the sheer expertise of the drag ball community in performing specific gendered and class identities. The Harlem Drag Balls of the 1980s are highly competitive events, with participants vying for trophies in narrowly defined categories, some of which resemble theatrical characters, such as Schoolgirl/Schoolboy, Executive, High Fashion Parisian, and Butch Queen First Time in Drags at a Ball, the latter being a self-reflexive category. Some of the categories do not involve cross-dressing in terms of gender but entail crossing in the sense of performing a role that does not align with the performer's ordinary life. Typically, this means projecting wealth, status, and privilege, the very qualities that lie out of reach for disadvantaged queer, racialized youth in 1980s America.

In the context of these Balls, drag is defined broadly. Nonetheless, the traditional definition of drag, namely, performing a gender identity that one was not assigned a birth, appears to dominate the proceedings. Above all, the participants' skill and sincere commitment to their performance stand out, offering a possible glimpse into the expertise of the young men and boys who enacted female roles in Shakespeare's theatre. *Paris is Burning* provides an opportunity for students to witness impressive drag performances that are designed to pass for *realness*, to adopt a term that is central to the documentary and to which I will return shortly. As such, this documentary may come closer to replicating the effects of Elizabethan cross-dressed performance than do some of the so-called "original practices" productions which feature all-male casts.[9]

While drag is traditionally understood to involve costumes, makeup, and movement that serve to exaggerate stereotypes of femininity, this is not the dominant aesthetic among the performers in *Paris is Burning*. Emulating fashion models and recreating images from luxury advertising figure prominently in the drag competitions recorded by Livingston. A drag performance in this setting might involve dressing in yachting or riding outfits and exuding the relaxed air of entitlement of a model in a Ralph Lauren advertisement. What we witness in this film is an expansion of drag into a wide array of performance styles and identities. Drag is truly diverse in this community, on many registers. As two of the reigning veteran drag queens, Pepper LaBeija and Dorian Corey, explain, the introduction of a virtual smorgasbord of highly specific drag categories in the 1980s had opened up the ballroom floor to participants of all shapes, sizes, interests, and talents. Dorian Corey recalls entering drag as a professional dancer in cabarets, decades earlier, during the Showgirl phase of

drag. This phase, she explains, was followed by the trend of celebrity impersonations, especially of gay icons, such as Elizabeth Taylor. By the late 1980s, the dominant trend was to wear luxury fashion brands, and emulate the style of wealthy white America.

Although drag is often defined as inherently parodic, most of the participants in *Paris is Burning* do not see the Ball culture as radical or as a critique of mainstream culture. They claim that they are not satirizing the privileged elite. Dorian Corey emphasizes: "It's not a take off or a satire. No. It's actually being able to be this" (00:20:08-00:21:00). The performances are aspirational rather than satirical. Nonetheless, in their interviews with Livingston, some of the performers offer incisive critiques of the injustice and hypocrisy that they recognize as rife within American culture. They speak movingly of the barriers they face as racialized, queer, marginalized individuals. This is the heart of the documentary, its purpose. When I screen the film in class, an important discussion ensues about the film's socio-political content. As well, we cover some of the controversies and critiques that Jennie Livingston's work has incurred over the years, such as claims that the documentary is voyeuristic and exploitative, and that its commercial and artistic success failed to translate into significant material benefits for its participants.[10]

Returning to the larger project of the course, what might this representation of drag ball culture tell us about Elizabethan cross-dressed performance? What stands out from *Paris is Burning* is the sincerity of the drag participants, the seriousness and commitment that they devote to crafting their performances. I suggest that the boys and young men who worked in the Elizabethan theatre likely applied a similar commitment to their own impersonations of female characters. In other words, the dedication and expertise of the film's drag performers may resemble that of Elizabethan actors. Drag, as depicted in *Paris is Burning*, may be taken as a corrective to the longstanding tradition in mainstream film and television of treating cross-dressing as inherently comic and ridiculous.

Even *Shakespeare in Love*, a film which focuses on Elizabethan cross-dressed performance, overwhelmingly frames cross-dressing as ridiculous, a perversion of both theatre and sexuality. In the cross-dressing course, I encourage students to analyze *Shakespeare in Love* in light of *Paris is Burning*. The Hollywood film has a deeply conservative view of acting and theatre, one that is wedded to literalism. The message may be summed up in Viola's statement early in the plot: "Stage love will never be true love while the law of the land has our heroines played by pip-squeak boys in petticoats." Viola's position is later linked to the Queen's wager: "Can a play show us the very truth and nature of love?" The wager is decided when the Queen witnesses the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, with the couple who inspired the play performing as the star-crossed lovers. The success of the play endorses a literalist view of literary creation: the assumption that real-life experience is required as the foundation and inspiration for compelling literary creation. Shakespeare has to fall in love in order to write both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*. The other literalist message is the confirmation of Viola's claim: the only true love is heterosexual love, and it can only be convincingly depicted with women playing the female roles.[11]

Overall, *Shakespeare in Love* positions the early modern theatre as in need of correction – it is too queer. Eventually, the law against women on the stage will be rescinded and the theatre establishment will enjoy the freedom to be more literalist and more heteronormative.

Heteronormativity and biological sex will triumph, yielding more truthful performances: that seems to be the message of *Shakespeare in Love*.

Like *Shakespeare in Love*, *Paris is Burning* foregrounds the theme of realness. But on this issue, the two films diverge drastically. Where the Hollywood feature narrows the concept, the documentary opens it up, expanding the definition of what counts as real. Members of the drag ball community voice a range of perspectives on what it means to be *real*. For some, especially the young trans participants, achieving realness involves surgical intervention. Realness can mean passing for a cis woman. For others, it is a matter of acquiring or creating fashionable attire and projecting an air of confidence, the impression that one deserves to wear the outfit. Above all, the documentary suggests that realness is not restricted by the gender that one was assigned at birth.

Paris is Burning can be a helpful vehicle for thinking through the vexed issue of performance as it relates not only to theatre but also to gender identity and expression. When I introduce Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender to the class, I am careful to explain that Butler did not intend to equate gender with theatricality. Instead, Butler arrived at the concept of the "performative" through the word's linguistic sense, where it means an utterance that performs an action by virtue of its very utterance. For instance, "I swear to tell the truth" is performative; saying the words performs the action.

Butler uses the concept of gender as performance to contest the assumption that gender pre-exists its expression. She proposes that gender comes into existence only through being repeatedly performed: "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed".[12] In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler distinguishes between performativity and theatricality: "Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance".[13]

Through the 1990s, Butler's perspective on drag underwent some shifts, qualifications, and adjustments. In a brief discussion of drag in *Gender Trouble*, Butler allowed that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency".[14] Butler writes approvingly of the drag queen Divine, star of the John Waters canon of films: "Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates".[15] However, upon returning to the topic of drag several years later in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler seemed determined to qualify its radical potential:

> Although many readers understood *Gender Trouble* to be arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms, I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence.[16]

Butler reassesses drag within an extended discussion of *Paris is Burning* and offers a largely unsympathetic analysis of the film. Butler's critique rests heavily on the tendency of some of the younger drag queens to harbour escapist fantasies of transcending the racist, heterosexist, and

socioeconomic barriers they face, either by achieving stardom or by securing the role of a traditional housewife. Butler terms this a "tragic misreading of the social map of power".[17] This seems a heartless perspective, to fault queer and trans individuals for drawing sustenance from the same dreams and aspirations, however unrealistic, that motivate so many American youth.

In an interview published in 1996, Butler expressed regret for having invoked drag in *Gender Trouble*: "The problem with drag is that I offered it as an example of performativity, but it has been taken up as the paradigm for performativity. One ought to be wary of one's examples".[18] Butler asserts that performance should be distinguished from performativity in that "the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject".[19] However, this distinction breaks down in the case of Butler's critique of the young queens in *Paris is Burning*. On the one hand, these queens are held up by Butler as victims of gender performativity for their apparent interpellation of hegemonic ideas about gender roles; on the other hand, as the film amply demonstrates, the queens are consciously and deliberately performing gender, albeit not the genders that they were assigned at birth, both on the ballroom floor and on the streets of New York City.[20] Thus, the young queens exemplify both unconscious performativity and conscious performance.

Paris is Burning reveals that the supposedly distinct meanings of performance, on the one hand, as the constitution of gender and, on the other hand, as theatrical enactment, are not as separable as Butler often assumes. These meanings blur into each other. While some members of the drag ball community separate their ballroom identities from their ordinary lives, for others, especially the trans participants, performance is something that they do not have the luxury of leaving behind on the ballroom floor. As Dorian Corey explains, "realness" for these queens means *passing*, that is, going undetected as queer or trans in the mainstream world: "When they're undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies, those are the femme realness queens" (00:22:30-00:22:45). For these individuals, gender presentation is not unconscious, but a highly conscious, ongoing action as they struggle to survive in a hostile world.

In an important article, Jennifer Drouin encourages Shakespeare scholars to borrow vocabulary and frameworks from "contemporary queer and transgendered practices",[21] including drag, in order to develop a more nuanced vocabulary for analyzing cross-dressing and gender performance in early modern drama. Drouin presents a new taxonomy, using the terms *cross-dressing, passing, slipping*, and *drag*. The term *theatrical cross-dressing*, according to Drouin, should be used exclusively to refer to boy actors performing female roles, whereas the many instances in plots in which characters disguise themselves with clothing of the opposite sex are better described with the terms *drag, passing*, and *slipping*. For instance, when Viola adopts the disguise of Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, she is attempting to pass. In those moments when Viola's risks exposure, her performance enters the realm of slipping. Drouin explains:

> While drag highlights that all gender is an illusion, the aim of passing is for the illusion to signify as real in the public sphere. Through its investment in realness, passing is the quotidian street equivalent of theatrical cross-dressing. When the illusion of passing fails, however, the performance can easily slip into drag, becoming a parody of the performer just as much as of the performance.[22]

Drouin emphasizes that not all drag is parodic, a point that I suggest is powerfully exemplified in *Paris is Burning*. In Drouin's taxonomy, the term *slipping* is applied to Shakespearean characters engaging in a "second type of non-parodic quotidian drag. It remains drag nonetheless, because Shakespeare's non-parodic drag shares an important trait with parodic drag — self-referentiality, that is, drag's tendency to draw attention to its own artificiality, in contrast to passing's need to disguise it".[23] Moments of *slipping* and drag in the playhouse evoke humour, whereas the real-life equivalent, a trans, queer, or cross-dressed individual's failure to pass, within either a public or private setting, risks violent repercussions.[24]

As we explore how performing gender in a theatrical setting may relate to performing gender offstage, in ordinary life, we return to the question of whether cross-dressed performance had a radical or emancipatory potential in Elizabethan culture. To what extent did cross-dressed performance raise an awareness of gender in ordinary life as a version of performance? Did this practice serve to denaturalize gender? Or was cross-dressing so entrenched as a theatrical norm that it went virtually unremarked and unnoticed? The fact that Shakespeare and his colleagues repeatedly include cross-dressing as a plot point in their plays implies that they did not regard this practice as entirely routine. Instead, it appears that dramatists were fascinated by cross-dressing and by the non-normative erotic possibilities that the practice might elicit.

Debates over whether drag is subversive, whether its tendency is radical or recuperative in relation to traditional gender and sexual norms, echo the long running debates within Shakespearean scholarship over the implications of cross-dressed performance practices and cross-dressed characters. The only consensus that has emerged is that specific context matters above all and that neither modern drag performance nor early modern cross-dressing should be assumed to be inherently subversive or recuperative. Katye Stoke has recently argued that it is time to set aside the debates over the question and acknowledge the diversity of drag practices.[25] Likewise, I suggest that we imagine a diversity both of responses on the part of spectators and of performance styles on the part of actors when it comes to cross-dressed performance on the Elizabethan stage.

One thing that is clear is that the very existence of an antitheatrical discourse targeting cross-dressed performance in early modern London implies a sense of its potential to challenge hegemonic ideas about gender and sexuality. Even when in the service of presenting a traditional marriage plot, there were bound to be moments in the playhouse when cross-dressed performance alerted audiences to the instability of gender presentation, its fluidity and unmooring from a supposedly fixed corporeal foundation. In an essay that focuses on scenes featuring undressing by cross-dressed male actors on the Elizabethan stage, Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass suggest that such scenes fostered "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".[26] Jones and Stallybrass explain: "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".[27] Jones and Stallybrass compare the spectator's oscillation between seeing and not seeing, knowing and not-knowing, to that of the Freudian fetish, a prop which simultaneously occludes and acknowledges an absence. Jones and Stallybrass suggest that the theatre cultivated an openness to viewing gender as prosthetic, but that this perspective would later be suppressed: "In its place, post-Renaissance culture would put a fantasized biology of the 'real'".[28]

The film *Stage Beauty* (2004) traces a transition of the kind that Jones and Stallybrass describe, the displacement of a theatrical practice that treats gender as a site of instability, a site of speculation and fantasy, to one that imposes "a fantasized biology of the 'real," an insistence on fixing and stabilizing gender. However, rather than critiquing and interrogating this transition, as we might expect, or at least hope for, in a XXIst-century treatment of the topic, *Stage Beauty* endorses a conservative view of sexual difference. The film dramatizes the shift to casting women in female roles at the beginning of the Restoration period. The protagonist is a fictionalized version of the real-life actor Edward (or Ned) Kynaston, who specialized in playing women at the beginning of the Restoration. Jeffrey Hatcher, who wrote the screenplay, adapting it from his stage play *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*, represents Kynaston as traumatized, utterly broken, once he is replaced by actresses. Historically, Kynaston's stage career survived this transition, and he went on to perform male roles for decades.[29] According to the customs of the pre-Restoration playing companies, the real-life Kynaston, who was about 17 years old at the start of the Restoration, would have expected to age out of female roles within the next few years. In 1660 to 1661, Kynaston played both female and male roles with notable success. Although Hatcher strives for some measure of fidelity to the historical record concerning the advent of the actresses to the commercial theatres, he nonetheless imagines a Kynaston who has been profoundly damaged by his career as an impersonator of women. So engrained is Kynaston's feminine theatrical identity, that he cannot perform as a man on the Restoration stage.

I screen *Stage Beauty* later in my course, at a point where students ideally have developed analytical frameworks for assessing its representation of early modern cross-dressed performance practices. In many ways the film echoes the attitudes of *Shakespeare in Love*, in that cross-dressed performance is depicted as an antiquated, artificial, even perverted theatrical practice in need of correction. However, *Stage Beauty* goes further than *Shakespeare in Love* in its denigration of cross-dressed theatricality, by implying not simply that it has unfairly limited women's opportunities but that playing female roles has psychologically damaged actors like Kynaston. I ask students to consider what the film's approach might imply about the practice of drag today. Have the filmmakers thought through the implications for queer, non-binary, and trans viewers?

The issue of identity looms large in this film. Once Kynaston loses his female roles, especially Desdemona with whom he heavily identifies, he loses himself. In a backstage discussion with Maria, his dresser and later rival, Kynaston recalls his tutor telling him: "A part doesn't belong to an actor, an actor belongs to a part." He then adds, quoting his tutor again: "Never forget you a man in a woman's form." He pauses, then wonders: "Or was it the other way around?" (00:22:24-00:22:44). This moment of uncertainty about the relationship between actor and role foreshadows trouble ahead when it becomes evident that Kynaston has internalized his theatrical role as Desdemona to such an extent that he is lost without it. The film implies that Kynaston's sense of identity is on shaky ground precisely because he has built a career on something unnatural, performing female roles, which is framed as a personal and theatrical perversion. He needs to undergo a stripping away of that false identity in order to rebuild a stronger, more natural identity, a process which is solidified through his rehearsal and performance as Othello at the end of the film. It is by directing Maria, his replacement in the role of Desdemona, and by performing the role of Othello himself, that he recovers a sense of identity. This new self is supposedly more fully masculine than the cross-dressed self. [30]

Maria diagnoses Kynaston's feminine identity, indeed his entire professional speciality, as wrong. She critiques his performance as Desdemona as a superficial travesty of femininity: "Your old tutor did you a great disservice, Mr Kynaston. He taught you how to speak and swoon and toss your head, but he never taught you to suffer like a woman or love like a woman. He trapped a man in woman's form and left you there to die" (1:25:00-1:25:29). We gather from this exchange and from Kynaston's recollections of his boyhood training "crammed in a cellar" (00:41:07) alongside fourteen "pretty boys like me" plucked from the "gutter" (00:21:55-00:22:04), that it is his tutor who is to blame for the actor's loss of his masculine self. Kynaston recalls: "Do you know when I was in training for this profession, I was not permitted to wear a woman's dress for three long years? I was not permitted to wear a wig for four. Not until I had proved that I had eliminated every masculine gesture, every masculine intonation, from my very being" (00:41:08-00:41:20). It is this training, and by extension a perverted theatrical practice, that has damaged Kynaston. In Maria's diagnosis, Kynaston's training has "trapped" him in a false exterior.

Hatcher's departure from the historical record when it comes to Kynaston's boyhood is worth examining. The historical Kynaston was apprenticed to John Rhodes, a theatre manager, in the years leading up to the Restoration. It had been the practice, among the pre-Restoration commercial playing companies, for boy actors to be bound as apprentices to adult actors and theatre professionals who held status as freemen of the London livery companies. As with any apprenticeship, the master was responsible for feeding, housing, and training his apprentices. Kynaston was among the last of the boy apprentices in the theatrical system.[31] However, Hatcher invents a scenario for Kynaston's boyhood that carries disturbing suggestions of secrecy, seclusion, and psychological and sexual abuse. The implication is that Kynaston's sexuality and gender identity were grievously deformed during his formative years by his initiation into performing feminine roles. Hatcher's vision of Kynaston's training in cross-dressed performance, as inherently demoralizing, exploitative, and damaging, represents a marked contrast to the nurturing of youth by a House Mother in the Drag Ball community as depicted in *Paris is Burning*.

Paradoxically, while Maria seems to be confident in diagnosing the flaws in Kynaston's performance as Desdemona, she is unable to translate her critique into her own successful rendition of that role. When Maria attempts to play Desdemona, she is herself trapped in a false identity: she mimics Kynaston's performance, even though she feels it is inauthentic. Maria's dilemma seems to contradict her insistence, a position which the film echoes, that only a biological woman can understand what it means to be a woman and thus authentically play a woman on the stage. If that were true, then why does Maria have so much trouble tapping into her own sense of femininity to perform the role of Desdemona?

In yet another of the film's baffling ironies and inconsistencies, Maria needs a male tutor to help her access her innate femininity. As Kynaston assumes the role of tutor to Maria, he abandons what he was taught and works from an entirely new concept of acting, one which closely resembles the modern technique of method acting. Kynaston coaches Maria to experience Desdemona at a deeply personal level. He strips away her elaborate costume, makeup, and hairstyle, a process emblematic of the stripping away of artifice. The implication is that her superficial, false exterior must be removed to allow a direct and natural access to the feminine role. Likewise, Kynaston has been stripped of his feminine artifice and is learning to access an authentic masculine self. The narrative

thus deploys the traditional Western metaphysics of depth versus surface, of nature versus artifice, as it reinforces the traditional gender binary.

Like *Shakespeare in Love*, *Stage Beauty* celebrates artistic principles and aesthetic codes that modern audiences recognize as naturalism or realism. These films imply that any performance practice that deviates from today's mainstream cinema is wrong, unnatural, and even perverted. Modern film demands that women be cast in women's roles; the notion that men once played female roles on the stage is depicted as laughable at best and perverted at worst. These aesthetic codes correspond to dominant notions about gender identity, ideas rooted in a deep investment in the gender binary and in assumptions about what is natural, healthy, and socially acceptable in gender expression and sexuality. *Stage Beauty* elides bad acting with bad gender performance while endorsing a retrograde (for 2004) gender essentialism.

In describing *Stage Beauty*'s implicit treatment of cross-dressed performance as "perversion," I draw upon Natasha Distiller's adaptation of the Freudian concept of the *pervert*, a category which she distinguishes from the *queer*. She explains:

> Unlike perverts, who invert, or deviate from, the accepted order, queers challenge the terms by which the order is structured. The psychoanalytic notion of the pervert, especially in the form of the invert (the homosexual), relies on the rules of gender… Perversion does not threaten the order of gender.[32]

Applying Distiller's terminology, we may identify Kynaston as a figure of perversion who is compelled, by the logic of the plot, to become straight. Within the world of the film and in terms of the film's thematic framing, Kynaston may be perverted, but he is not allowed to be queer. The only route out of perversion is to conform, to go straight, theatrically, and personally. A queer or non-binary identity is beyond the film's comprehension.

In my course on cross-dressing, *Paris is Burning* serves as a powerful counter example to the Hollywood fantasies of early modern cross-dressing. Where *Stage Beauty*'s Kynaston is traumatized and damaged by cross-dressed performance, the drag queens in Livingston's documentary are empowered and validated. What we discover in *Paris is Burning* is a concept of realness that is far more diverse and expansive than anything *Stage Beauty* and *Shakespeare in Love* can imagine. In its practice of cross-dressed performance, the Elizabethan theatre may have likewise expanded its definition of realness. While the practice of cross-dressed performance in Shakespeare's time had its roots in misogynistic attitudes, some of its effects may have been positive, opening up a space where gender was imagined as malleable and unfixed and where non-normative sexualities were, at least briefly, made visible.

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Notes

[1] In "How Old Were Shakespeare's Boy Actors?", David Kathman concludes, after an extensive sifting through archival evidence, that the boy actors playing female roles ranged in age from a minimum of 12 years to a maximum of 21-22, with the average age being 16-17. He notes that this was the same age as London apprentices. On the training of boy actors within the apprenticeship system of the London livery companies, see David Kathman, "Grocers,

Goldsmiths, and Drapers: Freemen and Apprentices in the Elizabethan Theater", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 55, n°4, 2004, p. 1-49.

[2] Ardel Haefele-Thomas, *Introduction to Transgender Studies*, New York, Harington Park Press, 2019, p. 20.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 24. Simone Chess's *Male-to-Female Cross-dressing in Early Modern English Literature* (2016) exemplifies the application of Trans studies to the topic of cross-dressed performance. Chess writes: "The ways in which we talk about gender have become more complex and interesting since scholars made the turn to trans* studies; now is the time, then, to come back to early modern crossdressers using language and ideas from trans* studies to complicate and clarify their genders individually and in relation to other characters and readers/audiences", Simone Chess, *Male-to-Female Cross-dressing in Early Modern English Literature*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 14.

[4] For a recent survey indicating a shift in attitudes in the US, see **URL**. Similar results for the UK are reported by Stonewall; see **URL**.

[5] William Prynne, *Histrio-mastix: The Players Scourge, or Actors Tragedie*, 1633, titlepage.

[6] Robert Reilly, "What a Drag: Corrupting the Innocent at Children's Libraries", *The Stream*, 12 June 2019. **URL**.

[7] Robert Lublin arrives at this conclusion in his investigation of early modern theatrical discourse. See "Anxious Audiences and Gender Play on the Early Modern English Stage" in this issue.

[8] The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s earliest example of the use of "drag" in the sense of cross-dressing dates from 1870. The entry for "drag" is labelled as in need of updating.

[9] The most familiar of recent so-called "original practices" productions is the all-male *Twelfth Night*, directed by Tim Carroll at the London Globe. The production came to Broadway in 2013 and was released on DVD in 2014. Cast in the role of Olivia, a 52-year-old Mark Rylance was about three decades older than the youth who would have performed the role on the Elizabethan stage.

[10] For an influential critique of *Paris is Burning*, see bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, "Between the Lines", Boston, South End Press, 1992, p. 145-156. Lucas Hilderbrand responds to this critique and points out some of its limitations in: Lucas Hilderbrand, *Paris is Burning: A Queer Film Classic*, Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013, p. 125-129.

[11] For an incisive critique of *Shakespeare in Love* for its promotion of heteronormativity, see Sujata Iyengar, "Shakespeare in HeteroLove", *Literature Film Quarterly*, vol. 29, n°2, 2001, p. 122-127.

[12] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990], London, Routledge, 2006, p. 34.

[13] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 59-60.

[14] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, *op. cit*., p. 187.

[15] *Ibid*., p. xxxi.

[16] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, *op. cit*., p. 85.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 90.

[18] Judith Butler, "Gender as Performance", in Peter Osborne (ed.), *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 111.

[19] *Ibid*., p. 112.

[20] In "The Trouble with "Queerness": Drag and the Making of Two Cultures," Katie R. Horowitz challenges Butler's distinction between performativity and performance in relation to drag. Horowitz advocates "a theory of performance that does not limit itself to the realm of mere metaphor, one that actually, unapologetically, and without qualification breaks down the boundary between stage performance and the performance of everyday life", Katie R. Horowitz, "The Trouble with 'Queerness': Drag and the Making of Two Cultures", *Signs*, vol. 38, n°2, 2013, p. 314.

[21] Jennifer Drouin, "Cross-Dressing, Drag and Passing: Slippages in Shakespearean Comedy", in James C. Bulman (ed.), *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008, p. 51.

[22] *Ibid*., p. 30.

[23] *Idem*.

[24] Sawyer Kemp makes a similar point about the ease with which Shakespearean characters pass in their cross-gendered clothing versus the difficulties experienced by real-life trans individuals. Kemp warns against assuming that the experience of trans individuals can be readily mapped onto Shakespearean characters who cross-dress.

[25] For this argument, see, as well, Mark Edward & Stephen Farrier, "Drag: Applying Foundation and Setting the Scene", in Mark Edward & Stephen Farrier (eds.), *Contemporary Drag Practices and Performers*, Methuen, Bloomsbury, 2020, p. 1-17.

[26] Ann Rosalind Jones & Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 215.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 217.

[28] *Idem*.

[29] On the historical Kynaston, see George E. Haggerty, "'The Queen Was Not *Shav'd* yet': Edward Kynaston and the Re-gendering of the Restoration Stage", *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 50, n°4,

2009, p. 309-326; and David Kathman, *art. cit*., p. 43-46. For a fascinating, partly speculative, framing of the historical Kynaston through the frameworks of drag and queer practices, see Simone Chess, "Queer Residue: Boy Actors' Adult Careers in Early Modern England", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 19, n°4, 2019, p. 242-264.

[30] For extensive analyses of the film's handling of gender issues and theatricality, see Cameron McFarlane, "'What's the Trick in That?' Performing Gender and History in Stage Beauty", *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 44, n°4, 2011, p. 796-814; and Anna Kamaralli, "Rehearsal in Films of the Early Modern Theatre: The Erotic Art of Making Shakespeare", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 29, n°1, 2011, p. 27-41.

[31] *Cf*. David Kathman, *art. cit*., p. 43.

[32] Natasha Distiller, "Shakespeare's Perversion: A Reading of *Sonnet 20*", *Shakespeare,* vol. 8, n°2, 2012, p. 139.

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