

Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without Drag

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for Jack, in memoriam

The Problem

It is generally agreed (though it must be admitted, without much evidence) that women did not play parts on the classical Athenian stage.¹ Instead, all speaking parts in Athenian tragedy and comedy were taken by men. Gender on the stage was matter of highly visible conventions (costuming, masks, probably props like swords or staffs). In addition, male cast members donned costumes consisting of body padding and masks to play female characters, if we can go by the evidence of vase painting. (Conversely, in comedy grossly exaggerated bodily markers were used for male characters. The actors wore large visible phalluses.) For some time modern critics simply ignored this cross-dressing, and historians of Greek theatre wondered aloud about the active, visible, public female characters of Greek drama, particularly in light of the secluded, private, and passive lives led by their “real” counterparts.² Indeed,

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I delivered a very early version of this paper at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association in 1997 and a slightly expanded version at the University of Washington in 1999. Questions from the audience on both occasions helped shape the final essay. I owe a large debt of thanks to the anonymous readers of *Theatre Journal* for many helpful suggestions and criticisms, and for saving me from numerous errors. David Román went far beyond the call as editor of *TJ* in helping me to formulate my ideas and providing much-needed editing of the early draft that I sent him. I would like to thank David particularly for seeing the potential in that draft and encouraging me to continue the project. As always, I alone am responsible for the errors or infelicities that remain. I am dedicating this essay to the memory of John J. (“Jack”) Winkler.

¹ The evidence is summarized and discussed in Nancy Rabinowitz, “Embodying Tragedy: The Sex of the Actor,” *Intertexts* 2 (1998): 3–4, especially n. 5. In general, the only positive evidence comes from pottery on which dramatic companies are depicted, sometimes in partial costume. Interpretation of these figures is open to some debate. I should note that, given what we do know about woman citizens’ public lives in fifth-century Athens, I would be astonished to learn that women were allowed on the public stage.

² A good example, and one which had considerable influence, is A. W. Gomme, “The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries,” *Classical Philology* 20 (1925): 1–25.

Virginia Woolf commented on this schism in a famous passage from *A Room of One's Own*:

Not being a historian, one might go even further and say that women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time—Clytemnestra, Antigone, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Phedre, Cressida, Rosalind, Desdemona, the Duchess of Malfi, among the dramatists. . . . Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact . . . she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room.³

Once feminist critics pointed out, however, that there were no real women on the Athenian stage—only men dressed up as women—a way was seen out of this impasse. There was, as it turns out, no conflict: real life was all about Athenian men, and the Athenian stage was all about Athenian men. In this view, most baldly stated by Sue-Ellen Case, the “women” who appeared on the stage were not women at all, but rather Woman, a “fiction of women created by the patriarchy.”⁴ While this claim is undoubtedly true, the argument fails to interrogate the curious convention of having men play these women’s roles “in drag.” That is, the “women” on stage were men, and the male players may have been perceived as such, but what effect does their drag have? What does it mean to the spectator? And how is it positioned within the ancient Athenian sex/gender system? By not considering these questions, we lose sight of the particular construction of gender that the plays present, and we are left only with the satisfaction of declaring them a product of patriarchy and suggesting that they should be removed from the canon (as Case does).⁵

I intend, rather, to ask the question that Stephen Orgel (and others) have asked of Renaissance English drama: what does the tradition of transvestite theatre in Athens reveal about Athenian notions of gender, and of the mode of representing it on the Athenian stage?⁶ It should come as no real surprise that I find cross-dressing in ancient

³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 44–45. Though Woolf takes on the entire Western tradition of fiction, it is significant that her first examples come from Athenian tragedy. In the course of this paragraph, Woolf also quotes (in a footnote) F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1928), 114–15, where he discusses the contrast between Athenian tragic heroines and women of real life. We learn that in Athens “a respectable woman could hardly show her face alone in the street” and that women were “kept in almost Oriental suppression as Odalisques or drudges.” This passage is cited by David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 208, n. 210.

⁴ The quotation is from Sue-Ellen Case, “Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts,” *Theatre Journal* 37 (1985): 318. This thesis (recast in her *Feminism and Theater* [New York: Methuen, 1988]) has had considerable influence. See especially Nancy Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁵ Stephen Orgel raises a similar objection in his discussion of gender in Renaissance drama: “In this respect, even the most powerful feminist analyses are often in collusion with precisely the patriarchal assumptions they undertake to displace.” *Impersonations: the Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 125.

⁶ The only article I know that addresses this issue directly is Rabinowitz, “Embodying Tragedy: The Sex of the Actor,” 3–25. Lauren Taaffe, “The Illusion of Gender Disguise in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazousae*,” *Helios* 18 (1991): 91–112, provides a nice discussion of comic instances of drag within the dramatic action (that is, visible to the spectators, invisible to those on stage). Significant work on the

tragedy to reveal a fundamentally different set of meanings than modern drag performances do. For, as Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber (among others) have argued, transvestism in modern America is inevitably bound up with notions of homosexuality.⁷ But the Greeks of the classical period did not divide the world of sexual practice into heterosexual and homosexual and, more importantly, did not conceive of individual identity in those terms.⁸ If the Greeks did not share our notion of sexuality, they can hardly have shared our notions of gender, and cross-dressing for the Greeks must have produced a set of meanings different from those produced by modern drag. Here, however, we find that the paucity of evidence from the classical world seriously hampers our investigation. Unlike renaissance England, classical Athens does not supply us with the pamphlets and tracts that provide a rich context for Orgel's study of Elizabethan Drama. We have only the texts of the plays (with no stage directions) from which to work.

I intend to reopen the question of the Athenian transvestite theatre by shifting the focus of attention away from men playing women's parts to a set of issues that has been even more neglected by previous dramatic criticism. In fact, I shall have little to say about the female characters of Athenian drama. Instead, I propose to approach the question of Athenian cross-dressing from a new angle, by looking at a specific set of instances of male gender slippage within the plays. I will examine meanings produced when the tragic heroes who are portrayed on the stage take on, sometimes by their own declaration, aspects of femininity (as Athenian society defined it). This phenomenon is separate from, though clearly related to, the practice of theatrical cross-dressing, for it has to do not with male actors playing female parts but with male characters acquiring a feminine identity—to their shame and disempowerment. This is obviously not the same as the convention, external to the world of the play, of men dressing in body-padding that marks them as female and allows them to play the part of "women." But insofar as the men who are feminized on stage reveal something about what it means for a man to be womanly, they provide us with a possible framework for understanding the phenomenon of Athenian transvestite theatre as a

construction of gender on the Athenian stage has been done, of course. On the importance of women's roles as an "other" for the Greek male imaginary, see especially Froma Zeitlin, "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," in *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, ed. Zeitlin (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 341–74. (Throughout this paper I cite Zeitlin from her 1996 collection of previously published articles, but refer to the articles by their original titles.) Richard Hawley, "The Male Body as Spectacle in Attic Drama," in *Thinking Men: Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, ed. L. Foxhall and J. Salmon (New York: Routledge, 1998), 83–99 has some useful comments on the eroticisation of the male body in tragedy, though he seems uninformed about Greek notions of sexuality (see especially 97). A brilliant discussion of Plato's narrative assumption of a female persona is David M. Halperin, "Why is Diotima a Woman," in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 113–52. On Elizabethan drama, see especially Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations*; D. S. Kastan and P. Stallybrass, ed., *Staging the Renaissance: Essays on Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

⁷ Discussed at length by Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992). See especially chapter 6.

⁸ See discussion and references below. Similarly, Orgel finds that gender is more fluid and less directly implicated in issues of sexuality in Elizabethan drama than it is for us. See *Impersonations*, 13–14, 32–35, 40, 57.

whole. I offer a more carefully nuanced set of categories for understanding male femininity on the Athenian stage and in the Athenian culture generally.

I have chosen deliberately to focus not on the most flamboyant moments of cross-dressing on the Athenian stage, such as in old comedy, but on the relatively tame and canonical tragedies of that most exemplary of tragedians, Sophocles. None of the heroes I have chosen to examine is particularly androgynous, at least not in the world of the play, before the particular moment of cross-gendering that I review.⁹ I will also treat briefly one well-known example from the *Bacchae* of the less conventional tragedian, Euripides, and some passages from the comedies of Aristophanes. I hope these sections will make the implications of my readings of Sophocles clearer.

Lastly, I offer a novel interpretation of Sophocles' the *Oedipus Rex*, a reading that has not been met with general approval. I argue that at the end of this most exemplary of plays the language and the staging suggest a parody of the Athenian wedding procession and that in this parody Oedipus is figured as a bride. I made this suggestion, initially, in my book on marriage in Sophoclean drama, in which I was primarily concerned with the ways that such a mock wedding might serve to solidify particular social identities for Oedipus and Creon.¹⁰ I intend here to revisit that question with two aims: first, I hope that in the context of Sophocles' other feminized male heroes the original suggestion will seem more reasonable; more important, I wish to explore the implications of Oedipus' gender-bending in their own right, as I was not able to do in the earlier argument.

Gender, Sexuality, and Drag

First, a word about gender and sexuality. Why do we assume that modern drag has anything to do with sexuality? After all, it is gender and not sexual orientation that is the primary referent of drag performances. But modern sexuality, as Butler has argued, is not the result of our binary division of gender into masculine and feminine. Rather, this "effect" of gender is, in fact, its cause: "The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female.'"¹¹ If gender is a product of the heterosexual matrix, then similarly the practice of "drag" is inextricable from homosexual signification, despite the fact that transvestism and homosexuality are quite separate phenomena and that most male transvestites are not gay.¹² Modern society, having constructed

⁹ Heracles is famously hyper-masculine and strangely feminine when we analyze his entire mythic tradition. See especially Nicole Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*, tran. P. Wissing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), especially chapter 7. The essay "Herakles: the Supermale and the Feminine" first appeared in English in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma Zeitlin, ed., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, tran. Robert Lamberton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Wissing's translation is "adapted" from that of Lamberton.

¹⁰ Richard Seaford's review of my book found my suggestion "thoroughly implausible," without specifying the reasons for its implausibility (Review of *Exchange and the Maiden: Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy*, *Classical World* 94 [2000]: 87).

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 23.

¹² Garber, *Vested Interests*, 4, 128–32.

sexual identity as a secret subjectivity, needs all the more urgently to be able to see it.¹³ As Garber puts it,

... if there is a difference (between gay and straight) we want to be able to *see* it, and if we see a difference (a man in women's clothes), we want to be able to *interpret* it.¹⁴

One of the ways we interpret cross-dressing is in terms of homosexuality. Whatever transgression against the order of gender men dressed as women may be effecting, we tend to associate such transgression with the order of sexuality as well.¹⁵

Within the world of drama and representation a range of possibilities exists for how convincing the act of cross-gendering is meant to be. On the one hand, we have performances of pure spoof (such as that of Jack Lemmon in *Some Like it Hot*), in which the act of drag is transparent to the external audience, and only convincing to other characters within the dramatic frame. On the other hand, there exists the possibility of fully passing for the other gender (as was done, at least for male heterosexual audiences, by Jaye Davidson in *The Crying Game*). Outside of theatre altogether we find that there are men and women who successfully pass for the other sex on a daily basis. Acts of cross-dressing within this range can also have a more or less subversive effect on heterosexual normativity. In some cases of pure spoof, for example, the character's "real" gender, apparent to everyone outside of the dramatic frame, registers by its very failure the deep authenticity of his or her "true" gender and sexuality. But at times such broadly comic portrayals can issue a challenge to gender binarism, as Garber has argued about Dustin Hoffman's *Tootsie*.¹⁶ Similarly, cases of fully successful gender deception can, as the horrific rape and murder of Brandon Teena implies, challenge and confound the stability of heterosexuality; the fully cross-gendered person may engage in sexual activity with a member of the same sex but opposite gender.

By and large, however, the image that comes to mind when we speak of drag is the performer who adopts a deliberately ambiguous persona. As Garber points out, the goal of much gay drag today is not to pass as the other gender but to destabilize gender and normative sexuality by blurring the lines between them.¹⁷ By doing so the transvestite introduces a "third term" to the supposedly binary structure of gender, and—of some importance to Garber—constitutes "a crisis of category itself."¹⁸ The

¹³ See, for example, Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994); D. A. Miller, "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets," *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays in Victorian Fiction* 14 (1985): 17–38, reprinted in Miller, ed., *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 192–220.

¹⁴ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 130, italics in the original.

¹⁵ As Garber discusses, straight cross-dressing men often have difficulty convincing the public that they are not gay (*ibid.*, 128–31). When the cross-dresser is, or can be taken as, gay as well, he/she becomes even more threatening. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) focuses on gay drag because "female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire" (28).

¹⁶ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 6–9.

¹⁷ See also Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 31.

¹⁸ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 17. Curiously, one of the analogies that Garber uses to articulate the idea of a "third term" is the introduction of a third actor to the Athenian stage, an innovation credited in ancient times to Sophocles. See Garber, *Vested Interests*, 11–12.

effect of such drag is to demonstrate that our understanding of gender is dependent on a stable, normative heterosexuality, and to challenge both normative gender and normative sexuality by calling into question the self-evidence of their interrelation.¹⁹ Not all drag, as Garber discusses, queries the heterosexual norm of society in this way, but it must be admitted that it is this transgressive force of drag that has occupied the attention of critics and public.²⁰

Following the lead of Garber and Butler, scholars dealing with cross-dressing in Athenian culture have tended to see there a “third term,” perhaps due to a desire to read the tragedies as challenging social norms. M. Silveira Cyrino, for example, writes: “In Garber’s terms, Herakles is experiencing a ‘category crisis’; he is negotiating ‘a borderline that becomes permeable’ somewhere in that indistinct liminal space between the poles of male and female.”²¹ But few critics have stepped back to consider the effect of drag within the context of Athenian society, within that society’s indigenous understandings of gender. Is the paradigm of a “third term” applicable to this case, and what, exactly, would such a “third term” destabilize?²² While in fundamental ways the understanding of gender as performative clearly does apply to ancient Greece and Rome, it is important to realize that the notion of gender blurs as a moment of liberation, as a transcending of a repressive regime, is utterly lacking from the world of fifth-century Athens.²³ More important and more fundamental, however, is the fact that whatever moments of crossing gender in fifth-century drama do mean, they do not interact with notions of sexuality in the same way as they do for us.

That is an inevitable, if seldom-drawn, conclusion from the fact that the ancients did not think of men and women as hetero- or homosexuals. In so far as they developed categories of sexual actors, they thought of players as either active or passive, or more precisely, penetrating and penetrated.²⁴ Fully adult men were, if normal, expected to

¹⁹ This was the premise of Kate Bornstein’s stage act, *Hidden: A Gender*, to cite only one well-known example. Bornstein has spoken and written extensively about the difficulty she had in obtaining a sex-change operation from male to female because she is (as a woman) a lesbian. She refers to herself as “the transsexual lesbian playwright.”

²⁰ M. Silveira Cyrino, “Heroes in D(u)ress: Transvestism and Power in the Myths of Heracles and Achilles,” *Arethusa* 31 (1998): 207–10 discusses how *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* presents drag in exactly these terms for a mainstream (straight) American audience. *To Wong Foo* is derivative of the Australian movie, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, which presents the characters’ homosexuality more openly and directly.

²¹ Cyrino, “Heroes in D(u)ress,” 217.

²² Discussions of the construction of gender in tragedy are too numerous to list here. The most immediately relevant are: Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*; Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*; Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Karen Bassi, *Acting Like Men: Gender, Drama and Nostalgia in Ancient Greece* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Laura McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, does recognize that cross dressing does not always challenge the binarism of gender, 139. See also Rabinowitz, “The Sex of the Actor,” 4, 9. Bassi, *Acting Like Men*, is particularly good on the performance of gender in the context of drama; see especially 8, 22–23, 109–13, 197, 215–24. See McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, chapter 6 for a discussion of Old Comedy’s insistence on re-establishing a stable and normative masculinity.

²⁴ The bibliography on this point is now extensive. For my purposes, the most important passages are: Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (New York: MFJ Books, 1989 [1978]), 16, 81–91, 168–70; Michel

play the penetrative role in sex. The sex of the erotic object was unimportant in determining the lover's personal character or social/sexual identity: whether lusting after a boy or a woman, no shame fell on the man merely for desiring or acting on that desire. Even more important, the particular object of a person's desire did not, for the Athenians, implicate that person in an identity, but rather expressed a simple taste or preference.

This is not to say that there were no social rules in the world of sex. On the contrary, for men, the deviant position was to be slave to pleasure in sex, as in other domains of desire. Such enslavement at its most disgraceful extreme could express itself in the enjoyment of being sexually penetrated. To give in to such pleasure was shameful for a man insofar as it indicated both passivity and effeminacy. For an Athenian man, the consequences of acquiring such a reputation could be far-ranging and serious: to play the passive role in sex might be thought to indicate a dangerous passivity in political or military situations as well. Men thought of in this way were subject to constant ridicule, and Aristophanes' comedies bristle with examples of such public humiliation. Even the most powerful men of Athens, such as Cleon and Alcibiades, found themselves attacked in the comedies via such sexual innuendo.²⁵ Furthermore, a man who sought out penetration left himself vulnerable to the possible charge of prostitution, and if convicted of the same, "... forfeited ... his entitlement to take part in the civic and religious life of Athens."²⁶ But again, it is important to note that there is no category of the individual known as a "passive," i.e., no sexual identity. Rather, sexual passivity was one of several possible signs of a failure of masculinity. Even the identity *kinaidos*, a man with a womanly desire to be sexually penetrated, is best understood as a gender deviant rather than a sexual deviant. *Kinaidoi* were open to ridicule and contempt, but our texts indicate that they were capable of desire for women and could play the penetrative role in sex (with women or boys). So they were not sexual deviants in our modern sense but rather gender deviants, threatening to the normative mode of ancient masculinity.²⁷

Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, tran. R. Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985 [1984]), especially 46, 85, 210–11; Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Sexuality*, 5, 15–40, 100–104; John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45–70. A brief, incisive, and useful summary is Halperin's entry, "Homosexuality," in Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, ed., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 720–23. Holt Parker, who spent much of the 1990's refusing to cite Winkler and Halperin, seems to be in full agreement with them, though he only begrudgingly acknowledges their influence. See Holt Parker, "The Myth of the Heterosexual: Anthropology and Sexuality for Classicists," *Arethusa* 34 (2001): 313–62. Richlin, as she claims, anticipated Foucault on this point in her 1983 book, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1983]); however her use of the term "passive homosexual" when she means, simply, "passive" has confused the issue. On this see Craig Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), which is now the finest discussion of the sexual system of Rome. See also Bernadette Brooten, "Paul's Views on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism," in *Immaculate and Powerful*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, Margart R. Mills (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 61–85.

²⁵ E.g., Alcibiades is *euruprokto*s, or "wide assed" at *Acharnians* 716.

²⁶ Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 94.

²⁷ See especially Halperin, "Forgetting Foucault," in *How to Do the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 34–37, where Williams is cited. It was first published as "Forgetting Foucault," *Representations* 63 (1998): 93–120. See also Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, especially 210–11; and Winkler, *Constraints of Desire*, 53–54.

Now, this might seem not so different from our own system, given that modern society tends to characterize gay men as effeminate.²⁸ The point that is often ignored and misunderstood, however, is that gender in ancient Athens is not the handmaiden of sexuality, but is rather the primary mode of signification. Men in fifth-century Athens were supposed to be active militarily, politically, and economically—active in every sense, of which sexual activity is a sometimes relatively unimportant subset. As Halperin put it:

For those inhabitants of the ancient world about whom it is possible to generalize, “sexuality” obviously did not hold the key to the secrets of the human personality. The measure of a free male in Greek society was most often taken not by scrutinizing his sexual constitution but by observing how he fared when tested against other free males in public competition. War (and other agonistic contests), not love, served to reveal the inner man, the stuff a free Greek male was made of. . . . The social body precedes the sexual body.²⁹

In other words, a violation of sexual norms (e.g. desiring the passive role) in ancient Greece did not make a man a “homosexual” (or any other kind of –sexual) but rather a gender deviant, and the forms of that deviance would be presumed to be equally visible, and more important, in the man’s performance in non-sexual arenas.³⁰

This points to an understanding of gender that is fundamentally different from our own, both more significant in a variety of venues and also more flexible. In some ways ancient gender works as modern sexuality does. As much as in our society homosexuality is a source of constant threat to impressionable heterosexuals who are just a bad example away from being “recruited,” the Greeks perceived femininity as a state into which men might accidentally slide. Winkler formulated this most succinctly:

. . . for the ancient world the two sexes are not simply opposite but stand at poles of a continuum which can be transversed. Thus “woman” is not only the opposite of a man; she is also a potentially threatening “internal émigré” of masculine identity. The contrast between hoplite and *kinaidos* is a contrast between manly male and womanly male, and therefore rests on a more fundamental polarity between men and women.³¹

So, to take one tragic example, Oedipus excoriates his two sons as being “like girls” (*hoste parthenoi*) because they stay at home while Antigone and her sister take on the trouble of caring for their aged blind father.³² These two brothers are not exactly pansies in the mythological tradition: they will alternately rule Thebes and eventually lead competing troops in a battle over that city, killing each other in face-to-face combat. In the context of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, they are feminine, which

²⁸ This is not to deny the many venues in which gay men are demonized as brutally hypermasculine; cf. *Pulp Fiction*. But even within these representations, the butch gay man is open to the accusation of effeminacy.

²⁹ Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 36–38.

³⁰ On gender deviance, see especially Maud Gleason, “The Semiotics of Gender: Physiognomy and Self-Fashioning in the Second Century C.E.,” in D. Halperin, J. Winkler, F. Zeitlin, ed., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 389–416; Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, 45–70. The most comprehensive treatment of the subject as it pertains to Rome is now Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, especially 175ff.

³¹ Winkler, *Constraints of Desire*, 50.

³² Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 345. All translations are mine and subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

means that they are likened to girls. In the same passage, they are also compared to Egyptian men who stay at home working the loom while Egyptian women work out-of-doors to provide food for their families (*Oedipus at Colonus* 337–41). In this example, then, the men are feminized, and so likened, without notable change in register, both to girls and to the feminized men of Egypt; gender is recognized as culturally generated and, importantly, produced by behaviors having nothing to do with sex.³³

Women, by contrast, were assumed to be “naturally” passive, sexually as well as socially. Indeed, the passive man’s inability to participate in civic matters finds an immediate parallel in the lives of women, who could not take part in Assembly, appear on their own behalf in court, or conduct significant economic business on their own.³⁴ Perhaps less intuitive is the notion that women, and passive men, were thought of as not having sufficient control over their sexual impulses. Men, that is to say, real men, were supposed to be able to rein in their desire for sex before doing anything too foolish, and especially before squandering their patrimony. The need for this control is expressed in terms of physical health, economic soundness, and political deportment.³⁵ This brief discussion of the interaction of gender and sexual practice allows us the following precise formulation: in the modern world, a straight man avoids feminine gender markers for fear of being thought gay; in fifth-century Athens, an active man (or, simply, a man) avoided the markers of passivity for fear of being thought feminine.

At the same time, we should recognize that Athenian culture ascribed a certain type of power to the feminine and declared particular uneasiness about this power. As Zeitlin showed in a series of articles in the 1980’s, “women” on the tragic stage are particularly adept at imitation or mimesis; femininity, even when adopted by real women, is always a disguise of sorts, and so subject to suspicion.³⁶ Indeed, in Greek myth the first woman, Pandora, is constructed as an image.³⁷ In conjunction with this deep mistrust of feminine identity we find a sense that the successful appropriation of femininity can create a more powerful man. So Heracles, in various myths, dresses up as a woman without losing his hypermasculine strength.³⁸ Similarly, the god Dionysus is described in feminizing terms in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, but with the result that “Dionysus’ effeminacy is a sign of his hidden strength.”³⁹ For men to put on femininity is, first, to appropriate the feminine quality of mimesis and, second, to appropriate and control it in the service of masculinity. It is tempting to read Athenian tragedy as re-enacting this process with each play, as men play women in order to circumscribe

³³ Discussed briefly in Bassi, *Acting Like Men*, 64.

³⁴ The social position of women in fifth-century Athens has been well-documented, starting with Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975). A useful recent discussion is David Schaps, “What was Free about a Free Athenian Woman,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 128 (1998): 161–88.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, tran. R. Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986 [1984]), especially 124–32; Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 35–36, 93; Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 67–68.

³⁶ See especially Zeitlin, “Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazousae*,” 409–16; “Playing the Other,” throughout.

³⁷ Zeitlin gives a good, brief discussion in “Travesties of Gender,” 412.

³⁸ Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*, chapter 7 and especially 129–30.

³⁹ Zeitlin, “Playing the Other,” 342. See also Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*, 4.

women's power within the ritual time and place of the dramatic festival. This becomes, however, a dangerous game: those men who imitate women too successfully in tragedy and comedy are rendered feminine and powerless; Plato, we should note, expressed considerable anxiety in the *Republic* about the need for actors to adopt a feminine part, lest in so doing men learn to be feminine in their civic lives.⁴⁰

How, then, does this change the way we view Greek drama? In the first place, we have to rid our minds of the notion that sexuality is the primary signified of men in women's clothes.⁴¹ As Loraux notes (despite anachronistic terminology), "Greek homosexual behavior . . . is essentially pederastic, and transvestism has little to do with it."⁴² As a corollary to this rule, we should not automatically assume that an instance of cross-dressing, or even of cross-gendering, challenges the binarism of Greek gender. The "feminine man" in Greece may well not constitute a "third term" in the world of Greek gender but merely a position on the Greek gender continuum, thereby confirming that gender, for men as for women, was a spectrum of possibilities, extending between the two poles of masculinity and femininity.⁴³ Second, we need to recognize that the semantic field of gender in ancient Greece is an extraordinarily wide one. For a man to become effeminate, or to say that he has become "womanish" suggests a broad register of possible meanings. As Loraux has it, "An entire range of Greek thought focused on sexual differences . . . much more than on the endless verification of man's active role in the opposition between passive and active."⁴⁴ It is this range of thought that I examine in the rest of this paper.

Cross-gendering and Tragedy

Before turning to the three Sophoclean heroes of my study, I should discuss one aspect of male cross-gendering in tragedy that has seemed to demand a homosexualized interpretation, that of Pentheus in the *Bacchae*. The hero of this play cross-dresses at a critical moment, and this has led to numerous psychological readings of his character, all variously inferring a previously suppressed homosexual identity.⁴⁵ From the beginning of the play, the young king Pentheus is suspicious of the Stranger, a priest of Dionysus (who turns out to be the god himself), and particularly suspicious of him

⁴⁰ See *Republic* 395c–d. Bassi provides a good discussion in *Acting Like Men* (19–21).

⁴¹ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 73 suggests that Attic comedy assumes that a man who is effeminized, by, e.g., the wearing of pretty clothes, "also seeks to play a woman's part sexually in his relation with other men and is sought by them for this purpose." Of course when a man's clothing choice is symptomatic of a more generalized effeminacy, his sexual desires may also come into question. We should also note that Dover is speaking here about fancy clothing, an indication of a taste for luxury, not cross-dressing per se.

⁴² Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*, 128. See Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, chapter 4 and especially 128–30, 135.

⁴³ Loraux in *The Experience of Tiresias* criticizes the notion of inversion precisely because it does not "introduce any break to the binary division of Greek categories" (8).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁴⁵ See especially William Poole, "Male Homosexuality in Euripides," in *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*, ed. Anton Powell (New York: Routledge, 1990), 117–20. A more sophisticated psychological reading can be found in the works of Charles Segal: "The Menace of Dionysus: Sex Roles and Reversals in Euripides' *Bacchae*," *Arethusa* 11 (1978): 185–202; and *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), chapter 6.

because he has attributes of femininity. In lines 451–59, Dionysus is described as having long hair (which is specified as not suitable for wrestling, a markedly masculine activity), fair skin, and a soft body. All of this is implied in contrast to the conventionally masculine Pentheus, who admits of no such softness. The Stranger's attractiveness and smooth gender style arouses misgivings in Pentheus and, as some would have it, also arouses his desire: "You are not without beauty, with respect to your body, at least for women, stranger, which is why you are at Thebes," Pentheus says in 453–54.⁴⁶ Pentheus assumes here that Dionysus' purpose in coming to Thebes is to seduce, and thus to control, the Theban women; the threat of his beauty is, then, not directed toward Pentheus himself. But it has been suggested that the phrase "at least for women" (*hōs es gunaikas*) protests too much.⁴⁷

Later on in the play, Dionysus gains control of Pentheus by compelling him—exactly how is not clear, but there seems to be some divine persuasion at work—to dress in a *peplos*, a woman's garment, in order to pass as a woman. Pentheus' disguise is more than a simple putting on of clothes; once so attired, he becomes inappropriately concerned with his feminine appearance. In line 927 and following, Pentheus worries about a lock of hair out of place, about the hang of his *zone* (an explicitly feminine girdle) and *peplos*. And in this guise, Pentheus, who until now has insisted on a proper and public stance of face-to-face conflict, sneaks off to hide and spy on the Bacchus-inspired women.⁴⁸ It is not difficult to see why critics have read Pentheus here as expressing a latent identity, as a young man too rigidly masculine at the beginning, and so inappropriately feminine in his downfall.⁴⁹

Even so, I would like to pause by challenging the prevailing tendency to read Pentheus' fall as a symptom of repressed homosexual desire. Pentheus is figured in a surprising variety of readings as a modern homophobe, whose anxieties about his own masculinity can be read as symptoms of homosexuality. So Poole declares:

I turn now from these pleasantries to something much deeper. It seems clear to me that Pentheus' downfall in the *Bacchae* is partly brought about by the fact that he finds the Stranger sexually attractive. . . . Dionysus deliberately assumes an oriental and effeminate type of beauty . . . which Euripides appears to have regarded as insidiously corrupting to those who fall under its power, irrespective of their gender . . .⁵⁰

Poole is more direct than most in declaring Pentheus gay (he finally uses the word "homosexual" further down the page), since he is (anachronistically) searching for evidence of homosexuality in Euripides' plays. But a similar structure seems to inform many other standard readings. Thus Segal searches elsewhere in the play for evidence

⁴⁶ Euripides *Bacchae* 453–54. Translations are mine and subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text. Segal in *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* notes that Pentheus is "particularly irritated (and attracted) by the free-flowing and luxuriously soft hair of the Stranger" (174).

⁴⁷ Poole, "Male Homosexuality in Euripides," 118.

⁴⁸ On the ideal of openness in conflict for men, see Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, 23–24, 33–37.

⁴⁹ See Jan Bremmer, "Transvestite Dionysus," in *Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece: Literature, Religion, Society*, ed. Mark Padilla (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1999) for a more socially-oriented reading of the play, responding in part to Segal's psychoanalytic reading. Bremmer is particularly interested in Pentheus as a youth who fails his rite of passage into manhood.

⁵⁰ Poole, "Male Homosexuality in Euripides," 117.

of homosexuality: "... his wrestling and panting with the god-bull in the darkness of his palace [620–21] may have the overtones of a homosexual encounter."⁵¹ As often with such readings, Segal sees Pentheus' supposed sexual identity as a result of his troubled upbringing: "The absence of his biological father seems to reflect something of Pentheus' incomplete or immature grasp of heterosexual union, symbolized perhaps by the Theban autochthony in his boyhood."⁵² Faced with the sensual form of the Stranger, the young king denounces the effeminate Dionysus; and this is read as disguising behavior, an act of repression that reveals his true, intimate, gay nature.⁵³ Such readings, even when subsequent to the work of Foucault, do not realize that if Pentheus' description of Dionysus here expresses a subtextual desire (and that is far from clear), then that would be normal masculine desire for an attractive, boyish man.

Similarly, when critics come to the scene of Pentheus' cross dressing, they liken his feminization to our own structure of sexuality, making it a subconscious reality to be drawn out. For E. R. Dodds, editor of the standard Greek text of the *Bacchae*, this repression takes the form of a refusal to accept the Dionysian element of Greek life, with its tendency toward unbridled sexual desire, luxury, and effeminacy. In Dodds's usually subtle, anthropologically motivated reading, Bacchus will out: "the poet shows us the supernatural attacking the victim's personality at its weakest point—working upon and through nature, not against it. The god wins because he has an ally in the enemy's camp: the persecutor is betrayed by what he would persecute—the Dionysiac longing in himself."⁵⁴ Lest we have any doubt as to what that Dionysiac longing should mean, Dodds earlier quotes Winnington-Ingram (without citation) at the note to lines 453–59 of the play: "the sensual appearance of the Stranger is precisely the form in which Dionysus should and could reveal himself to the suppressed sensuality of Pentheus."⁵⁵ In a similar vein, Rosenmeyer stops just short of calling Pentheus a homosexual, while listing his other forms of perversion: "Abruptly the officer of the State turns into a Peeping Tom. One shout of the god [810] and the manly general becomes a slavish, prurient, reptilian thing, intent on watching from a safe distance what he hopes will be a spectacle to titillate his voyeur's itch."⁵⁶ For modern critics, then, Pentheus' cross dressing is coterminous with his desire for the Stranger, both signifying homosexual deviance.

For the Athenians, however, the point of the two scenes is not their psychological unity, but rather the sharp break in personality that Pentheus' feminization marks. Before he is overcome by the god, Pentheus is the very picture of masculinity: strong, direct, controlling, and (perhaps) desiring. After he is dressed in a *peplos* that character changes. All this is shown on stage through his concern with his appearance and his

⁵¹ Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*, 189. Whether or not there are erotic tones to this passage, its distance from Pentheus' cross-dressing proves my point. We have to look elsewhere in the play for a reference to sexual activity, and there we can only posit the reference in the possible existence of "overtones."

⁵² *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵³ Similarly, Segal speaks of lines 809–11: "Dionysus' speech proves Pentheus' hidden desires. . . ." *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵⁴ E. R. Dodds, ed., *Euripides' Bacchae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 172.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵⁶ Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "Tragedy and Religion: The *Bacchae*," in *Euripides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Erich Segal (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 167.

willingness to resort to feminine tricks (hiding, spying) rather than masculine confrontation. Contrary to modern readings, the text presents no reason to read Pentheus' moment of cross-dressing in terms of a hidden feminine sensuality, let alone latent homosexual desire.

In fact, Dionysus' triumph over Pentheus is expressed not in terms of the hero's emerging or uncontrollable desire, but in terms of his public humiliation as feminine: "I want him to be laughed at by the Thebans, led with a woman's form through the city, after his earlier boasts, with which he was so terrible" (854–56). This punishment, it is worth noting, is exactly what Medea declares she cannot tolerate in the *Medea*: "Do I want to be laughed at, releasing my enemies unpunished?"⁵⁷ The phrase I have translated "be laughed at" is literally "incur laughter" (*gelota ophlein*), and is identical in the Greek in both passages. Laughter of this sort is, from Homer on, an expression of social shaming.

Rather than seeing an emergence of a latent homosexual identity, I posit that Pentheus' feminization is the primary vehicle and onstage expression of his downfall. Having started the play as the fully masculine ruler of Thebes, he is dressed as a woman, concerned with his appearance, rendered passively powerless before the god, and the object of a derisive gaze from the Theban public. This last is particularly important in the context of Athens; Athenian political life was fundamentally public, and to be the object of the ridicule of one's neighbors was a profound disgrace. More directly, Pentheus is no longer in charge, stripped of his masculine status, and will ultimately be torn to pieces by a band of divinely inspired women. It is only our own construction of homosexuality that links this passivity to his earlier description of Dionysus, with its (perhaps) muted sensual undertones. Nor is Pentheus' passivity described in sexual terms: we must remember that sexual passivity is only one aspect feminine characterization in the culture at large, and it is never mentioned or even implied in this passage. In sum, when Pentheus desires Dionysus, he is masculine, not feminine; and when he is feminized, he expresses no desire, sexual or otherwise, for Dionysus. It is the totality of his fall from power that motivates a reversal of gender, which is for the Athenians a powerful expression of Pentheus' undoing. Pentheus is rendered socially passive by the god: controlled rather than controlling, viewed rather than viewing, powerless, helpless, a victim—but not a pervert.

What, then, of the Sophoclean heroes? It is a curious and, it seems, largely undiscussed fact that in at least two and possibly three of the seven extant tragedies of Sophocles, the main hero is feminized at the end of the play. In two of the cases I discuss, the hero's cross-gendering is already accepted by the scholarly community—though little theorized—and indeed explicit in the text. The third is, so far, still speculative. I believe that, at the end of the *Oedipus Rex*, when Oedipus and Creon walk back into the doors that represent the royal house, the audience sees a spectacle that mirrors traditional imagery of an Athenian wedding, suggesting a reading of Creon as the groom and Oedipus the bride. Now, that is an unprecedented interpretation of the *Oedipus Rex*, and I will support it with philological and textual evidence. Before I do so, I will prepare my reading by examining the cases of Ajax (in the *Ajax*)

⁵⁷ Euripides *Medea* 1049–50. All translations are mine and subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

and Heracles (in the *Trachiniae*). I want to tease out some of the different meanings that gender inversion apparently had for the ancient Athenians. We will see echoes of these conventions of inversion when we turn to the case of Oedipus.

All of my readings, like the brief treatment of Pentheus above, will reveal a notion of gender that is expressed in non-sexual terms. What is interesting about these examples and one might add, typically Athenian, is the way in which they depict a tragic downfall in terms of a gender inversion. That is, the structure of the tragedies is to take a character who is at the height of his social, political, and economic power and reverse his position in each of those structures. It is this fall from power (in every sense) that the plays signify by means of a suggested gender inversion, and it is the combination of political inversion with gender inversion that makes the latter so powerful in the course of the drama.

First let me turn to the *Ajax*. This is, in many ways, the most textually difficult of the passages we have to consider. Just previous to the dramatic action, Ajax, one of the great heroes of the Trojan war, goes mad. In the course of his madness, he tries to kill his fellow Greek commanders, but as a function of his madness, as I take it, he fails to recognize who or what he is attacking and instead slays a flock of sheep. The play then centers on the discovery of Ajax after the slaughter, his attempts to deal with his disgrace, and his onstage suicide and its aftermath.

A little more than midway through the play, Ajax makes a surprising, even shocking speech. Just moments before, his bedmate Tecmessa had asked him to “soften,” and Ajax had replied, “You seem to think like a fool, if you plan to educate my nature (*ethos*) just now.”⁵⁸ But then, after the choral interlude, Ajax announces that he has changed his mind, that he must soften, learn to be more flexible. As it turns out, Ajax will not behave as this speech suggests that he will; rather, once everyone else is off the stage, he delivers a monologue declaring his inability to change and kills himself in full view of the audience. As a result, the speech I will discuss has been dubbed the “deception speech,” and Ajax’ intentions here have been the subject of endless debate.⁵⁹ I do not intend to solve this problem here. I will state baldly that I side with most scholars in believing that Ajax’s words are on some level ironic, and that the function of the speech is to lull Tecmessa and the Chorus into a state of complacency so that Ajax can get on with the business of killing himself.

The crucial words for my purposes come when Ajax declares:

For even I, who once was terribly powerful,
like iron by dipping, am become womanish in my mouth [sword?]⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Sophocles *Ajax* 594–95. All translations are mine and subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

⁵⁹ Interested readers can find references to the debate in Kirk Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden: Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 187, n. 23. I find Gregory Crane, “Ajax, the Unexpected, and the Deception Speech,” *Classical Philology* 85 (1990): 89–101 and Mary Whitlock-Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 82–83 particularly helpful.

⁶⁰ The word *stoma* can mean mouth or sword, an ambiguity that does not particularly concern me in this essay. I prefer to think that the immediate reference is to Ajax’s speech (and so I prefer the translation “mouth”).

because of this woman. For I pity to leave her,
widowed among enemies, and the child orphaned.

[650–54]

The critical word is *etheluthen*, “made womanish,” in 651. It is not a common word, and we are especially surprised to find it applied to the most manly of heroes, Ajax. As Gregory Crane has observed, the term cannot be complimentary here.⁶¹ What does it mean, in context?

I have given a deliberately vague translation of the construction of *pros tede tes gunaikos*, “because of this woman” (653). In a stronger sense, the construction of *pros* plus the genitive allows the possibility that Ajax has been made womanish by Tecmessa and not just because of her. In other words, he has given in to her appeal fifty lines earlier and has softened. And so his pity—expressed here for the first time in the play—can be taken as a change of character. Gone is the familiar Ajax who will not yield; here femininity is marked as a willingness to give in and, perhaps, to be governed by the softer value of pity rather than the manly code of honor and fame.⁶² But of course it is more than that.

For Ajax, characterized as the “wall of the Achaeans” in Homer, to give in to a woman is necessarily a form of self-abasement. He has resolutely refused in this play to be governed by anyone, least of all a woman. It is in this drama, famously, that Tecmessa records Ajax’s earlier reproach:

But he said to me that oft-spoken little saying,
“Woman, silence brings decoration to a woman.”
And I, having learned, left off while he went out alone.

[292–94]

Here, then, we are forced to hear Ajax’s speech with ironic overtones.

Though Ajax presents his change of heart as a good thing—the final word of the speech indicates that he will be *sesomenos*, saved—it is further difficult to read lines 677–82 in a positive light:

How should we not learn to be temperate?
I will, at least. For I have just learned
that I should hate my enemy just so far,
as far as one whom I will love later; and that I should plan to help my friend,
undertaking as much as for one who will not remain a friend.

We see here a remarkable redefinition of Athenian moral terminology. Ajax says that he must learn to be “temperate” (*sophronein*). In most contexts, this would be a laudable goal, and not an unmasculine one; for men, the trait of temperance (the noun form of the word is *sophrosyne*) generally indicates self-control of the sort that is assumed of men. But here, a few lines later, we discover that what Ajax means by “temperance” is closer to “prudence,” that he should treat his friendships as shift,

⁶¹ Crane, “Ajax, the Unexpected,” 95, n. 11.

⁶² Bernard Knox argues that Ajax here represents a heroic ideal that is not suited to the modern world (“The Ajax of Sophocles,” in *Sophocles*, ed. T. Woodard [New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966], 31).

purely matters of convenience and circumstance, rather than rooted in principle. Self-control has become, in Ajax's speech, pure opportunism.

This redefinition is the undoing of all that Ajax has stood for, of his basic ethical stance, as Blundell has argued.⁶³ When he loses the ability to rely on his relations to others, "he has been reduced to *dolos* [trickery], the weapon of women and weaklings . . ." ⁶⁴ Thus Crane (among others) suggests that the entire speech should be understood as a series of *adunata*, the miraculous instantiation of impossible events, and Ajax's reversal of character is just the crowning item on this list of impossibilities. Ajax's new flexibility is the opposite of the form of manly heroism that Ajax has formerly exemplified, a heroism that sees friendship among nobles as absolute, unshakable, and indeed natural.

In the event, of course, Ajax is not saved, and whatever is his intent in this speech, his listeners are here deceived.⁶⁵ Once Tecmessa and the Chorus leave the stage, he occupies the dramatic space alone and, unparalleled in any Greek tragedy that we know of, kills himself. Zeitlin sees his suicide as feminizing, primarily on the argument that usually women commit suicide.⁶⁶ Ajax, however, commits suicide in a manly way (falling on his sword),⁶⁷ and his final monologue is quite unlike the last speeches of Sophocles' female suicides. Sophoclean heroines generally signal their offstage suicides by reflecting, one last time, on their marriage and children. Ajax, by contrast, recalls his connection to his brother and parents, then to the earth and the sun. He seems primarily interested in preserving his heroic fame and honor.⁶⁸ So once this speech is over, it would appear that Ajax is not actually feminized; he just pretends to be. Even so, we are able to suggest what that feminization would mean for him: a form of self-abasement, an adoption of a more flexible approach to the world around him, and a concern for his personal relationship with a woman.

I will leave Ajax' feminization with one last observation, borrowed from Zeitlin. She notes that deception in tragedy is generally a female trait, linked to the female capability for mimesis:

Thus, the deceptive speech makes sense as a feminine strategy enlisted in the service of restoring an unequivocal manliness he can only achieve . . . by dying the manly death—heroically and publicly on stage—in the woman's way.⁶⁹

To the extent that this is a "deception speech," then, Ajax may be telling the truth when he says that he has become womanish. This involves us in a curiously abstract understanding of his gender inversion, however. He is feminine, in that he is deceiving those around him. The point of his deception, however, is to suggest (falsely) that he is softer, kinder, more feminine; his feminization is, therefore, true in

⁶³ Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies*, 82–86.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁵ Blundell points out that he is, in many ways, better off after the suicide and has been saved from degradation, compromise, time, and change (*ibid.*, 86).

⁶⁶ Zeitlin, "Playing the Other," 360.

⁶⁷ Nicole Loraux sees Ajax's death as manly, that of a hoplite (*Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, tran. A. Forster [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987], 12, 19–20).

⁶⁸ See Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden*, 158–59.

⁶⁹ Zeitlin, "Playing the Other," 360.

a performative sense. No character within the play comments on Ajax's deception; but for the audience outside the play, Ajax enacts his proclaimed femininity when he resorts to trickery. Femininity becomes a disguise that Ajax puts on so that he can clear the stage for his masculine suicide.

We turn now to the *Trachiniae*, whose hero Heracles has been the subject of a fundamental study on the masculine appropriation of femininity by Loraux.⁷⁰ Skipping over most of the details of the plot, the moment that concerns us is Heracles' entrance, roughly two-thirds of the way through the play. He is wearing a robe—a *peplos* as mentioned five times in the play—that his wife Deianeira has given him.⁷¹ Deianeira has imbued the robe with what she wrongly thought was a love charm and what turned out to be the ancient equivalent of hydrochloric acid.⁷² Consequently, when Heracles arrives on stage, his body irrevocably stuck to the robe that is slowly eating him away, he is in a good deal of pain and near death.

Athenian theatre convention again comes into play here. Greek tragedies were written in verse, but the metrical form of the verse changed from scene to scene. Everyday dialogue was written in iambic trimeter (actually six iambs as they are counted in English poetry). The chorus generally sings in more complex and flexible lyric meters. Occasionally characters will also speak—or cry out—in lyric meters, and such instances suggest heightened emotions. In this scene, Heracles initially wails away in anapests and dochmiacs, metrical figures that conventionally signal a highly overwrought state.⁷³ Then, at lines 1046 and following, he describes his reaction to the poison in the regular trimeters of character-speech. Again, the robe's effect on him is expressed in terms of gender-inversion:

Pity me,
I who am pitiable to many, crying out like a girl.
Nobody would say that they saw me
Doing this, before now,
but always I have held myself without groaning in the face of evils.
But now, alas, from such a thing I am discovered female.
[To his son, Hyllus]
And now, come, stand by your father
and consider under what fortunes I have suffered these things.
For I will show you them under my cloak.
Look, all of you, consider my miserable form,
gaze on wretched me, how I am pitiable.

[1070–80]

We learn that he is discovered female (*thelus*), and more importantly, that he is crying like a girl, *parthenos*. There are several things going on here: one, obviously, is a notion

⁷⁰ "Herakles: The Supermale and the Feminine," which appears as chapter 7 in Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*.

⁷¹ *Trachiniae* 602, 613, 674, 758, 774, noted by Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*, 130.

⁷² The substance is erotically overdetermined; it is the blood of the Hydra, taken from the wound of the Centaur Nessos, whom Heracles shot with a poisoned arrow when Nessos was trying to rape Deianeira.

⁷³ Cassandra speaks in dochmiacs in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* as she foretells the death of Agamemnon and herself at the hands of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife. The Chorus speaks in dochmiacs while Medea is killing her children offstage in Euripides' *Medea*.

of simple inversion. Heracles thinks at this point that he has been killed by Deianeira (intentionally), and he can hardly believe it. Just a few lines earlier he despaired of the fact that his killer was “a woman, being female, and not manly in nature/ alone she killed me, without a sword!” (1062–63). The piling-up of expressions that mean female in these lines indicates Heracles’ difficulty understanding this circumstance and point to why he is so befuddled. Gender in ancient Greece is fundamentally a structure of dominance (male over female), and for Heracles to have lost this external battle suggests a personal one as well. As I discussed earlier, the feminine is not just the opposite of masculine, but it is also always a potential state that a man may slip into, by losing control over his own body and desires. Here Heracles has been destroyed by a woman, but more than that he has lost the ability to control his own reactions to physical pain. Having been killed by a woman, he might as well be one.

Implicit in that inversion, Heracles is experiencing a form of abasement not unlike that which threatened Ajax. Like Ajax, he has been worsted by a woman, rendering him an object of pity. This pity stems from his overwhelming pain, a pain that is manifest to the audience both in his onstage wailings and the reactions of those around him. This agony, as Zeitlin argues, is necessarily feminizing because of the lack of control over the body that it produces: “at those moments when a male finds himself in a condition of weakness, he too becomes acutely aware that he has a body. Then, at the limits of pain, is when he perceives himself to be most like a woman.”⁷⁴ Femininity is a site, as Loraux has argued as well, for bodily pain, and particularly so in the hero’s body, at that limit where he finds that he is no longer the master of himself.⁷⁵

We can, however, be more specific about the form of Heracles’ femininity. This entire scene is shot through with language that calls to mind the Greek wedding ceremony. To start, Heracles is not just feminine here; he calls himself a *parthenos*, the standard Athenian word for a young woman of marriageable age. (It is sometimes translated “virgin,” but a woman may be considered a *parthenos* even after she has experienced sex.)⁷⁶ Next, there seems to be a reference to the *anakalupteria*, or “unveiling” that is a critical part of the wedding ceremony when Heracles offers to show his son what is “under the veil” (*ek kalummaton*) in line 1078.⁷⁷ Heracles’ mad ravings suggest a wedding, with Heracles in the starring role as bride. We might further note that in line 986 Heracles says that he is suffering from *odunai*, a word that typically means “labor pangs,” and that Deianeira has applied earlier to her marriage

⁷⁴ Zeitlin, “Playing the Other,” 350.

⁷⁵ Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*, 29–34, 39–42, 122.

⁷⁶ Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, tran. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 87–90. As Anne Hanson has shown, however, the medical texts of ancient Athens do view a young girl’s uterus as “closed” until her first sexual encounter, and her loss of virginity (in these terms) is the change of state from *parthenos* to *gyne* (“woman,” or “wife”). See Anne Hanson, “The Medical Writers’ Woman,” in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma Zeitlin, ed., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 324–30.

⁷⁷ Richard Seaford, “Wedding Ritual and Textual Criticism in Sophocles’ ‘Women of Trachis,’” *Hermes* 114 (1986): 57. See also Kirk Ormand, “*Trachiniae* 1055ff.: More Wedding Imagery,” *Mnemosyne* 67 (1993): 224–27, and the fine response by Dora Pozzi, “Deianeira’s Robe: Diction in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*,” *Mnemosyne* 47 (1994): 577–85. The time and place of the ritual of unveiling (*anakalupteria*) is the subject of some debate. See especially Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 93–99.

to Heracles, and to Iole's abduction by him.⁷⁸ All of this opens up the possibility that Heracles' suffering here is modeled on the subjective experience of the young woman in marriage, generally characterized by her separation from her natal family and sense of alienation from her girlhood self.⁷⁹ (Iole, for comparison, is abducted by Heracles after he has killed her father and brothers and razed their city; these are her *odunai*). Heracles experiences not just pain in this scene, but *odunai*, a feminine pain that separates the hero from his masculine self and renders him powerless.

Some critics, in reading this scene, have been unable to resist the urge to heterosexualize gender. Hawley, for example, has seen Heracles' repeated invitation to look at his tattered body as creating a specular economy of desire.⁸⁰ He goes so far as to suggest that "The strong Heracles in *Women of Trachis*, or the youthful Hippolytos, can become safe objects of a gaze which may verge on the erotic because they are dying."⁸¹ Like the readings of Pentheus that psychologize him as a homosexual pervert, Hawley here assumes that femininity implies sexuality and reads eroticism where the text presents none. Heracles rants about his own femininity, and we may be able to see, in his performance on stage, his lack of masculine control. All this is a matter of primary signification. But the vocabulary of the scene is not erotic; despite the bridal imagery in the passage just discussed, his gender-inversion is expressed simply in terms of self-mastery or, here, lack of it.

Now we turn to my third and most controversial example from tragedy, the end of the *Oedipus Rex*. I have already given away the game, by suggesting that we read Creon and Oedipus' return to the house as suggestive of a wedding procession.⁸² (I presume the reader's familiarity with the basic plot of this most famous of ancient tragedies). It is, of course, a problem that Creon and Oedipus reenter the house together at the end of the drama.⁸³ Earlier in the play, when Oedipus was in charge, he gave explicit directions about what should be done to the killer of Laius once identified: he should be expelled from Thebes. Indeed, that is the point of the oracle that Creon brings back from Delphi. The killer of Laius is pollution and is responsible for the massive perversion of fertility that has befallen the city. In the final scene of the play, Oedipus asks three times to be thrown outside the confines of the city or allowed to die; each time, Creon puts him off, finally replying that Oedipus' future is up to god (1435–45). Now, at the end of the play, the source of that pollution is not only welcomed, but indeed forced back into the house from which he should be expelled (1515–16). In 1962, William Calder III proposed a novel solution to this problem:

⁷⁸ See Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*, 40 for the typically feminine nature of Heracles' *ponos* ("pain, toils") in this passage.

⁷⁹ Examples are too numerous to list. See especially Medea's complaint at *Medea* 232 and following; the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, throughout. The alienation of the bride from all of her social contacts is one of the central theses of Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden*, especially chapters 2–4. Segal has suggested that, in the course of the play, Heracles gets to play every role in a typical wedding: husband to Deianeira, father of the bride (and groom) in the predicted marriage of Hyllus and Iole, and bride in the scene here. Charles Segal, "Time, Oracles, and Marriage in the *Trachiniae*," *Lexis* 9–10 (1992): 63–91.

⁸⁰ Hawley, "The Male Body as Spectacle in Attic Drama," 86–87, 97.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸² For my earlier discussion of this interpretation, see Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden*, 148–49.

⁸³ See George Gellie, "The Last Scene of the *Oedipus Rex*," *Ramus* 15 (1996): 41, n. 8.

Oedipus does not return to the house with Creon.⁸⁴ But only a few scholars have accepted this reading, which runs counter to Creon's pronouncements, and I take it as a given that Oedipus does return to the royal house and remain in the city of Thebes.

How does this come about? To begin, we need to recognize that the balance of power shifts drastically in this scene. Oedipus, whose active character has been so well described by Knox,⁸⁵ now must give way to the wishes of Creon. It seems, however, that power is never far in ancient Athens from some expression of gender. When Creon addresses Oedipus in this last scene, he speaks as a respectable father might speak to a young unmarried woman. He speaks specifically of Oedipus' *aidos*, shame, and suggests that it is inappropriate for him to be out-of-doors.⁸⁶

But lest you bring shame to the race of mortals,
have respect for the flame of King Helios, [i.e., the sun]
which nourishes everything. Be ashamed to show such pollution
uncovered, which neither the earth
nor the holy rain, nor the light will accept favorably.
[to servants]
Escort him into the house as quickly as possible.
For it is correctly reverent for only those within the family (*genos*)
To see and hear family troubles.

[1424–31]

Of course, decent young women are not supposed to be out of doors specifically because they are potential victims of rape, seduction, and malicious gossip. They are figured as fertile, unprotected, and, paradoxically, therefore dangerous when uncontrolled. Ideally, they have contact only with people within their larger familial group, or *genos*. Oedipus, here, is an inverted mirror of that set of associations. Despite having attained the height of manly power and prestige as King of Thebes, he now represents, as a man who has committed incest, a source of pollution and, particularly, pollution of fertility. And indeed, this has been the issue from the very beginning of the play. Because of the pollution in Thebes,

[The city is] wasting away with the fruit-bearing crops of earth,
wasting away with herds of grazing oxen,
with the unborn children of women.

[25–27]

So, too, now at the end of the play, Oedipus threatens not only a general sense of what is proper but also the divine rain, earth, and light, which nourish everything—the three elements that are required for the growth of crops for generalized fertility.⁸⁷

But what exactly is the source of Oedipus' pollution? Though the chorus earlier expressed shock and outrage at the fact of his incest (1207–13), Creon here calls

⁸⁴ William Calder III, "Oedipus Rex, 1515–1530," *Classical Philology* 57 (1962): 219–29.

⁸⁵ Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

⁸⁶ For comparison, consider Sophocles' *Electra*, 516–18. Similarly, at the beginning of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Antigone feels a need to justify calling her sister Ismene out of doors to discuss Creon's edict (18–19).

⁸⁷ On the association of young women with the fertility of fields, see especially Page duBois, *Sowing the Body* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 65–86.

attention to his face, with the grim and bloody fact of his mutilated eyes. Oedipus is particularly polluting and also shameful because his face is uncovered (*akaluptos*, 1427). We might well wonder at this; would it be acceptable to Creon if Oedipus were to appear *kaluptos* (veiled)? That suggestion seems unlikely, and it points to the importance of Creon's choice of words. The adjective is extremely rare—the standard Greek lexicon lists only this line for the fifth century. I have argued earlier that the word reminds us of the *anakalupteria* ("unveiling") of a young bride.⁸⁸

The *anakalupteria* appears to be a critical moment in the wedding ceremony.⁸⁹ Having made the procession to their new house, the bride and groom stand face-to-face while the groom lifts his bride's veil. It is a moment of familial recognition and acceptance; gifts are given at the time, and these gifts may be "adduced in court as evidence that a woman [is] . . . actually married."⁹⁰ At the same time, there is a strong association in Greek literature between a woman's veil and her sexual purity; to lift a woman's veil implies acceptance into the husband's household and makes her sexual purity the responsibility of the husband as well as the men of her new family.⁹¹ By lifting the veil, the groom figuratively takes charge of her sexual life. What does it mean, then, that Oedipus is *akaluptos*? In this regard Oedipus is exactly parallel to Heracles in the *Trachiniae*, who declared his intent to show us his body *ek kalummaton* (*Trachiniae* 1078). Both men are rendered "brides" by the need to be covered, and both become a gruesome parody of the typical *parthenos* in revealing their corrupted bodily states.

Oedipus' feminization, moreover, is similar to Heracles' in that it arrives concurrent with unbearable bodily pain. And though Oedipus does not display the same lack of personal control that Heracles does, we are struck by the fact that this mutilated face—as pointed out by Creon—has become a spectacle. For these heroes, to have a body, a body that is looked at, unprotected from the curious gaze of the world, is to be womanish and inappropriately public.⁹² It is perhaps further significant that both of these heroes desire to uncover themselves; unlike the brides that they parody, they are not so much objects of an erotic gaze as they are feminized subjects of a grotesque, inappropriate self-display. More than that, Oedipus' feminization renders him a source of pollution, something that needs to be contained and controlled, something that should not be wandering around *akaluptos*. Here the structure of marriage comes into play. Just as dangerous *parthenoi* (girls) are socialized—and controlled—through marriage, the logical thing to do is to lead Oedipus into the house where he can be

⁸⁸ Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden*, 149.

⁸⁹ On the ritual, see Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 93–99. On the pots that depict the *anakalupteria*, see John Oakley and Rebecca Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 25–26.

⁹⁰ Oakley and Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*, 25.

⁹¹ Penelope in the *Odyssey* is, therefore, careful never to show herself to the suitors without a veil. Similarly, when Andromache hears that her husband Hector is dead in the *Iliad*, she faints and throws off her veil (22.467–72). Seth Schein comments, "This is a gesture which symbolizes both the end of her marriage and, to the extent that her identity is bound up with Hektor, the end of her life . . . because the word for veil . . . can denote both a woman's chastity and the tower of a city, the loss of her veil suggests both the sexual violation of Andromache and the final destruction of Troy" (*The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 176).

⁹² See Hawley, "The Male Body as Spectacle in Attic Drama," 89.

secluded. So Creon ends his order to the servants with a strong emphasis on the familial nature of Oedipus' difficulties (*ta eggene kaka*, "family troubles") and presents the *genos* as a closed circle within which those troubles can be contained.⁹³

If Creon's role sounds a bit like that of a *paterfamilias*, however, we should recall that what is at stake is also a relation of political and public power. Though Oedipus does not enter the house when Creon first orders it (1431), he does exit the stage—probably into the house—under the leadership of Creon (1521). Creon's last words (and possibly the last words of the play) are: "Do not try to be master of everything. For those things which you ruled have not followed you into this life" (1522–23). Creon is King now, and he is calling the shots. His language expresses and reinforces this dominance. He denies that Oedipus is fit any longer to "master" (*kratein*) and rule everything as he did before. That is, Creon intends to redefine Oedipus' relation to the world (everything, *panta*) around them, and he does so by defining Oedipus as master of nothing.

But Creon is assuming authority on somewhat shaky ground; Oedipus does have sons, whom he regards as old enough to take care of themselves (1459–61). Presumably they could inherit the kingship, as indeed they had in the "prehistory" to Sophocles' earlier play, the *Antigone*. Creon is bolstered here, however, by the structure of gender implicit in Oedipus' feminization.⁹⁴ By leading Oedipus the Queen into the house, he secures his position as leader of the head family of Thebes. It might be argued that this is a curious transition of power, since in Athens lines of descent are generally patrilineal. But Creon here assumes power in exactly the same way that Oedipus did: Oedipus, having arrived in Thebes after the death of Laius, both assumed the royal throne and married the former king's wife, and thus the kingship passes, in the perverted world of Thebes, through the queen.

Although we have no stage directions for any ancient tragedy, it is worth pausing for a moment to speculate on the possible iconographic qualities of this scene. There are a large number of pots from ancient Athens depicting various moments of the wedding. One of the more popular scenes depicts the moment when the groom leads the bride toward their new home in the wedding procession. The pots that depict this moment universally indicate the scene by showing the groom and bride in a position that has become known as *cheir' epi karpo* (literally "hand on wrist"). The groom, in the lead, holds his bride by the wrist and leads her forward, often looking backward directly at her face in what has been taken as a reassuring glance.⁹⁵ Going back to the play, we know that Oedipus is blind. It seems to me only a small presumption to have Creon take him by the wrist and lead as they walk together into the house. If directed

⁹³ Similarly in the *Ajax*, Tecmessa suggests that only she should see the mutilated body of Ajax (915–19) and declares that she will cover (*kalupso*) him.

⁹⁴ Gellie, "The Last Scene," 40 suggests, "He is now the man in authority, but he is still Creon—kind, anxious, incapable."

⁹⁵ For a useful discussion of the *cheir' epi karpo* scenes, see Oakley and Sinos, *The Athenian Wedding*, 32, 45. For examples see their figures 85, 87, 97, 106, 118. See also Keith DeVries, "The Frigid Eromenoi and their Wooers Revisited: A Closer Look at Greek Homosexuality in Vase Painting," in *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 14–24. DeVries shows definitively that the *cheir' epi karpo* gesture does not indicate hostility or abduction and is better interpreted as an affectionate gesture.

in this manner, the scene would correspond to a popular iconography of the Athenian wedding procession and could be immediately recognizable as such.

I suggest that as a concluding moment for the play, we are reminded of a wedding ceremony, which creates several mutually supporting effects. As groom, Creon is clearly in charge in the scene, and Oedipus as bride is rendered powerless; as the husband of the person who until recently ruled, Creon assumes the throne quasi-legitimately (much as Oedipus did before him). And disturbing as we may find it to watch Oedipus walk back into the royal house of Thebes, the implied wedding metaphorically provides a social structure for containing his pollution—the domesticated position of the young bride entering the household that will control her access to public life.

Gender, as I read it in this play, is not exactly what we expect. Some aspects are familiar: it is a structure of dominance and control that expresses the relationship between Creon and Oedipus. At the same time, it is more than that. Oedipus' femininization is also an expression of his internal status, of the way that he must now begin to view the world. As Creon says, "Do not seek to be master of everything" (1522). His is now the experience of living in a world without power, of being led around by those over whom he formerly exerted authority. Part of this, moreover, is Oedipus' danger as a source of pollution, as a source of potential shame to his relatives, which must be contained because he does not have the ability to control himself. Again, power is the signified; gender is the mere signifier. The gender reversal that accompanies Oedipus' fall, the cross-gendering of Oedipus if you will, poses no challenge to the stability of gender and does not transgress the gender order; it confirms it. It consolidates the normal Greek gender dispensation and confirms that that order is more slippery and in some ways more subtly nuanced than our own.

Sex and the Well-dressed Comic Hero

I suggested at the beginning of this essay that my study of Sophoclean cross-gendered heroes would provide a framework for understanding Athenian transvestite theatre. Let us now return briefly to an examination of the conventions of that theatre. In a fundamental sense, Sue-Ellen Case is correct: there are no women on the Athenian stage. We should not assume, moreover, that men playing women's parts were thought of as feminized. In considering the forms of signification commanded by the theatre, we need to remember that the stage provides conventions for representing femininity that would not apply in real life. Such conventions—body padding being the most obvious example—serve a double function: they allow the audience to suspend judgment on the sex of the actor, and they allow the actor to portray the female sex without fully taking the risk of adopting the other gender. The point is not to portray femininity but to portray a female character—representation of femininity, not imitation of it.

How, then, did the Athenians represent femininity? We have no sure evidence on this matter, aside from a few pots depicting the body pads and masks that actors evidently wore in order to represent women.⁹⁶ While not conclusive, the pottery evidence seems to indicate the stability of the actors' real gender beneath the costume;

⁹⁶ Rabinowitz, "Embodying Tragedy," 4–6. See also Taaffe, "The Illusion of Gender," 97; McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, 18–19.

on a pot in Amsterdam, the men who are suiting up to play women's parts are depicted with full beards.⁹⁷ (A full beard is a common sign for adult masculinity on Attic pots.)⁹⁸ We do not know for certain if the actors modulated their voices to a higher register, though this is of course possible.⁹⁹ The use of masks by all characters (male and female) may, as Taaffe suggests, have allowed for a "believable convention" of female roles played by men.¹⁰⁰ That is, the audience may have been able to enter into a suspension of disbelief and simply accept the men on stage as adequately representing women.

In a more specific vein, McClure has recently shown that women's parts in comedy as well as tragedy encompass specific "verbal genres" of speech.¹⁰¹ Women, more than men, are associated with lamentation, ritual obscenity (*aischrologia*), female rituals of maturation, gossip or "babbling," and seduction. These types of speech are not exclusively reserved for women on stage, although some specific words are used only by (or of) women speakers. On the whole it appears that these conventions serve to define speech marked as feminine and, as such, suggest a set of rules by which men can represent women within the conventions of the stage.

The evidence of old comedy is also of some use here, as it concerns itself generally with the unmasking of stage convention, and in several plays specifically with the convention of theatrical cross-dressing. In Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae* and *Ecclesiazousae* we have instances of double- and triple-cross dressing. In the *Thesmophoriazousae*, Euripides' kinsman dresses as a woman—even undergoing a shocking, public depilation—in order to infiltrate an all-women's festival (as portrayed by male actors).¹⁰² In the *Ecclesiazousae*, a group of women (played by men) try to pass as men in order to set up a council of women.¹⁰³ In these comedies, the act of cross-dressing emphasizes, paradoxically, the internal stability of gender identity, at least within the frame of the play. Neither gender is very good at imitating the other.¹⁰⁴ In the *Thesmophoriazousae* Euripides is unable to get the effeminate Agathon to aid him, and so naturally enough the task falls to the oldest, hairiest, least feminine man available, his Kinsman (also sometimes translated "Relative").¹⁰⁵ He is eventually unmasked because of a truly effeminate man, Cleisthenes, who has penetrated his disguise by unstated

⁹⁷ Allard Pierion Museum 3356; discussed by Taaffe, "The Illusion of Gender," 94.

⁹⁸ See, for example, the discussion of the Pronomos Vase in John J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song: *Tragoidia* and *Polis*," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysus?*, ed. J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 43–46.

⁹⁹ Rabinowitz, "The Sex of the Actor," 7–8 suggests that voice may have been a biological clue to the sex of the actor, though some traditions of drag involve convincing falsettos.

¹⁰⁰ Taaffe, "The Illusion of Gender Disguise in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazousae*," 97.

¹⁰¹ McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, especially chapter 2.

¹⁰² See Zeitlin, "Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae*," for a brilliant discussion. I discuss the femininity of Agathon in the first part of the play below.

¹⁰³ I am indebted to Taaffe, "The Illusion of Gender," for my reading of this play.

¹⁰⁴ Orgel, *Impersonations*, 18 points out that on the Elizabethan stage cross-gender disguises are "represented as all but impenetrable." That is, other characters on stage almost never recognize the act of cross dressing. The opposite is true on the Athenian comic stage: no act of cross dressing goes undiscovered.

¹⁰⁵ See Zeitlin, "Travesties of Gender and Genre," 384–85. McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, 218–26, shows that the Kinsman maintains an unambiguous masculinity throughout the play through his use of obscenity. Similarly, she notes that "although the Relative becomes like a woman in physical appearance, and even to some extent in speech, he cannot maintain the illusion for long . . ." (236).

means, denounces him to the women. Cleisthenes' very effeminacy proves the rule—he is a real passive, and so, comically, indistinguishable from the women in the play.¹⁰⁶ The Kinsman, by contrast, eventually returns home to his wife and children, secure in his normal masculinity.¹⁰⁷ Gender determines sex, and not the other way around.

Similarly, the women in the *Ecclesiazousae* provide a handy list for how to act like a man: stop shaving, get a suntan, wear a fake beard, wear men's clothes, use a walking stick.¹⁰⁸ This awareness of the performative nature of gender would seem to indicate the possibility of gender blur: the comedy is "based on the implicit possibility that the men on stage may be exposed as not men."¹⁰⁹ But these "women in drag" keep making verbal slips that confirm the inevitability of gender—e.g. a woman swears "by the two goddesses," a feminine oath (155–60).¹¹⁰ Even more explicit, they don't seem to be able to control their sexual impulses, a lack of control generally characterized as feminine. In lines 93–97, Praxagora upbraids one of her companions:

Look at you carding wool, you who must not
Show any part of your body to those seated (in assembly).
We would not fare well if, the Assembly happens to be full,
And some woman climbing over (the seats?) and
Throwing over (her cloak) should show her Phormisios.

Phormisios, evidently, was a man known for his full beard, and so the lines are a reference to the woman's genital area, as Taaffe suggests.¹¹¹ But what Taaffe apparently misses is that "carding wool" (*xainousa*) is an Athenian euphemism for female masturbation. The danger, then, is that the women will reveal themselves as women through their lack of sexual control, which here is also expressed through the metaphor of women's work.¹¹²

There is a double joke here, since the revelation that these "men" are "really" women is undercut by the fact that underneath their disguises as women, they are really, really men. But whereas this comedy makes fun of the theatrical convention, it does so without challenging gender binarism outside of the play. There is no specter here of a "third gender": only women and men; and for the men, the danger is that they might slip into the other gender. A man can never become a woman, of course, but he can, like Cleisthenes become so thoroughly feminine that he is no longer recognized as a man. There is a continuum of gender, but not a corresponding continuum of sex.

I have focused on a few short passages to make a general point about the comedies that fuller studies have borne out: the comedies may present moments of gender ambiguity—women may, momentarily, play the parts of men and vice versa. But in the end these plays take pains to re-establish the normal order of things, not least in the

¹⁰⁶ Zeitlin, "Travesties of Gender and Genre," 386.

¹⁰⁷ McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, 236.

¹⁰⁸ Aristophanes *Ecclesiazousae* 2. 116–50. See also 268–79. All translations are mine and subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰⁹ Bassi, *Acting Like Men*, 138.

¹¹⁰ Taaffe, "The Illusion of Gender," 101.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹¹² McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, 242–46, provides a full discussion of the women's failure to adopt convincingly masculine speech patterns.

area of gender. Indeed, much of the humor stems from the fact that the “true” gender of would-be imposters keeps slipping out. There is no crisis of categories here, created by the unstable space of drag; rather, drag is used to represent gender identities as fully stable.¹¹³ This stability is, of course, an artifice of the theatre and in some sense must be seen as a reaction to the ancient understanding of gender as inherently unfixed, an axis on which slippage is always possible.¹¹⁴ But there are only two poles on the axis, and I see no suggestion of a third term. The comedies, moreover, seem bent on exposing the artifice involved in the male adoption of female parts, thus defusing the possible transgression of female imitation outside the world of the play. Like the pots that depict bearded men carrying female body pads, the comedies, through laughter, render this act of representation “just a play.”

I do not mean to suggest that the feminization of a man could not also be a comment on his sexual tendencies. Quite the contrary—as a final pass at this question, we might consider a short and pretty funny passage from the *Thesmophoriazousae* of Aristophanes. Euripides and the Kinsman are about to meet with Agathon, who dresses in a feminine manner, talks like a woman, and is generally feminized in every imaginable way. Before they even see him, the two comic heroes set up his appearance for the audience:

- Eu. There is a certain Agathon—
 Ki. Do you mean the dark, muscular one?
 Eu. No, another one. Have you never seen him?
 Ki. Not the one with the shaggy beard?
 Eu. You *haven't* ever seen him.
 Ki. No, by Zeus, I haven't, at least not that I know of.
 Eu. Yet you've screwed him; but perhaps you didn't know that.

[30–35]

In this play, Agathon's “feminine” characteristics—the opposite of the characteristics that the Kinsman guesses at in the passage above—are also indicators of his sexual passivity, of his possible identity as a *kinaidos*.¹¹⁵

Even here, however, there is a sense that Agathon may not really be passive; as he eventually explains, he takes on different roles in order to write different kinds of scenes, and when writing about women, he takes on the manner of a woman¹¹⁶ (148–52). Indeed, there is considerable gender blur in the person of Agathon; the Kinsman, confounded, complains:

- Who are you, boy? Are you raised as a man?
 And where is your penis? Your man's cloak? Your Laconian shoes?
 But are you a woman, then? But then where are your breasts?
 What do you say? Why are you silent? But then from your song
 I will search you out, since you do not wish to speak.

[142–45]

¹¹³ See Taaffe, “The Illusion of Gender,” 104–7; also Helene Foley, “The Female Intruder Reconsidered,” *Classical Philology* 77 (1982): 1–22 for a similar reading of the *Lysistrata*.

¹¹⁴ See the fine discussion by Bassi, *Acting Like Men*, 220–24.

¹¹⁵ McClure suggests that “Agathon is depicted not only as effeminate but as a male prostitute” (*Spoken Like a Woman*, 220). See also 222–26.

¹¹⁶ Zeitlin sees him as fully passive; his imitation of women here is “. . . all too much in harmony with his nature and his ways” (“Travesties of Gender and Genre,” 384).

Here we have something close to the modern idea of a drag queen, an ambiguous presentation of gender that confounds and confuses categories. Laura McClure deduces from this speech some conclusions about the staging of the scene: "Agathon obviously lacks both the comic phallus worn by the Relative and the padded breasts typically used by male actors playing women in both tragedy and comedy."¹¹⁷ Agathon's costume is evidently lacking the conventional markers by which gender is signified on stage. This ambiguity is, emphatically, the subject of ridicule, not celebration. In the world of this play, it is moreover not the result of Agathon's sexuality so much as it is of his being a playwright.¹¹⁸ Euripides tells the Kinsman a bit later that he was like that too, when he was first writing plays¹¹⁹ (173–74). In the comic text then, the real perverts, even more dangerous than effeminate men like Cleisthenes, are a subset of exactly two Athenians: the tragedians Euripides and Agathon, both favorite targets for Aristophanes. It is not effeminacy per se, but the condition of being a woman-identified tragic poet that is flagrantly abnormal. They are like the modern drag queen; the viewer cannot see the relation between their professed gender and an anatomically determined sex.

Conclusion

Unlike Agathon, the feminized male heroes in the tragic texts I have discussed are feminized without being represented as sexually submissive to other men. Even in the remarkable presentation of Heracles and Oedipus as brides, that representation connotes other social realities—flexibility, powerlessness, bodily awareness, containment of pollution—but I detect no markers of specifically sexual passivity. In other words, in fifth-century Athens, gender could be a code for power among men without referencing sexual practice, or the particular mode of their desires. In fact, I would argue that the ancient Athenians saw the relation of gender and sexual activity as the exact inverse of our understanding of that relation: rather than seeing a particular sexual act as forming an identity, as the code, the key to unlocking the psyche, the Athenians see gender as, in Loraux's formulation, "the richest of discriminating factors . . . the operator par excellence that makes it possible to conceive of identity as fashioned, in practical terms, by otherness."¹²⁰ In this system male femininity does not necessarily imply sexual submissiveness to men, let alone homosexuality. This difference of ideological organization is exactly the gap of imagination that we must try to traverse if we want to understand how the notion of gender worked in ancient Greece.

I do not mean to attack modern directors who, for example, play the character of Agathon as "gay" when putting on the *Thesmophoriazousae*, or even play on sexual

¹¹⁷ McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, 224. McClure's discussion of Agathon is excellent (222–26).

¹¹⁸ In other depictions Agathon is figured as feminine because he tries to maintain a youthful appearance well into young adulthood. See Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 144. Maintaining a youthful appearance beyond one's youth can be taken as a sign of having passive tendencies. See Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 90, 182, n. 22.

¹¹⁹ In this context it is also worth noting that Aeschines and old comedy taunt one Misgolas, in part for his appetite for boys, but also for his (evidently noteworthy) preference for *kitharaidoi* (lyric singers). See Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 73.

¹²⁰ Loraux, *The Experience of Tiresias*, 4.

stereotypes when portraying the cross-dressed Pentheus in the *Bacchae*. That is one way to translate the idea of the characters' gender deviance, if not necessarily the best or most radical way. To understand the texts that we have, however, we are required to engage in an exercise of imagination: imagine that cross-gendering had nothing necessarily to do with sexuality but expressed an understanding of gender that was both more flexible and more subversive of masculine certainty than our own. These are the terms in which I interpret Oedipus as a Queen: at the end of the *Oedipus Rex* he is, in fundamental and important ways, cross-gendered. Like Heracles, like Ajax, he is emasculated when exposed to great pain and great self-abasement. That emasculation strips Oedipus of both masculinity and the authority that has been his as a man and king. In compensation, however, he now has the power—or perhaps we should say here the role—of transferring authority, through marriage, to a real man.

All of my examples force us to consider a structure of gender that is fundamentally different from our own. Each of the tragic heroes, and even the comic heroes, demonstrates an ability to slip on the spectrum of masculinity without subverting, undermining, or calling into question the normative structure of masculinity itself. There is no third term here, no crisis of categories. Rather, the crisis is specifically within the category, a crisis of masculinity that needs to be continually and repetitively overcome in the daily self-presentation of each man in order to maintain the stability of the system of Athenian masculinity as a whole. The men on stage may be in drag if by that phrase we simply mean representing women. But they do not necessarily become feminine when they go into drag, and they can be feminized without cross-dressing. We have, in Athenian transvestite theatre, cross-gendering without drag.

What, then, of our manly actors who don body pads and feminine masks in order to play Medea or Phaedra? Only Plato worries about the deleterious effects of female impersonation on their character. We should not see this act of theatrical transvestism as a kind of flirting with an alternate gender identity. The formalized conventions used to portray women on the Athenian stage (and no less the outrageous phalli worn by "men" who cross-dress in comedy) effectively served to insulate the actors from any risk of a conversion that might carry over, dangerously, into real life. If the transvestite theatre endangered anyone, it was not the men who played women's parts, but the real women whose voices they usurped, as Case and others have shown. At the same time, what the male characters in the plays find at risk in the experience of feminization is not exactly masculinity in our sense, with its heterosexualized meanings. Their feminization figures a broader social disempowerment, expressed by their loss of self-control and their inability to curb pain, or desire, or even to prevent gruesome self-display.