Crossing the Sexual Divide

by Catherine Belsey



English Association Bookmarks
No. 64

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Scope of Topic

While our society is only beginning to come to terms officially with the fact of sexual diversity, fiction has been exploring the matter at intervals for 2000 years. From a range of examples, this Bookmark singles out cases where fantasy allows a celebration of the possibilities opened up by crossing the sexual divide. But what bearing, if any, does such fantasy literature have on real life?

BOOKS TO READ

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando.*
William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*.

NOTES

The question of pleasure

It happened one day that Jupiter, king of the gods, began a playful argument with his wife (and sister) Juno. The issue was which sex derived greater pleasure from love. Jupiter ascribed a deeper satisfaction to women but Juno disagreed. How could the matter be resolved?

In the event, they settled on an appeal to Tiresias, who had been both man and woman. He had accidentally struck two mating serpents with his staff, and in consequence, Tiresias changed sex and spent seven years as a woman. Although the story seems to treat becoming a woman as a punishment, Tiresias took Jupiter's side: women have a better time.[1]

Nearly two thousand years later, T. S. Eliot gloomily invoked Tiresias as his speaker in section III of *The Wasteland*. This 'old man with wrinkled dugs' witnesses the dispiriting sexual encounter between the typist and the estate agent's clerk, and comments, 'I Tiresias have foresuffered all/ Enacted on this same divan or bed'.[2] In this instance, no one seems to derive much pleasure from the event: evidently the post-war wasteland of 1922 has engulfed enjoyment, and curiosity gives way to a pervasive indifference towards all experience.

In the course of the same decade, however, Virginia Woolf's fantasy novel, *Orlando*, would revive in a different key the question that puzzled Jupiter. *Orlando* records another sex change. Painlessly, miraculously and quite unaccountably, the hero wakes after a long sleep to find he has become a woman at the age of thirty.

It takes him, now her, some time to adjust to this new position. Orlando has to learn to become less independent, more vulnerable; instead of taking the initiative, she now waits to be asked. But which state is more pleasurable? Lazing on the deck of a ship, she admires the texture of her own skin against the flowered silk of her dress. On the other hand, she reflects that she can no longer jump overboard for a swim in her long eighteenth-century skirts. But then again, wouldn't it be exciting to be rescued by a sailor? At dinner, the captain coaxes her to accept a tiny slice of meat. How glorious to have the power to resist and disappoint him — or instead to yield and please him. 'Which is the greater ecstasy? The man's or the woman's?'[3]

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The novelty of her situation makes Orlando's new-found helplessness seem thrilling. But the narrative voice comments acidly that this is a very naïve view: Orlando's conclusion would not impress mature women, who have experienced a lifetime of dependency. The book was published in 1928, when women in Britain at long last secured the vote on equal terms with men. *Orlando* acknowledges that femininity has its pleasures but, in the light of recent history, this work is far more conscious of the limitations imposed on women by cultural expectation.

Whichever way the argument is settled, what prompts the question that so concerns the gods, as well as mortals? Sexual difference means that there is something each one of us is not, a condition we cannot experience, or not without a miracle — or surgery. What would it be *like* to be the other sex? How would sexual relations change? How different would the world look? Speculation deepens in periods of intense gender polarization, but the mystery is always there, and fiction offers the opportunity to explore the unknown, to treat as real what realism relegates to dreams and impossibilities.

The limits of realism

Cultural critics often talk as if all literature ought to be true to life, depicting things exactly as they are. Such writing confirms what we already know. But in practice fiction can also do better than that, offering access to what might be, or worlds that do not exist, imagining answers to unanswerable questions.

Tiresias and Orlando experience both sexes, but each of them can only manage one at a time. Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines, on the other hand, do not change their anatomy, but they do not quite confine themselves to a mere change of costume, either. Instead, they move rapidly back and forth between distinct gender-identifications. No less than five of the plays ignore the requirements of realism to present young women who pass for boys, going unrecognized in the process by their nearest and dearest. If we are prepared to concede the fantasy, it is possible to see the plays as surpassing our own most advanced theories in their daring exploration of gender as performance.

Shakespeare's comedies

In Shakespeare's best-known comedies cross-dressing is motivated by practical considerations, not magic. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* disguises herself as a lawyer to save the life of her husband's friend; in *As You Like It* Rosalind becomes Ganymede to fend off thieves and rapists; and the shipwrecked Viola in *Twelfth Night* needs a place to live. She would like to serve Olivia as an attendant, or waiting gentlewoman, like Maria, but the Countess has forbidden all access to her court. The only other option is Orsino's household, but a bachelor has no place for ladies-in-waiting: his attendants are all male. If Viola is not to work as a scullery maid, she had better become a boy.

The magic, if that is what it is, resides in the ease with which they all inhabit their new roles. All three turn disguise into carnival, adopting with relish the manners of young men, and discarding them as readily when occasion requires. Transformed into Cesario, Viola shows she can compete with a professional clown when it comes to making jokes (*Twelfth Night*, 3.1). Celia may be exhausted but, impersonating Ganymede, Rosalind gives her support, restrains Touchstone's excesses, and buys a cottage for them all to live in, 'as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat' (*As You Like It*, 2.4.6-7).[4] The law was the most masculine of all public institutions at that time but Portia, for the first half of the play little more than a fairytale princess, immured in her palace and bound by the will of a dead father, now acts in court as 'the doctor' with perfect assurance and authority (*The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1).

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If their fictional escape from the constraints of femininity invests each of these early modern protagonists with a new-found freedom to be more, and more capable, than was permitted in real life to ladies, it also sets a puzzle for the audience. Who is speaking when Rosalind, fathoms deep in love, declares in the person of Ganymede that 'Love is merely a madness' (*As You Like It*, 4.1.198; 3.2.389)? Or what view does the play uphold when the same Rosalind, who is planning to marry Orlando, affirms as Ganymede that 'men are April when they woo, December when they wed' (4.1.140-41)? What assessment of love does Shakespeare's romantic comedy invite playgoers to take away from the theatre, if the central figure speaks from such opposite points of view, according to gender-identification?

Discontinuity

To read the play now is to miss one of the conditions of early modern staging. The speech prefixes in the printed text attribute all these utterances to Rosalind, so that Ganymede seems no more than a pretence, a dissimulation designed to incite Orlando to ever greater protestations of love. And so, in a sense, he is. Modern stage performances, where the part is played by a woman, also keep before us throughout the essential femininity of Rosalind. But on Shakespeare's own stage, where the part was played by a boy, the 'true' gender of this ambiguous figure would have been much less clearly evident.

What would the audience see? A boy, playing a girl, playing a boy. What would they hear? If the actor did justice to the part, a rapid oscillation between a woman in love and a 'saucy lackey' (3.2.291-2) who ridicules lovers. Then, as now, boys were entitled to be cheeky, and grown-ups indulged them. Shakespeare repeatedly exploits the charm of irreverence, which must, of course, have come easily to his boy-actors. When the actor was a boy, Ganymede would have had his own on-stage autonomy, and the gender of Shakespeare's protagonist would have seemed much more discontinuous, less readily unified. And perhaps the play's account of love remains correspondingly unresolved, open to discussion, to be determined one way or the other as we like it.

Viola-as-Cesario is 'saucy' too (*Twelfth Night*, 1.5.192) — and equally discontinuous. Who, then, does Olivia fall in love with? From her point of view, Cesario begins as a puzzle. This stranger will not take no for an answer, Malvolio reports (1.5.136-46). The steward's account provokes Olivia to a series of questions about her would-be visitor: 'What kind of man is he?', 'What manner of man?', 'Of what personage and years is he?' (147, 149, 152). Not satisfied with the answers, Olivia, who has barred strangers from her court, allows Cesario in — to 'wonder' at him (193).

The wonder deepens as Cesario shifts his mode of address from respectful to cheeky and back again, now courtly (233-7), now teasing the 'giant' Maria about her diminutive stature (199, cf. 2.5.13; 3.2.65). As the scene goes on, Olivia retreats from her initial position of authority in her own house. Intrigued by the figure who at one moment lavishes praise on a beauty he has never seen, and the next admits that he is playing a part he has learnt for the purpose, she dismisses her attendants at his request, reveals her status, and finally lifts her veil to show him her face. 'Is't not well done?', she asks, archly. 'Excellently done, if God did all' (229-30), responds her mischievous interlocutor. 'Painting' was appropriate to whores in the period. Cesario's reply, disarmingly precocious from a boy, would be offensive from another woman.

Olivia's questions continue throughout the scene. Who, or more precisely, *what* is this speaker, capable of intense lyricism in the 'willow cabin' speech (263-9), comically indifferent to the proprieties at other times, and evasive when it comes to personal questions? As the scene goes on, wonder gives way to fascination, and fascination to desire. Olivia falls in love with a mystery, a figure who crosses the gender divide, and escapes the limitations imposed by her culture's assignment of distinct behaviour patterns to different sexes.

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It won't do, of course. At this time marriage was at least as much about progeny and lineage as romantic love. Besides, Viola has already set her heart on Orsino. Mercifully, her male twin has what his sister lacks anatomically (3.4.299-300), and Olivia's story ends happily.

Masquerade

When Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* first appeared in the bookshops, Joan Riviere, a disciple of Freud's, was giving her attention to a real-life case history. Her subject was a new woman, capable, professional, mainly engaged in speaking and writing, which she performed with considerable flair. In private life she was happily married. But she tended to display a curious degree of anxiety after a successful public appearance, going out of her way to seek approval from men, and flirting with them outrageously. She wanted them not only to admire her competence, but also to show that they found her sexy.

What was going on? Riviere interpreted her subject's behaviour as unconsciously designed to ward off the reprisals due to a woman who in the 1920s challenged men on their own ground. She was as good as they were at what she did, and she wanted the men to recognize that. At the same time, she did not want their recognition to make them see her as a threat or an antagonist. And so she moved uneasily between distinct and discontinuous identifications, alternating hyper-femininity and the competence associated at that time primarily with masculinity.

What is most remarkable about this essay, first published in 1929, is that, in accounting for her subject's behaviour, Joan Riviere describes femininity as a 'masquerade'. There is no difference, she urges, between true 'womanliness' and the impersonation of it in performance. Femininity, in other words, is *superficial*.[5]

Plenty of fiction would confirm the view that gender-identifications are acquired. The proposition is hard to test: in life the stereotypical masculine and feminine behaviours are often internalized at such an early age that they seem natural.

What is the relationship between nature and nurture? Science has not resolved the question. Hermaphrodites, intersex babies, Olympic athletes whose hormones or chromosomes do not match their anatomy, and even bisexuality all demonstrate that there is more diversity in heaven and earth than our simple binary oppositions allow. It seems that men *in general* may be better at spatial relations than women, while women *in general* may have better language skills. But nothing in nature seems to make women less competent or more vulnerable, and it would be increasingly hard to find anyone who thinks they are.

Science has not, however, fully caught up with the fiction that for so long has ascribed a potential discontinuity to gender-identifications. Ovid, Virginia Woolf and Shakespeare all in their different ways put in front of us a proposition for discussion. While the majority of us will probably not actually change our sex, whether by magic or surgery, a degree of diversity is not necessarily just for other people. Instead, if many of our gender-behaviours are learnt, we could learn more, without losing any. By this means we could each of us be more diverse, and in the process, paradoxically, more singular, as well as possibly more fascinating, than we currently are.

Notes

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.316-38. Ovid's racy love stories influenced many later writers, especially Shakespeare. There is a Penguin translation by David Raeburn (2004), but the most lyrical version is probably by Charles Martin (New York: Norton, 2004).

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, lines 228, 243-4 (Collected *Poems, 1909-35* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936)).

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 109.

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All Shakespeare references here are to *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London: Thompson, 2001). Any other edition will do just as well, but the scene and line numbers, which are editorial, may vary.

Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', *The Body*, ed. Tiffany Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 110-14. This anthology also includes a number of other accessibly presented discussions of this and related issues.

Further reading

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2004). This classic feminist pamphlet is based on two talks given in 1928.

Anna Tripp ed., *Gender* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). A valuable selection of essays by leading figures, including Joan Riviere's.

Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

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Crossing the Sexual Divide by Catherine Belsey is Number 64 in the Bookmark series, published by

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