

Feminist History, Theory, and Practice in the Shakespeare Classroom

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In their final presentation of scenes, the students in my Shakespeare class staged for their audience two versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act 2 scene 2. One was played straight, the other with gender-crossed roles. It was our hope that audience members would walk out of the theatre wondering why their reception to the two scenes was so different, and begin to question for themselves Shakespeare's construction of gender. The final presentation was the result of a class in which theory and practice converged. Our work was in part inspired by Jill Dolan, who argues compellingly for the consistent intersection of these two often divergent studies:

Theatre and performance help shape and promote certain understandings of who "we" are, of what an American looks like and believes in. As theatre and performance educators, training our students to enter an industry whose representations structure our national imagination, whose images citizens look to for knowledge, understanding, and support, means training our students to look past the classroom's walls into the larger culture. How dare we teach them that art is outside of history, outside of ideology. ("Rehearsing Democracy" 5)

This argument becomes even more significant when we note its relevance to feminist theatre.

When we pursue theatre practice without considering the conditions surrounding the historical and social status of women, we run the risk of reifying women's subordinate position in society. In Dolan's terms, to create theatre without an understanding of ideology and history is to fail to shape and promote certain understandings of who women are. "How dare we teach" our students that theatre is outside of the history of gender construction, outside of sexual ideology? And yet, in a classroom, joining theatre's disparate elements is a challenge, one which requires instructors of theatre practice and teachers of feminist theatre history and theory to work diligently to engage each other's areas of expertise. As Geraldine Harris notes, "While the perceived 'gap' between theory and practice is at times a locus of difficulty, it is also a potentially productive space" (2).

In this essay, I hope to offer one example of a "productive space," a paradigm not only of how feminist history/theory can coexist with theatre practice, but of how each can enrich the other in a pedagogical setting, allowing instructors the opportunity to address issues relevant to feminism while simultaneously pursuing practical theatre instruction.¹

She died, my lord, but whiles her slander liv'd.

—*Much Ado About Nothing* 5.4.66²

My Shakespeare course for talented high school students in the 1998 Brown University Summer Focus Program was three weeks long. During that time, my students were with me for a minimum of four hours each day, five days per week, and spent their evenings reading plays and memorizing their lines—they had no other classes. By the second week, my class had already read, discussed, and performed scenes from Henry V and Much Ado About Nothing. Today was our second day working with A Midsummer Night's Dream; tomorrow we would transition to Hamlet.

As it was the second day that we were working with a play, my students had finished reading it and had spent the night before memorizing scenes they had chosen and practicing with partners so that they would be prepared to perform before the class this morning. A young woman and a young man had decided to perform 2.2, the scene in the woods at night in which Lysander unsuccessfully tries to convince Hermia to have sex with him.

The two ascended the short steps leading to the performance space we had in the front of our classroom. Their scene was very funny. The class's laughter began with Lysander's first suggestion that "One turf shall serve as pillow for us both; One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth" (2.2.40–1). Punctuating his line, the actor eagerly lay down on the ground behind Hermia and put his arm around her. Hermia responded by swiftly rising and moving to the other side of the stage, giving the modest recommendation that Lysander sleep further off. Lysander responded with a poetical appeal to their love for one another and advanced upon her on his knees in apparent supplication. Hermia then appealed to that very same love for patience, outwitting Lysander with her own rhetorical skill, and convinced him to wait until the two were married before having sex. Each move by Lysander and countermove by Hermia elicited laughter from the audience until her final success drew applause and the scene concluded with the two going to sleep on separate sides of the stage.

The actors stepped down from the stage and our class got in a circle to discuss the scene. Everyone agreed that they had enjoyed the scene and found it very comical. The question I asked was: Why was it funny? In their responses, my students ultimately decided that the humor of the scene derived from two sources. First, it was funny to see two Shakespearean characters enacting a scene that, except for the language, would not be uncommon today. Second, they found it funny to see the overeager boy denied by the clever girl. So I asked them: Why does she deny him? After some deliberation, the students agreed that "back then" people were not allowed to have sex before marriage. More specifically, one of them corrected, women were not allowed to have sex before marriage. But, I asked, what happens if they do?

To help my students consider this issue, I introduced into the discussion the following theoretical argument from Renaissance studies; for women in Shakespearean drama, the consequence of premarital sex is nothing short of death. An examination of the disastrous wedding scene in *Much Ado About Nothing*³ makes apparent the dangers awaiting the woman who is merely accused of having had sex before marriage. Standing at the altar, prepared to take the

hand of Claudio in a socially (and we assume personally) propitious marriage, Hero is the ideal of feminine happiness in Shakespeare's plays. Claudio, however, has been tricked by Don John into believing that his bride has been unfaithful. Rather than call off the wedding, he has resolved to make it the forum in which he will humiliate her, shaming her publicly so as to destroy her social identity:

She's but the sign and semblance of her honour.
Behold how like a maid she blushes here!
O, what authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
To witness simple virtue? Would you not swear,
All you that see her, that she were a maid,
By these exterior shows? But she is none:
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed:
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty. (4.1.32–41)

It is important to note that in this scene, Hero does not fail to prove her innocence—she is never given the chance. Her guilt is predetermined by the crime of which she has been accused. The fear of female sexuality that is maintained by all of the men in the play overwhelms any defense. Thus, although the scene bears resemblance to a trial, judgment has already been passed against her.

Indeed, the feeble defense Hero offers serves only as further evidence of her crime. When she blushes, as the above quote shows, Claudio interprets it through the lens of his own anxieties as proof of guilt. When she speaks, her words serve not to refute her accusers but to verify her licentiousness. As Karen Newman has argued, “disallowed speech is a sign throughout the period of sexual transgression. . . . An open mouth and immodest speech are tantamount to open genitals and immodest acts” (11). It is no wonder, then, that Hero's protestation serves only to further condemn her.

The attack against Hero continues until she swoons, apparently dead. Only then do her accusers Claudio, Don Pedro, and Don John leave. When she starts to recover, the true significance of the scene becomes apparent. Hero's father, Leonato, makes it clear that without her chastity, she should be dead:

Do not live, Hero, do not ope thine eyes;
For did I think thou wouldst not quickly die,
Thought I thy spirits were stronger than thy shames,
Myself would on the rearward of reproaches
Strike at thy life. (4.1.123–7)

Looking at *Much Ado About Nothing*, along with *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*, Valerie Traub has argued that, in Shakespeare's plays, a woman without chastity is nothing:

In Shakespearean drama what engenders the female body is her sexuality. As the drama positions the female gender within its psychic and narrative frame, “woman” becomes synonymous with the presence or absence of chastity. This statement may seem innocuously self-evident, until one considers that at its theatrical extreme, the presence or absence of chastity arbitrates life and death. (25)

Hero ultimately survives and enjoys a happy ending only because her chastity is proven by virtue of her apparent death and the machinations of comedy. Were she truly “impure,” no one would champion her cause and her death would be assured.

Such is the situation we find in *Hamlet*. Critics have disputed for centuries whether or not Ophelia is a virgin at the time of her death, but none contests the primary role that patriarchy has in controlling her actions, in stymieing her speech, and, ultimately, in effecting her death for the purpose of containing her threatening feminine sexuality.⁴ Like Hero, Ophelia only wins back her chastity and social respectability by her death. Previously shunned by Hamlet, Ophelia is wept over and her loss deeply lamented when she is a corpse. However, unlike Hero, Ophelia is not protected by the conventions of comedy, which allow the dead to come back to life when their threat to patriarchy is allayed. Ophelia’s death is permanent.

If the presence or absence of chastity does, indeed, arbitrate life and death for women in Shakespeare’s plays, then Hermia is in precarious straits in the woods alone with Lysander in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Consequently, we can begin to discern a very different dynamic in 2.2.

To introduce this theoretical argument to my class, I presented Traub’s thesis that for women in Shakespearean drama, the presence or absence of chastity arbitrates life and death (25). To substantiate this statement, I reminded my students of the scene in Much Ado About Nothing (which we had just read) in which Claudio publicly accuses Hero of infidelity, noting how the assault only ceases when she seems to die of shame (4.1). We then read the scene aloud and brainstormed about what would happen if Hero had, in fact, lost her virginity before marriage. Considering her father’s response, the students were convinced that, at best, Hero would face disownment and exile from Messina. Benedict restrains Leonato from actually killing his daughter, but Leonato makes it absolutely clear that he wishes Hero either chaste or dead.

Equipped with an understanding of the deadly ramifications of premarital sex in Shakespeare’s plays, we returned to A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The two actors playing Hermia and Lysander once again performed their scene, but this time the stakes were considerably higher. Lysander remained driven by his sexual desire, but Hermia was motivated by the desire to survive. No longer did her words derive from a vague sense of coyness, but rather from the danger that Lysander represented to her very existence. In order to investigate the nature of this change, I asked the students to employ the same staging that they had developed the night before. The performance of the scene was riveting in a way that the earlier, more comical scene was not. There was still humor but there was no longer laughter after every retort. The comedy was more reserved as the scene took on a much deeper significance.

In our ensuing discussion, the students agreed that this performance was much more compelling than the first. They noted that Lysander’s sexual advances were no longer innocently humorous but aroused anxiety in the audience as they feared for Hermia’s safety. Additionally, when Lysander put his arm around her, they worried that he was going to rape her. Alone, in the woods, with no one to help her, Hermia was clearly in a perilous situation. Furthermore, seen in

this light, Lysander's losing his way in the woods suddenly seemed very convenient and contrived.

The efficacy of the new scene was no doubt enhanced by the fact that the classroom audience was aware of the serious risk Hermia was taking by being alone in the woods with Lysander. And yet, much of the power derived from the actors who fully engaged the darker aspects of the scene, rendering my argument from Renaissance studies into palpable action. For instance, when Hermia squirmed out from under Lysander's arm, she seemed genuinely afraid of him. In this manner, the scene would likely have introduced Hermia's very real danger even to an untrained audience. What had previously been a simple comic scene was now a highly dramatic moment in which two characters negotiated their primary, sexually specific desires in a historically determined milieu.⁵

The transformation of the performance prompted me to ask the students about a comment they had made earlier. In the discussion that followed the first performance, they had largely agreed that this scene, aside from its language, is not uncommon today. So I inquired if the danger of death accompanies premarital sex for women today as we determined it does for those in Shakespeare's plays. The debate that followed was heated, with my students championing two positions. One position held that times had changed and premarital sex was no longer unacceptable. The other held that death was still an inherent fear in premarital sexual intimacy today.⁶ The students in this camp argued that, with sex, regardless of precautions, comes the possibility of pregnancy. Even today, pregnancy carries with it the likelihood of a radical transformation for a woman as she must choose either to terminate the pregnancy and deal with the psychological consequences of that decision, or opt to have the child and devote herself to its care. Thus, pregnancy carries with it a threat to a woman's plans, dreams, and social identity. Essentially, sex threatens who a woman is. For several members of my class (a mixed group of men and women), this meant that, for women, the danger of death accompanied the act of premarital sex.⁷ So I asked my students, what if Shakespeare is partly to blame for the danger that women have faced and continue to face in premarital sex?

It has been compellingly argued, I explained, that Shakespeare has played and may continue to play a significant role in the establishment and maintenance of gender roles that subordinate women. As Alan Sinfield has argued, "Any social order has to include the conditions for its own continuance, and capitalism and patriarchy do this partly through the education system" ("Give an account" 158). Shakespeare is currently the most widely read author in the American and English educational systems.⁸ Consequently, Shakespeare can be understood to have played a significant role in the continuance of patriarchy. Sinfield explains that "Shakespeare has been made to speak mainly for the right," becoming "an instrument within the whole apparatus of filtering whereby schools adjust young people to an unjust social order" ("Give an account" 159).⁹ For instance, Shakespeare's preeminence in the English educational curriculum occurred concurrently with the project of British imperialism in the nineteenth century, so that, according to Susan Leach, "knowledge of Shakespeare became and remained central to ideas of nationhood, the educated man (rather than woman) and social and cultural acceptability" (8). This suggests that Shakespeare has served as a politically conservative voice since his introduction into the academy.

The books and articles on Shakespeare pedagogy that have proliferated over the last century deal extensively with methodological questions, such as whether the plays should be taught primarily as drama or as works of literature, but only a very few over the last two decades have begun to question the ideologies that are forwarded in Shakespeare instruction.¹⁰

A précis of the ideologies perpetuated by a traditional consideration of Shakespeare's work has been offered by Barbara Freedman, who finds in Shakespeare the Western sexist tradition that appears most clearly in *Oedipus Rex* and *The Taming of the Shrew*:

If we conflate the complementary myths of *Oedipus* and *Shrew*, we have the tragedy of the man who discovers his sexuality and the woman who learns to disavow her own in the very apprehension of a repressive patriarchal law. One scenario identifies civilization with male payment of his own sexuality, the other identifies it with male control over disordered female sexuality. Both not only record but promulgate the values of a repressive patriarchal culture. (58)

The veracity and far-reaching significance of Freedman's statements can be witnessed in *Midsummer* 2.2. There, we find exactly what she highlights: Lysander in the process of discovering his sexuality and Hermia in the process of disavowing her own. Alone in the woods, he sexually pursues her. She, however, refuses his touch, subordinating sexual desire to the desire to survive in a patriarchy that delimits her actions even when she is far beyond the walls of Athens. Our understanding of the scene simultaneously depends upon and forwards a set of rules governing gender that prescribes what constitutes proper behavior for a man and a woman. As a result, the straightforward presentation of this scene, whether in a classroom or on a stage, cannot help but forward its politics as normative and its understanding of gender roles as essential and unchanging.

But gender roles do not have an essential nature that precedes discourse. When we are born, we know nothing of gender. It is only in the process of being introduced to language that we are taught that we belong to the category "male" or "female." There is no "essence" of masculinity or femininity that defines these categories before this point; indeed, beyond their sociolinguistic construction, gender roles have no inherent reality. They are learned through the acquisition of language and literally embodied through the performance of roles prescribed by a particular culture. As Freedman explains using Lacanian psychoanalysis, "male and female, regardless of biological differences, are products of a linguistic signifying system, so that male is necessarily 'not female' and female 'not male'" (55). Taking this one step further, Elizabeth Grosz denies "that there is the 'real,' material body on one hand and its various cultural and historical representations on the other. . . . [T]hese representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constituted bodies and help to produce them as such" (x). However, these constituted bodies often seem very real, and the rules dictating their construction are difficult to detect. In explanation of this fact, Judith Butler states:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding masculinity or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the performative aspect of gender is concealed. (279)

Butler is arguing that, in the process of constructing our notion of “male” and “female,” language conceals the role it plays and attempts to establish its categories as universal truths. Accordingly, we can see how the dialogue in *Midsummer* 2.2 is not passively presented by Hermia and Lysander. Rather, the dialogue actively constitutes each character’s sexually specific, socially defined identity and then hides the traces of its cultural construction by suggesting that the identities constructed in their discourse already existed and are now merely being articulated.

For my students, mired in the process of adolescent self-fashioning, learning that one’s anxieties derive heavily from one’s attempts to achieve the sexually specific identity prescribed by his or her culture proved nothing short of a revelation. Achieving this revelation required that we devote a fair portion of a class to defining what a “man” is and what a “woman” is today. We then considered how this notion is both reflected and produced in popular culture, looking at images from television, in the movies, and in advertisements. Finally, we noted how notions of femininity and masculinity have changed, even over the course of the students’ lives. What emerged was an understanding of one’s sexually-specific identity as a product of sociohistorical construction. Additionally, the fact that they achieved this understanding in a classroom setting (versus alone, perhaps while reading) meant that they now had a supportive environment in which to pursue choices and lifestyles not necessarily dictated by their culture.¹¹ My students were fascinated by the notion that their subjectivity was trained into them, perhaps even in the very act of studying Shakespeare.

The question then must be raised: Do we need to stop teaching and performing Shakespeare’s plays? Does the presentation of Shakespeare in a classroom or on stage necessarily reify the patriarchal structures inherent in his works? By considering the critical issues involved, teachers and performers can pursue strategies that work counter to the patriarchal ideologies found in Shakespeare. As Sinfield explains about Shakespeare pedagogy, “The plays may be taught so as to foreground their historical construction in Renaissance England and in the institutions of criticism, dismantling the metaphysical concepts in which they seem at present to be entangled, and especially the construction of gender and sexuality” (“Give an account” 178). Shakespeare’s works can be presented in a classroom in such a manner that they reveal their historically determined definitions of gender and sexuality, and consequently liberate students to consider how their own understandings of gender and sexuality are similarly historically determined. McLuskie supports this conclusion, stating:

Feminist criticism need not restrict itself to privileging the woman’s part or to special pleading on behalf of female characters. It can be equally well served by making a text reveal the conditions in which a particular ideology of femininity functions and by both revealing and subverting the hold which such an ideology has for readers both female and male. (106)

Furthermore, the fact that Shakespeare is ubiquitous in the English and American school systems makes his plays particularly potent vehicles for challenging social norms.¹²

McLuskie’s statement, in addition to providing a worthwhile goal for the Shakespeare classroom, also suggests a means by which feminists can effectively engage Shakespeare in performance. By constructively playing with Shakespeare’s

work and privileging performance over text, theatre artists can make manifest and dismantle the patriarchal ideology presented in the plays. This requires that directors and performers consider the ramifications of their creative choices for the perpetuation or contestation of gender roles. As we have already noted, the straightforward presentation of Shakespeare offers its gendered politics as normative and, consequently, invisible to an audience. A performance that refuses to present its gender politics in a straightforward manner, on the other hand, has the potential to make its sexually specific expectations conspicuous and reveal how those politics are not static and unchanging, but are instead the product of social construction.

For instance, a great deal of work has been done with cross-dressing in contemporary performances of Shakespeare, with varying degrees of success at questioning cultural norms. There have been multiple instances of all-male castings of the plays. While this offers the potential of subverting sexual expectations, it similarly threatens to reinstate the presumption of the male as universal (Alisa Solomon, qtd. in Ferris 6). It must be remembered that the original production of Shakespeare in early modern England with all-male casts served the purpose of excluding women from the entire process of producing plays. I want to encourage theatrical play that reveals and subverts the structures of patriarchy in Shakespeare's plays, rather than threatens to reify them. Far more challenging to gender stereotypes are performances like Neil Bartlett's 1992 production of *Twelfth Night* at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, which had an entirely female cast except for Viola and her twin brother Sebastian, who were played by two sixteen-year-old boys. Such a production opens up Shakespeare's work to multiple and concurrent interpretations so as to simultaneously present and undermine the play's patriarchal expectations throughout. To begin to understand how this casting choice destabilizes normative understandings of gender in the play, one need only consider the final scene in which the Duke (a cross-dressed woman), asks Viola (a cross-dressed boy [who has been pretending to be a boy]) to put on her "woman's weeds" and marry. The bodies on stage in Bartlett's production simultaneously present and confute the roles they perform. Once the audience acknowledges that there is a woman in the Duke's clothing, playing his part, it will have to consider the two meanings that the actor presents: the one produced by the character dressed in men's clothing, and the other which comes from the female body underneath. Thus, for the duration of this performance, the early modern patriarchal rules that define the expected roles of men and women are thrown into question. Shakespeare's lines promote particular understandings of masculinity and femininity while the staging highlights the arbitrariness of those definitions.

Another significant instance of such play is the "postmodern, revisionist, gender-bent" production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that Jill Dolan and Phillip Zarrilli directed at The University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1991.¹³ For their production, Dolan and Zarrilli employed nontraditional staging to break down the division of stage and audience, cross-dressing to open up parts to multiple readings, cross-gender casting to invert expectations, and homosexual love to subvert Shakespeare's heteronormative universe. The play was performed in a highly flexible arena setting (in the round) that allowed actors to walk freely among and intermingle with audience members. Made to resemble a cabaret, the production sought to create a festive atmosphere in which gender play was both the method and the intended goal of performance. The impact of the production was perhaps greatest on the students who performed in it. Dolan

notes that throughout the course of the production, the actors came to realize how notions of sexuality are socially constructed: “Most of our cast was heterosexual, perhaps, but after the production I think most of them understand their sexuality as a choice, not as a natural birthright” (“Peeling” 157). Beyond the importance that her production might have had for its audience, Dolan’s statement here emphasizes the significance that such play has for those who perform it and highlights the usefulness of including such work in a classroom setting.

Having considered the manner in which specific Shakespeare plays construct sexual identity, my students were receptive to the notion that in academia and in performance, Shakespeare has overwhelmingly served to maintain sexist understandings of masculinity and femininity. But they were adamant that they loved Shakespeare and did not want to give up studying or seeing his plays. Consequently, they were eager to consider the potential that constructive play in performance has to subvert Shakespeare’s patriarchal ideology. We began by asking what would happen if the roles were reversed in Midsummer 2.2 and Hermia were intent on sleeping with Lysander. Rather than simply ponder this situation, two students took their books onto the stage and began the scene with their roles reversed; the woman read the part of Lysander and the man read that of Hermia (to ease the change, the actors maintained their names so that Hermia was still the woman but was now the aggressive figure, and Lysander was the man but was now the coy one). The scene was hilarious. Lost in the woods at night, Hermia recommends that she and Lysander lie down to sleep until day. When Lysander lies down on the ground, however, Hermia gets down behind him and puts her arm suggestively around his waist, saying that one bed will suit them both. Shocked at her forwardness and her suggestion, Lysander leaps up and moves across the stage, urging restraint. She follows on her knees, pleading with him to sleep with her. He responds by wittily appealing to their love for the preservation of their chastity. Thus outmaneuvered, the sullen Hermia gives up her pursuit and goes to sleep across the stage from Lysander.

Try as the actors might, they were unable to imbue the scene with the dramatic tension that attended the “proper” performance of the roles. In discussion, we noted that when Lysander was the aggressor, Hermia needed to make quick use of her wits to avoid his sexual advances—her extraordinary rhetorical skill was required to circumvent the threat that Lysander represented to her safety. After all, she not only had to inform him that she did not want to have sex, she had to convince the much larger man that it was in his best interest not to take her by force. When the scene was reversed and Lysander used the same words to avoid the sexual advances of Hermia, there was no valid motivation to support his delivery of the lines. Sex (in Shakespeare’s time and in our own) offered little threat to his physical or social well-being since he would neither have to birth the child nor necessarily deal with it afterwards, and he certainly did not have to fear being overpowered and raped by the much smaller woman. The reversal of gender highlighted the sexually specific nature of the dialogue in the play and made conspicuous the socially defined rules governing each of the characters.

To further analyze the potential of cross-gender casting, my class decided to stage the possibility of homosexual love. More than any other activity, the staging of gay and lesbian love in Midsummer 2.2 made clear the

heteronormative nature of Shakespeare's drama. Early in the dialogue, we had a very different scene before us. Rather than a man and a woman running from the law of the father, we had two gay men or lesbian women seemingly running from the homophobic society that would forbid their love. Lost in the woods, the two characters before us had as much to gain as to lose from sexual intimacy. But then the scene lost its cohesion; for one to forcefully pursue and the other to fearfully retreat after they had both chosen to run off into the woods together seemed illogical. Where the scene stopped making sense, however, the deeply heterosexist ideology of the language became apparent. No longer was gender theory a subject of intellectual curiosity, but a concrete reality that my students could corporealize on stage and question in their lives.

Cross-gender casting offers a means by which to make visible the assumptions governing our understanding of gender and sexuality in a theatre classroom. One way to understand the effectiveness of cross-gender casting is to consider it in contrast to cross-dressing practices. Lesley Ferris introduces her anthology on cross-dressing by stating that

the essays ask us to view cross-dressing as Barthesian writerly texts, imbued with a doubleness of vision. The authors question the cultural and social assumptions of gender by examining the public display of the performing body and they generally agree that the theater is an important locus for cultural transformations. (14)

Cross-dressing encourages us to simultaneously consider the text (performance) before us through two lenses. In one, we read the text according to the sexual identity that is represented by the clothes; in the other, we consider the play as performed by the sexual identity that can be described underneath. The result is a performance in which sexually specific meaning can be produced, questioned, and played with throughout.¹⁴

Cross-gender casting works very differently. By having men take the parts of women and playing them as men and also having the women take the parts of men and playing them as women, we are asking the audience to view the text before them with a single vision, but one that does not easily come into focus. As I noted earlier, gender is the product of a linguistic signifying system. In cross-gender performance, the linguistic signifiers before us construct their speaker as belonging to a particular sex and defined by a consonant sexual ideology, both of which are troubled in our eyes. On stage we see Hermia, a character who is understood to be female. In Shakespeare's plays, being female means being defined by one's chastity. To then have this character flout her culturally understood definition by sexually pursuing Lysander blurs the categories by which female is understood to be "not male." Similarly, Lysander, who is culturally understood to have nothing to lose from premarital sex, is speaking lines that suggest an anxiety that does not fit his socially defined role. Those places where there is a noticeable gap or chink between what is said and the person who says it mark points at which we can see the borders of the social construction of gender.

What we found by employing cross-gender casting in a workshop context in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.2 was a means to interrogate Shakespeare's construction of gender and see how his works propagate the notion of a uniformly heterosexual universe exhibiting essentialist understandings of masculinity and

femininity. Such a discovery highlights for students the very constructedness and performativity of gender. Dolan notes that “feminism begins with a keen awareness of [female] exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse” (*Feminist Spectator* 3). Cross-gender casting provides a means by which theatre instructors can use performance to explore the manner in which language, whether on stage or in private dialogue, can serve to perpetuate the exclusion of women. In such instances where theatre practice becomes the means to forward students’ understanding of feminist history and theory, and feminist scholarship contributes to meaningful, engaging performance, the “gap” between theory and practice becomes a creative source of profound inspiration.

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Notes

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1. While I focus primarily on the importance of jointly considering theatre history, theory, and practice for feminist theatre pedagogy in this essay, J. Ellen Gainor addresses their significance for feminist performance:

The idea that artists need and will benefit from rigorous engagement with history and theory may come to have as profound an influence on them and on the theatre as their training in any specific creative technique(s). Only by examining the dynamics of this other triumvirate—history, theory, and technique—can we determine the value of any performance practice for an enlightened theatre. (173)

2. The editions of Shakespeare I use throughout are the Arden series of individual plays.

3. My decision to focus on *Much Ado* at this point in my class and in this paper derives from the fact that my students had all read it before we began work on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. With your own students, you may wish to focus more centrally on *Hamlet* (a play more college students have read), using Valerie Traub’s discussion of Ophelia and Gertrude to establish the enormous anxiety that surrounds female sexuality in Shakespearean drama and the patriarchal strategies of containment used to control it.

4. Traub argues that Hamlet displaces disgust for his mother’s erotic mobility onto Ophelia: “Contaminated in life by the taint of Gertrude’s adultery, Ophelia reclaims sexual desirability only as a dead, but perpetual virgin” (31). Gabrielle Dane is not concerned with Ophelia’s physical virginity, noting that Hamlet is “emotionally” Ophelia’s lover: “He had seduced her into giving herself to him completely (whether physically or not), then subsequently abandoned her” (416). Erik Rosenkrantz Bruun persuasively argues that Ophelia is not a virgin, highlighting a seventeenth-century reading of the play in

which this opinion is articulated and noting that the plants she mentions in her songs were early modern remedies for pregnancy (93–9). In each of these configurations, Ophelia's chastity, whether physically maintained or not, is sullied by the mere possibility of premarital sex. For a further summary of previous considerations of Ophelia's virginity, madness, and death, see Gabrielle Dane's essay, particularly footnotes 13 and 23.

5. The historically determined milieu to which I here refer is the early modern one which produced the gender roles that find articulation in Shakespeare's play. In this manner, I am considering Shakespeare using a "new historical" or "cultural materialist" critical methodology as broadly defined by Stephen Greenblatt (under the term "cultural poetics") in the introduction to his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1–9). For an insightful consideration of the manner in which gender roles, and particularly femininity, were constructed in early modern England, see Karen Newman's *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama*, particularly the introduction and chapters 1 and 2.

6. None of my students was married. Had they been, the discussion might have turned toward the fears that attend even marital sex. As *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* make clear, masculine fear of female infidelity is a major source of anxiety in Shakespearean marriages.

7. The students in both my 1997 and 1998 classes were extraordinarily open to the issues and ideas raised in discussion and often tried to push the envelope even further. This was probably helped by the fact that they had chosen to spend their summer studying Shakespeare and were not in any way required to take the class. To encourage the students to trust and open up to one another, I began my courses with confidence and team-building exercises that are commonly used in acting classes. Most of the students (thirteen in 1997 and nine in 1998) were around seventeen years old and were about to enter the eleventh or twelfth grade. The vast majority were white (with one from Germany and another from Haiti); there was a black student one year and an Indian student (born and raised in the US) the other. Issues of race were discussed while examining the plays but were not considered while casting scenes. One of the classes had twice as many women as men, while the other was almost evenly balanced. Additionally, during the course of our three weeks together, two of my students "came out" together as lesbians. My students were very bright, liberally inclined, remarkably open to new ideas, and eager to try new approaches.

8. Peggy O'Brien notes that at the start of the twentieth century and during every subsequent decade, writers have acknowledged Shakespeare's preeminence in the American school curriculum (165). Sinfield speaks to the unparalleled importance of Shakespeare in the English curriculum, both in the article previously cited and in "Heritage and the market, regulation and desublimation."

9. The introduction of Shakespeare into the English and American school systems can be dated to the middle of the nineteenth century. Thomas Dabbs gives an account of how Shakespeare transformed at that time from a "popular" playwright into a required subject of academic study.

10. See Peggy O'Brien's article for a brief history of approaches to teaching Shakespeare that were published during the twentieth century.

11. This environment may have contributed to the decision of two of my female students to become open about their homosexuality.

12. Margot Heinemann has noted that “Shakespeare has become part of the way that literally millions of people, consciously or unconsciously, imagine and fantasise and think about the world. If we’re seriously concerned about politics, we need among other things to think freshly about the plays and how to present them, not hand Shakespeare over as a reactionary writer to be used or misused by the defenders of capitalism in decay” (228).

13. Jill Dolan provides a detailed explanation and analysis of this performance in her essay “Peeling Away the Tropes of Visibility: Lesbian Sexuality and Materialist Performance Practice.”

14. It is important to note that despite the radical potential of cross-dressing to undermine sexually specific meanings in a text, there is considerable debate as to whether it ever served this purpose when Shakespeare’s plays were first performed with boys playing the parts of women. As Lorraine Helms argues, “Shakespearean texts, bearing the traces of their history in a theatrical enterprise which completely excluded women, construct gender from a relentlessly androcentric perspective” (196). Perhaps the most thorough study of this practice and its ramifications for early modern England is Stephen Orgel’s book *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare’s England*.

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