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Gender Play in Early Modern Drama

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The Dramaturgy of Emasculation in Early Modern Comedies

Comedy often relies on the breaking of expectations. To create effective comedy, theatre makers often look first to what assumptions their audience may be making about the situations and characters that the narrative is setting up. One area where associations are potent and nearly instantaneous is gender— audiences look for signs of a character's gender identity automatically, not only in early modern England, but also today. The costume, facial hair, makeup, jewelry, and body shape of an actor form complex signals to the audience about what to think about a character. Even more assumptions are generated when the character begins to interact with others, through their voice, behavior, gait, and actions. This makes gender a fertile ground for comedy, because any number of assumptions made by the audience can be subverted for laughs at any moment. By analyzing the dramaturgy of emasculation in early modern comedies, I will explore how masculine power was often denoted by a character's capacity for dominance, and argue that onstage emasculation scenarios largely serve to reinforce heteropatriarchal cultural scripts.

The Taming of the Shrew by William Shakespeare is replete with messaging about what it means to be a woman or a man. Kate defies standards of femininity, while Petruchio's ultimate success in 'taming' her is dependent upon his ability to achieve such superlative masculinity that he can dominate even a grossly misbehaved woman such as her. Emasculation within the world of the play serves as an accompanying set of instructions— what NOT to do as a man. The 2012

Globe Theatre production highlights this well by displaying Petruchio's initial failure to tame Kate as a failure to perform sexual dominance. Initially, the scene is directed to allow the audience, and the characters listening on stage, to believe that Petruchio and Kate are having sex. Kate screams "yes, yes, yes, yes, YES!" followed by a firm "NO" from Petruchio, as if Kate is not being happily seduced as it initially appears, but rather is doing something violent to Petruchio (1:46:00-1:46:10). In "The Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage", Shakespeare scholar Coppélia Kahn applies a critical feminist lens to *The Taming of the Shrew*, arguing that

It is Kate's submission to him which makes Petruchio a man, finally and indisputably.

This is the action toward which the whole plot drives, and if we consider its significance for Petruchio and his fellows we realize that the myth of feminine weakness, which prescribes that women ought to or must inevitably submit to man's superior authority, masks a contrary myth: that only a woman has the power to authenticate a man, by acknowledging him her master (Kahn 100).

This idea of women as arbiters of manhood is supported by the text itself as well as the Globe's interpretation; While a woman's worth was defined by her submission to men, a man's was defined by his ability to dominate women. In the text, which does not include the yes-no exchange, we are given the information (via Curtis) that Kate and Petruchio are in her chamber, where he makes "A sermon of continency to her" (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 4.1.155), implying that he is badgering her about self-restraint. Kate's refusal to submit to Petruchio in this scene, whether it is a refusal to be restrained or a refusal to be conquered, makes him a laughing stock to the audience, and completely undermines his manhood.

In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio's embarrassing behavior after being tricked by Maria's forged

letter from Olivia is emasculating, and illustrates the link between class status and masculine power. Gail Paster's explanation of this subplot's overall purpose from *The Body Embarrassed* is apt and relevant. She writes that "[Malvolio's admission of familiarity with Olivia's urinary habits] exposes [him] as blunderer and ensnares him verbally in two ways, involving him either in behavior that would be offensive and intrusive between social equals of the same gender or in behavior that identifies him as beneath social notice altogether" (33). Because masculinity is defined by power, his lack of financial power, self-awareness, and cultural competence undermine his masculinity. The more effort he puts into fitting in, the more he sticks out and is shamed by the audience and the other characters. This is mirrored by his willingness to change his behavior and appearance to be more pleasing to her. Malvolio exclaims, "I will be strange, stout, in yellow stockings, and cross-gartered, even with the swiftness of putting on" (*Twelfth Night*, 2.5.140). The yellow cross-gartered stockings are of particular note. Not only is the fashion of cross-gartering "Already outdated when Malvolio adopts it" (Lublin, 12), they are a visual symbol for his behavioral failure as an upper-class man. Although Malvolio does not cross-dress, he proudly wears the ridiculous cross-gartered yellow stockings because he believes that Olivia desires it. His social humiliation and emasculation is not merely based on his foolishness for believing the fake letter, it is defined by his gleeful submission to the desires of a woman of a higher status.

In *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* by Ben Jonson, there are many scenarios of emasculation. The presence of the character Epicoene creates a contagion of emasculation throughout the narrative. La Foole and Daw falsely brag that they have slept with Epicoene, a claim that comes back to bite them after she is revealed to be a man. Information about Epicoene's sex reveals La Foole and Daw as either liars or gay. Morose, the reclusive man who

marries Epicoene, is emasculated in more ways than one. In “Sounding the Space Between Men: Choric and Choral Cities in Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene, Or, the Silent Woman*” by Mimi Yiu, the author explains how “Morose’s dictatorial domain...constitutes an epicene space... Presented with a character thus demonized from the beginning, audience members can readily identify Morose as an other who demands to be subjugated and exorcised” (Yiu 79). Yiu finds that his fixation on avoiding noise and his non-participation in the rapidly-developing British city life is, in a sense, gender queer. Dramaturgically, this epicenity makes Morose a target for the audience, allowing them to take part in affirming heteropatriarchal standards of behavior. The most obvious manifestation of Morose’s epicenity comes at the end of the play, when he admits his failure to perform his sexual duties as a husband. “I am no man, ladies,” Morose states, “Utterly unabled in nature, by reason of frigidity, to perform the duties or any the least office of a husband.” (*Epicoene*, 5.4.41-44). On the surface, Morose is the most stereotypically patriarchal figure in the play, yet by the end, he completely renounces his own manhood in order to further isolate himself from the world and avoid noise. Arguably, it is Morose and not Epicoene who faces the greatest narrative condemnation for his failure to fulfill his gender role adequately.

Sex and marriage are acts that are inundated with gendered cultural scripts and expectations. For men, the ability to perform and control these scripts can make or break their reputation and status. *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Epicoene* all exploit the audience’s expectations about the social behavior of men and women to create humor and push their respective narratives forward, specifically employing scenarios of emasculation as a comedic device. Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* that “...gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler,

25). The performativity of ‘doing’ gender becomes more visible than ever when the actor (In this case, a literal actor in the theatrical sense) fails to accomplish what was expected, or what they were attempting to do. In this way, theatrical scenarios of emasculation not only act to reinforce feelings of shame associated with gender nonconformity, but simultaneously reveal the falseness of gender essentialism. Evidently, heteropatriarchy is built on threats of humiliation, not biological truths. If gender was inherently true and unchangeable, how could one fail at it?

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