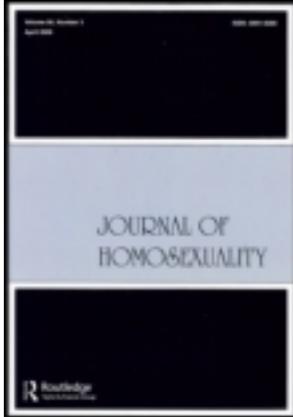


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“I Am the Man!” Performing Gender and Other Incongruities

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SUMMARY. The following essay details the genesis of the performance “I Am the Man” for the First International Drag King Extravaganza. In it the authors explain both their autobiographical performances and the relationship between their drag performances and transgender theory by linking Shakespeare to queer theory and by overlapping their personal narratives. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Transsexuality is a response to the dream by forcing back, even abolishing, the frontiers of the real.

—Catherine Millot

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TRANSGENDER PERFORMANCE AS DRAG

In queer subculture and mainstream popular culture alike, drag is often considered a temporary, performed presentation of the self. For example, in her *Female Masculinity* Judith Halberstam defines the drag king as “a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costumes and performs theatrically in that costume” (1998, 232). Despite a detailed examination of the complexities and paradoxes of performing masculinity, Halberstam’s reliance on a stable, definable body “underneath” the drag king performance remains essential to her definition of drag.

While drag may disturb our notions of gender and encourage slippage between two gender identities, at its core drag performance relies on the existence of a permanent, fixed and biologically determined “body” beneath the trappings of drag. But what happens to our understanding of drag if we assume that the body is not fixed, but is in fact constructed by performance and the audience expectations of that performance? What happens to a definition such as Halberstam’s when the “usually” female performer is replaced by another gender; when a male performs as a drag king? Can such a performance even be considered drag?

Using Judith Butler’s claim that gender is a copy with no original, our performance of “I Am the Man” at the First International Drag King Extravaganza (IDKE) in Columbus, Ohio sought to disrupt the notion of drag as the performance of a fixed-body-as-gender into multiple unstable possibilities. Rather than use drag to reinforce the notion of a “real” or “true” body underneath the performance, our drag portrayals attempted to deny the audience knowledge of which of us had what body, or even the assurance that a definable body existed. We attempted to make our cross-dressing a cross-identity exercise. We used each other’s identity as the temporary persona. In other words, Jay played Sarah and Sarah played Jay. Within these portrayals, we made no assumptions of how either of our bodies was supposed to look or act. Rather, we were as true to the text as we could be, and we coached each other on the visual and aural appearance of each other’s role.

As such, “I Am the Man” represents an initial attempt to discover what transgender drag might look like. We tried to blur the distinction between our performance of gender on stage and our performance of gender in daily life. Seeing Jay on the street, little about his physical appearance suggests he had been born female. Facial hair, a strapping 6’2” frame, and a low voice all reaffirm the message communicated by his

clothes that Jay is a man, albeit a man with a flamboyant sense of dress. Conversely, little about Sarah can be readily identifiable as definitively male. She has a low voice, but too high to pass on the phone. Physically smaller with rather delicate hands and an impossibly feminine first name, Sarah's much more conservative men's style rarely convinces the casual observer of an absolute man. However, the limitations of Sarah's male impersonation do not always make her recognizable as a woman either.

As part of our preparation, we spent hours of rehearsal discussing how we moved through the world, how people read us on the street, and how linguistic imperatives such as "he" and "she" neither encompass nor encapsulate our trans bodies. Who are we really, we pondered? Butches? Drag kings performing all day, all the time? Female-bodied men? Theory provided a useful point of departure. To return to Halberstam, her theory divides the broader spectrum of female masculinity into three distinct categories: the drag king, the male impersonator, and the drag butch. She writes:

Historically and categorically, we can make distinctions between the drag king and the male impersonator. Male impersonation has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, but the drag king is a recent phenomenon. Whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act, the drag king performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act. Both the male impersonator and the drag king are different from the drag butch, a masculine woman who wears male attire as part of her quotidian gender statement. Furthermore, whereas the male impersonator and the drag king are not necessarily lesbian roles, the drag butch most definitely is. (232)

Despite the care with which Halberstam creates these distinctions and definitions, gaps and overlaps remain. Most days Sarah falls under the category of drag butch with the occasional foray into male impersonation depending on the audience, and the odd bit of self-deprecating humor à la the drag king. Jay, for his part, exists completely outside these three categories. Or, rather, he performs all three simultaneously. Perhaps he is a male impersonator, except that part of Jay *is* male. Too, Jay can play the flamboyant dandy at the drop of a well-tailored hat. But much of his performance depends on the audience present. For still oth-

ers he performs the drag butch. The role of the audience is particularly relevant to the fluctuation of these categories. Jay, sans breast binder, recently happened upon a group of young people. The gawking and giggling began. As Jay quickly moved to enter the safety of his home, one of the youths declaimed, "That's a woman on my life!" The longer Jay lives as a man, the less he believes in gender outside of his daily performance.

No matter how differently we look from each other, however, we both feel caught in the middle of the gender lines. Though we always part ways at the public restroom, our lives have followed similar courses. We studied the same magazines for cues about how to be male, learned from our fathers (both of whom are gay) about an exclusive world of men, and followed feminine women as our romantic ideals. Though we express it differently, we have been playing in male drag for most of our lives.

In our performance, we attempted to explore our individual performances of maleness and masculinity, while at the same time challenging the gender assumptions that usually support the performance of drag. In other words, we attempted to do drag without cross-dressing. To do this we not only cross-dressed, but also cross-acted. Jay wrote text that reflected a theatrical version of his experience as a transgendered/transsexual man. Sarah wrote text that represented her history of gender ambiguity and confusion. We then performed each other's texts, and eventually merged the two stories into Act I, scene v from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. In this way, we did not assume a fixed body beneath our roles, but rather assumed the "real" body of the other. We thus approached our performance as a cross-*identity* piece instead of the more conventional cross-dressing.

SHAKESPEAREAN DRAG

Our interest in Shakespeare emerged out of both the Elizabethan cross-dressing performances and the more specific use of cross-dressing and identity confusion evident in many of the comedies. Of particular interest to us was the exchange between Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night, or, What You Will*. The parallels between the modern day drag king and the impersonations of Shakespeare's heroines seemed particularly relevant to the gender issues we wanted to explore. The scene we performed occurs early in the play as Viola, dressed as a man, woos Olivia on behalf of Viola's master, Orsino. Shipwrecked in Illyria, Vi-

ola has adopted the persona of a man to survive in her new environment. Though Viola is herself in love with Orsino, she agrees to court the fair Olivia on his behalf. Unfortunately, Olivia falls in love with Viola in her male persona of Cesario. All is resolved at the end when Viola's twin brother arrives, enabling Olivia to easily transfer her homoerotic attachment to a more appropriate mate. The scene we performed highlights Olivia's mistaken attraction for Viola and Viola's sense of displacement in the erotic relationship. We chose this scene in particular because it highlights the complications of gender as performance not only for one's gender definition, but sexual orientation as well.

Within this context of cross-identity, we sought to perform what seems natural (Jay's male identity, Sarah's in-between identity) as façade. For Jay, our intention was to explicate the lack of preparation for Jay's gendering as a man. As he writes, "How does a thirty-five-year old man who played as a tomboy, bled like a girl, reared as a lady, fucked like a stone butch lesbian, and dresses like a dandy become a man?" To perform Jay's persona, Sarah wore a fake mustache and adopted exaggerated macho gestures. Sarah-as-Jay-as-facade highlights a felt truth for Jay. He will not lie about his past girl/woman/lesbian/stone butch self. Medical authorities prefer that Jay, himself, believe that he has never been anything but a man, that he was raised erroneously as a woman. Indeed, in the words of Kate Bornstein, "[Transsexuals] are labeled as having a disease for which the only therapy is to lie, hide, or otherwise remain silent" (1994, 62). Jay's openness about his past was a major part of our performance work together. Indeed, it seems ideal. For it is in the context of "drag" that the definitions, visual cues, and mental assumptions that the average viewer has of Jay as a man can be best challenged.

This awareness of Jay as a performing "man" was an integral part of our work. Constructed as alternating monologues, Jay's language was performed by Sarah. Thus, the following speech, though directly Jay's experience, was spoken by Sarah in "drag":

But the me the world sees is not the me who sees the world. Don't get me wrong. I am a man . . . a white man . . . a white heterosexual man. Your eyes tell you that. My look is unassailable. But am I man?

The first time I took off my shirt at the public pool, I knew everyone would see the truth . . . but of what? A woman with whiskers, broad shoulders, a nice looking package and hair, hair, every-

where hair; or a man with bigger tits than average and a great bathing suit on?

Because the drag act is performed by a woman who is recognizably female, the artificiality of the “act” is highlighted. Even with a fake mustache and tie, Sarah’s appearance as a man is hardly “unassailable.” But the simultaneous presence of Jay who—despite being dressed in an ill-fitting, Catholic school girl’s uniform—does look unassailably male, draws attention, not only to Sarah’s performance as Jay, but also to Jay’s performance as man in girl drag (Is Jay a drag queen or female impersonator or neither?) and highlights Sarah’s in-between reality as a woman performing masculinity performing drag. Eventually all of these complications coalesced into a fundamental question regarding the notion of a “real” body underneath Sarah’s pants or Jay’s skirt.

Interspersed within Sarah’s performance as Jay is Jay’s performance of Sarah through a monologue detailing teenage love. The subject of the monologue is a girl who mistakenly believes Sarah, the object of her affection, to be male. As Jay (as Sarah) recounts:

When I was fifteen, I found true love. The most lasting perfect love, that every teenager hopes to find, and I did. Me! Trouble is, she thinks I’m a guy. I keep pretending . . . and hiding the fact that I attend an all-girls Catholic high school.

From this beginning, Jay quickly segues into a high school recitation of Viola’s monologue from Act II, scene ii of *Twelfth Night*. In preparation for the monologue, Jay remarks on the similarities between Viola’s being mistakenly viewed as a man, and consequently being made (unwillingly) into the object of Olivia’s affection, and the drama of a high school crush. “Funny how a guy in the 17th century could have such a clear understanding of me and my situation, while my best friend ignores my little incongruities.” Once the perimeters of the high school crush are established, Jay moves into Viola’s monologue.

In this new context, Viola’s monologue takes a new understanding of double entendre. When Jay, dressed as he usually is, states “I am the man! If it be so, / Poor lady she were better love a dream” he comments not only as Viola, a woman dressed in men’s clothes, but also on his own status as a man who possesses male secondary sex characteristics, but not the primary “real” body, i.e., the phallus. The monologue further comments on Sarah’s ambiguous relationship to masculinity and her stated gender as opposed to others’ assumptions of her gender orientation.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DRAG

Jay-as-Sarah-as-Viola's reading begs the question of how deep drag goes. Is it only in clothes, hairstyle, and glued on facial hair? Or, does it extend to hormone treatment and some surgery as well? Is Jay's body itself drag? Within the context of the performance, these questions remain unanswered. Even within the original Shakespeare, Viola, herself in love with her master on whose command she is sent to woo Olivia, cannot uncover the solution to her own convoluted gender identity. In Shakespeare's original text Viola laments:

How will this end? My master loves her dearly,
And I (poor monster) fond as much on him;
And she (mistaken) seems to dote on me.
What will become of this? As I am man,
My state is desperate for my master's love;
As I am woman (now alas the day!),
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!
O time, thou must untangle this, not I,
It is too hard a knot for me t'untie. (1989, 350)

For our performance, however, we changed a few of the lines, although we kept the text in iambic pentameter.

How will this end? Poor she that dotes on me.
What will become of this? As I am a man,
My state is desperate for another's love;
As I am woman (now alas the day!),
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!
O time, though must untangle this, not I,
It is too hard a knot for me t'untie.

By the conclusion of the monologue, Jay has emerged as his male self and Sarah has been buried under a pile of feminine accoutrement. Once the gender switch is complete—Jay has moved from female to male, Sarah from male to female—they begin to play the roles of Viola-as-boy (Jay) and Olivia (Sarah) in their first meeting in Act I, scene v. Buried under the skirt and wig, Sarah adopts a falsetto voice, highlighting the

contrivance of the performance of femininity while Jay affects an exaggerated masculine physicality, as a former woman, now a man. The disguise goes deeper than most drag, but is arguably still a creation within the context of the performance. In other words, the performance of both Jay's male body and Sarah's female body are both reduced to merely layers of creation without a stable foundation. Though both appear to be playing themselves (Sarah *is* a woman and Jay *is* a man), the exaggeration of the masculinity and femininity draws attention to the artificiality of gender performance. The inversions of performance finally climax in the moment that Olivia/Sarah reveals her face, formerly hidden behind the wig. Her revelatory line reads: "We will draw the curtain, and show you the picture. Look you, sir . . . Is't not well done." What is revealed, however, is Sarah's face still created to look male, including a mustache. Thus, the vision of Olivia, of feminine perfection, is marred by the presence of facial hair. Upon seeing this Viola/Jay responds, "Excellently done, if God did all," which of course, can be taken as an insult, both to Olivia commenting on her facial hair, and to Sarah commenting on the artificiality of the facial hair. Clearly, one can see by looking at Sarah's face that God did not "do all." Sarah, with a novelty store mustache and spirit gum, did at least part. Similarly, Jay does all with hormones, and still others have plastic surgeons do all while still others do all through voice lessons and body movements. God or nature is irrelevant to gender. The transgendered body only provides canvas, not the art.

Theoretically, separating trans performance from drag or assuming a fixed body beneath a performance or gender remains problematic. One must be sensitive to the individual performer's preference for definitions and biological determinism. Not every drag king considers herself to be transgendered. Many transmen would consider the term drag king derogatory or mocking. Finally, scores of genderqueer people believe in only two genders while scads more do not. But barring the individual's preference and scientific belief system, one can see the places of obvious overlap between Halberstam's drag king, male impersonator, and drag butch, and the problem of assuming that a fixed body exists underneath the performance. These spaces of overlap, ambiguity, and ambivalence gliding, sliding and interpenetrating around a whirling, changing, transforming body became a "truth" we wanted to perform. Since we live this dervish dream every day, performing in front of a crowd of screaming dykes and kings felt like a vacation.

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