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I

Shakspere's Amazons

Behold, it is my younger brother dressed,
A man, or woman, that hath gulled the world.
FIELD, *Amends for Ladies*, III. 2.

THAT in Shakspere's time, on the public stage, the parts of women were played by boys is a fact too well known to require more than the very briefest reference. "Every schoolboy knows" that actresses were not seen in England, except in private performances, till after the Restoration[1]; and most people could tell us that on January 3, 1660 (old style), Samuel Pepys saw women on the stage for the first time. The dullest reader of Shakspere's plays never fails to catch the point when he lights on Rosalind's epilogue: "If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me"; and everybody understands the Egyptian Queen when she says she will not go to Rome to see "some squeaking Cleopatra *boy* her greatness." Nevertheless it is less easy than one would think to keep constantly in mind the fact that the female parts were not written for a Sarah Bernhardt or an Ellen Terry, but for a Kynaston or a "child of the chapel"[2]. Many touches in Elizabethan

[1] The case of Davenant's *Siege of Rhodes*, acted in August 1650, is no exception. Though it is scarcely an opera in the real sense of the term, Davenant called it so to avoid the Commonwealth prohibition of stage-plays; and the women *sang* in it. They were, as Mr Schelling says, chosen for their voices rather than for their acting; and one of them, Mrs Coleman, had already appeared in a previous "entertainment" of Davenant's.

[2] The Puritan objection to stage-plays turned largely on the assumption of women's dress by men. Thus, for example, Rainolds, in his *Overthrow of Stage-Playes*, calls such an assumption "unscriptural"; and the same view is expressed by Gosson. No one would accuse Gilbert and Sullivan of Puritanism; but it will be remembered that one of their rules of action was never to give a man's part to a woman or *vice versa*.

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plays are often misunderstood or passed over through a neglect, even momentary, of this point. There are some passages, for example, in speeches of Lady Macbeth or of Perdita which Shakspere would probably have written differently if he had meant them for the mouth of Mrs Siddons or Mary Anderson.

The chief complication due to this historical accident (for such it really is) of the English stage arises when a Julia or a Portia is represented as donning a man's clothes and mimicking a man's bearing and behaviour. We are thus confronted with the curious situation of a boy pretending to be a girl who pretends to be a boy. From the frequency with which this situation appears in Elizabethan plays, it would seem that the audiences were delighted with its piquancy, and had no objection to being thus twice beguiled—or rather to being, first cheated and then cheated of the cheat. At any rate the device is found half a dozen times in "Beaumont and Fletcher"; in *Philaster* for example, in the *Pilgrim*, in the *Maid's Tragedy*, in *Love's Cure*[1], and, very gratuitously, in *Cupid's Revenge*; while Ben Jonson's *Silent*

[1] *Love's Cure* is usually ascribed, wholly or in part, to Massinger. It is noteworthy that the device with which we are dealing is here much better prepared and motived than is generally the case in the genuine plays of "Beaumont and Fletcher"; and this fact is quite consistent with Massinger's authorship; for "the most striking feature of Massinger's art," as Köppel says (*Cambridge Hist. of Eng. Lit.* VI. p. 153), "is to be found in his great constructive power"; whereas the merits of Fletcher, unquestionably, lie anywhere rather than in his plot-construction. (Beaumont was dead before the earliest date to which the play can be assigned.)

Love's Cure supplies a specially elaborate development of the device. Here we have Lucio in woman's apparel, and his sister Clara, a sort of Bradamante or Britomart, in man's. The plot turns on Clara's sudden access of love for her father's enemy Vitelli, and its "humour" on a series of equivocal jests arising out of the confusion of dress. It may be observed that it abounds in obvious imitations of Shakspere: perhaps therefore it may be allowable to trace to Shakspere's influence the measure of skill with which the device is prepared.

The relation of *Love's Cure*, as well as of the *Pilgrim*, of which we shall speak later, to its Spanish original is well worth working out in detail.

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Woman is based upon a variation of the same idea. Nay, the motive was a favourite with University playwrights, and presumably with their audiences. Not to mention *Laelia* (1595), a Latin setting of the story upon which Shakspere based *Twelfth Night*, we find in *Silvanus*, acted at St John's College, Cambridge, Jan. 13, 1596 (old style), the heroine Panthia assuming the disguise of man's apparel, and under the name of Erastus following Silvanus about like a faithful dog, while another girl called Florinda falls in love with her. So too in *Labyrinthus*, by Walter Hawkesworth (1603), Lepidus passes as a woman and Lucretia as a man; hence, says Professor Boas[1], arises "a bewildering and unedifying series of love entanglements before they are finally united to Lidia and Horatius, the son and daughter of Cassander"[2].

It must be remembered that plays of this class were among the greatest successes of their authors. The presence of this device was enough to excuse the total absence of any other merit. Even that miserable performance, *Cupid's Revenge*, to which we have already referred, is said to have been "often acted with great applause"; and it certainly passed through three editions. Indeed, the motive gave innumerable chances for introducing the touches in which Elizabethan dramatists and audiences delighted. Little "ironies" like Viola's

> My father had a daughter loved a man
> As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,
> I should your lordship;

[1] *University Drama in Tudor Age*, p. 320.

[2] The appearance, in *Soliman and Perseda* (whether this play be by Kyd or by another), of Perseda "upon the walls in man's apparel" is hardly worth mentioning here. The whole scene of her disguise, if such it can be called, covers but fifty lines.

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tiny capriccios, scarcely deserving to be called irony, like Shylock's exclamation:

> How much more elder art thou than thy looks;

these, and a thousand others both delicate and indelicate, must have "tickled" the Elizabethan auditor "not othergates" than a clever quibble in words, or than a confusion arising from the likeness between twins.

But—and here we reach the important point—it was essential for that auditor not to forget that there *was* a cheat. Precisely as, to use Coleridge's expression, he must "suspend his disbelief," and allow himself—while the play lasted—to be beguiled into thinking that the boy was a girl, so he must *never* be allowed to forget that, despite appearances, the girl has not—within the "reality" postulated by the play—become a boy. Otherwise, the original illusion, willingly accepted by the audience, would run a great risk of being destroyed altogether. But this end was *at that time*, however easy now, hard indeed to compass; for what in the play was a pretence was in the actual world a reality: and the acting, if *too good*, would be worse than bad. It is as if, in the mock-play within *Hamlet*, the player-king and his queen were to acquire a far greater actuality than the Prince, Gertrude, or Claudius. *There*, however, a few touches made all safe; Shakspere could, and did, give to his "two-remove players" a wooden versification and a stilted style, while doubtless instructing his actors to be even more wooden and stilted than their style and their verse. So much so, that if we may believe

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a story of Addison's, one of the worst of conceivable actors achieved a splendid reputation by playing the part of the Mouse-trap King so badly as to do it *well.*

But how was Shakspere to accomplish the far harder task of first making his boy a real Portia, and then turning Portia back into a boy who must not be so real a boy that we ever forget he is Portia all the while? It takes a god to perform the miracle described by Virgil:

> iuvenis quondam, nunc femina, Caeneus,
> Rursus et in veterem fato revoluta figuram:

but the miracle of a Portia is fully as difficult of performance. For the stage-conventions must not be strained too far. While the audience is to see that the doctor is the lady of Belmont, the doctor's part is to be acted with sufficient skill to make it natural that the Duke, and Shylock, and even Bassanio, shall not penetrate the disguise. The groundlings must recognise her all the time, but must never be led to cry out, "What fools are those people not to know her too."

To Shakspere, who, though the greatest of poets, was most emphatically a playwright, all these things were more obvious than to us; and he set about to conquer his difficulties in his usual commonsense and business-like manner. It was his aim to make things easy for his patrons; and he knew well that while audiences will put up with a great deal of obscurity or inconsistency in phrases or sentences, an awkward situation annoys them above measure. Hence we find that, like the old musicians preparing a discord, he always "prepares" his hearers for this situation with especial care. It may

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be laid down as a rule that, in Shakspere's plays, a girl who masquerades as a man either is, from the very first, shown to us as of an even ultra-womanly character, or else, *just before she assumes her disguise*, is represented in ways, or in circumstances, which bring her femininity into a strong light. She is, in fact, either an Imogen or a Rosalind. Not a single "masculine" woman, in all Shakspere's plays, ever poses as a man. But if we get a woman of strong character, she is carefully revealed at her most "feminine" just as she dons the swashing and martial garb. Yet further, as opportunity offers, the audience is reminded, by hint or gesture, of the "true" state of affairs—and that with an iteration which is quite unnecessary on the modern stage.

As one might expect, the skill with which this task is accomplished varies between wide limits. Shakspere's earlier plays are in this as in other respects comparatively rude. In the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, for instance, the transformation of Julia is prepared both too carefully and not carefully enough. She is, it is true, feminine, but—unlike Imogen or Viola—not so obviously and emphatically feminine that the audience, during the time of disguise, needs no reminder of the truth. The reminder accordingly is given; a preparatory scene, of an obtrusive clumsiness which would by itself prove the immaturity of the play, informs us of the coming change. The dialogue with Lucetta is to the same purport as that of Rosalind with Celia, but how different in its effect upon us! And the same boisterous feeble-

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ness characterises the later reminders: a few asides keep our attention awake, but with difficulty. "I grant," says Proteus to Silvia, "that I did love a lady, but she is dead." "'Twere false, if I should speak it," mutters the disguised Julia, overhearing him; "for I am sure she is not buried."

The case of Jessica in the *Merchant of Venice* is perhaps hardly worth detailed notice. She appears in boy's dress for a space represented by but a score of lines, and she vanishes with her lover and her father's ducats to re-appear as a thorough woman at Belmont. But we may observe that, brief as is her transformation, the fact that it *is* a transformation is carefully emphasised. She dislikes her apparel, and would fain keep herself in the dark: Lorenzo informs *her*, and reminds *us*, that she is "obscured" even in the lovely garnish of a boy. Here, however, Shakspere had better things to do, though of a like kind, in the same play, and it was not his cue to dwell upon the insignificant at the cost of the important. Yet we are ready, after Jessica, to expect a great advance, in Portia, on the crudities of Julia.

And a great advance indeed we find. The problem here is far harder than that of Julia, for Portia's mind is by nature more "masculine," she has far more of the intellect, the rationality, the courage, and the vigour which it pleases men, and Shakspere among them, to think the special marks of their sex. Here then, on that very account, Shakspere takes unusual pains to prepare us for the coming development. Shortly before the crisis of the play Portia, in her betrothal speech to

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Bassanio, emphasises, even to exaggeration, her womanliness: she is, she says, "an unlettered girl, unschooled, unpractised"; and her words of surrender might befit a patient Grisilda yielding to a Marquis Walter rather than the masterful lady of Belmont whom we have hitherto seen. Again, when she opens her purpose to Nerissa, she exaggerates the change that is to come over her. She is to prove a "pretty fellow, to wear her dagger with a brave grace, and to practise a thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks." None of these things does she actually do afterwards; she wears no dagger, she practises no raw trick. Why, then, are these boasts put into her mouth—except in order that, by their very exaggeration, we may be cautioned against being taken in, even for a moment, by Dr Balthasar and his painstaking clerk? For a similar reason, half-way through the trial, when she has conducted the case so skilfully that we might be inclined to forget who she is, there comes in that famous bit of by-play which sets us straight: "Your wife would give you little thanks for that, if she were by, to hear you make the offer"—a touch only pointed and pleasing to-day, but in Shakspere's time all but necessary. Nerissa follows with her contribution; and then, the requisite effect having been produced, Shylock's "We trifle time" recalls the husbands and wives to their main business, and incidentally prevents us, the audience, from wondering why the recognition does not come now.

With Rosalind, who belongs (with Shakspere's usual subtle differences) to Portia's class, the case is similar,

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and the preparation similarly made. It is quite obvious from the first, for instance, that she is of a far stronger and—if we like so to say—more "masculine" character than Celia; and yet, just before the decision to disguise herself is formed, it is Celia that is, for the time being, the more forceful and man-like. Rosalind weeps because of the Duke's harshness; it is Celia that takes the office of comforter. It is Celia that proposes the journey to the forest of Arden, and Rosalind that shrinks from it. It is Celia that dares danger, and Rosalind that fears it. From that moment, it is true, Rosalind, despite her weakness of body, never fails to assert her strength of mind; but from that moment it would seem impossible for anyone to forget that for all the doublet and hose she is a woman through and through. Nevertheless, so careful is Shakspere to help the duller among the audience, that every now and then he reminds us, by one little ironical touch after another, of the "true" state of the case. "I could find it in my heart to disgrace my man's apparel and to cry like a woman," says Rosalind just as she enters the forest; and a hundred other hints follow in due course. On the other hand, a series of well-devised accidents excuses the failure of Orlando to recognise her, and delays the "anagnorisis" to its proper place at the end of the play.

Viola and Imogen, as we have already said, are altogether different. With them, the difficulty is not so much to keep their femininity before the audience, as to prevent it from becoming too prominent. Both of them are women *par excellence*—women, indeed, whom

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we can well believe Shakspere would have wished to be impersonated by women. Nay, it is not improbable that Viola at least *was* so acted on her first appearance; for everything seems to indicate that the first performance of *Twelfth Night* was at the court of Queen Elizabeth, and perhaps a private one, at which a maid of honour may well have sustained a part. Be this as it may, no one in the audience can ever have taken Viola for anything but a woman; and in the play itself the interest largely consists in watching how the revelation of her sex is constantly just avoided. To the Duke she all but betrays it on three or four occasions, and is only saved by a sudden turn in the conversation, by the entrance of the clown, or by some other fortunate chance. To Sir Toby and Sir Andrew she is on the very edge of confession, when Antonio enters in the nick of time, and the expected event is again postponed.

Nevertheless it is worth notice that even here Shakspere thinks it desirable to prepare us, by the dialogue between Viola and the sea-captain, for the coming metamorphosis. We see her *before* the change, and we see her making ready for it. For Shakspere's method is usually that of expectation rather than that of surprise: he desires us to say, "How is this, which I foresaw, being brought to pass?" rather than "I never expected that." Yet this dialogue itself is to be regarded less as telling us, "This boy-actor is a girl," than as saying, "This girl is really trying to be a boy." Her success is not great; but it is *just* sufficient to carry the

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