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978-0-521-56842-5 - *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*

Stephen Orgel

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Why was England the only country in Europe to maintain an all-male public theatre in the Renaissance? Stephen Orgel uses this question as the starting point of a fresh and stimulating exploration of the representation of gender in Elizabethan drama and society. Why were boys used to play female roles in drama, and how did such cross-dressing affect the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries? What was the place of women in the Renaissance theatre, either on stage or in the audience? And what did society make of those women who significantly and successfully violated accepted gender boundaries? At once provocative and witty, lucid and stylish, *Impersonations* will reshape our understanding of the Renaissance theatre, and make us rethink our own inadequate categories of gender, power and sexuality.

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Stanford University



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In memory of
DUNCAN ASWELL
TOM STEHLING
ARTURO ISLAS
JACK WINKLER
GARY SPEAR

*o beate Sesti,
vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat inchoare longam . . .*

Oh goodlooking fortunate Sestius, don't put your hope
in the future;
The night is falling; the shades are gathering around;
The walls of Pluto's shadowy house are closing you in;
There who will be lord of the feast? What will it matter,
What will it matter, there, whether you fell in love
With Lycidas, this or that girl with him, or he with her?

Horace *Odes* 1.4, tr. David Ferry

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The word *Person* . . . in latine signifies the *disguise*, or *outward appearance* of a man, counterfeited on the Stage; and sometimes more particularly that part of it, which disguiseith the face, as a Mask or Vizard: And from the Stage, hath been translated to any Representer of speech and action, as well in Tribunalls, as Theaters. So that a *Person*, is the same that an *Actor* is, both on the Stage and in common conversation; and to *Personate*, is to Act, or *Represent* himselfe, or an other.

Hobbes, *Leviathan* I.16

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Preface

This book began, for me, long before gender construction was a fashionable topic and postmodernism the dominant discourse. For two of my four years at the Horace Mann School for Boys in New York in the late 1940s, transvestite theatre was an unproblematic reality. Like several other members of the Drama Club, I regularly played both male and female roles, with no sense that any stigma was attached to performing as a woman. This is how the Drama Club had always operated; but in my junior year, in 1948, the policy suddenly changed: for *Our Town* and *The Man Who Came to Dinner* we brought in actresses from a nearby girls' school, and thereafter transvestite theatre was a thing of the past. What strikes me now as odd is how seamless the transition was. Not only was it never discussed publicly, but more interestingly, nobody ever asked why the change had been made – it did not occur to me to wonder why in my sophomore year I was playing women without awkwardness or comment, and a year later to do so had become unthinkable. It took almost forty years for me to realize that I had lived through a paradigm shift without noticing it.

Once I did notice it, however, I became intensely curious. The drama coach, Fred Little, a charismatic and inventive director and an extraordinarily sympathetic teacher, was in his eighties, living in retirement in Vermont. I had admired him immensely, and consider him one of the formative influences of my school years. I had last exchanged letters with him at least thirty years before, but I phoned him out of the blue and posed my question: how did it happen? Had

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parents complained? Had boys started to refuse to dress as women? Not at all, he assured me; nothing had happened: "I just didn't think it was a good idea." But why not? His first answer was clearly an evasion: the boys simply couldn't do it convincingly. When I pointed out that we did not make very convincing men either, he wholeheartedly agreed, and – cautiously – went on to the explanation I had, I suppose, been waiting to hear: "It was turning the boys into pansies."

So there it was – the very explanation that William Prynne or John Rainoldes would have given me three hundred and fifty years before. But Fred Little was no descendant of Renaissance antitheatrical polemicists; what he, and I, had participated in was a genuine change in sexual morality. Five years earlier what the school would have considered dangerous to the morals of American adolescent boys was precisely the presence of women at close quarters, and travesty was the prophylactic against erotic contamination; suddenly, in 1948, travesty itself was the danger, and women had to be imported to save us from becoming pansies. Everything we were taught in biology and sex education classes to the contrary notwithstanding, gender was obviously not a fixed category, neither in 1948 nor in 1600. I decided not to reveal to my old teacher that his fears had been realized in me, but from the moment of that phone conversation, writing this book became irresistible.

I owe a great debt to many friends and colleagues. Anne Barton, Catherine Belsey, A. R. Braunmuller, Alan Bray, Jonathan Crewe, Simon During, Marjorie Garber, Linda Gregerson, Jonathan Goldberg, Stephen Greenblatt, David Halperin, Barbara Johnson, Ann Rosalind Jones, Coppélia Kahn, Adrian Kiernander, Joan Linton, David Lee Miller, Steven Mullaney, Karen Newman, Alan Sinfield and Nicola Watson read (or heard) and commented on sections of the manuscript; Heather Dubrow in addition supplied

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Finally, I am grateful to David Ferry for allowing me to print a passage from his beautiful translation of Horace, *Odes* 1.4 in the dedication.