



The Space of Language: Uncovering Gender Fluidity in Metatheatrical Episodes in Early Modern Dramas

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Abstract

In Early Modern dramas the concept of gender is often questioned because of the complexity that is performance, which itself involved a layering of disguise. Since women were restricted from acting, men played both male and female characters. The texts I examine point to particular moments in staging where the body becomes detached from society's definition of gender via speeches and language. Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* offers us an opportunity to read soliloquies from a man and woman's perspective, respectively, to illustrate historically the cultural idea of gender and its instability, while John Webster's *The White Devil* presents a dumb show which shows the action of gender's slipperiness. There is a societal distinction between masculinity and femininity and as Jack Halberstam writes, "masculinity is this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege" (2) and "femininity as a crisis of representation that confronts the heroine with unacceptable life options" (6). This essay interrogates the fickleness of gender performance in relation to metatheatrical episodes of characters experiencing dual personas and verbally expressing/demonstrating this to the audience. As the identity of the characters in these dramatic texts become evasive, the fluidity of gender is made more visible within the early modern period.

Keywords

language, performance, masculinity, femininity

In Early Modern dramas the concept of gender is often questioned because of the complexity that is performance, which itself involved a layering of disguise. Since women were restricted from acting, men played both male and female characters. The texts I examine point to particular moments in staging where the body becomes detached from society's definition of gender via speeches and language. Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* offers us an opportunity to read soliloquies from a man and woman's perspective, respectively, to illustrate historically the cultural idea of gender and its instability, while John Webster's *The White Devil* presents a dumb show¹ which shows the action of gender's slipperiness. There is a societal distinction between masculinity and femininity and as Jack Halberstam writes², "masculinity is this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege" (2) and "femininity as a crisis of representation that confronts the heroine with unacceptable life options" (6). This essay interrogates the fickleness of gender performance in relation to metatheatrical episodes of characters experiencing dual personas and verbally expressing/demonstrating this to the audience. As the identity of the characters in these dramatic texts become evasive, the fluidity of gender is made more visible within the early modern period.

Through the lens of New Historicism, I close read my three primary texts to better understand the function of gender in a period removed from my own and attempts to suggest, as many critics before me, that early modern England was more progressive than imagined. Joy Wiltenburg and Stephen Greenblatt lay the foundation on which I form my argument, while Carole Levin and Michael Neill assist in the articulation of my thoughts. While there are other critics whose resources I rely on, these four strengthen the bulk of my claim. My approach for this essay builds off Stephen Greenblatt and his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. While Greenblatt argues, "that there is in the early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities" (1), I wish to add gender to that list. The recognition that gender does not belong to a particular sex creates a generation of gender fluid people. Self-fashioning deals with a level of awareness and it is this awareness that provides both men and women with the courage to go against cultural norms. While I am not arguing that masculine female or feminine males first appear in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, I do believe several dramas, especially the three I examine, noticeably depict the existence of a gender shift. These characters in these plays represent a sense of self, reflective within the community. On stage there is a layer of fantasy present that allows the audience to confront their personal realities once the play is over. Because there was a lack of vocabulary to define what was happening in the early modern period it is easy to overlook the progressiveness that was forming; nonetheless, it is important to close read these historical dramas and interrogate moments of gender in movement.

¹ A dumb show is used as another form of a play within a play.

² I am using the language from Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* to define how I am examining masculinity and femininity.

Greenblatt lists ten observations that relate to English Renaissance self-fashioning, two of which are valuable to my comparison of gender and language. The writers of the soliloquies and the dumb show I explore use of language alters the perception and meaning of the act. The language works as an identifier to the instability of gender. All three plays demonstrate a male or female performing the opposite trait of their proscribed sex. Greenblatt's numbers six and seven on his list states, "When one authority or alien is destroyed, another takes its place" and "There is always more than one authority and more than one alien in existence at a given time" (9). Since these statements are about characters, as well as the authors who create them—they fit perfectly within this analysis of gender performance on the stage. On the other hand, Greenblatt's number seven on his list discussed multiple authorities existing simultaneously. Since I show how authority provides a person with power, including the power to display multiple aspects/personalities of themselves. The overlap of authority depicts how various characteristics work together to form a whole. Greenblatt's analysis pairs well with metatheatrical gestures. Soliloquies and the dumb show are small instances in the larger play, which strays from the standard presentation to offer a visible opposition from what the drama is telling/showing.

A fear for many men was that women would usurp their power and replace them as the authoritative figure. In believing that the masculine identity was being destroyed, or worse, commandeered by females the belief was that women were fashioning themselves into the ruling class. These fears and anxieties were not unreasonable; however, they were exaggerated especially during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Since this was a woman who spoke very dominantly, the possibility that she could influence other women could very well happen. And we see this power and assertive language in *The White Devil* in Salome's soliloquy. She herself says that she wants to be a custom breaker and that is exactly what Queen Elizabeth is, although James I was ruling during the time of this play, the masculine female identity has been established. At any given time, men and women can display masculine and feminine qualities. This blending of genders makes a person complete, since there are moments in life that require sensitivity, as well as times where anger or assertiveness is needed. Each metatheatrical episode humanizes everyone as their own personalities are complex, yet familiar within the play world and the real world. While Greenblatt speaks on authority and self-fashioning, I extend self-fashioning to gender to better interrogate how aside moments in dramas expose its suppleness.

Each of these plays has episodes that act as windows to confront the unknown and uncomfortable topics. In the action of further displacing gender fluidity, it illustrates how it can be done, but without directly being held accountable for doing it. Although written at different times, each of these dramatists includes the same elements of breaking the binaries of gender. As a result, there is an overlap of masculine and feminine presence making it indistinguishable as to who really owns the trait. Each of the characters exhibits the other sex's characteristics perfectly. Richard, Salome, Julio, and Christophero break their traditional, societal customs to inhabit a different persona.

Exposing Richard

I began with *Richard II*, who at this moment awaits his death after being stripped from his kingship. Alone, Richard wrestles with his identity and soon recognizes the precariousness that is mankind. During his, almost nihilistic, soliloquy Richard states,

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. Sometimes am I king;
Then treason makes me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am. Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king. (5.5. 31-35)

His allusion to possessing multiple identities creates a space for masculine and feminine traits to exist simultaneously, essentially these lines open a space where the self can become more fluid. Richard's confusion is evident in his monologue and this emotional state makes him unsure about himself, which is emasculating. Out of the many personalities that exist within him he remarks "none contented", meaning that out of everything that makes him Richard, he is still unable to produce himself as a stable individual. The language he uses here further displaces the idea of a concrete masculine or feminine traits. I read the character of Richard as both a masculine and feminine king, sliding between the two genders until his death ends his torment. The conflict among his gender fluidity and his peers weakens Richard's confidence in who he is as a king. Stephen Greenblatt writes in *Tyrant* about the madness those in power suffer from, "But Shakespeare was also interested in a more insidious problem, that posed by those who began as legitimate rulers and are then drawn by their mental and emotional instability toward tyrannical behavior" (113). Richard behaves as a tyrant only through his paranoia, he cannot trust his subjects or family and at the moment of his soliloquy he does not appear to trust himself. Richard tells us how he is parts of a whole, and in this confession he shares one way to endure the chaos,

And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be,
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
With being nothing. (5.5. 38-41)

Richard's indifference towards what he embodies shows his awareness of choice. "Whate'er I be" does not have any restrictions, as long as we understand this decision is a conscious selection. The fact that he does not know what to label himself heightens the realization that he is speaking out loud to himself, we are allowed to witness his thinking process which makes him vulnerable. And that vulnerability is not gender assigned, because we see it at its infancy, as it is being created Richard quickly reduces it to nothing. Those who are vulnerable, mad, or fluid cannot thrive until they accept that they are these things. Richard cannot live as both a feminine and masculine authority figure until he accepts both characteristics. Yes, others may be threatened or apprehensive about his ambiguity, but they must become comfortable with their own issues, he cannot do it for them. While Joy Wiltenburg mainly focuses on women in *Disorderly Women and Female Power*³ her explanation of gender during the early modern period is useful in

³ *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany*

comprehending the newly developing and strangeness of it. Wiltenburg writes, “The early modern preoccupation with the proper ordering of sexual roles, and the tensions over their definition, suggest widespread uncertainty and unease about these issues” (9). Richard’s society struggled with his refusal to be compartmentalized, not just with his gender, but also in his reign.

Richard’s soliloquy starts off on a level of uncertainty, but his speech ends with reinforcing the power of changeable thoughts. He believes he is loved yet again and that is what he states in his speech. While his openness leans more towards feminine behavior, rather than masculine, his monologue tells us how both are always present as he mentally takes control of his ominous situation. Whether Richard believes his own words or not, his language makes the unknown acceptable. Allen Boyer writes in *Drama, Law, and Rhetoric*⁴, “Just as he created characters whose brilliant language deceived others, so he created characters who deceived themselves, and whose magnificent language could reflect their progress from self-deception into self-awareness: the eloquence, loss, and consolation of tragedy” (34). The soliloquy enables Richard to discuss the tragedy of unpredictability and as a man he is allowed to demonstrate trepidation unjudged and even though the audience hears him, Richard does not acknowledge their presence.

Shakespeare’s use of this split from dialogue to isolate Richard enables the audience and readers to fully emerge themselves with the portrayal of a feminine male. At a time when we would expect Richard to show confidence and assertiveness, he flips the script and expresses how defenseless and vulnerable he feels instead. Loneliness can equip a person with the security of being their most comfortable self. If Richard has a sense of self-awareness, he knows the best way to talk himself through his troubles, even if it may seem unfitting to his sex. Even though Richard’s life comes to a tragic end, he seems to be aware of what is to come of him and his language shows that he has intellectual insight which he communicates. Whether Richard remained masculine or conveys a sentimental attitude, his fate was already set, and his choice of gender could not have prevented it.

Progressive Wickedness

In Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* readers are confronted with a dissatisfied Salome, wife to Constabarus and mistress to Silleus, who questions the privileges of men in a heated soliloquy. Her private thoughts are made public as she reveals the discrepancies between men and women, embedding her soliloquy in masculinity. Much like Richard there is a blending of genders, Salome’s feminine body houses her masculine thoughts. Salome’s questioning of the gender and sex hierarchy confronts an uncomfortable truth; women are no different from men. While I do not believe Salome is a model protagonist, Cary equips her with right temperament to call attention to laws written against women and push back on them. Wiltenburg claims, “The ideal social and cultural order of early modern Europe called for women to play a secondary role, as helpmates to men rather than principal actors. But literature often

⁴ This is an essay from the collection *The Law in Shakespeare* edited by Constance Jordan and Karen Cunningham.

departed from this idea, bringing women to center stage” (47). The center stage is where Salome stands out and encourages other women to do the same. In going against the expectations of how she is supposed to behave, Salome creates a new standard. Women have a voice, and they should use it to challenge those who wish to restrict them. Salome wants to divorce for her, which is an issue for her, but how easy it would be for Constabarus to receive one. This is where the inequality is very present, Salome asks,

Why should such privilege to man be given?

Or, given to them, why barred from women then?

Are men than we in greater grace with heaven?

Or cannot women hate as well as men? (1.4. 45-48)

Although women are the inferior sex when it comes to cultural beliefs Salome interrogates why this is normal and presents rhetorical questions to illustrate the absurdity of her, and many women, situation. Salome’s lack of understanding why women are restricted from having the same privileges as men, places an amount or cap on power, which basically constructs this imagined idea that there is not enough to go around. By talking about the privileges that men have, and women do not, she vividly shows the discrepancies between the two. Men are allowed to hate people or things, but women do not have that same luxury. While a man can hate his wife and plan to leave her, a woman must remain in a miserable situation if she is unhappy, making it harder for them to find their own pleasure. The same people, who provide men with privileges, are the same people who decide those same privileges do not extend to women, and Salome is rightfully puzzled by this arrangement. As she challenges the rules that were put in place to limit her authority in her argument and her language, she shows how women are just as capable of men in being control of themselves and their emotions.

Elizabeth Cary is writing in a time after England has experienced a strong and effective monarchy from a woman ruler. Queen Elizabeth’s feminine body may have been a source of power; however, Cary shows that much has yet to change as far as women’s authority. Nonetheless, Salome is able to express her anger without the threat of being labeled as hysterical, since she is speaking to no one in particular and, coincidentally, this is part of the soliloquy’s power. As stated before, her powerful language shapes her as a dominant figure; she craves to have the same rights as men and explicitly asks what the difference between the genders is? Carole Levin notes, “This expansion of gender roles was reflected in some of Shakespeare’s plays in terms of crossing-dressing heroines and women characters using what might be perceived as ‘male’ language” (4). Although Levin is speaking about Shakespeare, I believe this rings true for all early modern dramas and Salome’s language, here, is male in the sense that it is aggressive and controversial. Salome’s soliloquy conflates gender and while her ‘male’ language commands the audiences’ attention, her presence as a woman cannot be overlooked.

Salome develops an image that does not please her husband, or in her opinion, any man; however, she hopes that women will realize by going against what is expected of them they can create their own happiness. Salome states,

I’ll be the custom-breaker, and begin

To show my sex the way to freedom’s door,

And with an off'ring will I purge my sin;
The law was made for none but who are poor. (1.4. 49-52)

Salome's decision to go against her society's ideas and beliefs sets her apart from the other women in the play. Yet, her language suggests that she hopes other women will follow the path she has taken. One-way women can reach freedom's door is through asserting themselves and behaving the same as the men. The things they say alone have to match their actions when they are around others, especially men. For these reasons Salome is not afraid to make her private thoughts public and she shares with her husband her discontent with him. Her comment about the law also shows that gender should be excluded from it and that it is strictly an issue of class. The men and women who have money and power should not be subjected to follow the laws of the land and gender should not matter.

In both soliloquies above, we see a flip in gender representations while Richard's monologue is sensitive, Salome's speech is forceful. Nonetheless, they both illustrate how gender is fluid by consistently demonstrating a shift between the two. Richard's male body and feminine speech is reflective of Salome's feminine body and masculine tone. Their use of language enables people to hear the ease in sliding in and out of nonconformitive behavior, making the performance of gender rely more on the person who is enacting it. The soliloquies make room for both Richard and Salome to perfectly display their portrayal of the opposing gender and the stage makes it possible for people in their community to identify with their characters and either approve of their existence or disapprove of this doubleness. By performing these very private moments on stage, it initiates a shift from traditional gender roles to progressive ones.

Witchly Men

During the early modern era witchcraft and witches were reserved for women, when a person thought of witches, they imagine evil, wicked, or old women. John Webster's metatheatrical dumb show is a visual representation of men performing witchcraft, which causes the death of Isabella. The shifting of gender within this drama refutes the idea that only females are witches and delve in black magic. A dumb show is presented below at length to retain the wholeness the phantasm and witchery,

Enter, suspiciously, Julio and Christophero. They draw a curtain where Bracciano's picture is. They put on spectacles of glass, which cover their eyes and noses, and then burn perfumes afore the picture, and wash the lips of the picture. That done, quenching the fire and putting off their spectacles, they depart laughing.

Enter Isabella in her nightgown as to bedward, with lights after her, Count Lodovico, Giovanni, and others waiting on her. She kneels down as to prayers, then draws the curtain of the picture, does three reverences to it, and kisses it thrice. She faints, and will not suffer them to come near it; dies. Sorrow expressed in Giovanni and in Count Lodovico. She's conveyed out solemnly. (2.2.)

Webster's play within a play offers an alternate reality for his audience members. This metatheatrical moment reverses the cultural prescription on witchcraft and shows men as

cunning and sneaky beings. As Andrew Gurr writes, “Like witchcraft, play-acting was a deliberately deceptive business, and so must be the Devil’s work. When what we call Elizabethan drama got going in the 1580s and 1590s excessive realism was a constant concern” (7). The devil’s work was not limited to just women and Gurr’s unfettered language relates to all those who practice deception and commit other acts of sin.

Burning the perfumes in front of the picture, before placing poison on the lips of the painted Bracciano is sacrilegious. These men take the act of making a Christian sacrifice and taint it with their scheme to murder. The term spectacle works in various ways, on the first level as a mockery to the burning of aromas before what Isabella treats as an altar. The word wash also translated to ‘anoint (with poison)’ in this play, reinforcing my claim that Julio and Christophero are participating in the devil’s work. The improper use of anointing the painting depicts the men engaging in charms and enchantments, similar to the image that was drawn of early modern drama witches. In works such as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Middleton’s *The Witch*, and Dekker, Rowley, and Ford’s *The Witch of Edmonton* old women are the primary profiles for witchcraft, but Webster introduces a different way to view those who partake in spells and sorcery to enact revenge in between the time of these three dramas.

Secondly, the spectacle of glass the men use to protect themselves from the odors and poison, so it behaves as an obstruction for shielding them from both the toxins and facial recognition because it covers their eyes and noses. Michael Neill notes, “Katherine Maus has written in of the ways in which revenge drama, by presenting the delicious spectacle of subjects hoodwinking and finally annihilating their superiors, addressed the ‘repressed frustrations’ of a society in painful transition” (329). Webster’s drama removes the danger in displaying men as witches by having their malicious act carried out in a dumb show, an illusion. Gender roles are switched, and the vengeful men set an ill fate into motion. It is important to analyze the reason behind a play within a play to talk about the fluidity of gender. By removing the direct connection between societal issues and the public stage, Webster inconspicuously establishes the existence of a problem, without having to immediately address it. Showing men involving themselves in conjuration, a culturally assigned woman’s profession, clearly portrays witchcraft as gender restricting. Although these men may not think of themselves of witches, their actions say otherwise.

After putting poison on the portrait, the men “depart laughing”. This laughter symbolizes the complete disregard for the life they are about to take. Murder is a joke for them and Julio’s occupation as a doctor makes these matters worse. While this play’s white devil is characterized as the unruly Vittoria, who seems to be calling the shots, the devil’s workers are the men who fulfill her murderous desires. The men conjure up the poisons and murders for Vittoria’s personal reasons and self-gain, which again imitate gender reversal. She gives them the orders and the men obediently follow her direction. Webster’s exchange of gender happens continually throughout *The White Devil* and men prove themselves more conniving than the women. They constantly involve themselves in dirty work and murderous schemes, which does more harm to everyone than the good it brings to just one person.

I describe the men as witches to clarify how their actions stray from Webster’s other male characters and match more with someone who delves in magic. And while

men who studies magic are usually seen or identified as conjurers, I make the argument that the name conjurer and witch are synonymous. The men seemingly mix gases to make a deadly potion, which works effectively on the unsuspecting Isabella. The image of the dumb show itself is an illusion, allowing the men watching what has not happened to enter the realm of witchcraft as well. So, why are men called witches when they obviously can behave as one? This stems from societies' shared opinion about the appearance of witches, but Webster shows that a witch can embody various physical appearances; even more importantly, a witch can look like a man. Julio and Christophero are exuding both sides of gender during this murderous plot. This small part in the *White Devil* plays a larger role in the development of identifying in overlap and relevance between masculinity and femininity.

Conclusion

By looking at the three distinct dramas that feature metatheatrical moments of soliloquies and dumb shows, I hope to have shown the presence of gender fluidity in the early modern period. In the performance of their assigned characters Richard, Salome, Julio, and Christophero use the stage to display notions of gender role reversals. While I am applying modern language to discuss earlier dramas, I believe describing these characters as fluid pairs well with their speech and actions. The relationship between gender and metatheatrical episodes is that it allows for the flexibility of gender to expand. Masculinity and femininity spill over to the opposite sex and are performed just as well as the societies' idea for that assigned sex. Gender is not restricted during these private moments of monologues or schemes, and in this isolation a person is allowed to express their true self, one unrestricted by their environment.

Within my close readings it should be clear the position many early modern citizens found themselves in, an area of gender turmoil. The stage was a place of fantasy where men could behave as women and women as men, with little to no real punishment. Characters in these dramas took a chance and while it was sometime ineffective, the deed was still completed. Gender is a complicated issue, in the past and present, but it is what provides a person with an awareness of self and individualism. Trying to identify what qualities and traits belong to whom confuses matter, and more people are presumed as abnormal when they decide not to be categorized. The characters examined refusal to be compartmentalized acts as a marker on the timeline of analyzing gender reversals.

Even though they are fictional, the characters in the three selected dramas mentioned are representatives of their communities and the author's outlook on his/her environment and imagination. From Shakespeare to Cary, their use of language equips actors with an interesting disposition/charisma. Richard and Salome may appear as the villains to some, but their charm cannot be denied, and their words are masterfully and beautifully delivered. While Webster's use of a dumb show mimics the behavior of gender reversals as it is carried out. Going a step further than words, Julio and Christophero take part in what appears as dark magic, but unlike women they are left unpunished. The accessibility of masculinity and femininity is enhanced on stage for *Richard II*, *The White Devil*, and *The Tragedy of Mariam* allowing characters to step

outside of the role audiences would normally see them in and show how each gender can easily be performed by anyone who wishes to perform it.

Elizabeth Cary as a woman writer is an essential part to the development of more women creating dramas and giving women characters a voice aligned with their experiences. This is to say, while the men may have very well been familiar and accustomed to women behavior, having a woman writer compose for women provides them with more agency and representation. Cary's writing also gives audiences an opportunity to view how men are written from a woman's angle. While Webster and Shakespeare are well known names, their reputations of playwrights are complicated, yet intriguing. It is not always easy to separate the dramatists from the drama, but as readers we must choose to direct our focus on what is unfolding on the pages. Cary, Shakespeare and Webster's description on gender shows readers a modern way to view males and females, as fluid.

These plays are a glimpse into the early modern depiction of a gender shift and besides the three dramas that were discussed there were many other plays presenting masculine females and feminine males. It is imperative to interrogate these brief asides to understand their importance to the overall drama. In the action of deviating from the bigger plot, we witness a break in the character also. At the time when a man or woman believes that they are not being watched, they act differently from what we have been seeing in the play. In the decision to perform the opposite gender more freely when alone, it highlights the taboo of it within the community. The dramatists in this essay provide examples in their writing of how simple it is to access emotions relevant to a particular situation. Women do not have to restrain their anger and men do not have to hold back their tears, and in fact, when they do give into these feelings it makes them more human and relatable. The times when the characters break from the standard of their sexes has a lot to do with the attempt to conceal the emergence of role reversals as common.

The metatheatrical gestures explored have depicted two ways to identify gender fluidity among males and females in early modern dramas. Shakespeare, Cary, and Webster's writing works as an apparatus to set the tone to properly illustrate how characters on stage can maneuver between masculinity and femininity. The spectrum that gender rests on is more understandable among people in today's society, but as it was forming in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was causing more problems than it should have. These dramatists compose gender to not appear as a threat; masculinity and femininity is not the problem, but people are the problem. The relationship gender has with these episodes is as a way to escape, escape the pressures of society and life in general. We must not forget that these dramas are just fantasies, and the soliloquies and dumb shows are just an extension of that prolonged fantasy, a place where gender is unrestrained and accessible. Exploring gender's purpose in the early modern period indeed shows how it limits women, like Salome, but also how it frees men like Richard, Julio, and Christophero—and both cases are needed to comprehend the past's definition of what is manly and what is womanly. Throughout this paper, I have shown the relationship between the performances of genders as it relates to metatheatrical moments and hope to have clearly articulated the importance of the two in the development of early modern dramas and modern-day interpretations of gender. As stated before, these dramas are indicators that the fluidity of gender has been forming for a long time and we can see the proof in the dramas that were discussed at length.

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